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Ragnar C. Teigen

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On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent

Gustavo Gutierrez

Translated from the Spanish by Matthew J. O'Connell

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987

136 pp., \$8.95 U.S. paperback.

A wealth of material has been produced about the book of Job. Praised as one of the masterpieces in world literature Job's versatility has made possible a range of treatments from technical commentaries to semi-popular works, not to mention adaptation in drama form. To this array has now been added the monograph under review with perspectives from a liberation theologian which have not been highlighted, if mentioned at all, in Western interpretations. For this reason alone the book by Gutiérrez is worthy of careful attention.

In his introduction (xi-xix) Gutiérrez poses a question of primary importance to the Latin America context: "*How are we to talk about God?*" (author's italics). More particularly: "How are we to talk about God from within a specific situation—namely the suffering of the innocent?" It is from this vantage point that the author explores the Book of Job.

Part I, "The Wager", with three short chapters, involving reflections on the prologue, epilogue in part, (42:7-17), and aspects of the poem (especially chapter 3), focuses on God's wager with Satan that Job serves God with no thought of reward. Satan provokes the dare; 1:9, "Does Job fear God for nought?" (The inquiry in the mouth of Satan seems a supreme irony. Was this the Joban author's intent?) Emergent from this conversation are calamities in chapters 1-2 and the dramatic transformation of Job as result from a patient hero to a titan in struggle, chapter 3. The whole becomes a testing ground for the profound question about disinterested religion. God spoke well of Job in the end. The point was made. Satan lost! In between lay the desolate land where Job struggled in suffering protests of innocency. Disinterested religion, diametrically opposed to reward (the obverse of retribution as Gutiérrez notes), had its price.

Part II, "The Language of Prophecy", comprising chapters 3-6, features Job in strident debate with his competent but theoretically misguided theologian friends. Their abstract doctrine of retribution—Job is ill, he must have sinned—leaves Job in frustration but with a growing realization in the debate that other suffering innocents exist. (In chapters 29:31, e.g., he himself remembers his practical care of the poor.) Not only is this God's will but it also "provides firm ground for prophetic talk of God". (See pages 47-49 for a convenient summary of Part II.)

Part III, "The Language of Contemplation", chapters 7-10, identifies Job in rumination over his suffering yet acknowledging that all things come from God. Gutiérrez includes in these chapters on contemplation the passages where a mediator, if briefly, appears in Job's consciousness. Called the

"Arbiter" in 9:15ff., the "Witness", 16:18-22 and the "Avenger" (Kinsman-Redeemer) in 19:25-27, the mediator as an existent reality is not in doubt. It is his identity which is in question. The arguments are drawn between those who see God himself as the go-between, so Gutiérrez among others (page 65), and those who propose an intermediary between God and Job. Conclusions on either side seem indefinite save in the minds of proponents based on their careful research. One can possibly argue the second of the options since a variety of intermediate beings between the divine and human worlds appear in the Old Testament. The passages, in any event, point to Job in the depth of anguish reaching out for help beyond himself.

The contemplative theme includes the Yahweh speeches, Job 38-42 which to this reviewer assume an enchantment due to the sympathetic exposition given them by Gutiérrez. The chapters represent, in this light, "the mysterious meeting of two freedoms". One might have thought of these speeches as a divine bombast of response to Job but scarcely an answer to his painful demands for justice on behalf of his innocency. Gutiérrez prefers to think of these speeches and Job's laments as two freedoms. "The final chapters of the Book of Job tell us of the meeting of these two freedoms. Job's freedom finds expression in his complaints and rebellion; God's freedom finds expression in the gratuitousness of the divine love that refuses to be confined within a system of predictable rewards and punishments" (page 80).

In his "Conclusion" Gutiérrez asks, "How are we to speak of God" in conditions where massive murder occurs and "contempt for human life" is so common? "Job shows us the way with his vigorous protest", his commitment to the poor "and his acknowledgement of the gratuitousness that characterizes God's plan for human history" (page 102).

A rich supply of endnotes for each chapter completes the book. The monograph is readable, non-pedantic, yet scholarly all at once. Not only are Spanish works interspersed in the endnotes but salient works on Job from North American and European scholars. A scripture index is included at the end. An alphabetized bibliography would have been of help but a monograph of 136 pages will have such a limitation for the sake of space.

The reviewer considers the themes of "disinterested religion" and "suffering innocency" as especial contributions in this pertinent and refreshing volume. Innocency should not be theologically confused with sinfulness. The latter is not the issue in this context. Gutiérrez comments: "In his resolute defense of his innocence, Job does not make the mistake of regarding himself as sinless" (page 24). He knows himself to be a "sinner like every other human being, but he declares himself innocent as far as his sufferings are concerned" (page 73).

Given our present world conflagrations where justice seems hidden under sinister oppressions this volume is more than timely.