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When the Celebrity Is without a Friend: Expanding the Tensions of Social Justice in Job 29-31

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The book of Job presents a hybrid of philosophical and theological arguments about the nature of God, the problem of evil, and friendship. As a wisdom corpus, the book of Job is not only about "God-talk." It also offers a reflection on human condition and ways of living. Wisdom is personified as a friend.[1] The dynamics involved in friendship, harkening to the cries of the sufferer and pursuing social justice also lie at the heart of the book. In fact, the book does not set out to resolve the problems or give answers to most of the troubling questions the themes and sub-themes confronting the characters.

However, there seems to be a slight resolution when Job questions human relationships in chapters 29-31. This article seeks to explore how Job reflects on issues about human relationships using a cultural reading of Job 29-31, and to show how Job looks at friendship in times of distress. Cultural hermeneutics attempts to utilize cultural ideological insights and poetics of social location in the interpretation of scripture.[2] It is a model applied to explore issues on accountability of society and people. It refers to the analysis and interpretation of how culture influences understanding of reality at a particular time and location.[3] This

1. For a discussion on wisdom personified as a friend, see Derek Kinder, *Proverbs* (TOTC; Downers Grove: IVP, 1981), 31-56; Sung-Jin Kim, "Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs: The Literary and Hermeneutic Function of Wisdom," *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 75 (2011): 69; Iain Torrance, "Friendship as a Mode for Theological Engagement: David Ford's Exploration of Christian Wisdom," *Modern Theology* 25 (2009): 126; Donald K. Berry, *An Introduction to Wisdom and Poetry of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 156; William W. Young III, "The Patience of Job: Between Providence and Disaster," *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007): 593-613.

2. David T. Adamo, "African Cultural Hermeneutics," in *Vernacular Hermeneutics,* ed. R. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 70-72.

3. Musimbi Kanyaro, "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the Twenty-First Century," *Feminist Theology*

study, therefore, will begin with an exploration on the social function of Job 29-31 and then reflect on some of the cultural issues the text presents. The goal is to approach the Book of Job as wisdom "from below" and with the question of justice in human relationships, the answer will be responsible caring, pragmatic speaking, and a healthy working ethic.

Job Speaks Out (Job 29-31)

Commentators have long held that Job has a central message—theodicy.[4] The unique literary style, genre, and focus of chapters 28 and 29 to 31, however, raise certain suspicions to that idea. In these chapters, there is a radical shift in presentation. Alison Lo rightly takes the challenge of investigating chapter 28 in the context of Job 22-31.[5] She argues that chapter 28 functions as a bridge between the previous dialogues and the speeches that follow. She agrees that Job 28 serves as a rhetorical process to persuade the friends of Job to admit their inadequacies.[6]

Some scholars opine that the wisdom poem in chapter 28 interrupts chapters 27 and 29; hence, the repetition, "Then Job again took up his discourse" (29:1).[7] For David J. A. Clines, this introductory state-

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9.27 (2001): 42; M. Kanyaro, "Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible,* ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 101-113. This approach is similar to what Katharine Doob Sakenfeld calls "culturally cued literary reading" which pays attention to the socio-cultural dynamics of the text as well as the literary structure. See Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "In the Wilderness Awaiting the Land: The Daughters of Zelophehad and Feminist Interpretation," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 9 (1988): 188-189. While Kanyaro focuses on women and culture, Sakenfeld's method of reading concentrates on exposing the patriarchal structures, values and androcentric concerns.

4. Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1973), lxxiii; Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament,* 4th ed. (Englewood Cliff: Prentice Hall, 1986), 591; Berry, *Wisdom and Poetry of the Old Testament*, 155; Gerald Keown, "The Canonical Shape of the Wisdom Literature," in *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature and the Psalms: Festschrift Marvin E. Tate,* ed. H. Wayne Ballard, Jr. and W. Dennis Tucker, Jr. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000), 187; Rick Moore "Integrity of Job," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 45 (1983): 19; Alan Cooper, "The Sense of the Book of Job," *Prooftexts* 17 (1997): 228.

5. Alison Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric: An Analysis of Job 28 in the Context of Job 22-31* (VTSup 97; Leiden: Brill, 2003).

6. Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric,* 75.

7. E. Dhrome, *A Commentary on the Book of Job,* trans. H. Knight (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 415; Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible,* ed. Leander Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 537. The same introductory for-

ment in 29:1 puts the flow of the earlier dialogues into disarray.[8] The narrator's assent on discourse (משל) presumably prepares the reader for a different kind of expression; solemn to the ear, proverbial in essence and practical in its form. Job is no longer addressing the friends. He must have someone in view if he wants to impart wisdom. Interestingly, J. Gerald Janzen sees 29-31 as a form of wisdom enactment.[9] It is this enactment that is evidenced in Job's prayer and life assessment. The problem in this pericope is not particularly about divine justice. The social order is distorted. Creating a discourse to reflect on such distortions should not be a challenge given to God. Rather, the challenge is for human beings. If "Job again took up his discourse," then he probably did this to a new group of people. At the outset, Job knew God cannot be summoned before any court or be challenged to answer a query. To dare to cross these lines means he has a hidden motive - i.e., to challenge his family and neighbors. He wants to speak to an audience capable of understanding him.[10] After all he has said enough to his friends.

It is not surprising that Job speaks to God in 29-31.[11] His friends had continually urged him to engage in prayer as a resource to control and displace what Job calls רגז "agitation, trouble, restlessness" (Job 3:26; 14:1). The friends wanted to help Job, but in the end they were passionate about justifying themselves.[12] But Job strongly repudiates them and argues against that option.[13] Indeed, Job seems to dissuade the unjust sufferer from praying to God (cf. 15:4). The one he has to pray to has been the cause of his problems. In Job 29-31, however, Job accepts what the friends are advocating. He "speaks" to God and here one finds a resolution in the arguments of the friends. Whether the prayer will solve Job's troubles is another matter to consider.

Again, Job 29-31 is frequently considered as a challenge to God. Generally speaking, this monologue stands as a soliloquy.[14] Considering the dominant approach to the literary structure and genre as soliloquy,

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mula is used in 27:1 and 29:1.

8. David J. A. Clines, *Job 21-37* (WBC 18a; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 980.

9. J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 188.

10. Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Context of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 184.

11. There is no addressee at the beginning of the unit. Examples of internal evidence that shows Job is addressing God can be found in 30:20; 31:35.

12. James Crenshaw, *A Whirlwind of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 70.

13. Newsom, *Context of Moral Imaginations*, 96-109.

14. It must be admitted that the term "soliloquy" is not the best way to characterize the genre. See Newsom, *Context of Moral Imaginations*, 184, 185.

it makes little sense to say that Job is talking to himself yet the speech is to God. Clines takes a softer stance by saying that though it is formally a soliloquy, Job speaks in order to be heard.[15] Newsom calls this pericope a testimony of one's own account,[16] while Hartley contends that it is an avowal of innocence.[17] Here, Job offers a defense of his past glory (Job 29), enforced lowering and disgrace in the present (chapter 30), making him to swear his innocence to God while focusing on the future (chapter 31). However, the vigor of the language and the pathos in his opening words reveal the desire to see some change in his family and neighbors —"O that I were in months of old" (29:2). This desire is a call for social justice and the reason behind such a desire gives rise to such prayer. The background scenes and past events provide mappings of the social engagement Job wants to see again. He succinctly identifies the problem. As Jeffery Boss puts it, the problem is of a social one.[18] The persuasive effect in Job's speech, one can imagine, lies in Job's credibility (chapters 30-31), emotional appeal (29:2), and passion (31:35). His convictions and knowledge of the socio-cultural values is without question (29:7-17). The society had a place for people like Job and they upheld good speeches. Norman C. Habel is right in saying that underneath the frames of the arguments lay Job's evaluative testimonies to a public audience.[19] Job was in a sense seeking for a way to speak indirectly to the hearts of an audience (cf. 29:22b). The tenor of the speech draws a wide spectrum of complaints implicitly against his children (29:5) young men and aged (29:8), nobles (29:9), princes (29:10), neighbors (31:9), neighbor's wife (31:10), male and female slaves (31:13) orphan (31:18,21) and strangers (31:32).

Carol Newsom's survey of the recent scholarship on Job especially on chapters 28, 29-31 reveals that scholars are shifting from the speeches of Job and Job's character to the role of the rhetoric of the book.[20] She adds, "When God actually speaks, however, he will not challenge the adequacy of Job's words, not through direct refutation, but by challenging the system of tropes and images (the moral world of village

15. Clines, *Job 21-37*, 979.

16. Newsom, *Context of Moral Imaginations,* 185.

17. John Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 41.

18. Jeffery Boss, *Human Consciousness of God in the Book of Job: A Theological and Psychological Commentary* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 258.

19. Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 404. See also Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric*, 216.

20. Carol Newsom, "Job Reconsidered," *Currents in Biblical Research* 5 (2007): 165. See also Y. Hoffman, *A Blemished Perfection: The Book of Job in Context* (JSOTSup 213; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

patriarchy) upon which they are built."[21] The distorted social order in Job 29-31 provides a canvass for Job to paint a picture of his own righteousness. In fact, the community may hear Job differently as addressing their lapses. The rhetoric of Job 29-31 implicitly functions to draw attention to the demands of the cultural setting rather than to serve as catalog of boastings. Job felt he does not deserve what he is going through. In the ancient society, such matters of intrinsic justice were of great concern.[22] Furthermore, Mark Hamilton has rightly posited that 29-31 among other things seek to convince Job's audience of his social location that has been denied him.[23] He has been left alone to his fate.

Job 29-31, which highlight structured community life and social roles, also look forward to the Elihu speeches (chs. 32-37) and the divine speeches (chs. 38-41) than the earlier three cycle of speeches.[24] Elihu may have jumped into the scene without any formal invitation because he felt Job had addressed a group of which he is part. Elihu does not only jump in to defend the friends but also respond to Job's accusations. For example, he points out that Job cannot claim he is free from guilt (33:9). He accuses Job of keeping company with evildoers (34:8) and exhibiting a false righteousness (35:7-8). Right at the center of Job's monologue is the spectrum of interpersonal relationship that Elihu also addressed. These speeches from Elihu like Job thread on the "other."[25] In Job 29-31, social evil becomes the concern of Job and when Elihu breaks in, the "God-talk" resumes. For Job, one of his most important desires was to see his friends and neighbors observe their social responsibilities and stand by him.[26]

An appreciation of the cultural dynamics of the speech is also a preoccupation on human responsibility. It is also uncommon in our world to find people acting as friends but standing against the sufferer. Job

21. Newsom. "Job Reconsidered," 165.

22. K. D. Irani, "The Idea of Social Justice in the Ancient World," in *Social Justice in the Ancient World,* ed. K. D. Irani and Morris Silver (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), 3.

23. Mark Hamilton, "Elite Lives: Job 29-31 and Traditional Authority," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32 (2007): 73.

24. Newsom, "The Book of Job," 336; Stuart Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 62-63.

25. It is assumed that Elihu was directly addressing a crowd of wise men in chapter 34. See Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 145-146; Alan Pierson Finnan, *A Rhetorical Critical Analysis of Job 32-37* (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988), 104-105.

26. Norman Habel, "Only the Jackal is my Friend," *Interpretation* 31 (2006): 229.

29-31 depict similar lessons about human relationships. In this pericope, Job believed God was the source of all his problems. In his view, since God was fighting against him he has to complain. David Clines, for instance, was incensed to speak for Job against God when he published his "Job's Fifth Friend." He wondered why commentators were reluctant to speak for Job but trying to justify God's injustice in the face of unjust human suffering.[27] From the outset, Clines like Job dares to question God's fairness. But he departs sharply from Job's view and character when he raises ethical issues about God's behavior. Clines also expresses his doubt about clinging to this deity whose justice is different from human conventions, and who acts as a dispassionate judge speaking in a whirlwind to oppress humanity.[28] A different position is taken in this study. Who is to take the buck when the young men make sport of Job (cf. 30:1)? We do not want to become Job's sixth friend to question God, but rather to stand with Job and question fairness in our world of human relationships – a place where celebrities can end up becoming the loneliest people.

Unlike the other dialogues and monologue in the book, there are hardly the characteristic ironies in chapters 29-31.[29] What the reader finds is Job's social life with God and others captured in rhetoric of reportage. An object of Job's last prayer is somehow to recount in plain language that those who show love in good times lack most in bad times. He says, "I stood up in the assembly, cry out for help. I have become a friend of jackals, a companion of owls" (30:28b-29). In fact, after Eliphaz and Bildad's third speech, Job comes in focusing on his past glories and lamenting on the friend's attitude. He moves on to reproach the friends and neighbors on their social responsibility. Job's words here furnish no room for a reply from the audience. They were dumbfounded. Like the friends, it is their attempted condolences and the way they treat Job which provoked his bitterness against them.[30] Consistently, Job emphasizes his innocence and beneficence. He shows how his charity gives bodily and spiritual hope to the helpless. He is not just a donor. He

27. David J. A. Clines, "Job's Fifth Friend," *Biblical Interpretation* 12 (2004): 235.

28. Clines, "Job's Fifth Friend," 244-245. Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 424-438, however, argues that the book of Job is about the God who is worth serving.

29. Carol Newsom, "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 97 (2002): 102. Gregory W. Parsons, "Literary Features in the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 217-218, for instance, observes mild "self-irony" in 29:2 and 29:18-20 and also an implied ironic slap in 29:25c.

30. Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature*, 69.

has become a father to the needy and the protector of the vulnerable. Unfortunately, he is suffering without anyone supporting him. Consequently, he translates the suffering into words.

Job was highly esteemed because of his speeches. Actually, the community knew how to give credit where it was due. They respected him like a leader or a king. So when Job enters the meeting of the tribunal, or the council of the elders of the city, within which he had a seat and a voice, silence becomes their trademark. The young men retire into the background, and the old men stood up for him. But within the time of crisis, their attitude changed. For Job, if the family, friends and neighbors are unable to see through the mystery of his affliction, they must at least hold on to dynamics of listening to a sufferer. They must reciprocate the care and concern with their active presence and not open themselves to acts of injustice.

What is actually going on in chapters 29-31? Was Job speaking to God and for which reason the friends and neighbors must be disinterested in what is going on? From the discussion above, one cannot ignore the sociological and cultural nuances going on in this setting. Job finds that the problem is not only the friends. He shifts gears to indirectly confront his family and neighbors. Job is addressing a distorted social world where he played a role of a father, leader, and benefactor who exhibited a conduct of equitableness. Perhaps, the family and community felt ashamed to respond or begin a dialogue after hearing this. Their silence is logical; they have nothing more to say if indeed they accept that they have acted unjustly towards the sufferer. In fact, they have allowed Job to journey towards suffering and death alone. The family, community and neighbors should set a good example.

A Friend in Need

Friendship and mutual caring are not only contingent on Christian ministry or mission to the vulnerable.[31] It is a human need and Karl Barth calls it "something ontological."[32] It is a gift to be in community and one may be missing the mark within the context of justice if those in need of empathy are left to struggle alone. Job longed for comfort and acceptance but his friends and neighbors detached themselves from the reality of his experience. In fact, Habel is right when he says:

31. Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 74.

32. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3.2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 210.

> The poet of Job forces us to consider friendship as a radical option for life in an age of increased anonymity and contrived sensitivity. His word is more than a nostalgic glance at what appears to be a vanishing species. If education in the art of friendship is dangerous, the task of seeking a friend may be even more precarious. We, like Job, may find it relatively easy to discover redeemers who will save our property or life from disaster.[33]

At a point, Job indicates that the friends are rather doing him more harm and their silence will be more comforting than empty words (Job 13:13; 19:1, 13-22). Their presence rather makes things worse. And so were the family and community. The sages say, "Better is the neighbor who is nearby than the kindred who are far away" (Prov 27:10). In our contemporary world where technological presence is displacing physical active presence, empathy and social responsibility seem to be meaningless. At best, they thrive on delegation. The social phenomena of obligation and responsibility are hardly the right things to do. Talk about autonomy, and personal preferences appear to come first.[34] These changing boundaries of social relationships are affecting our contemporary world of friendship. The wisdom tradition addressed these concerns. In fact, "the one who despises the friend is not wise" (Prov 14:2). Jesus also teaches that what we owe our neighbor and do for them should be what we owe God (Matt 25:31-46).[35]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's responsibility ethic is particularly relevant for the contemporary world because it challenges the arbitrary use of power and benevolence. He claims that responsible living is a duty to humanity and to God.[36] This duty, he terms deputation, is the surrender of one's life to the other, and such a sacrifice is still necessary even if one lives alone. He, however, notes that "deputyship is open to two abuses: one may set up one's own ego as an absolute, or one may set up the other man as an absolute."[37] That is to say, one should not act to boost his or her own moral or focus on the recipient as an end of the sacrifice. There must be a delicate balance in providing for the needs of others as a means to an end and philanthropy just for the sake of it. Moreover, the focus must not be on reward. Acknowledging our neighbor and showing concern in a time of distress is a righteous behavior (Luke 10:30-37). As

33. Habel, "Only the Jackal is my Friend," 236.

34. Newsom, "The Book of Job," 541.

35. Nigel Biggar, "Nicholas Wolterstorff, Justice: Rights and Wrongs," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 23 (2010): 137.

36. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics,* ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville H. Smith (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), 220.

37. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 222.

Bernd Wannenwetsch also asserts, responsible living arises from hearing and listening to the other, and "for Christians, responsible acting and living is responding to Christ and neighbor, not to a 'responsible self'."[38]

Job looked out to such friendship but the people around him disappointed him. When he was rich and healthy, he was generous to them. He cannot be accused of social injustice (cf. Amos 4:1; 5:10; Obad 1:13-14). Even if he had demanded material things from them, he would not have deserved to be mocked. Job is continually urging all "to face him in all his pathetic ignominy, to look him in the eye and admit that he has never lied to them. He has been a genuine friend, loyal to his word and to their relationship. He pleads with them to repent (*shūb*) and affirm his integrity. Only by so doing would they demonstrate their oneness with him as friends."[39]

It is important to mention that little gestures such as smiling matters a lot. The concept of social justice does not only confront us with equal rights and opportunities or acts of charity. It also seeks to bring about systematic transformation in relationships and raise the consciousness of responsibility in behavior. Standing by those in distress and privileged people who are struggling with their integrity is justice. Sharing a genuine smile with those who used to make us smile reinforces the seminal principle of religious justice. Job says, "I smiled on them when they had no confidence, and the light of my countenance they did not extinguish" (NRSV; 29:24). Times of distress sometimes test people to know if they are truly loyal.

The Pragmatics of Speaking

In the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible, knowing how to communicate well has a high value.[40] The Book of Job, for instance, is characteristic for its profound speeches, abounding in imagery and proverbial wisdom, classic for its use of metaphors, similes and ironies.[41] The

38. Bernd Wannenwetsch, "'Responsible Living' or 'Responsible Self'? Bonhoefferian Reflections on a Vexed Moral Notion," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18 (2005): 140.

39. Habel, "Only the Jackal is my Friend," 232.

40. Good speech is emphasized throughout the Hebrew Bible. David Clines, for instance, has argued that David's gift of intelligent speech as well as that of the intelligent and persuasive women speakers in the David's story are characteristic features of masculinity. He also claims that to be of good words was an important role in Israel. See David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 219-220.

41. See Habel, *The Book of Job,* 47-48; George Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (1984):

friends of Job used all the profound knowledge they had but because they did the right thing in the wrong way, it affected them. Again, in reference to the value of good speech in the Book of Proverbs, Claus Westermann claims that the wise "call attention to speech that is good, fitting, and beautiful, at the same time cautioning against what is destructive and harmful."[42] As far as good speech is concerned, one ignores it at his or her own peril. In the Book of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar incurred the wrath of God for not speaking correctly about God.[43]

From another perspective, not only were these friends guilty of not speaking correctly, Job himself was caught in a similar web. God points out to Job that he spoke without knowledge (Job 38:2; 42:3). A casual reading may also reveal how Job struggles to defend himself in speeches that hardly meet the ears of his friend. Newsom rightly points out that Job's speech is a parody with a multiplicity of perspectives that points the reader to the unique circumstances under contention.[44]

Significantly, Job knows how to talk to God. He describes his relationship with God as "friendship" (סוד; 29:4), an expression denoting confidential discussions in a council or with an intimate companion.[45] It also indicates that the relationship between God and Job was akin to close confidants who share secret thoughts as a friend to a friend. Job knows how to communicate with God and such a compliment finds support in the African proverb, "A child who knows how to wash the hands can eat with adults." Like Moses who encounters God daily on a "face to face" basis, Job also offers daily sacrifices to God on behalf of his family. In fact, the Lord testifies about Job, "that there is no one like him on earth" (1:8). Job himself recalls that in the past, he had good relations with God and his children; when "the light of God shone over

339-402.

42. Claus Westermann, *The Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 17.

43. God's vindication that the friends have not spoken correctly but Job spoken rightly in 42:7 is problematic and commentators continue to conjecture why this is so. The Yahweh speeches in 38-41 show that Job spoke in ignorance and he repented from what he said. See Pope, *Job,* 350; Stephen M. Hooks, *Job* (CPNIVC; Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2006), 479-480; Janzen, *Job,* 264; Berry, *Wisdom and Poetry of the Old Testament*, 154.

44. Newsom, "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text," 100.

45. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* 2, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 745. See also Job 15:8; 19:19; Amos 3:7; Prov 3:32. It is in Job 29:4, however, that the Hebrew word conveys the meaning of intimate friendship.

his head" (29:3a), and "when the Almighty was still with me, when my lads (נער)[46] surrounded me" (29:5).

Job also knows how to talk in his community. As he approaches the gathering, the aged would stand to welcome him while the young men would step aside for him to take his seat (29:8). This kind of recognition, similar to that given to a celebrity, comes with a royal touch.[47] He says, "I chose their way and sat as chief, I dwelt like a king among his troops, like one who comforts mourners" (29:25). When he spoke, his words were a blessing to the people. He was not honored just because he was wealthy. His contributions to society's welfare were rather commendable: "When the ear heard, it considered me blessed, and when the eye saw, it testified about me" (29:11).[48] So when he takes his seat at the city gate, all ears are ready to hear his voice. In other words, Job equates his social contributions to the actions of a wise man. Indeed, as Carol Newsom avers, Job was not recounting these socially acceptable shared-values to boost his ego. His words rather give affirmation to the patriarch's social identity as a leader.[49] Likewise in African traditional societies, eloquence grants a person a seat in the court of elders. This virtue boosts one's identity and image. Mutual bonds of indebtedness portrayed using the image of a patron-client, or a king-servant, provide for Job an infrastructure to maintain social and religious cohesion.[50]

46. We follow the TANAKH which renders נער as "lads." Most English Bible versions, however, translate this verse as "children." Milton Eng, *The Days of our Years: A Lexical Semantic Study of the Life Cycle in Biblical Israel* (LHB/OTS 464; New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 58-84, has recently stressed that נער can refer to (i) a male child, (ii) a son, or (iii) a male person as a term of endearment. It usually means a young person or a servant working under the tutelage of someone other than the father.

47. Janzen, *Job*, 203.

48. The theme of commendation is continued in vv. 21-25. On the other hand, Job argues that the friends have done nothing good to claim wisdom and speak well to him. So they were not in a position to counsel him (26:1-4). Certainly, Job's speech is far from using witty words (cf. Ps 55:21). He knows how to acquire and inherit wisdom.

49. Newsom, "The Book of Job," 538.

50. Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (JSOTSup 112/ BLS 29; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1991), 69, discusses the metaphor of the king-servant relationship in the book of Job. The Patron-client relationships appear to represent Job's relationship with his community and also with God. The patronage society, as David deSilva, "Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrew and Patron-Client Relationship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996): 92, attests promoted obligation, allegiance and favor shared between equals and unequals. P. J. Botha, "Social Values and the Interpretation of Psalm 123," *Old Testament Essays* 14 (2001): 193-194, also

More importantly, Job's wisdom, speech and social values opened him up for God's approval (cf. Ps 12:2-4). For Job, the appropriate use of words motivates and is motivated by good relationship. He is someone who provides good counsel, and people listen attentively when he is speaking (29:21-23). Speaking well is emphasized here, not in the sense that he has a powerful voice or his words overshadow others, but people find reason to hear him. The aged, nobles, chiefs and rulers accorded him all the respect when he speaks (29:8-9). Given this line of thinking, Hooks says, "The respect paid to Job's *counsel* was a tribute to his superior wisdom and rhetorical skill."[51]

Furthermore, Job's words were instructive and powerful enough to penetrate and saturate the hearts of his hearers. Job says, "When I spoke they said no more, my words overwhelmed them" (Job 29:22). Some translations put the second clause as: "my words fell gently on their ears" (NIV); "my speech dropped on their ears" (NRSV; NASV; ESV). Job's words are clearly a rereading of Moses' song in Deuteronomy 32:2 – "May my teaching drop like rain, my speech condense like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth" (NRSV). Job argues that his good speech was like the falling dew or light rain that restores, renews and yield abundantly.[52] As the people waited in silence, Job's words "dropped" upon their hearts. Their effect was so awesome that they opened their mouths to absorb more of his words.

In any case, Job was aware of his limitations and that not all the people of the community cherished his speeches. Whereas Job's speeches received the approval of a section of his community, it became a stumbling block for his friends. These friends show the reader that despite their good intentions to be with the sufferer, they unconsciously wanted to "teach" Job how to speak. So in the time of Job's crisis, they were consistently critical of Job's rhetorical prowess. Since they cannot

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points out that obligation exists among treaty partners. But where it is between unequal partners the patron has no obligation towards the client to grant favors. It is generally an act of grace. In a sense, Job's reputation suffered when he felt his honor was challenged and the reciprocity to his services unacknowledged. For further readings on Patron-client relationship, see R. P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982); Neils Peter Lemeche, "From Patronage Society to Patronage Society," in *The Origins of the Ancient Israelite States,* ed. Volkmar Fritz and Philip R. Davies (JSOTSup 228; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 106-120; W. Dennis Tucker, "Is Shame a Matter of Patronage in the Communal Laments?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 3 (2007): 417-474.

51. Hooks, *Job*, 340. Emphasis original.

52. Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10 – 34:12* (WBC 6b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), 794.

stand Job's words, they felt they are empty and inappropriate (8:2; 11:2; 15:2). For them, Job is laying claim to discernment and knowledge more than the "fathers" did, that is, the fathers "who acquired wisdom from the beginning."[53] But Job makes them understand that their theological constructions hang off-balance and have no bearing on life on the ground (17:10), and no amount of words from the friends can convince Job to refrain from speaking the way he does. The friends, family or community could not perceive the dynamic cosmic dimension at play.[54] Certainly, Job knows that his own words can condemn him (9:20), yet he spends a lot of his time talking. He presumed he was promoting good speech that refreshes his hearers like the rain and the dew that are vital to life. Perhaps, Job overreacted when his speeches did not "drop" on some of the members of the community.

Job chooses to resolve his abandonment with curses upon those who are mocking him. Job has come to appreciate that it is possible for one's own people to reject good counsel. For instance, he furiously remarks: "But now they mock me, those who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock" (30:1). Again, some of the people were turning their backs on him in that "when he looked for good, evil came" (30:25). After laying claim to refreshing speech and defending it, Job turns to reply those who mock him and make fun of him by saying:

> In the gullies of wadis they must dwell,
> In holes in the ground and rocks.
> Among the bushes they bray,
> Under the nettles they huddle together.
> Sons of foolish people, sons of people without a name,
> Who have been scourged out of the land (30:6-8).

Mocking and cursing can rightly be understood within the ancient Mediterranean cultural context as traditional codes of life.[55] Such speeches are also claims to honor and shame perceived in a cycle of challenge-riposte and appeal for a verdict.[56] Clines contention that Job lays claim

53. Habel explains that, "the claim of the friends that they have inherited the 'profound truth' of the first fathers seems discredited. The primal fathers are a spurious source of wisdom if the friends are faithful witness to that wisdom." See Norman C. Habel, "Of Things Beyond Me: Wisdom in the Book of Job," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10 (1983): 149.

54. Elaine A. Phillips, "Speaking Truthfully: Job's Friends and Job," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18 (2008): 35.

55. Newson, "The Book of Job," 544; John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, *Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 530.

56. Andrew Mbuvi, "The Ancient Mediterranean Values of 'Honour and

to a very scrupulous ethic may be farfetched.[57] Job rather saw self-cursing as an option to address the young people who were disgracing him. It was unacceptable for people of such social class to stand against Job. In this context disgrace-shame, which also features prominently in the lament Psalms and in the Book of Proverbs, serves as a resolution to the acts of faithless people. By cursing, Job seems to look for restorative justice, since physical punishment alone may not be effective in changing behavior and may not lead to the promotion of responsible living.

Job's self-cursing and desire to share in the responsibility of evil if he is proven guilty may be way out of line for some contemporary readers. Self-imprecation and swearing falsely in the ancient Near East had grave consequences but Job never gives up. In some traditional African and Asian communities, self-cursing is never acceptable. It is considered socially and culturally destructive and efforts are made to deter people from treading that path. Actually, the terror of the consequence does not only affect the speaker. When the accursed suffers, the family, neighbors and community, also pay a price. Certainly, it is expected that they all share the responsibility in attending to the victim. If this is anything to go by, then Job's speech in chapter 31 may not lie within what is considered proper attitude. The assumption is that, Job moved to the extremes however justified it may be.

Perhaps, Job's speech incites God to answer him in a whirlwind (38:1). In fact, he dared God: "Here is my signature. Let the Almighty answer me" (31:35b). Whatever Job perceived to request such a judicial contest cannot be justified. Job finds it unthinkable that God refuses to

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Shame' as a Hermeneutical Lens of Reading the Book of Job," *Old Testament Essays* 23 (2010): 752-768. For a helpful discussion of honor and shame in the ANE, see J. Pitt-Rivers, "Honor and Social Status," in *Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society,* ed. J. G. Peristary (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 21-77; Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World" in *The World of Luke-Acts: Models of Interpretation,* ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 25-65; Lyn Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction of Social Conduct in Biblical Israel: Judicial, Political and Social Shaming," *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 49 (1991): 47-76; Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, ed., *Honor and Shame in the World of the Bible* (Semeia 68; Atlanta: SBL, 1994); Saul M. Olyan, "Honor, Shame and Covenant relations in Ancient Israel and its Environment," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996): 201-218; Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology,* 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Johanna Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible: The Prophetic Contribution* (JSOTSup 346; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

57. Clines, *Job 21-37*, 1027.

"see" his problem.[58] He thinks that his inability to experience the covenantal love of God as he used to has opened him up to ridicule. Did Job really overlook who the Almighty was? So when God poses various questions to him, he admits his limitations: "Indeed, I spoke without discernment, marvelous things beyond me, which I did not know" (40:3). Despite the flaws in Job's speech, God's final judgment vindicates Job as someone who spoke better than the friends (42:7).

Healthy Working Relations

Additionally, Job prides himself with his moral ethic. In chapter 31, Job lists 14 virtues he strived to achieve. The rhetoric seems not only to maintain his innocence but also functions to depict standard working relationships and reciprocal obligations.[59] Characteristically, Robert Alden entitles these virtues as disavowal of falsehood (31:5-8), adultery (31:9-12), injustice (31:13-15), uncharitableness (31:16-23), materialism and paganism (31:24-28), meanness and secret sin (31:29-34), and tenant farmer abuse (31:38-40).[60] It can be observed that Alden approaches the text from the point of view of the community. As the patron, Job sets an example of parental responsibility over his household, employers, community and strangers. He recognizes the need to respect their human rights.[61] He lived among the people "as a king among troops, as one who comforts mourners" (29:25c). He treats the people with dignity, and gives opportunities for his subordinates to complain against him. So what they hear Job saying is the charges against unacceptable behavior. The community is not only accountable for their own behavior. Job also knows he is accountable for their actions. He says:

58. Richard W. Neville, "A Reassessment of the Radical Nature of Job's Ethic in Job 31:13-15," *Vetus Testamentum* 53 (2003): 195.

59. Hamilton, "Elite Lives," 74.

60. Robert L. Alden, *Job* (NAC 2; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 229-230. It seems strange why Job would jump into denial or disconnect with his past virtue of religiosity. Disavowal strategy tends to make one reject the reality of an action that has resulted in a traumatic experience. Alden also contends that Job is trying to boast in order to hide his awareness of shame associated with his actions.

61. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 185; Samuel Terrien, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The Interpreter's Bible,* ed. G. A. Buttrick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 1119.

If I have denied justice to any of my servants,
whether male of female,
when they made a complaint against me,
What will I do when God arises?
What will I answer when called to account?
Did not he who made me in the belly make him?
Was it not one who formed us both within the womb? (Job 31:13-15)

Richard Neville cogently argues that Job 31:13-15 is not about equality but about sameness of form. He further shows that Job's rhetoric suggests that there was an existing ethical standard Job was alluding to for which one is accountable.[62] Similarly, Hartley also contends that Job "bases his compassionate concern for each of his servants as a person in his conviction that God has made both himself and his servants in the same way."[63] Why would God expect from Job, who was a patron, a lesser ethic than from Job's servants? If Job is to account for their injustice, then the people are also to be blamed for Job's predicament.[64] Job is also willing to admit his mistakes, even his secret sins. He is confident that he has acted justly. In a culture where slavery was permitted, Job did not take advantage of worker's wives and children or abuse them (cf. Prov 5:15, 20). He did not make sexual demands from subordinates and house-helps in exchange for favors.

Finally, Job calls on his family and neighbors to avoid evil and falsehood. He also urges them to avoid complacency in times of prosperity, or seek one's own interest at the expense of others. They should not try to gain advantage over someone without putting in anything or encroaching on the land of others. He further instructs them to treat subordinates with respect and dignity (cf. Eph 4:25, 29). Such, to Job, were the tenets of justice.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show how a cultural interpretation of Job 29-31 unearths issues about injustice and looks at friendship in times of distress. In context, Job 29-31 builds on the social injustice in the previous chapters but more so provoke the speeches that come after it. The Joban poet speaking with a polyphonic voice does not only point readers to a challenge between Job and God in the pericope but also expands the semantic elements of Job's soliloquy to embrace a call for social justice from the family, community and neighbors. In the text, Job, a celebrity

62. Neville, "A Reassessment of the Radical Nature of Job's Ethic," 182.
63. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 414.
64. Neville, "A Reassessment of the Radical Nature of Job's Ethic," 196.

in his own right, challenges God about his undeserved humiliation but this challenge is shaped by a desire to see all engage in active care for the sufferer, use soothing words, and seek after the moral enhancement of employees and fellow workers.

Job had his friends around him but he argues that they were not there for him. Deep within, his family, neighbors, and people he has supported made him feel lonely. He had no true friend among them. So Job concentrates on his past and present predicament to persuade his latter audience to bear responsibility for their acts of injustice and show love in good times and in bad times. He points out that he was there for the family and community in their times of need so they should also be there for him in his bad times. He looked forward to a transformed relationship where people will be responsible to one another. He shows that there is a human obligation which demands that one should not suffer alone. He urges his family, friends and neighbors to give a listening ear to the sufferer and support those going through bad times with their active presence. Using soothing words during such occasions influence good relationship for all must be treated with dignity. For Job, one should not take advantage of the other in the working environment. What is necessary is maintaining standard working ethic and cordial relationships. Since all are accountable to one another, evil and falsehood must be eschewed. In these avenues, Job addressed the injustices of the society.

At its core, justice demands that appropriate and equitable rights are established, the weak are supported, and friendship become liberating in word and in deed. Social justice demands that the privileged that are undergoing challenges in their social identity need care and concern just like the poor. Job's world may not be our world but the principle of social responsibility and caring need consideration. Robin Routledge cogently avers that the conclusions Job draws are observations of the natural world. They are not just directed to God's chosen people.[65] However, the church has a higher responsibility. As the light of the world, it is called to grapple with its responsibility towards those who are suffering. The capacity to respond appropriately is a divine calling and is qualified as wisdom, righteousness and justice. What lies at the core of humanity is not only acting to restore life but also being there for people especially in their times of suffering. Job seeks to uphold a culture where oneness abounds and where care and concern are given as loyalty to God's demands. His voice confronts all with the idea that the past is no guarantee for the future, yet the human responsibility must not be sacri-

65. Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 249.

ficed. A high moral ethic built on divine-human covenant rather inspires communal justice and responsibility.