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Complaint and Transformation: Decreation at the Outset of Job

Jamie A. Grant
Highland Theological College, UHI, Scotland

This article contends that the decreation language found in Job 3 is used by the author to give first voice to Job's lament—his formal covenant complaint against YHWH. This poem is not just a prelude to the complaints that follow in the speech-cycles but it is actually the first expression of Job's legitimate lament. This passage is often described as a soliloquy or an abstract poetic expression of Job's pain that gives the reader insight into the extent of his suffering. This article argues that Job 3 is something more than just screaming at the universe. It is in fact a cry directed at the Creator of the universe. Furthermore, this decreative language sets the reader up for the response that ultimately arises in the YHWH speeches (Job 38–41). YHWH's creative order is real, even when all we see is chaos, and that order is good.

Key Words: chaos, complaint, decreation, Job 3, lament, order, soliloquy

The connection between wisdom and creation is readily observable in the biblical text.[1] Even the most superficial reading of the wisdom texts

[1] In recent years there has been substantial debate about the accuracy and usefulness of the concept of "wisdom" and, indeed, the appropriateness of talking about the "wisdom literature" as a corpus. See Will Kynes, "The Nineteenth-Century Beginnings of 'Wisdom Literature', and Its Twenty-first-Century End?" in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Jarick; LHBOTS 618 (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2015), 83–108, and his more recent *An Obituary for Wisdom Literature: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: OUP, 2019). This is an important discussion; however, given the constraints of this article, it is also one that must be reserved for another day. Within any community of specialists, jargon can actually be helpful even if it is not entirely accurate (see the interesting podcast *Something Rhymes with Purple*, ep. 6 "Crambazzled" https://open.spotify.com/show/7ntItPoYGVgBKzFOYnQgbR). I am here using the term "wisdom," as part of that shared community vocabulary, in the traditional manner to refer to those themes and forms that are classically associated with the sapiential traditions of the ANE. In the same way, when referring to the "wisdom literature," I have in mind, specifically, the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. It may be that, in due course, I too will come to reject this terminology—I remain keen to learn—however, for the time being, I still feel that these classifications provide a helpful intellectual shorthand for communicative purposes within the guild of Old Testament scholars.

of the Old Testament will recognize the importance of creation themes and vocabulary to the Sages. Equally, it is broadly acknowledged that the use of the Hebrew origins story in the sapiential literature is not just an interesting intertextual phenomenon: wisdom theology reflects a worldview that is, in some sense, fundamentally grounded in reflection on the created order.[2] Creation in the wisdom literature is both comfort and challenge. It is the bedrock upon which the reader is encouraged to build her life, but it also contains the most incomprehensibly fearsome phenomena known to humanity. It is the symbol of both solid rock and uncontrollable chaos.[3] Although frequently used to establish human finitude, by and large, creation is a positive theme in the wisdom books. It reflects the divine order in human experience. YHWH has established his ways in the cosmos and, therefore, the reader can expect a certain degree of order, security, and stability in a life lived according to wisdom principles. Proverbs 1–9 would be the primary example of this kind of establishing view of creation in wisdom texts: creation as the bedrock for a life well lived.[4]

Interestingly, however, the author of Job takes this familiar creational imagery and twists it to a different end at the beginning of his work. Job 3 initiates the lengthy speech cycles that follow with a *decreative* plea. Job's torment is reflected in a prayer for the restoration of chaos. The wisdom tradition not only allows for, but actively encourages, the expression of those thoughts that might normally be viewed as awkward or angular. The author of Job sets out his theodicy by twisting creational themes.[5]

[2] So much so that Murphy can summarize: "wisdom theology is creation theology" (Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, FOTL XIII [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 5).

[3] Compare the solidity of the created order in Prov 3:19–20 with the implied threat and uncontrollability (at least in terms of human experience) of the creative phenomena in the Yahweh speeches of Job 38–41.

[4] See, for example, the wisdom poems of Prov 1:20–33 and chapters 8 and 9. Equally, Prov 3:19–20 offers a similar kind of perspective, highlighting the cosmogenic significance of wisdom. Creation themes form a key backdrop to the theology of this introductory section of Proverbs (see Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Liminality and Worldview in Proverbs 1–9," *Semeia* 50 [1990]: 111–44).

[5] The book of Job is a theodicy, of course, but we should remember that it deals with a lot more than the classic questions of divine justice and the suffering

Effectively, this unusual practice introduces the author's work as standing in continuity with the recognized traditions of the wisdom schools but, at the same time, he indicates that his reflections will not be easy—this is wisdom, but it is something different from the wisdom of Proverbs. The use of decreation imagery in Job 3 prepares the reader for the coming awkwardness. Hard questions will be asked, and they will be probed relentlessly and without flinching, refusing absolutely to accept an easy answer. In some ways the book of Job reminds me of cinematographer Sean Bobbitt's assessment of Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*: "We are uncomfortable because the camera does not look away."[6] In a similar manner, the author of Job never flinches from the uncomfortable task he has set himself. This text has no release valve until its unexpected denouement. It is my contention here that Job 3, rather than being a plaintive cry to the universe or an abstract soliloquy giving the audience insight in the depths of Job's pain, is actually a formal lament. This unusual wisdom poem initiates a formal complaint against YHWH for covenant unfaithfulness, and the decreation imagery plays a vital part in our understanding of that complaint.

Framing the Theodicy Question

There is a sense in which the essential questions have already been answered by the time we arrive at Job 3:1. Everything from Job 3 through to the end of the Elihu speeches in Job 37 is elaboration on the answers already established in Job 1–2. The first question is framed in terms of the accusation that Job only practices wisdom because of the personal benefits that he has accrued as a result (Job 1:9–10). With intense irony the satan asks, "Indeed, stretch forth your hand to strike all that he has, and will he not just 'bless' you to your face?"[7] However, this question is answered immediately, after the summary removal of all of the tangential benefits of Job's ideal wisdom practice.[8]

of innocents (Ernest W. Nicholson, "The Limits of Theodicy as a Theme of the Book of Job," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and Hugh Godfrey Maturin Williamson [Cambridge: CUP, 1995], 71–82).

[6] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-25713841.

[7] All Scripture translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

[8] Job 1:1 effectively presents the book's hero as an ideal practitioner of biblical wisdom—one who is "blameless and upright, fearing God and turning away from evil." The story of the prologue accords with the basic presentation of wisdom found in Proverbs that, broadly speaking, a life lived wisely will experience the resultant benefits of wisdom. This is not, as is often suggested, a mechanistic

> Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked shall I go from here. YHWH has given and YHWH has taken, let YHWH's name be blessed. (1:21)

The implied curse does not arrive, and Job is absolved of all guilt (1:22). So, the first question is answered before the stakes are raised in Job 2.

The satan again calls Job's motives into question but this time the focus is on divine personal protection rather that the external benefits of a wise lifestyle. The powerfully idiomatic adage "skin for skin" introduces the adversary's accusation. If not for gain, then personal protection motivates Job's response to God (2:4–5). The tension regarding Job's response is heightened somewhat in this second test by the intervention of Job's wife (2:9–10). Traditionally, the rhetorical role of Job's wife has been viewed negatively, often being grouped along with the friends and the satan.[9] However, in recent years her role has come to be seen in a potentially more positive light as, effectively, the one who crystallizes Job's options, thus, showing that he has in fact only *one* option.[10] The effect of this interlude, of course is to heighten the tension somewhat. Job passed the first test, but will he pass the second? He does so again:

> "Shall we receive good from God and not also receive evil?" In all this [the narrator tells the reader] Job did not sin with his lips.

Another test is passed by Job. He establishes the genuineness of his devotion by avoiding the temptation to curse God. Yet there is still a latent tension for the attentive reader. As with any great story, we know that it

equation. It is, rather, a general rule of thumb that may be described as being broadly true. Proverbs is well aware of the suffering of the innocent (Prov 1:11 or 6:16–19, for example).

[9] Calvin, to take just one example, describes Job's wife as "an instrument of Satan . . . a she-devil . . . a fiend of hell" (John Calvin, *Sermons on Job* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993]). However, I would not want to pick on Calvin unfairly; his observations reflect the majority view throughout the history of interpretation.

[10] See, for example, Ellen Van Wolde, *Mr and Mrs Job* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 23–29, 146–50, who suggests that Job's wife's use of "bless" may be genuine and, therefore, the succeeding part of her statement becomes one of consequence—"You either find a way to bless God or you die!" She (and others) go on to point out that Job's response in 2:10 may not be as dismissive (or sexist) as it first appears, but that is a discussion too far for the point being made here. See Choon-Leong Seow, *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary*, Illuminations (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 293–98, for fuller discussion.

cannot end here. Will our hero stay the course? The narrative continues with an earthly assembly to match the preceding heavenly ones (2:11–13), with the curse question still fresh in the mind. Job's trial has just become public: what will his interaction with the friends bring with regard to his already-fraught relationship with YHWH?

The answer comes in Job 3:1:

> After this Job opened his mouth and cursed . . .
> One can almost imagine the dramatic pause.
> . . . the day of his birth (lit. "his day").

So, effectively, the key question is answered by 3:1.[11] Job does not—and, by implication, now will not—curse YHWH. The curse question is settled. The satan's attempts to disrupt the divine-human relationship have failed.[12] The curse has fallen not on Yahweh but on the day of Job's birth. The rest of the book of Job elaborates on the *how* of that decision. *How* does Job maintain relationship with YHWH despite the undeserved torments that he has experienced? Job 3 is key to this resolution because, despite appearances to the contrary, Job gives voice to his angst relationally (i.e., addressing YHWH) and the decreative imagery ideally encapsulates and summarizes the worldview turmoil caused by the trials of the Prologue.

Place within the Book and Structure

Job 3, as a lament, plays a framing role within the narrative. Along with Job 28, a classic wisdom poem, this chapter brackets the lengthy debates between Job and his friends contained in the speech cycles.[13] Both Job 3

[11] Susannah Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity: Reading Beyond Barth* (London: Continuum, 2005), 56.

[12] John H. Walton, *Job*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 67.

[13] Westermann is, of course, also correct in connecting Job 3 with the extensive lament of Job 29–31 (Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis*, trans. Charles A. Muenchow [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981], 97–98). There is a strong similarity of language and theme between these two sections. This is unsurprising, given the argument below, that here we have the first vocalization of Job's lament and in Job 29–31 we have the final and fullest vocalization of that complaint. The latter is, effectively, an expansion upon the former. However, the bracketing function of decreation (Job 3) and creation poems (Job 28) is also a significant structuring feature—indicating the extent of the human debate. These poems encompass the speech cycles by both questioning and asserting order within creation. This dynamic echoes Job's attitude in

and 28 are dominated by creation themes although the latter is a much more "orthodox" take on both wisdom and creation.[14] Job 3, as the opening bracket, is more than a precursor to the complaint that follows from the man of Uz. His lament voiced in the debates with the friends is forceful, direct, and uncompromising.[15] This opening wisdom poem prepares the reader for what is to follow and "the camera does not look away." We are given a full-blast insight into Job's pain, which leaves the reader looking for respite even before the more explicit vocalization of his covenant complaint really gets going in the debates with the friends. The reader has her first "surely not" experience here in this opening and tone-setting poem.

Structurally, Job 3 breaks down into three main parts that voice the full extent of Job's pain.[16] The first major unit covers vv. 3–10 and is driven by the curse.[17] Job 3:3 introduces the section with a curse on the day and the night of Job's pain. The two elements of the twenty-four-hour period are then addressed in separate stanzas ("day" in vv. 4–5 and "night" in vv. 6–9) with a closing rationale (3:10) justifying the initial curse (3:3). The following two major units are both laments marked by the typical "why" question (למה, vv. 11 and 20 respectively). The first lament (vv. 11–19) focuses on the question of why Job did not die at birth.[18] Infant

lament, as he both decries and acknowledges his dependence on YHWH's order in his life (Job 13:15 would be the classic example of this "conflicted" attitude).

[14] Alison Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric: An Analysis of Job 28 in the Context of Job 22–31*, VTSup 97 (Leiden: Brill, 2003). Wisdom poems tend to consider the true nature of wisdom and typically do so via the medium of reflection on creation and the created order (Jamie A. Grant, "The Wisdom Poem," in *IVP Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns [Downers Grove: IVP, 2008], 891–94).

[15] Habel summarizes Job's accusations thus: "He had berated his God for being a merciless hunter, an insidious spy, a capricious destroyer, and a sinister ruler who employed his 'wisdom' and 'counsel' to create chaos rather than order in nature and society (12:13–25)" (Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job*, OTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985], 536).

[16] See David Noel Freedman, "The Structure of Job 3," *Bib* 49.4 (1968): 503–8, and Gianni Barbiero, "The Structure of Job 3," *ZAW* 127.1 (2015): 43–62, for discussion of the breakdown of the chapter.

[17] Freedman refers to the three sections of Job 3 as "major units" (Freedman, "The Structure of Job 3," 503) whereas Barbiero, following van der Lugt, prefers "cantos" (Barbiero, "The Structure of Job 3," 43). The study of Hebrew poetics is plagued by a plethora of terms for the same concepts.

[18] There is an outlier here in v. 16, which begins with an implied interrogative

mortality was common in the ancient world. Why should he be blessed with the miracle of survival just to experience such pain and loss? The "rest" of stillbirth would have been better than this (3:13). The second lamentation (vv. 20–26) questions why Job should continue to be given the light of life when his one desire is for death. Awareness of the structure of the text is important to the argument that I wish to develop below because, although the poem is sometimes described as a "soliloquy," it is, in fact—as shown in the structural breakdown—actually a full-blown lament.

Decreation

The use of creation imagery in wisdom poetry is not surprising. However, the expected norms are turned on their head in Job 3. Normally, the Sages celebrate the movement from chaos to order, as is reflected often in Proverbs (3:18–19) or even later in the book of Job, in the YHWH speeches, for example (Job 38:4–11). The establishment of order and rhythm out of primordial turmoil lies at the very heart of wisdom theology and worldview. There is a very real sense in which this is how the sages view God and the cosmic reality of which human beings are a part. Theologically, God is a Being who brings order out of disorder in creation (Genesis), in redemption (Exodus), in the formation of community (the allotments to the tribes and the Jubilee), in his instruction to humanity, both corporate and individual (Torah), and in a thousand other ways. YHWH is a Creator, constantly bringing order and design to disarray and meaninglessness. Philosophically, the ordering God provides a good structure within the cosmos and the human task is to align oneself in accordance with these rhythms and limits in such a way that one can "negotiate life successfully in God's good but fallen world."[19] This is "the art of steering" (תחבלות, Prov 1:5)[20]—finding the best way to live in a structured created order that is replete with choices, some better than others, and full of temptations that would lead us from true, full humanity. It is against this ideological backdrop that the dissonance of Job 3 rings out

(but not למה) and focuses on stillbirth, like v. 11. Some would like to move this verse to follow 3:11, but Barbiero argues convincingly for the verse to be read as the close of a chiasm echoing 3:11 instead ("The Structure of Job 3," 52–53).

[19] Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Proverbs with Integrity* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2001), 8.

[20] Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 17 (1964): 149.

clearly.

The curse finally comes and the standard creational tropes of the wisdom tradition are reversed.[21] Job calls for darkness to consume the light (יהי חשך in Job 3:4 cf. יהי אור in Gen 1:3).[22] The appeal for "deepest darkness to claim (גאל)" that day and for "a cloud to rest upon it" (3:5) is equivalent to a plea for the restoration of the "formless void" (תהו ובהו) of Gen 1:2.[23] The creational mandate of growth and fruitfulness (Gen 1:28) is countered with an appeal for barrenness (3:7), and Leviathan, the mythical sea beast—normally vanquished in creation myths as the symbol of chaos—is roused again to consume that day (3:8).[24] Normally in creation references, the doors are shut against the destructive power of the waters, allowing human habitation to prosper (Job 38:8), but Job instead curses the day of his birth because it did not shut the doors of his mother's womb on him (3:10).[25] It is hard to overstate the controversial power of Job's curse of the day of his birth. These words would have been just as awkward and angular to a biblically literate audience in the original setting

[21] "The whole thrust of the text in Job iii 1–13 is to provide a systematic *bouleversement*, or reversal, of the cosmicizing acts of creation described in Gen. i–ii 4a" (Michael A. Fishbane, "Jeremiah IV 23–26 and Job III 3–13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern," *VT* 21.2 [1971]: 153). I agree with the general thrust and main point in Fishbane's helpful article, but I am not entirely convinced that we see a reversal of all seven days of creation here. See Rebecca S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of The Theme of 'Chaos' in the Hebrew Bible*, BZAW 341 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 319–22, for a fuller discussion.

[22] Seow, *Job 1–21*, 320.

[23] "The rhetoric is of the end of the world and the return to its primordial state" (Seow, *Job 1–21*, 320).

[24] There is some evidence from ancient Near Eastern myths that Leviathan may have been seen as a sun-swallower, potentially bringing powerful imagery and a fascinating play on words to the fore in Job 3:8 (יום cf. ים) but the evidence is not conclusive (see Fishbane, "Use of the Creation Pattern," 159, cf. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*, 326).

[25] Note that the close synonym סכך is used in 38:8, rather than the סגר of 3:10, but the symbolism remains unchanged. There is some debate as to whether the plea is to prevent conception. However, the imagery seems to fit better with childbirth. If gates are set in place to stop the flow of waters, why were the life-giving waters of his birth not gated to prevent their flow? See Tremper Longman, *Job*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 101, and cf. Seow, *Job 1–21*, 327, who sees this as referring to both natural and cosmological birth, marking this as an accusation against God rather than just a failure of the night.

as they are to readers today.

> Job's theological world has turned topsy-turvy. In his anti-cosmic rhetoric, human experience of "misery" is viewed as the experience of cosmic chaos. The experience of misery is in Job's rhetoric a failure in creation, a creation that he wishes to be undone.[26]

The initial decreative curse is followed by two laments, each instigated by the "why" question. The first revolves around the massive irony of surviving birth and infancy just to experience such great suffering. The second laments the horror of continued living when death is more desirable.[27] The rhetorical significance of these laments is marked. They transform the opening curse from a scream against the universe to a complaint against the Creator of the cosmos. This is no abstract deliberation on pain.[28] It is the first vocalization of Job's lament that will unfold over the speech-cycles in Job 4–27 and climax in his final defense in chapters 29–31. Job 3 very much sets the tone for what follows.

The Effects of Decreation

So, what does the curse of Job 3:4–10 do within the text? How does its surprising tone and message impact the reader hermeneutically?[29]

Framing the Pain

First, and quite obviously, the decreative curse indicates the extent of Job's anguish. The reader is meant to side with the literary Job, and the poem of chapter 3 gives us an insight into the depths of anguish that Job

[26] Seow, *Job 1–21*, 328.

[27] Hartley describes these laments as "the harshest words Job utters against himself in the entire book. They startle us. . . . The former Job 'did not sin or charge God with wrong' (1:22), but this Job verbalizes his bitterest feelings" (John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 101).

[28] "Though Job approaches the brink of cursing God, he does not. Instead he vents *the venom of his anguish* by wishing he were dead. He survives his darkest hour, since he neither curses God nor takes his fate into his own hands" (Hartley, *Job*, 101).

[29] I should emphasize here that I am not making a formal rhetorical argument here but rather discussing the poetic and thematic effect of this poem in its place within the book. For a more formal (and insightful) rhetorical study, see William C. Pohl, "Arresting God's Attention: The Intent and Rhetorical Strategies of Job 3," *BBR* 28 (2018): 1–19.

faces.[30] The language of decreation shows the extent of the chaos experienced by the central character. This is no light thing. The pious acceptances of the prologue, where Job refused to curse God, may lead the reader to assume that his devotion to YHWH is such that he is little impacted by the losses and personal suffering that he has faced.[31] Job 3 makes clear, first, that this is not the case and, second, that he will not move on easily.[32] Such is his anguish: he not only wants the world to stop but he wants his very existence to become nonexistence.[33] There are no philosophical niceties. There is no navel-gazing over the fact that his

[30] This, of course, is why some commentators describe this pericope as a soliloquy. As with the "To be or not to be" speech in *Hamlet* or Edmund's bastard soliloquy in *King Lear*, a soliloquy gives insight into the character's mental position that would otherwise be unknown to the audience. The nunnery scene sheds light on Hamlet's existential crisis and mental descent, and Edmund's speech shows the deep bitterness that has marked his whole life. Job 3, similarly, gives voice to a psychological position that the readers may assume to be true but of which they could not otherwise be certain. However, the real significance of Job 3 is not the mental insight that it brings but the complaint that it marks. The former is a precursor to, and essential part of, the latter. The establishment of cause is an essential part of complaint.

[31] The sudden change of tone is a frequent focus of discussion in the secondary literature. "The contrast between the Job of the prologue and the Job of the poem could not be sharper" (Hartley, *Job*, 101). Similarly, Kynes states, "Thus, the Job of the prologue is innocent of any fault. With this all interpreters should agree. But it is with the beginning of the poetic dialogue in chapter 3 and Job's cursing of the day of his birth that this judgement becomes more difficult to sustain" (Will Kynes, "The Trials of Job: Relitigating Job's 'Good Case' in Christian Interpretation," *SJT* 66 [2013]: 177).

[32] Walton suggests that "it would not do to leave the audience thinking of [Job] as superhumanly untouched by grief" (*Job*, 125). The persistence of Job's lament is frequently attested to throughout the following section of the book. See, for example 10:1–3 or the climactic defiance of 31:35–37.

[33] There is some discussion about whether this is a literal or non-literal death wish (see the discussion in Pohl, "Arresting God's Attention"); however, I am not sure how helpful this distinction actually is. Clearly, Job does not expect to drop dead as he curses the day of his birth. However, at the same time, such an approach displays something more than just cavalier attitude towards his own existence. Calling on the gods in the ancient world to end one's existence would be viewed as an extremely high-risk example of "tempting the fates." In that sense, although this is a "non-literal death wish" which is ultimately designed to invoke an encounter with the Divine, the extent of this expression of anguish infers that Job would not mind if the Almighty were to take him up on his offer.

stillbirth would have meant that his children never existed or the good that he has done would never have happened.[34] Nonexistence is better than such pain.[35]

> This poem, one of the great masterpieces of the work, is striking above all for its restraint. Not the restraint of Job's emotions, which are deep, raw and terrifying, as he showers with maledictions every aspect of the world that gave him existence or continues to support it. . . . The restraint that makes this poem of world stature is the exclusive concentration on feeling, without the importation of ideological questions. . . . [H]ere we are invited to view the man Job in the violence of his grief. Unless we encounter this man with his feelings we have no right to listen to the debates that follow; with this speech before us we cannot over intellectualize this book, but must always be reading it as the drama of a human soul.[36]

Initiating the Design Theme

Second, the "return to chaos" language highlights another key question of the book of Job. While the debate regarding theodicy—the tension between God's goodness and the continuing existence of evil or suffering—dominates much of the book, the text makes plain that there are other foci that are also of great significance to the author.[37] Another of the important questions of the book revolves around the issue of the divine design for the life of an individual faced with intolerable suffering. Certainly, this is the key question of the YHWH speeches:

> Who is this that darkens design (עצה) by words without knowledge? (Job 38:2)[38]

[34] "Job's curse functions as the expression of a wish, a way of saying that his life is so miserable that it is not worth all the good moments leading up to the crisis" (Longman, *Job*, 99).

[35] Walton, *Job*, 127.

[36] David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989), 104.

[37] See the helpful overview and discussion in Nicholson, "Limits," and also the comprehensive discussion in Antti Laato and Johannes C. De Moor, eds., *Theodicy in the World of the Bible* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003).

[38] Dhrome translates עצה as "providence" (see H. H. Rowley, *The Book of Job*, NCBC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 241). Wolters echoes this idea: "Here *ʿēṣâ* does not refer to 'counsel' in the sense of advice but rather to the providential plan of God, his 'sovereign governance' in ruling the world. . . . *ʿēṣâ*, thus understood, is 'the central concept of the divine speech at the end of Job. . . .' (Al Wolters, "יצה," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2, Willem A. VanGemeren, gen. ed. [Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996], 491).

The key issue from YHWH's perspective is not Job's questioning, even accusatory, lament. It is the fact that Job calls his plan, his design, his good purposes for every individual into question.[39] The language of darkening in 38:2 may imply more than simply "questioning" or "obscuring" the divine plan. It may be taken to imply an accusation that Job was daring to suggest that God's plans are not good but evil—darkening in the sense of morally besmirching YHWH's intentions for humanity and for the individual.[40] The question of design is first raised here in Job 3 with the appeal for a return to chaos. The implication of Job's initial voice is that primordial chaos would be better than the chaos of present reality.[41] The implied undertone is that YHWH's (or God's, depending on how one reads the text) control over the events of Job's life has somehow failed. For the profoundly theistic Hebrew culture, a cry to the universe is never *just* a cry to the universe. Job is railing *against God* in this chapter. As Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran argues: "A cry means something only in a created universe. If there is no creator, what is the good of calling attention to yourself?"[42] This surely is true of Job and the Hebrew worldview. He is not railing against the injustices of an unjust world. He is railing against God and the reason for this vociferous complaint is rooted in the experience of cataclysmic design failure. YHWH's plan has failed. Benign control has been lost to chaos in Job's life. So, a complete reversal to primordial chaos would be better than rampant disorder where there is the expectation of meaningful structure. At the heart of the decreative curse

[39] See Elaine A. Phillips, "Speaking Truthfully: Job's Friends and Job," *BBR* 18.1 (2008): 31–43, for a persuasive argument that Job's lament is affirmed as right and good by YHWH in the epilogue.

[40] See Walton, *Job*, 399. Interestingly, when repeating this accusation in 42:3, Job uses not the causative of חשך, but a different verb (the Hiphil of עלם). This may well be an attempt to distinguish his actual intent in proffering his lament from the way in which it is presented by YHWH in 38:2. Job seems to be implying that his intention was never to accuse YHWH of evil purpose but, rather, of loss of control. Either way Job acknowledges that his overall understanding was limited, and therefore skewed, in 42:1–6.

[41] Clines argues that herein lies Job's longing for Sheol "as a place where order reigns . . . an order where the conflicts of the absurd have been swallowed up by a pacific meaninglessness" (*Job I*, 105).

[42] Emil M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born,* trans. R. Howard (New York: Arcade, 2013), 177.

lies the assumption that something has gone seriously wrong with God's plan for Job's life.

A Lament Not a Soliloquy

There is in the commentaries something of a lack of clarity about how to read Job 3 from the perspective of its genre and consequent rhetorical effect on the text. Almost everyone is agreed that there are elements of lament in the second and third strophes of the poem.[43] However, it is also broadly acknowledged that this is not a "normal" lament.[44] As a result, there remains in the secondary literature an ambivalence or ambiguity regarding the type of text that we are dealing with in Job 3. Some read the poem, effectively, as an aside—an abstract expression of pain to give the reader an insight into Job's mental state that would otherwise be missing.

This leads to some conflicted descriptions of the chapter. Rowley entitles this chapter as "Job's Opening Soliloquy" but he goes on immediately to state that "Job utters his opening lament on his suffering" in the verses that follow.[45] Walton also describes the poem as a lament but suggests that Job has "not yet begun to blame God."[46] Seow presents the author as deliberately "subverting the individual lament form" in order to create an ambiguous picture—is Job accusing God of covenant unfaithfulness or not?[47] And Longman suggests that "Job's words here *resemble* those of a psalm of lament." However, he goes on to argue, "Looking more closely at Job 3, we see that Job's words are far from this type of lament . . . . Job's words are more like the grumbling of the Israelites in the wilderness than like the laments in the Psalms."[48]

The difficulty regarding type arises from the fact that many of the traditional markers of the individual lament are absent from this text: direct vocative address to God, specification of the cause of complaint (surely unnecessary here in Job 3), confession of sin (again, this would be counterproductive given Job's declarations of innocence), or the voice of praise and/or hope that is often found at the conclusion of a lament.

[43] A cursory trawl of the commentaries will provide ample evidence of this. See, for example, Francis I. Andersen, *Job*, TOTC (Leicester: IVP, 1976), 99–101; Clines, *Job I*, 89; or Hartley, *Job*, 95–100.

[44] See, as an example, Longman, *Job*, 106–7, and note also the counter arguments in Pohl, "Arresting God's Attention," 6–8.

[45] Rowley, *Job*, 38.

[46] Walton, *Job*, 125.

[47] Seow, *Job 1–21*, 337.

[48] Longman, *Job*, 106 (emphasis added).

However, it seems to me that this is a discussion that we need to put to bed. Job 3 is an individual lament. Job screams not at the air but at the Creator for removing all semblance of order from his life.[49]

The problem is that scholarship is, arguably, still too wedded to Gunkel's approach to genre where a whole list of criteria have to be observable before a poem can be classified as belonging to a particular genre.[50] The difficulty with any understanding of genre based in tightly-defined lists of characteristics has always been that few poems include every "typical" indicator and, therefore, we are left with many "mixed genre" psalms or psalms that are of a particular genre but lacking some of the key markers. More contemporary approaches to the study of genre have taken a different tack, one where genre is understood a little differently:

> Genre is a socially defined constellation of typified formal and thematic features in a group of literary works, which authors use in individualized ways to accomplish specific communicative purposes.[51]

Current understandings of genre are less focused on questions of inclusion and exclusion based on the presence or absence of specific typical formulations. There is now a broad acknowledgment of greater authorial freedom in the appropriation of form while still allowing that form to be recognized by the reader.[52] In other words, a lament can be recognized as a lament even without the presence of an explanation of cause or a concluding voice of praise. It is for this reason that most commentators instinctively describe the two "why" sections of Job 3 (vv. 11–19 and 20–26) as "laments," even if they are slightly unsure what to do with the opening curse.

Job 3 is a lament. The curse against the day of his birth is an implied complaint against God, the Creator of that (and every) day. Distinctions are important here: it is a *curse* against the day but a *complaint* against God. In that sense, the wish formulation contained in the curse is actually an expression not of illegitimate grumbling but of legitimate covenant

[49] See the Cioran quote above.

[50] Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon: Mercer University, 1998).

[51] Jeannine K. Brown, "Genre Criticism," in *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory*, ed. David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 146.

[52] Brown, "Genre Criticism," 146–47.

complaint.[53] Job believes that YHWH has not kept up his side of the covenant agreement and expresses his sense of grievance in this poem.

The primary confusion regarding form in Job 3 revolves around the absence of direct address to God. Typically, the complainant will speak directly to God in a psalm of lament.[54] The plaintiff believes that God is not only the source of his anguish but also, in contradictory fashion, the only possible solution to it. This is the dichotomy of lament. It is, effectively, a means of maintaining real relationship with YHWH in the face of the bitterest of circumstances.[55] Job 3 gives first voice a complaint that will become much more direct and explicit throughout the speech cycles and in his final defense in chapters 29–31. However, the complaint is present here from the very outset.

The day that is cursed (vv. 3–4)—as everyone knows—is created and its events ordained, like every other day, by YHWH. A clear rationale for the complaint implied in the curse is given in vv. 10 and 26. The typical "whys" of lament follow in vv. 11, 12, 16, 20, and 23. The object of address is implicit throughout much of the poem but lurks obviously behind the text. This is well illustrated by the divine passives of v. 20: "Why is light given to one who is toiling? Life to one bitter in soul?" The identity of the giver of that light is known to every reader. Finally, the cause becomes explicit in v. 23: "To a man whose way is hidden; *whom God has hedged in*?" The implicit is clearly expressed at last. *God* is the cause of these great injustices: existence where non-existence would be better, birth and life where stillbirth would have been more merciful, and continued life where the rest of death is preferable. This may not be the typical formal structure of individual lament that we observe in the psalms but this is clearly a covenant complaint poem.

Pohl describes the rhetorical effect of Job 3 in this way:

> The result of this is to delay the focal point of the complaint, God, which does not occur until v. 23b with אלוה. The delay stresses at the climactic point of the lament that God is addressed implicitly. This informs retroactively the prior complaints. The accusations expressed through the rhetorical questions proactively stress Job's rhetoric for the alleviation of his suffering. Given the nature of complaint . . . the address to God is designed to move him to action to bring relief. The tension builds throughout the speech, and it is only at the end that Job finally clarifies what his previous words have only hinted at: he is loudly, brashly, shockingly complaining against God.[56]

[53] Philip S. Johnston, "The Psalms and Distress," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 63–84; Jamie A. Grant, "The Hermeneutics of Humanity: Reflections on the Human Origin of the Laments," in *A God of Faithfulness: Essays in Honour of J. Gordon McConville on His 60th Birthday*, ed. Jamie A. Grant, Alison Lo, and Gordon J. Wenham, LHBOTS 538 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 182–202.

[54] See, e.g., Ps 44 (communal) or 88 (individual).

[55] Grant, "Hermeneutics of Humanity," 198.

A Framework for Restoration?

I wonder if there is not another significant effect to be drawn from the language of decreation in Job 3:3–10. It seems just possible that a complaint voiced in this unusual manner points beyond itself to a reality that is, in fact, ordered and, therefore, to the hope of restoration. All of the effects listed above stand: decreation is an expression of turmoil; it raises the question of design, and it is a specific formulation of lament. However, as the initial frame for the debates to follow, it seems possible that the author is also giving the reader an insight into the ultimate solution of Job's tension. The YHWH speeches in Job 38–41 are something of a curve ball. They do not provide us with the answer that we want (Why Job?). Instead they provide us with the answer that we need: *there is order in creation* and, therefore, in all of YHWH's ways, both in the cosmic realm and in the life of the individual.

There is a great deal of debate and discussion regarding the effect of the curse language in Job 3. Particularly in the older literature, there is extensive discussion of ancient Near Eastern incantations and their use.[57] This, however, seems somewhat to miss the point of Job's lament. It is extremely unlikely that Job actually expected his curse to be efficacious. It was, rather, an expression of implied complaint directed towards God. As Pohl points out, it was a plea for divine intervention. Job is voicing the fullness of his turmoil in terms of disrupted creation with the hope that YHWH will intervene to restore order to his life. The impossibility of the curse is, in fact, its point.

Longman brings some helpful rationality to proceedings: "There has been a lively debate over the significance of the curse in the OT. Some believe that the curse brings its own reality. . . . Of course, there is no way that Job's curse could come true."[58] No Hebrew reader would have expected an actual ontological impact on the day of Job's birth. For a culture with a strong view of divine sovereignty and a linear view of history, Job's

[56] Pohl, "Arresting God's Attention," 18, contra Clines, *Job I*, 104–5.

[57] See, e.g., Fishbane, "Jeremiah IV 23–26 and Job III 3–13."

[58] Longman, *Job*, 99.

nonexistence would never have been viewed by the reader as a real possibility. Therefore, the author is clearly doing something else with this poem. It is the very impossibility of decreation that points the reader back to the security of an ordered creation. The darkness cannot consume the light because God said, "Let there be light," and there was. Leviathan cannot be revived to restore chaos because he is created and controlled by YHWH (Job 41). So, on it goes. The decreative curse is a factual impossibility that—through its surprise effect—causes the reader to think about the stability and order of creation. The sun will rise tomorrow in the east and set in the west. Darkness will not overwhelm the light. The waters will not restore chaos. Although, humanly speaking, there will be days of despair when we simply do not want the night to end or the sun to rise, that ordered creation actually speaks hope and security into our depression and despondency.

Given that the author ends with the imagery of an ordered created reality (Job 38–41)—the rigorous and inescapable expression of divine providential design—as the "answer" to Job's angst, it seems likely that the decreation language of Job 3 is a reflective pointer toward that ultimate conclusion. Real, primordial chaos is impossible because YHWH has established order and constantly sets limits and boundaries.[59] This is indicated in the two heavenly assemblies of the prologue that immediately precede this poem. The heavenly beings *have to* respond to YHWH's summons and *limits* are placed on the satan's actions against Job. The heavenly imagery of the prologue is of a mysterious, by all means, but ordered reality. The human participants may experience that as chaos, but the perceived disorder is not really real. This poem makes it clear that the experience is indescribably painful for the literary Job, but that pain *is* part of an ordered reality—the perception of "chaos" is illusory. Describing turmoil in terms of decreation will always point the reflective reader towards the unchangeability of the established creation order.

Conclusion

Without revisiting the caveats expressed at the start of this article, the book of Job is very much a part of the Hebrew wisdom tradition. As is typical of true Hebrew wisdom, it will not look away. It will not accept a trite or easy answer. Nothing pat or pre-prepared will suffice. It will wrestle with the hardest of questions until it gets as close to an answer as is

[59] This is clearly implied in Prov 1–9 (see Van Leeuwen, "Liminality") and in the first YHWH speech (in particular Job 38).

possible given the limits of human cognition. The author of Job begins the poetic section of the book with an unflinching contemplation of human trauma. It is, undoubtedly, one of the literary masterpieces of the ancient world.[60] The voice of decreation is as surprising as it is powerful. The effects of that voice are incredibly poignant—describing the chaos of pain, questioning the divine order, expressing covenant complaint but, ultimately, pointing the reader to a stable reality beyond the human experience of disorder. In the end, Job realizes that comfort is to be found in the knowledge of a God who orders all things (42:1–6), even if our experience of that order is often shrouded in mystery beyond satisfactory comprehension. Job 3 validates our rage against God because it is only in voicing our complaint that we are able to maintain that perspective-transforming relationship with the Divine. Cursing the day of our birth—calling for its reversal—may be the only way to keep ourselves from functional atheism, where we no longer believe in a God who intervenes in *our* human reality. Decreative lament is always ultimately transformative.

[60] Clines, *Job I*, 104–5.