



Research article

THE NEED FOR WISDOM LITERATURE: TO UNDERSTAND THE SUFFERING OF THE STREET CHILDREN IN THE LIGHT OF THE BOOK OF JOB

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ABSTRACT



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The issue of children living on the streets is one that requires immediate attention in our society. The government has made some effort, although it is not nearly enough to solve the issue. The book of Job paints a clear picture of the compassion and kindness of God. Job, who is completely blameless, ends up having to deal with some terrible consequences. In addition to this, he was a sufferer of the phenomenon known as “retributive dogma.” The majority of Job's friends were convinced that he had broken some of the laws in some way to suffer such misfortunes. But Job, being the upright man that he was, would not listen to his friend and insisted that God answer his questions about his suffering. The article delves into the history of Job and poses the following question: Do children living on the streets, especially girls, have the right to demand that God listen to them and talk about their experiences living on the streets and why they are suffering, similar to how Job, who was a male and a wealthy influencer in his community, demanded that God listen to him and explain why He allowed him to suffer?

Keywords: *Street*

Children, Suffering, Job, God.



Many scholars have been attracted to The Book of Job over the years. It is one of the oldest of the Old Testament texts. Their research considers its historicity in terms of authorship, integrity, and hermeneutic relevance to its readers. It is a fascinating and distinctive work, in terms of its composition and literary genres. Even a cursory examination of the entire work reveals that it is a complicated book¹, as it contains two major literary forms — prose and poetry. The well-known Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann sees Job as a helpful, self-conscious reflection on being human in the Old Testament.² This article will concentrate mainly on Job’s concluding response regarding his suffering. Job was not satisfied with the council of his friends on the reason for his suffering, he was determined to hear from God; thus, his demand to hear from God is the source of wisdom literature and divine justice. In his quest to achieve this, he encountered God as the last possibility of vindication for his “blamelessness.” Additionally, the article will examine the suffering of street children.

It is crucial to consider the society in which Job flourished; Hamilton notes, “The author of Job envisions a society of hierarchies of status and reciprocal obligation.”³ Job, a wealthy man who hails from an elite community, makes it quite apparent that the only source of justice he will accept is that which comes from God. The question that needs to be asked is, what about those people who are disadvantaged, underprivileged, female, or children? Do they have the right to demand to hear from God about their suffering? Mays observes that “The approach to ethics [in Job] incorporates external action and inner attitude and the principle of ethical thinking.”⁴ Osborne⁵ and Perdue⁶ suggest that “in the past, educators and preachers frequently disregarded the importance of wisdom literature, which resulted in the misuse of this kind of literature.”; this article hopes to take up the challenge to encourage

¹ Steven L. McKenzie, *How to Read the Bible: History, Prophecy, Literature—Why Modern Readers Need to Know the Difference and What It Means for Faith Today* (Oxford: OUP USA, 2010), 103.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, ed. Rebecca J. Kruger Gaudino (Fortress Press, U.S., 2012), 489.

³ Mark Hamilton, ‘Elite Lives: Job 29—31 and Traditional Authority’, *Journal for The Study of The Old Testament* 32 (1 September 2007): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089207083766>.

⁴ James L. Mays, *HarperCollins Bible Commentary: Revised Edition*, Revised edition (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 388.

⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Revised and Expanded edition (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, US, 2006), 191.

⁶ Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, U.S., 2007), 1–2.



biblical scholarship by examining the psychosocial dimensions of Job's righteousness, to see how it may relate to human dignity, gender equality, social inclusion, and justice for street children.

The reputation of the Book of Job lies in its construction of wisdom. Douglas and Tenney explain the concept of wisdom in the context of ancient literature which originates from the Hebrew root word *ḥokmâ*, which can signify skill, experience, shrewdness, prudence, and wisdom.⁷ Brueggemann gives us a clear and insightful understanding of wisdom from the perspective of the Bible, which he explains as follows: "Wisdom in the Old Testament refers to a body of accumulated teaching that is based on discernment and reflection about the nature and mystery of life."⁸ We can recognize that "the reality of life is hard toil that involves constant discernment, fresh imaginative articulation, and sensitivity to matters that may challenge and veto old agreements" when we see things from the perspective of wisdom.⁹ So, wisdom has practical aspects for spirituality and life in general because it is high-quality knowledge put to use. The Book of Job is a collection of such wisdom.

Ceresko¹⁰ sees, "The concept of wisdom as both a significant cultural phenomenon and a component of spirituality for liberation is presented here. He gives the impression that the characters in wisdom literature and the authors themselves are aware of the relationship between divine and human life." Spirituality is not viewed by wisdom as an end in and of itself, detached from any relationship to the "ordinary human life" aspects of day-to-day living.¹¹ As a consequence of this, an individual's life and attitudes are subjected to critical evaluation in wisdom, either for acceptance or condemnation, as he goes on to explain, wisdom writers, portray a critical way of existing.¹² Thus, he suggests that: "we will be able

⁷J. D. Douglas, Merrill C. Tenney, and Moisés Silva, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Illustrated edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2011), 1529.

⁸Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, U.S., 2003), 232.

⁹235.

¹⁰Anthony R. Ceresko, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: Spirituality of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999), 8.

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¹²3.



to get a better grasp on what it means to have a wise spirituality if we can able to identify the morals and convictions that lie at the heart of the sage's advice."¹³

In the ancient Near East, wisdom literature was a broad category of writing.¹⁴ Dell observes that Job's requests and/or hostile statements against God and his companions, as well as God's final "response" to Job, are to Job's words, not to Job's troubles: "The wisdom worldview, which seeks to uncover ordering and patterns in the human experience of the world that provides certainty, is therefore presented with a significant challenge by this."¹⁵

As an illustration of participation in everyday life, Vincent P. Branick cites the beneficial impacts that biblical wisdom literature has in terms of disseminating moral and ethical education on how to live one's life with acceptable and profitable attitudes. As a result, it contributes to the provision of confidence in the face of the unknown future in ways that are meaningful and constructive.¹⁶ In light of the fact that Job's friends encouraged him throughout the book to work toward a more contrite relationship with God to have a prosperous future, Vincent P. Branick considers Job's three friends to be exemplars of optimistic wisdom.¹⁷ Yet, Job did not yield to such calls but remained focused on keeping his integrity and harmony with God; however, pessimistic in words, he was still optimistic about his righteousness, which became his vindication.¹⁸ As a result, wisdom theology is advanced by wisdom literature as well as wisdom ethics.

The concept of wisdom theology can be understood as the total of wisdom and wisdom ethics in terms of their roles as manifestations of divine sovereignty and sovereignty over life and the world. It is the demonstration of knowledge gained through experience and practice, done in awe or reverence of God and in accordance with the divinely revealed order of existence. This form of theology is important for influencing people's lives, both individually and collectively within the community of faith that is the church, so that they fear God and

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¹⁴Charles F. Pfeiffer, John Rhea, and Howard F. Vos, *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopaedia* (Chicago: Moody Pub, 1975), 1815.

¹⁵J. W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, 1st edition (Oxford; New York: OUP Oxford, 2008), 414–15.

¹⁶Vincent P. Branick, 'Wisdom, Pessimism, and "Mirth": Reflections on the Contribution of Biblical Wisdom Literature to Business Ethics', *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 34, no. 1 (2006): 73.

¹⁷77.

¹⁸Branick, 83.



live righteously.¹⁹ Bruce Birch and other scholars observe that: “wisdom theology is true ‘faith seeking understanding’ trying to determine what it is about God’s power and purpose that limits and permits, that authorities and engages human meaningfulness in day-to-day connections.”²⁰

The Book of Job shows that righteousness is not immune to suffering. Ngwa also agrees that it was an inner reality with outward evidence, but not for Job’s own sake but for God’s. Job’s piety and suffering are not unrelated to questions of economics, power, and above all, to the government of human communities and eventually of the creation. In this book, righteousness should be viewed from a variety of perspectives with various implications for comprehension, expectations, and implementations.²¹ Understanding issues of human dignity, gender equality, economics, power, social exclusion, and justice requires a close reading of the text.

Jonker and Lawrie explain that: “a careful study of the text itself is the only way to gain a grasp on the book’s exclusivity as it exists in its written form.” In engaging with the text, “reading text carefully demands you to have a discerning sense of every detail and the capacity to connect different aspects of the book coherently.” “[M]eaning does not lie in isolated elements but in how the elements are combined in the text,” which means that “one cannot regard the content of a text (what is said) and its form (how it is said) as separate.” As a result, “one must learn to see the text as a whole and its given details.”²² The proper understanding of the text discloses the ontological standing of human dignity.

Frits de Lange engages with the discourse on dignity in such a way that highlights the significance and role of dignity in humanity; in which he points out that: “Dignity is not a ‘value,’ interpreted as an abstract idea, but the moral qualification of real practises of social

¹⁹Leopoldo Cervantes-Orti, “Reading the Bible and Reading Life: Everyday Life Approaches to Wisdom Literature from Latin America”, *Calvin Theological Journal* 46 (2011): 278.

²⁰Bruce C. Birch, David L. Petersen, and Terence E. Fretheim, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Abingdon Press, 1999), 414.

²¹Kenneth Ngwa, ‘Did Job Suffer for Nothing? The Ethics of Piety, Presumption, and the Reception of Disaster in the Prologue of Job’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33, no. 3 (1 March 2009): 367, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089209102502>.

²²Douglas Lawrie and Louis Jonker, *Fishing for Jonah: Various Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (African Sun Press, 2005), 74–75.



recognition.”²³ Thus, it must be manifested in practical terms to another human being as ‘the other’. In virtue of the close relationship that exists between being and doing, de Lange continues by saying, “Whoever speaks of dignity behaves morally.”²⁴ This helps us understand that: “dignity is awarded ontological status; it becomes rooted in the greater scheme of things. Despite the fact that dignity can be defiled, it can never be destroyed.”²⁵ Bosman concludes his discourse by saying, “The concept of humanity being created in “God’s image” places us in the liminal space between the potential for grandeur and the possibility for weakness. This notion is based on the idea that we have the ability to mirror God’s image and resemble his likeness.”²⁶ Beverly Eileen Mitchell²⁷ also agrees that: “Since this dignity is a gift from God alone, it cannot be taken away by other people because God is its exclusive source.” Thus, “...having dignity is an essential component of what it means to be human.”²⁸

The book of Job illustrates the struggle and yearning of a soul that has seen better days. The events that take place in the book are not only an attempt to bring another interpretation of wisdom to the forefront of literature; rather, they are an attempt to vividly describe how a human being is and could be, regardless of whether they are under regular circumstances or not. This thought comes from a meditation on the fact that Job’s experience serves as a “symbol for the human condition” for many thinkers and theologians.²⁹

Preuss points out a multidimensional discussion of the Old Testament, touching on its social, political, theological, and significant ethical dimensions. In the narrative portion of the book, Job is depicted as a good and devout man; nevertheless, in the dialogue portion of the book, he acts impatiently and raises concerns about his own morality. As a result, H.D.

²³Frits De Lange, ‘The Hermeneutics of Dignity’, *Society of Biblical Literature*, *Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence*, written by L. Juliana Claassens and Klaas Spronk, 2013, 9.

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²⁵11.

²⁶Hendrik Jan Bosman, ‘Figuring God and Humankind: The Imago Dei in View of Anthropologies in the Old Testament’, *Fragile Dignity. Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence*, 2013, 52.

²⁷B.E. Mitchell, “*The Givenness of Human Dignity: A Response to the Essays of Frits De Lange and Hendrik Bosman*”, vol. *Fragile Dignity Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence*, Semeia Studies; v.72 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 67.

²⁸*Fragile Dignity Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence*:14.

²⁹John Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Cdr edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 505.



Preuss sees Job as a divided human being.³⁰ Eissfeldt observes that human struggles were sustained and prevailed over the oddities of life when he reflects on the theory of human suffering in the book, which in his belief, "...is not a theoretical solution to the problem of suffering which the original book offers, but rather we are shown how the pious man, who suffers despite being bound by belief in retribution, can overcome his suffering in practice." [T]here Job accomplished this by placing himself, with an ever-increasing level of trust, into the arms of God, who poses a challenge to his moral self by mandating undeserved pain and so appears to be his adversary."³¹

Job was an ancient figure in an ancient patriarchal context, which is a plausible idea by many scholars. Newsom sees him as a village patriarch who might have a very significant representation,³² an individual who lived in the past and was expected to uphold extremely rigorous moral and ethical standards.³³ Job emerged from this ancient environment, which amplifies his pursuit of justice in terms of his suffering. Even though the fact that he is innocent due to his steadfast grip on his integrity, Job is given the opportunity in the context of a legal polemic to call God to action in terms of a definitive response.³⁴ Fohrer reads the context of Job's narrative, in which the narrator highlights "the longing for restoration and the challenge to God by Job."³⁵

Wisdom theology is faith in Yahweh, which seeks to understand the meaning and purpose of life as revealed by God through everyday life experiences.³⁶ In the ancient Near East, the understanding of "retributive theology", or life based on deeds and consequences, was understood and accepted as a conventional order of the day. This is evident throughout the dialogues in Job's friends' wisdom theology. Job's friends were so certain that he was suffering for no reason and that catastrophe had been fallen him as a result of something he had done wrong (Job 4, 5 8, 11, 15, 18, 20, 22). This way of understanding the world can be

³⁰H.D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 129.

³¹Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947), 467.

³²Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary, Third Edition: Revised and Updated*, Updated edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 212.

³³John B. Job, *Where Is My Father? Studies in the Book of Job*, 2nd Revised edition (Ilkeston: Moorley's Print & Publishing, 1993), 42.

³⁴Michael Brennan Dick, 'The Legal Metaphor in Job 31', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1979): 37–50.

³⁵J. Philip Hyatt, James L. Crenshaw, and John T. Willis, eds., *Essays in Old Testament Ethics: J. Philip Hyatt, in Memoriam* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1974), 4.

³⁶Birch, Petersen, and Fretheim, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 414.



found, for example, in the customs and cultures of India. In these contexts, disasters, diseases, and other misfortunes are frequently interpreted as the result of a specific act that someone committed, which infuriated the spiritual world and incurred their wrath, among other negative consequences. According to my experience, street children especially girl child was accused of being born as a girl and bringing misfortune to their families.

According to Parsons, the Book of Job challenges the interpretation of conventional wisdom by placing it in its historical and cultural context. However, Job's experience as well as the utterances of Yahweh, in which he describes chaos as being a part of the world that he created and controls, disrupts and questions such conventional understanding or perception. The "retributive dogma" of that time period is addressed and refuted in the book of Job. Although God does not have to behave in accordance with this manmade retribution doctrine, He will normally bless the good and punish the wicked.³⁷

Like Job, street children are in pain and puzzled by life and ask many searching questions. In addition, this is an essential component of the traditional way of life in Indian culture. The question of "who" or "what" is frequently framed in terms of "who" is being responsible for "what," but the search is always to know the cause behind a particular occurrence. However, one of the most important things to take away from the book of Job is the fact that Job's "Why-me, God?" inquiries were not answered; even when God spoke out of the storm there was no clear answer. (Job 38-42:6). The friends of Job made an effort to explain, but despite their sincerity, they came to the incorrect conclusion that the entire scenario about Job's life and experiences was best understood by having a faulty evaluation and judgement of it (42:7, 8). Thus, wisdom theology or conventional understanding of deeds and consequences are challenged in the Book of Job when a righteous, blameless, upright servant (Job) struggles from an extraordinary situation to brokenness and disability without reason (2:3). Branick points out, "The truly mature person lives his life based on profound trust, rather than on fabricated answers."³⁸

It is a painful irony that Job has been a person who has been doing his best to keep himself pure and righteous before God in his thoughts and actions (31:1;5-12 etc.), yet he

³⁷Gregory W. Parsons, 'Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Job', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 604 (1994): 403-4.

³⁸Branick, 'Wisdom, Pessimism, and "Mirth"', 83.



suffers calamity as if he had done wrong in the eyes of God. This is because of a wisdom tradition that believes that God usually treats people according to their actions, rewarding the righteous with good things, and punishing the wicked with calamities. Job ironically refers to God as his adversary (31:35 cf. 9; 10; 16), whereas God has been proud and fond of Job as a loyal servant in God's testimony about Job to Satan (1:8; 2:3). So, is it the street children who suffer for nothing and without their fault uphold high dignity in God's eyes?

It is evident that dignity was also extended to vulnerable people in the wisdom literature, such as the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the destitute (31:16-23) when Job says:

If I have withheld anything that the poor desired or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail or have eaten my morsel alone. The orphan has not eaten from it— for from my youth I reared the orphan like a father, and from my mother's womb I guided the widow— if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or a poor person without covering, whose loins have not blessed me, and who was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep; if I have raised my hand against the orphan because I saw I had supporters at the gate; then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket, for I was in terror of calamity from God, and I could not have faced his majesty.

The pursuit of human dignity and the re-humanization of persons who have been demeaned for a range of reasons and in a variety of methods and regions are both difficult challenges for Indian society. From the Christological perspective, “holiness as wholeness...implies that justice is done to all God creatures, to humans and the non-human part of creation.”³⁹ As could be seen in Job's pious life, “holiness is manifested in solidarity with the poor and protest against poverty.”⁴⁰ Thus, holiness (purity) becomes an essential element of dignity: “holiness implies reverence for life, both the life of human and natural societies.”⁴¹ The children living on the streets maintained their purity of heart despite having their dignity taken away from them.

³⁹N Koopman, “Holiness and the Public Life in South Africa: The Quest for Wholeness, Embrace and Justice”, *Colloquium* 40, no. 2 (2008): 167.

⁴⁰172.

⁴¹173.



The Indian culture is known for its many forms of discrimination, stigmatisation, victimisation, and injustice that are practised amongst various Indian groups that come from different castes, races, ethnicities, tribes, genders, sexual orientations, and socio-economic positions. These disturbing realities in India are enough to raise our awareness and willingness to work earnestly and conclusively to contribute to enhancing the unfortunate situations of children on the streets. Even in the most heartbreaking of life circumstances, the life of Job and the events that transpired in his life have opened our eyes to the sovereignty of God. Faith ought to be demonstrated in our day-to-day lives and deeds as vital and genuine evidence of our familiarity with and devotion to God, maintaining our commitment regardless of the circumstances. But how will street children do all this?

According to my understanding, the children are suffering on the streets because human beings cannot find the wisdom of their own accord, since it is hidden. This also is true, especially since human beings are not looking for wisdom; regardless of how humanity toils and searches for something of material value and are unable to enjoy the treasures of wisdom since they are preoccupied with acquiring material treasure. Moreover, humans do not rest on God to bring what is hidden from them, such as wisdom. Wisdom proclaims that those who seek her find her (Prov 8:17). When they do, they find life and receive favour from God (Prov 8:35). Human beings are lovers of material possessions, which bring suffering to the world. Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness! The more you have, the more people come to help you spend it. So, what good is wealth—except perhaps to watch it slip through your fingers! (Eccl. 5:10-11).

The desire for more possession and denying the rights of other human beings is the result of a lack of wisdom. Proverb 4:5-9 mentions the importance of wisdom. Amid the suffering, Job holds on to wisdom. Humans need to realise that material possessions can be taken away but not wisdom:

⁵Get wisdom; develop good judgment.

Don't forget my words or turn away from them.

⁶Don't turn your back on wisdom, for she will protect you.

Love her, and she will guard you.

⁷Getting wisdom is the wisest thing you can do!



And whatever else you do, develop good judgment.

⁸ If you prize wisdom, she will make you great.

Embrace her, and she will honour you.

⁹ She will place a lovely wreath on your head;
she will present you with a beautiful crown.”

In conclusion, at the close of the book of Job regarding his suffering and his entire life, the climax of Job’s reply to his friends, as well as to God is his dire need to urge God to respond to him publicly and decisively, either to forgive him or to declare his offence so that all people may hear and know why he was suffering. Job’s attempts to persuade God to respond to him are evident in his vocal ranting, of his own life in pieces, and bearing it out so that everyone may see and know both his private and public existence. Job’s attempt to get God to respond to him is shown in the book of Job. Job did not deserve to suffer for anything that he had done wrong (2:3); as a result, his life experience, which took place within a context that is very much aware of the retributive dogma, was a serious challenge and a call away from the common understanding of life in such a stereotypical way and into another level of God’s interaction with God’s people based on God’s grace rather than for anything that they have done. I rest my case in this note that in contemporary India, the need is for advanced (and realistic) wisdom integrity, a contemporary reaction and offering of hope, human dignity, gender equality, social inclusion, and justice, in addition to the theological importance of wisdom literature in our day-to-day existence. The psychosocial dimensions of Job’s righteousness lie in the faithfulness of God. In today’s context, God’s faithfulness is explained in the suffering of children on the streets. As God is suffering with them on the street too.

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