



*Lectio
Divina
in Job*

READING JOB TODAY WITH THE FATHERS

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Introduction

The first extensive Christian commentary on the book of Job is a series of twenty-two homilies by Origen of Alexandria (b. 185; fl. c. 200-254), later translated into Latin by Hilary of Poitiers, and then unfortunately lost to posterity. It was not until the end of the fourth century that Christian commentary on Job began to flourish, perhaps because the growing instability of the Roman Empire called forth the kind of questions and concerns that the book addresses.

As with much of the Biblical exegesis of the time, there is a noticeable difference between commentaries on Job in the Alexandrian tradition, and those in the Antiochian vein – the former featuring an emphasis on allegory, and the latter focusing on a literal interpretation of the text. Prominent among the Antiochian commentaries is that of John Chrysostom (344/54-407), while an example of the Alexandrian tradition is that of Didymus the Blind (c. 313-398).

The exegetical distinction was carried into the west, where Augustine (354-430) produced a brief literal commentary, *Adnotationes in Job*, and Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) a more voluminous allegorical one, *Moralia in Job*. Of further interest are the commentaries of Hesychius of Jerusalem (fl. 412-450) and Ephrem the Syrian (b. c. 306; fl. 363-373), which draw from both the literal and the allegorical traditions.

While both of these exegetical approaches contribute greatly to our understanding and appreciation of the book of Job, I would argue that in our own time we may be particularly helped by the Alexandrian tradition, precisely because it goes against the grain of how we have been told we ought to read the Scriptures for the past few centuries.

The Fathers in this tradition saw the figure of Job as a type of Christ both in his extreme suffering and in his holiness. By extension, they saw Job also as a type of the Church, the body of Christ, and as a type of the individual Christian, formed in holiness by suffering in union with Christ for the sake of the gospel.

Invitation

I would like us now to listen to the words of Scripture and those of the Fathers, allowing them to speak to us about the suffering of the Church today, and how that suffering, in the spirit of Job, can form us in holiness if we will let it.

What follows is a series of six moments of lectio divina. Lectio divina is an ancient practice of praying with Holy Scripture as well as other spiritual texts. It has formed the bedrock of contemplative prayer in the monastic orders since the time of the Fathers. Lectio divina consist of four movements: *lectio* or reading, *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). Lectio is prayerful reading of the selected text. Meditatio is becoming aware of a certain meaning in that text. Oratio is conversing with God about that meaning. Contemplatio is resting in the awareness of having encountered God in His word.

Each of the exercises which follow will comprise a reading of a selected passage from the book of Job (*lectio*), a selected reading from the Fathers on that same passage (*meditatio*), an invitation to consider the text prayerfully in our current circumstances (*oratio*), and a brief time of silent prayer to close (*contemplatio*).

It is hoped that this time of prayerful listening will not only model a way of reading Job for the renewal of the future church, but also bear fruit for us and for our present ministries.

Let us pray.

Job 1:14-21

LECTIO

¹⁴And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them: ¹⁵And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

¹⁶While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

¹⁷While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

¹⁸While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: ¹⁹And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

²⁰Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, ²¹And said, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

MEDITATIO

For not a single thing that we possess is properly our own. We are properly owners of only one possession, that is, godliness.

- CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (C. 150-215), CATENA: FRAGMENT I (ANF 2:577)

Those who lost all their worldly possessions in the sack of Rome, if they owned their possessions as they had been taught by the apostle who himself was poor without, but rich within – they could say in the words of Job: "the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." For if many were glad that their treasure was stored in places which the enemy chanced not to light upon, how much better founded was the joy of those who, by the counsel of their God, have fled with their treasure to a citadel which no enemy can possibly reach! "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

- AUGUSTINE (354-430), CITY OF GOD 1:10 (NPNF 1 2:7-8)

ORATIO

The sack of Rome began on August 24, 410 and lasted for three days. It followed a series of sieges over a two-year period that had left the city of Rome decimated by starvation and disease. The desecration of ancient historical and cultural landmarks, as well as the kidnapping of prominent Roman citizens, was the final blow to a devastated people. Tens of thousands fled the city, never to return.

While the Church in Rome escaped major damage, its members suffered loss of property, means, and resources, even as they were being called upon to take a larger role in a society that had begun to implode.

Augustine invited the Christians of his day to respond to this challenge in the spirit of Job, who lost everything he had in one day, and still worshipped God; in the spirit of St Paul, who said, “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things” (Phil 3:8); and most of all in the spirit of Christ Himself, who for our sake “became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:8).

- *How have we as a church responded to the loss of our members, our property, our material resources, and our status in society?*
- *What kind of attitude does God want us to take towards the challenges these losses present?*
- *Can these challenges be an opportunity for growth in holiness?*

CONTEMPLATIO

[Silence.]



Job 2:7-9

LECTIO

⁷So went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown.

⁸And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes.

⁹Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die.

MEDITATIO

Now, since the betrayer had been defeated in every battle, had failed in all his attempts, had been hindered in all his hunts, had been deprived of all his schemes, and all his traps had been broken, after destroying Job's wealth, after the death of his numerous children, after ripping Job's body with his blows, as a last, and in the betrayer's opinion, most compelling resource, he leads his wife against Job.

- HESYCHIUS OF JERUSALEM (FL. 412-450), HOMILIES ON JOB 4.2.9 (PO 42.1:138)

ORATIO

Hesychius suggests that for Job, an even greater trial than the loss of all his possessions, the death of all his children, and the affliction of his body, is the betrayal that comes from within: the voice that urges us to “curse God, and die.”

If, with the Fathers, we regard Job as a type of Christ and the suffering of Job as a type of the Redeemer’s passion and death, then we can see in the words of Job’s wife a foreshadowing of Christ’s betrayal by His own followers. That is, every act of the church’s unfaithfulness to the gospel can be described as a betrayal of the Bridegroom by His bride. When we are unfaithful, it is a far greater affliction to our Lord, a far greater loss to the Church, than any other.

“Blessed be the name of the Lord,” said Job. “Curse God and die,” said Job’s wife.

- *In the midst of all that has changed in our church and in our world, has our fear, grief, and discouragement led us to attitudes or courses of action which are ultimately a betrayal rather than an affirmation of the gospel?*
- *Have we “cursed” rather than “blessed” our Lord’s name, by failing to love as He loves?*
- *Can we as a church find holiness in our willingness to suffer for and with the Beloved?*

CONTEMPLATIO

[Silence.]

 Job 3:2-10

LECTIO

²And Job spake, and said, ³Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived. ⁴Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. ⁵Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. ⁶As for that night, let darkness seize upon it; let it not be joined unto the days of the year, let it not come into the number of the months. ⁷Lo, let that night be solitary, let no joyful voice come therein. ⁸Let them curse it that curse the day, who are ready to raise up their mourning. ⁹Let the stars of the twilight thereof be dark; let it look for light, but have none; neither let it see the dawning of the day: ¹⁰Because it shut not up the doors of my mother's womb, nor hid sorrow from mine eyes.

MEDITATIO

“Let the day perish wherein I was born,” not the day I was formed but that “wherein I was born.” God, in fact, forms me into goodness, but Eve, who transgressed, conceives me into sadness. To be sure, Eve began to conceive and give birth after the fall in paradise and after the transgression due to the miserable nourishment of the tree.

- HESYCHIUS OF JERUSALEM (FL. 412-450), *HOMILIES ON JOB* 6.3.3 (PO 42.1:170)

For a person “adds sin to sin” who, over and above what he has done, justifies his error. He does not “leave the night alone” who also adds vindications to support the darkness of his fault. Thus, the first man Adam, when questioned concerning the night of his error, would not allow his “night” to remain alone. God’s questioning called Adam to repentance, but Adam responded by justifying himself, saying, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I did eat.” Adam covertly blames his Maker for the fault of his own transgression. It was as if Adam said, “You provided me with an occasion for sin, because you gave me the woman.” Therefore, the branch of this sin remains manifest in the human race up to the present time. We continue to justify our misdeeds.

- GREGORY THE GREAT (C. 540-604), *MORALS ON THE BOOK OF JOB* 4.37-39 (LF 18:207-9)

ORATIO

Because the Fathers saw Job as a type of the Church, they interpreted his cursing of the day of his birth as a topos representing mankind's cursing of the day of Adam's fall. (This is in contrast to other Fathers, largely in the west, who saw the fall as *felix culpa* – the “happy fault” which made the Incarnation necessary. It was a “fortunate fall,” they said, because it brought a greater good to us than could ever have arisen if mankind had never sinned.)

- *Just as Job's anguish over his loss leads him to curse the day of his birth, is the Church's temptation to curse its own day, its losses and its changes in fortune?*
- *Is it possible for us as a church to see a greater good coming out of loss and change?*
- *Rather than pointing the finger of blame as Adam did, can we embrace God's invitation to repentance as an essential path to holiness for the Church, opening the way for what God desires to do in and through us?*

CONTEMPLATIO

[Silence.]

Job 28:12-28

LECTIO

¹²But where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding? ¹³Man knoweth not the price thereof; neither is it found in the land of the living. ¹⁴The depth saith, It is not in me: and the sea saith, It is not with me. ¹⁵It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof. ¹⁶It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx, or the sapphire. ¹⁷The gold and the crystal cannot equal it: and the exchange of it shall not be for jewels of fine gold. ¹⁸No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls: for the price of wisdom is above rubies. ¹⁹The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it, neither shall it be valued with pure gold. ²⁰Whence then cometh wisdom? and where is the place of understanding? ²¹Seeing it is hid from the eyes of all living, and kept close from the fowls of the air. ²²Destruction and death say, We have heard the fame thereof with our ears. ²³God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof. ²⁴For he looketh to the ends of the earth, and seeth under the whole heaven; ²⁵To make the weight for the winds; and he weigheth the waters by measure. ²⁶When he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder: ²⁷Then did he see it, and declare it; he prepared it, yea, and searched it out. ²⁸And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

MEDITATIO

“For he looketh to the ends of the earth, and seeth under the whole heaven; To make the weight for the winds; and he weigheth the waters by measure.”

God’s “looking” is the renewing to his grace the things that were lost and undone. For by his very glance he restrains the evils of our lightness and imparts the great value of maturity. When Wisdom from above fills souls, it renders them weighty with imparted maturity. This is not the same weightiness of which it is said, “You children of men, how long with a heavy heart?” (Ps 4:2) For it is one thing to be weighty in relation to good counsel and another to be weighed down in relation to sin. It is one thing to be weighty by faithfulness, another to be weighty by wrongdoing. For this latter weightiness has the weight of burden, the other the weight of merit. Therefore, souls receive weight so that they should not from this day forward with light motion move away from their aim at God, but made to settle into him with immoveable weightiness of constancy.

ORATIO

For the Fathers, the personified figure of Wisdom in the Old Testament is a type of Christ.

Yes, God's hand is displayed in the wonders of creation, and yet the creation cannot, of itself, impart Wisdom to us. Only the source of all Wisdom, our Lord Himself, can do so. Through Wisdom, says Gregory, God gives us the "weight" of spiritual maturity.

- *Through the challenges our church has faced in recent years, where, and to whom, have we looked for Wisdom?*
- *In all our struggles as a church, are we aware of having the "weight" of good counsel, faithfulness, and constancy, or the "weight" of wrongdoing and heaviness of heart?*
- *What can we do to seek Wisdom from Wisdom's true source?*

CONTEMPLATIO

[Silence.]

Job 38:1-7

LECTIO

¹Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, ²Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? ³Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. ⁴Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. ⁵Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? ⁶Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; ⁷When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

MEDITATIO

“The morning stars sang together,” that is, those stars that also rise and appear in the evening. Therefore, we say that Christ is signified through the term morning and the apostles through stars; and the teachers, sons of the angels, are defined as participants in the angelic nature.

- EPHREM THE SYRIAN (B. C. 306; FL. 363-373), COMMENTARY ON JOB 38.7 (ESOO 2:16)

“Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened?” Here “the foundations” represent the preachers. The Lord first put them in the church, and on them the structure of the building was developed. That is the reason why the priest, by entering the tabernacle, had to wear twelve stones on his breast, because our high priest, who offers himself for us, giving us from the beginning firm preachers, wore twelve stones under his head in the upper part of his body. And so the holy apostles are the stones that constitute the main ornament of the breast and are the foundations that make the building firm on the ground.

- GREGORY THE GREAT (C. 540-604), MORALS ON THE BOOK OF JOB 28.14 (CCL 143B:1405-6)

ORATIO

The Fathers saw, in the creation of the earth and stars, a type of the founding of the Church on the teaching of Christ and His holy Apostles. At the dawn of that new creation, the Church was never more materially poor, and never more spiritually rich.

- *Or was it? Have two thousand years of faithfulness and holiness not left us with an even greater treasure than that with which the Church began its life?
All the saints – the martyrs, confessors, and doctors of the Church, the Fathers, the mystics, the holy men and women of all ages – haven't their lives and witness and teaching and prayers nourished, sustained and enriched us – even transformed us?*
- *In all our present struggles, what would happen if we as a church made a point of drinking constantly and consciously from this living fountain of holiness and truth?*

CONTEMPLATIO

[Silence.]



Job 42:1-6

LECTIO

¹Then Job answered the LORD, and said, ²I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. ³Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. ⁴Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. ⁵I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. ⁶Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

MEDITATIO

To hear is, with us, to adapt our ear, which is in one place, to a sound that comes from another. But with God, on the other hand, to whom nothing is external, hearing is properly for him to perceive our longings that are rising up beneath him. For us then to speak to God, who is acquainted with the hearts even of those that hold their peace, is not for us to utter what we think with the words of our throat, but to long for him with eager desires. A person asks a question in order to be able to learn that of which he is ignorant; for a person to question God is to acknowledge that he is ignorant in his sight. But for God, to reply is for him to instruct with his secret inspirations the one who humbly acknowledges his ignorance.

- GREGORY THE GREAT (c. 540-604), *MORALS ON THE BOOK OF JOB* 35.4 (LF 31:664)

ORATIO

When, in the midst of deep suffering, our confidence in God's loving-kindness is shaken, doubt in God's providence always leads us to question Him, that is, to articulate our questions to Him in our prayers.

Yet when we speak thus to God, Gregory says, it is not simply a matter of vocalizing our discontent. Our Lord knows what is in our hearts even when we remain silent. Rather, we question God in order to learn from Him.

- *How can we as a church "question" God in ways that express not just our pain, but our deep longing for God and our hunger for His truth?*
- *Can we question God even as we trust in Him?*

CONTEMPLATIO

[Silence.]

