

THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD: COMMUNITY AS A MEANS OF GRACE IN JOB

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Abstract

As extreme loss and suffering descend on Job, he remains oblivious to being tested by a heavenly adversary who doubts that Job fears God “for nothing” (1:9). Job passes the tests, God admits to being incited against Job for nothing (2:3), but Job continues to suffer. All the while, he fiercely protests the hiddenness of God that compounds his suffering. Who or what might have mediated God’s presence to Job? It is untimely to formally consider the “means of grace” emphasised by John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement. Job’s friends and community held the most potential to mediate the presence of a hidden God to Job but largely fail. This paper explores the book of Job’s subtle theology of community as a means of grace, mediating the presence of God. After examining the anachronistic Wesleyan formulation of the means of grace, evidence of community as a potential means of grace in the book of Job is examined. This includes Job’s prior example of exemplary faith embedded in community, Job’s unfulfilled expectations of his friends, God’s congratulatory estimation of Job and chastising evaluation of his friends, and the negligible transformation of Job’s community into a means of grace in the epilogue. Finally, the contemporary implications of community as an abiding means of grace will be briefly examined.

Keywords

means of grace, the book of Job, community, John Wesley, hiddenness of God, suffering

The central character of the book of Job is described straight away by the narrator as blameless, upright, fearing God, and avoiding evil (Job 1:1). God reiterates this characterisation in the celestial courtroom in two conversations with the Accuser (*ha-satan*: 1:8 and 2:3).¹ In Job’s cultural setting—lacking a developed theology of an afterlife with associated eternal rewards—Job and his companions do not question the connection between Job’s integrity and his initial prosperity. The theological critique arises with the Accuser (*ha-satan*) who questions how a reward system based on retributive justice affects Job’s motives. Thus, he disputes with God whether Job

1 As in Zech 3:1–2, the definite article identifies this as a title and not yet a proper name. Only very late in the OT is this word used as the personal name of a demonic figure. This title has been variously translated by scholars as Accuser, Examiner, Challenger, Prosecutor, Agent Provocateur, Adversary, and even Executioner.

fears God “for nothing” (*khinnam*) (1:9).² Then the Accuser (*ha-satan*) enacts, with God’s indulgence, a series of tests. As a result, extreme and inexplicable personal loss inundates Job. In four hyperbolic and overlapping courier reports he is advised that three thousand camel have been stolen, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and seven thousand sheep slaughtered, and all ten of Job’s children and those serving on his estate have perished.

Job profoundly mourns these losses, while maintaining his integrity and refusing to curse God. God accuses the Accuser (*ha-satan*) of having incited him against Job for nothing (*khinnam*) (2:3).³ Still suspicious, the Accuser inflicts Job with extreme bodily suffering. After Job successfully passes this second test, the Accuser departs the story never to return. Neither Job, the four surviving messengers, nor any other characters in the account are ever made aware of the divine council meetings, the Accuser’s costly experiments, nor Job’s success in passing the tests. Even the informed readers are soon bewildered by Job’s ongoing suffering, enduring through another forty chapters of poetic dialogue set within the prose frame.⁴ Job’s prolonged suffering is compounded by the unresponsiveness of God.

Job’s extensive suffering is inconsistent with his previous understanding of and commitment to the retribution principle. With bold and unrestrained speech, Job complains about God’s relentless, unmerited, crushing attack. With courtroom language and analogies, he demands that God either reveal the charges against him or vindicate him. He is met with God’s continued silence. Job fiercely protests God’s hiddenness. This central complaint is touched on in Job 9:11: “Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him; he moves on, but I do not perceive him.” The clearest exposition of the hiddenness of God, however, is found in Job 23:3–9:

Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
I would lay my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would learn what he would answer me
and understand what he would say to me.
Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No, but he would give heed to me.
There the upright could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

2 All biblical references will be in the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

3 Samuel E Balentine, “For No Reason,” *Interpretation* 57, no. 4 (2003): 10–12; “Look At Me and Be Appalled.” *Essays on Job, Theology, and Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, Biblical Interpretation Series 190 (Brill, 2021), 113.

4 Paul Kang-Kul Cho, “The Integrity of Job 1 and 42:11–17,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2014): 230–51.

“If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

In the last stanza, Job argues for the totality of God’s absence (cf. Psalm 139:7–12, which by contrast affirms the inescapability of God’s presence). Not only is God unresponsive to Job’s suffering but, according to Job, God has failed in his responsibilities in maintaining universal justice (24:1–17). Although Job places God on trial, he does not seek a miraculous restoration of his estate. Instead, he yearns for God’s renewed presence and friendship. Eventually, God will speak to Job (38–41), but the pain and trauma of the interim is profound. Could Job’s community have diminished his suffering by mediating God’s presence to Job in meaningful and practical ways?

Centuries after Job, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, spoke extensively about ordinary “means of grace” by which people could experience the mediated, but real and immediate, presence of God. Many of these means, such as the Eucharist, were unavailable to Job in his time and place. Who or what could have mediated the presence of God to Job? Job’s community held the most potential to be a means of grace to him, but they largely failed.

This paper argues that the book of Job subtly offers a theology of community as a means of grace, mediating the presence of God. It maintains that this is a perpetual and requisite function of community. After examining the anachronistic Wesleyan formulations of the means of grace, several aspects of the book of Job will be highlighted as evidence of its theological principle. This includes Job’s prior example of exemplary faith embedded in community, Job’s unfulfilled expectations of his friends, God’s congratulatory estimation of Job and chastising evaluation of his friends, and the negligible transformation of Job’s community into a means of grace in the epilogue. Finally, the contemporary implications of community as an abiding means of grace will be briefly examined.

Means of Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition

For John Wesley and contemporary Wesleyan thinkers, “means of grace” refers to those practices and activities through which individuals can experience God’s grace and deepen their relationship with him. This includes acts such as prayer, reading and meditating on Scripture, participation in the sacraments (like baptism and communion), fellowship with other believers, and acts of service and love. These means are seen as channels through which God’s grace is made available, enabling believers to grow in faith and holiness. Although John Wesley affirmed that grace was a free gift of God springing from the merits of Christ alone, he insisted that such grace flows through ordinary means and becomes available through participation in

them. Wesley used the term “means of grace” for an increasing number of individual and collective Christian practices in his sermons and writings.

Wesley categorised the means of grace into three pairings. Firstly, means of grace could be either “general” or “particular” means. General means of grace are the faithful dispositions toward the pursuit of transformation in the Christian life (e.g. denying oneself, taking up one’s cross). Particular means are more specific acts of worship and discipline. Secondly, Wesley distinguishes “instituted means”—established by Christ and belonging to the universal church throughout time—from “prudential means”—adapted to human situations in different times, cultures, and contexts.⁵ Finally, Wesley’s third distinction was based on the orientation of the human action. Practices directed toward God are designated “works of piety,” and those directed toward one’s neighbour fall into the category of “works of mercy.”

Works of mercy covered a “range of possible contributions to the welfare of others—from clothing and shelter to healthcare and education, to basic friendship.”⁶ Prior to Wesley, these were not typically identified as a means of grace. Wesley, however, viewed them as such and valued them higher than works of piety. Thus, in his sermon “On Zeal,” he argued “whenever, therefore, one interferes with the other, works of mercy are to be preferred. Even reading, hearing, prayer, are to be omitted, or to be postponed, ‘at charity’s almighty call’—when we are called to relieve the distress of our neighbour, whether in body or soul.”⁷ Several Wesleyan scholars have offered explanations for Wesley’s preference of works of mercy. Knight argues that works of mercy “are more than *means* of grace; they are acts of love, which is the *end* of religion.”⁸ Randy Maddox explains that because of the reciprocity between love for others and love for God, works of mercy deepen people’s relationship with God’s empowering presence and reshape their moral natures into the image of Christ.⁹

John Wesley and Wesleyan scholars after him primarily emphasise the transformational effect of these practices on the practitioners, whether exercised individually or in community. For individuals, practicing the means of grace is a “framework for the spiritual life,”¹⁰ the “environmental context for Christian discipleship,”¹¹ provides “a rich resource for Wesleyans seeking to shape others into

5 Dean G. Blevins, “The Means of Grace: Toward a Wesleyan Praxis of Spiritual Formation,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 79.

6 Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 181.

7 John Wesley, “On Zeal,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, Bicentennial ed., vol. 3 (Abingdon Press, 1986), 314.

8 Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace*, vol. 3 (Scarecrow Press, 1992), 4.

9 Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 181.

10 Andrew C. Thompson, *The Means of Grace: Traditional Practice in Today’s World* (Seedbed, 2015), 135.

11 Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Abingdon Press, 1972), 119.

Christian identity,”¹² and is deemed essential for renewing humanity in formative holiness. Practiced corporately, the means of grace form the community “into a sacramental reality of accountability and action” and extend worship into the daily life of the community. By living out Christian perfection and practicing the eschatological new creation in the here and now, these practices form the community in love.¹³

In other words, the primary emphasis in the Wesleyan tradition has been on the personal and collective transformation that occurs in the lives of those *practicing* the means of grace.¹⁴ A lesser emphasis, however, has been to examine the effect on others when an individual or group *acts as* a means of grace. Blevins illuminates this in a study pertaining to Wesley’s passion to see children participating in means of grace. The outcome of children’s participation and transformation inspired and encouraged adults. Thus, Wesley believed that by participating in the means of grace, children and their lives could become means of grace to others.¹⁵ This raises the question of how individuals and communities might become means of grace, mediating the presence of God to others.

Contemporary Methodist scholar Larry Duggins has explored the question of what it means for Christian communities, particularly “alternative” Christian communities (in contrast to the traditional gathered church), to be a means of grace. He argues that any type of community gathered under a unifying principle has the potential to be a means of grace. Alternative Christian communities may be means of prevenient grace, bringing God’s grace into peoples’ lives before they have a relationship with Christ. They do this by embodying Christ in practical ways, living by faith, and modelling love and inclusion in community. A loving community may also be a means of sanctifying grace by organically nurturing other Christians into greater unity with God through friendship, fellowship, and love.¹⁶

Although Wesley’s expression of “means of grace” was a christological formulation, he recognised the dynamic and contextual nature of God’s methods of mediating grace. Duggins adds that the *means* by which God’s grace flowed into the world changed as the story of God and humanity developed.¹⁷ Certainly, God’s

12 Dean G. Blevins, “The Trinity and the Means of Grace: A Sacramental Interrelationship,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36, no. 1 (2001): 232.

13 Dean G. Blevins, “Practicing the New Creation: Wesley’s Eschatological Community Formed by the Means of Grace,” *The Asbury Journal* 58, no. 1 (2003): 82.

14 Blevins, “Practicing the New Creation,” 94.

15 Dean G. Blevins, “To Be a Means of Grace: A Wesleyan Perspective on Christian Practices and the Lives of Children,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (2008): 67.

16 Larry Duggins, *Together: Community as a Means of Grace* (Cascade, 2017), 28–31, 80–81.

17 Duggins, 14. Duggins specifically explores “Workplace as Community,” “Communities Formed around Food,” “Communities Formed around Children’s Schools and Activities,” and “Communities Formed around Affinity Groups.”

means of grace were expressed differently in the Old Testament through sabbath, covenants, torah, sacred days, and sacrifices. Although the Old Testament mentions occasional theophanies when God's presence was direct and unmediated, there are more examples in the Old Testament of God's mediated presence. Priests mediated God's forgiving, redeeming presence and Israel was called to be a "priestly kingdom" (Exod 19:6). Kings were to mediate God's equitable and compassionate presence. Prophets, bringing the presence of God to people through the spoken word, mediated God's guiding, transforming, and redirecting presence. In other words, humans in community were conceived as the means of God's presence and grace. Just as God exists in inseparable, loving, triune community, Duggins asserts that humanity, created in God's image, experiences community as an essential part of its nature. The first thing labelled "not good" in God's new creation was the single human alone in the garden. "Community is not simply pleasant or efficient; it is a central part of who we are . . . Humanity was created to be encircled in God's love and to encircle others in that love."¹⁸ The next two sections will explore evidence that Job himself has an experiential understanding of the responsibility of community to embody and mediate God's presence and grace to others (i.e., in Wesleyan terms to be a "means of grace").

Job's Exemplary Faith Embedded in Community

The author appears to have placed the events of Job in the patriarchal period, although Job is portrayed as non-Israelite. Recent scholarship, however, generally dates the book's composition between the fifth and third centuries BCE based on cumulative evidence from intra-biblical parallels, linguistic clues, and the development of Israel's religion.¹⁹ Many suggest that the story—as wisdom literature—is a thought experiment or hypothetical scenario rather than historical literature, and that it was constructed to explore important theological questions. This is not a concern of this paper, however, since "the teachings of the book are true regardless."²⁰

In the opening chapter, Job offers precautionary sacrifices for his children after their feasts in case they have committed unintentional offenses against God. While the details of Job's actions are unclear, including whether the children were present, the sacrifices are mentioned as evidence of Job's outstanding character. His actions seem to mimic those of Israel's later priests who are "specially charged with the responsibility of sustaining the connection between God and humankind."²¹

18 Duggins, 10–11. See Jesus' prayer in John 17.

19 Bill Kynes and Will Kynes, *Wrestling with Job: Defiant Faith in the Face of Suffering* (IVP Academic, 2022), 13–15; Lindsay Wilson, *Job*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 2015), 2–4; Bowes, *Job*, 29–33.

20 John H. Walton and Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Job* (IVP Academic, 2015), 39.

21 Balentine, *Look at Me*, 107.

In addition to the narrator's characterisation of Job's sacrifices on behalf of his children, we have Eliphaz's testimony about Job's benevolent character:

See, you have instructed many;
you have strengthened the weak hands.
Your words have supported those who were stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble knees. (Job 4:3–4)

These are the most complimentary words offered by Eliphaz in the dialogue cycles. He mentions four ways in which Job's conduct was exemplary. The imperfect form in the last three of these indicates continual practices. Job habitually offered astute, specific, compassionate assistance to those experiencing life's impediments. The threefold emphasis on the latter highlights their importance. Eliphaz's kindness, however, is short-lived. He apparently only mentions Job's wise actions toward his community as a springboard to attack Job for not applying such wisdom to his own adversity.

In chapter 29, Job himself recalls his acts of grace demonstrated toward community along with the people's expectant postures and grateful responses:

Because I delivered the poor who cried
and the orphan who had no helper.
The blessing of the wretched came upon me,
and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.
I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
my justice was like a robe and a turban.
I was eyes to the blind
and feet to the lame.
I was a father to the needy,
and I championed the cause of the stranger.
I broke the fangs of the unrighteous
and made them drop their prey from their teeth. (12–17)

"They listened to me and waited
and kept silence for my counsel.
After I spoke they did not speak again,
and my word dropped upon them like dew.
They waited for me as for the rain;
they opened their mouths as for the spring rain.
I smiled on them when they had no confidence,
and the light of my countenance they did not extinguish.
I chose what they should do and sat as chief,
and I lived like a king among his troops,
like one who comforts mourners. (21–25)

Balentine warns against regarding Job's recollections as an "exercise in self-flattery," and he asserts that:

. . . the community understands Job's friendship as the key to their security and welfare (29:21–25). They wait for him with the same urgent expectancy they have for the spring rains. Even when they cannot believe, their doubt cannot extinguish the guiding light of his countenance (29:24) . . . The final image in Job's ruminations may be the most telling of all: he lives among them as one "who comforts mourners" (29:25b). In other words, he offers the friendship of loyal compassion that he now needs from his own friends but has not received.²²

Job embodied true compassion and commitment toward his family and community. It may be anachronistic to speak of his spiritual care and works of mercy as a "means of grace." Nevertheless, his habitual practices exemplified his faith and spiritual formation and benefited others. Job sees himself as part of a community and is fully engaged in doing his part to ensure that the community flourishes.

Following Job's reflections on his past practices and the positive response from his community, Job laments the mocking he now receives from the community he served (chapter 30) and offers a negative confession listing all the sins he has not committed against his community (chapter 31). Implicitly, Job provides his experiential understanding, or "theology," of community as a means of grace. This becomes increasingly clear in his evaluation of his friends' responses to his own distress.

Job's Unfulfilled Expectations of His Friends and Community

Job 2:11–13 provides early evidence of Job's community acting as a means of grace in response to his catastrophic circumstances. Three friends hear of his troubles and set out on a journey to comfort him. They weep and mourn in traditional ways and then sit with him in silence for seven days and seven nights (2:11–13).²³ They are content to comfort and console him with their sympathetic silent presence. They approve of his silent submission as an acceptable response to his circumstances. But following Job's extended complaint in chapter 3, wishing that he were not alive, Job's friends transition from comforters to inquisitors.²⁴ This is not appropriate speech in their estimation, and they will not sustain a friendship that threatens to shake the foundations of their theology. Balentine describes the outcome with imagery that is surprisingly contemporary: "Like a virus bug loosed in the world, Job is now

22 Samuel E Balentine, "Let Love Clasp Grief Lest Both Be Drowned," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30, no. 4 (2003): 392.

23 Similar mourning practices can be found in Gen 37:34–35; 2 Sam 3:31; Neh 9:2; 2 Sam 1:11–12.

24 Balentine, "Let Love Clasp Grief," 388.

targeted as a disease. For the health and well being of the world, his poison must be eradicated; at the very least, he must be isolated, quarantined, ostracized.”²⁵

God remains silent and hidden. The advocate Job has invoked using several different Hebrew words (Job 9:33–35; 16:19–22; 19:25–29) never makes an appearance.²⁶ And now, with the failure of his friends, there is no mediation of God’s grace offered to Job. Job experiences conflict rather than a sense of companionship and dignity. Job summarises his isolation and despair saying: “In truth I have no help in me, and any resource is driven from me” (6:13).

In addition to Job’s despair over the lack of relational resources, chapter 6 reveals something of Job’s implicit theology of community as a means of grace.²⁷ From his friends, Job expected kindness (*hesed*; 6:14), a dependable source of refreshment (6:15–20) and, empathy and wise counsel in the face of his desperate ramblings rather than critique (6:24–27). Instead, Job encounters the distrust of his friends (6:28–30) and their personal fear of entanglement in his calamity and demise (6:21–23).

In Job chapters 12–13 (Job’s response to Zophar’s first speech), Job confronts his friends for treating him as if they were sole beneficiaries of wisdom and he were inferior. In circumstances already weighed against him, Job laments: “Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay. Let me have silence . . .” (13:12–13a). Job expects his community to defend him. He demonstrates defiant faith in his “not good” world,²⁸ and this is what he desires from his friends. But rather than mediating grace to Job who has searched in vain for God (23:1–7), his friends justify God’s absence.²⁹ Balentine equates Job with the victim in the New Testament story of the good Samaritan: “The friends’ presumption of Job’s guilt effectively leaves him in the ditch with the beaten man on the road to Jericho. They will help him out only if he accepts their terms, unconditional surrender to their theology.”³⁰ Not only do Job’s friends neglect his emotional needs, but they also argumentatively defend God’s failure to appear, saying—in the words of Balentine—that:

1) Job’s sin has driven God away, and his repentance will bring God back again (8:3–6; 11:13–19; 22:23–28); and 2) God’s wisdom is necessarily too deep and too high for mere mortals to grasp (8:8–9; 11:7–9; 15:7–8: cf. 33:12–14; 37:21–24). Job should not misread transcendence as absence, they

25 Balentine, “For No Reason,” 383.

26 Walton and Longman, *How to Read Job*, 74–78.

27 Balentine refers to this as a “theology of friendship,” Balentine refers to this as a “theology of friendship.” See Samuel E. Balentine, “Job 23:1–9, 16–17,” *Interpretation* 53, no. 3 (1999): 290–91.

28 Cf. Gen 1:31.

29 Balentine, “Job 23,” 290.

30 Balentine, “Let Love Clasp Grief,” 388.

insist. If he will only submit obediently to what God gives and withholds, then he can be “at peace” with God and with himself (22:21).³¹

Job is neither comforted nor persuaded. When his friends find they cannot bully him into conformity and their treasured theology is challenged, they choose loyalty to their theology rather than to Job. This non-Israelite man has performed intercessory sacrifices for the potential sins of his children (Job 1:5) and will later perform them for these transgressing friends (42:8–9). An argument could be made that Job’s friends should have offered a sacrifice on Job’s behalf, consistent with the ancient Near Eastern practice outlined in the narrative. Although they are convinced that Job has sinned, they “rationalize rather than sympathise.”³² They are unable or unwilling to step into this complex reality and be the means of grace that Job needs. Instead, they torment him and break him to pieces with their words (19:1). Balentine summarises Job’s evaluation of such friendship:

From Job’s perspective the only friendship worthy of the name is that which proves itself in the crucible of suffering. Those whose suffering pushes them into despair need “loyalty” (*hesed*) from a friend (6:14). Job understands this to mean that friends will not let go of friends no matter what. In good times and bad, in success and failure, in joy and in sorrow, friends should be present with equal commitment and passion. Job’s criticism of Eliphaz and his cohorts offers a graphic description of what we might call “fair-weather friends.” They are present when it does not cost them anything and their resources are not needed, but when the stakes are high and the cost could be dear they retreat and wait for better times to appear.³³

Added to the disloyalty of these friends is the disintegration of Job’s other social relationships expressed in 19:13–22:

“He has put my family far from me,
and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me.
My relatives and my close friends have failed me;
the guests in my house have forgotten me;
my female servants count me as a stranger;
I have become an alien in their eyes.
I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer;
I must myself plead with him.
My breath is repulsive to my wife;
I am loathsome to my own family.
Even young children despise me;

31 Balentine, “Job 23,” 290–91.

32 Norman Habel, *The Book of Job* (SCM, 1985), 299.

33 Balentine, “Let Love Clasp Grief,” 394.

when I rise, they talk against me.
All my intimate friends abhor me,
and those whom I love have turned against me.
My bones cling to my skin and to my flesh,
and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth.
Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me!
Why do you, like God, pursue me,
never satisfied with my flesh?

Wendell Bowes describes these verses as “a heart-wrenching passage from a person who feels totally isolated.”³⁴ Job’s expressions of disappointment and disillusionment with respect to the responses of his friends, relatives, and social network provide an implicit understanding of Job’s theology of community as a means of grace. In the following section, God’s evaluation of Job and his friends will also reveal the divine expectations of community as a means of grace.

God’s Evaluation of Job and His Friends

In spite of Job’s despairing complaints, bold protests, accusations of God’s injustice, and seemingly contentious challenges of God’s ability to govern the world, God does not withdraw his positive evaluation of Job offered in the prologue (1:8 and 2:3). Instead, he adds a positive evaluation of Job’s speech in contrast to that of his friends. Addressing Eliphaz, God asserts, “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7). Their theological attempts to vindicate God in response to the problem of suffering³⁵ were unwelcomed and unnecessary. Rather than allowing his contrasting evaluation of Job and of his friends to cause division, however, God offers them all the means by which social relationships may be restored. God commands the friends to offer a burnt offering and assures them that Job will pray for them. As a result, they will not be dealt with according to their folly. God presumes on Job’s reliability as a means of grace to his community, and Job does not disappoint in his response. Balentine says, “With his sacrifices Job keeps us mindful that priestly rituals are enormously important gifts of grace; they help us mediate the gaps that explicably and inexplicably threaten to undo our world and subvert our trust in God.”³⁶ In other words, Job takes on a priestly role in mediating God’s grace to his friends.

³⁴ Bowes, *Job*, 242.

³⁵ This is known as *theodicy*.

³⁶ Balentine, *Look at Me*, 126.

The Transformation of Job's Community into a Means of Grace

The prose introduction to the book of Job ends with Job sitting among the ashes on the margins of society and his three friends coming to comfort (*nud*) and console (*nakham*) him in the midst of all his trouble (*kol-haraah*) (Job 2:11). In the subsequent poetic dialogue, Job's hopes and expectations for support and defence by his friends and community are thoroughly disappointed (Job 12–13, 19). In the epilogue, such support is finally offered by Job's community. Job's numerous brothers and sisters, and all who had known him before, show up. They comfort (*nud*) and console (*nakham*) him in the midst of all the trouble (*kol-haraah*) the LORD had brought upon him (Job 42:11). This narrative, with the same vocabulary of comforting and consoling in the midst of all trouble, forms a bookend with the story of his friends' compassionate actions in Job 2:11. Here, however, the community not only blesses Job with their presence but also with gifts and a shared meal. This same community was conspicuously and inexplicably absent in the prose introduction and they are portrayed as either estranged or actively despising and turning against Job in the poetic dialogue (19:13–22). Therefore, the epilogue itself stands in sharp contrast to all that precedes it. The poor example of Job's friends and family as a means of grace in the poetic section gives way to the inception of a community who are present, engaged, and oriented to the care and support of Job. Although they may not yet fully understand their role as bearers of divine presence, their response of faithfulness seems to have been inspired by that of Job. Hankins notes that their new social camaraderie seemed to be formed around “a traumatic encounter with the divine that is ultimately incomprehensible.”³⁷ Although such encounters have the power to undermine social relationships—as occurs with Job's three friends—they may also unite and transform the community who share together in such catastrophic events.

The problem of suffering is not solved in the book of Job. The epilogue, however, placed in literary contrast to the poetic section, suggests that a positive response of community in the context of adversity serves as a means of grace.

Implications for Community as a Perpetual Means of Grace

The bookend examples of community consoling and comforting a member in the midst of adversity and Job's own exemplary faith embedded in his community offer wisdom about the importance of community as a means of grace. Job's unfulfilled expectations of his friends and God's chastising evaluation of their worthless theodicy stand in stark contradiction. The book of Job demonstrates that in the face of adversity and the seeming absence of God, community may either exacerbate distress or act as a bearer of divine presence providing comfort, strength, care, and

37 Davis Hankins, “What Does Job Want? Desire, Fear, Anxiety, and God in and Beyond Job 23,” *Biblical Interpretation* 31, no. 3 (2022): 331.

support. These two possible responses are contrasted in the book. The result is an implicit depiction, rather than explicit instruction, on the practical, ethical, and theological wisdom of community as a means of grace. This fits into the overall biblical theology of the nature of humanity as a community fashioned in the image of the community of the triune God. It also serves as one more example that part of God's mission of reconciliation is to entrust humans to be conduits of God's grace. This metanarrative extends from Israel's covenant to be a blessing to all nations, the calling of prophets, priests, and kings to mediate God's presence, to the incarnation of Jesus as a means of God's grace and presence and the explicit instructions to the church of Christ to "comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor 1:4). Job, as a non-Israelite, represents the universality of the need for community as a means of grace.

In more specific terms, Job depicts the need for community to stand in the gap when the suffering or trauma of one or more members threatens to subvert faith. Community can be a means of grace by being present, sensitive, patient, humble, and practical in their expressions of comfort. People should be prioritised over theodicy and theology (no matter how good it may be). Suffering is not an intellectual problem to be solved. The hiddenness of God is often an experiential reality. As Balentine asserts,

Like Moses we are permitted only partial glimpses of God at best (cf. Exod 33:12–23). Often we must admit that we see less, hear less, and are less certain about God's active involvement in the affairs of the world and of humankind. The New Testament asserts that God is incarnate in Jesus. And yet it also reports that even Jesus' faith was shaped by a profound understanding of God's absence.³⁸

God's presence is mediated through the community of faith. Community members must be present with equal commitment, passion, and loyalty in good times and bad. They must be willing to sit with, eat with, share gifts with, and affirm the dignity of those who suffer. One such sufferer reflected on his own experience saying: "In that deep trough I needed companions more than prayers or potions."³⁹ Mediating God's presence by actively listening to deep questions of grief must take precedence over correcting defective theology. Companionship may not completely ease the pain of another, but it may improve the quality of their suffering.⁴⁰

Just as God does not defend himself in the face of Job's courtroom proceedings, the faith community should never feel the need to vindicate God in a context of suffering or adversity. Instead, they should seek to embody God's faithfulness and

38 Balentine, "Job 23," 292.

39 Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), 180.

40 Balentine, "Let Love Clasp Grief," 394.

loyalty, and make God present in the provision of nourishment, refreshment, and encouragement.

Cain's rhetorical question—"Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9)—echoes in the book of Job and the narrative responds with a subtle but firm theology of community as a necessary "means of grace," despite the anachronistic nature of the term itself. This is a perpetual and requisite function of community, and the book illustrates the effect when it is both absent and present.