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THE MOUNTAINS SHALL BURST INTO SONG

Wilderness and the Problem of Evil

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Reflecting on the first night of his captivity in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, the author and Jewish activist Elie Wiesel writes:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.¹

The Holocaust marks the absolute apogee of human cruelty. Wiesel's 1960 novel *Night* is a tour of suffering: a staggering degree of evil cramped into the account of one teenage boy. Not only does his account demonstrate the intensity of the Holocaust; it also reveals its awful scale. Every one of the six million Jewish victims of the genocide—each “wreath of smoke beneath a silent blue sky”—bears a memoir's worth of suffering.² There is no telling the magnitude of the Holocaust. Wiesel goes on:

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.³

Faced with the monumental horror of the Holocaust, Wiesel rejects his faith in God, his dreams, even himself. In his 1973 memoir *The Gulag Archipelago*, the Russian priest and author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrestles with a similar tragedy, that of the Soviet gulag system that killed tens of millions.⁴ He writes:

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?⁵

Evil seeps into us. It is sewn into our skin and bone.

Wiesel and Solzhenitsyn recognize that mass murders of the 20th century motivate self-rejection. In response to the massive churning of tragedy, both men turn inward. In his introspection, Wiesel finds himself a living vessel of the Holocaust: his inner self has suffered a total burn.⁶ Solzhenitsyn recognizes that evil, even at its grandest scale, is located within “the heart of every human being.”⁷ Whether we are victim or perpetrator, evil seeps into us. It is sewn into our skin and bone.

What can be done? This “problem of evil”—as it is often called—poses a significant challenge to any account of the human condition.⁸ In particular, religious narratives struggle to solve it because the existence of an all-good and all-powerful God seems incompatible with the reality of evil. An omnibenevolent and omnipotent God would not let bad things happen to good people. If God were all-good, then he would want to prevent evil, and if he were all-powerful, then he would be capable of preventing all evil. If God is all-good and all-powerful, then how does evil exist? For many, the plain existence of evil in the world is the best evidence against God’s existence.

The Christian tradition has struggled with the problem of evil for its 2,000-year lifespan, but it did not invent the dilemma. The Jewish tradition stretches another millennium into the past, and it faces the same fundamental question: how can an all-good and all-powerful God—Yahweh, in this case—let bad things happen to good people? The Jewish authors of the Hebrew Bible offer answers to this question that reverberate forward in time. When the Hebrew Bible entered the Christian tradition as the Old Testament, its claims about the nature of evil—and the nature of God—provided a foundation for Christian theology. To this day, the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible is essential to the Christian response to the problem of evil.

In this essay, I will explore the response to the problem of evil offered by the book of Job, and the development of this response in contemporary Christian theology. I will begin the essay with a characterization of Job, the eponymous main character of the book. Next, I will explore Yahweh’s response to Job at the end of the book: what does Yahweh say about the nature of evil, and what does he say about himself?⁹ I will argue that Yahweh establishes his benevolent supremacy over his creation, but he never offers a direct answer to the problem of evil. Instead, he appeals to the natural wonder of his creation to establish his incomprehensible goodness, offering us an incomprehensible redemption from evil.

“A MAN IN THE LAND OF UZ”

Job’s story begins in Uz, a region southeast of Israel.¹⁰ Job is not an Israelite, and he exists outside of the main historical narrative of the Hebrew Bible, but he is utterly devoted to Yahweh, the God of Israel. The author of the book of Job says as much: “That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.”¹¹ The author continues for several verses, describing Job’s considerable wealth; his large, happy family; his verdant agricultural estate; and his ritual devotion to Yahweh.¹² He is an upright and virtuous paragon of religious observance and faith.

Unfortunately, Job’s prosperity does not last. The account describes an angelic meeting in which a “heavenly being” named the Accuser challenges Job’s righteousness before Yahweh.¹³ The Accuser asks, “Does Job fear God for nothing? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.”¹⁴ Job has every reason to devote himself to Yahweh because he has been blessed by Yahweh. The Accuser challenges Job’s motives: is he devout because he really loves his God, or is he devout only because of the good fortune he has received?¹⁵

Yahweh considers this challenge and allows the Accuser to test Job: “Very well, all that he has is in your power, only do not stretch out your hand against him!”¹⁶ Yahweh allows the Accuser to take away all that Job has, but not to harm Job himself. From tragedy to tragedy, the Accuser makes short work of Job’s many blessings. His oxen and servants are stolen by raiding parties from the north and south, his sheep are struck dead by lightning, and his children are killed in a violent dust storm.¹⁷ Job, “blameless and upright” as he is, does not renounce Yahweh.¹⁸ He “tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped.”¹⁹ Even as he mourns his children, he devotes himself to Yahweh: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.”²⁰ The account confirms that the Accuser has failed in his challenge: “In all of this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.”²¹ So far, it seems that Job does not require material blessing in order to be faithful.

If Yahweh is truly all-powerful, why does he allow evil to occur?

Having failed in his first attempt, the Accuser returns to Yahweh with another request: “All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and flesh, and he will curse you to your face.”²² Initially the Accuser could not harm Job directly, but he now seeks to increase his challenge to Job’s faithfulness. Yahweh concedes: “Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.”²³ The Accuser then inflicts Job with “loathsome sores” that cover his whole body; Job is ruined.²⁴ He “sits among the ashes” and scrapes himself with a shard of pottery.²⁵ Three of Job’s friends hear of his affliction and visit him.²⁶ The account details that they “sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”²⁷ This is the apex of Job’s suffering. After a week of silence, he “opens his mouth and curses the day of his birth.”²⁸ He says, “Let the day perish in which I was born ... Let that day be darkness! ... Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?”²⁹ Though Job does not curse Yahweh, this lament is the beginning of a challenge that Job levies against him. He questions why Yahweh caused him to suffer so greatly; he even questions why Yahweh gave life to him, only to inflict such pain.³⁰

Job’s fall from grace clues us into the nature of evil. The account makes it clear that Yahweh does not cause Job’s suffering, at least not directly. Instead, Yahweh acquiesces his power to the Accuser, the real culprit of Job’s suffering. Though Yahweh is not the immediate cause of evil, he does have control over the Accuser. If only Yahweh had not let the Accuser challenge Job, he would not have suffered so much.

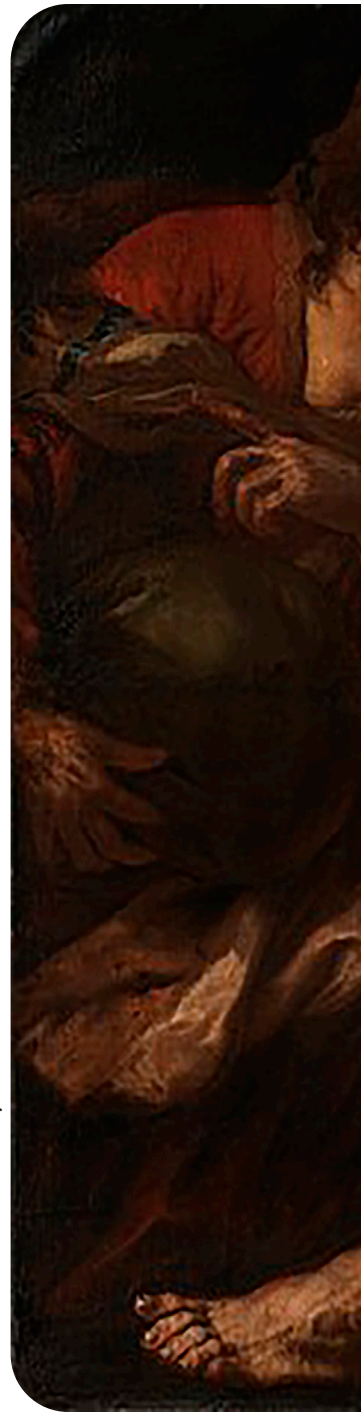
Yahweh is primal in every sense of the word—he is the wild and powerful progenitor of all created things.

I will return to this question—who causes evil?—later in Yahweh’s response to Job. While Yahweh always makes it clear that he does not directly cause evil, the question still stands: if Yahweh is truly all-powerful, why does he allow evil to occur in the first place? If Yahweh could really stop the Accuser, why does he not? For now, at least, these questions remain unanswered, and I return to Job.

“OUT OF THE WHIRLWIND”

After his lament, Job’s friends begin a conversation with Job that spans most of the book of Job.³¹ Their discourse examines the injustice of Job’s suffering, and it questions Job’s righteousness before Yahweh. It is abruptly ended, however, by an appearance from Yahweh himself. From “out of the whirlwind,” he speaks directly to Job in poetic verse.³² Yahweh’s response marks the climactic end of the book of Job, and settles the friends’ discussion with divine finality. In his speech, Yahweh makes claims about the nature of evil and claims about himself. With respect to evil, Yahweh establishes his control, domination, and hatred over all darkness and injustice; he justifies this authority with his divine distinction from his creation. In his creative omnipotence, Yahweh has given life to humanity and set himself totally apart from them. He is primal in every sense of the word: he is the wild and powerful progenitor of all created things.

Yahweh begins by meeting Job’s attack on his Lord’s faithfulness. He demands, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”³³ Yahweh reverses the direction of interrogation: “I will question you, and you shall [answer] me.”³⁴ The rest of Yahweh’s speech consists of rhetorical questions that challenge Job’s authority to question his maker. Yahweh’s first set of questions establishes his divine ability to order the cosmos justly. He demands,





“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ... Who determined its measurements—surely you know! ... who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”³⁵ Yahweh pictures his universe as a construction project on a grand scale. He meticulously planned its dimensions before time began. Yahweh shows himself to be the master craftsman of reality, who artfully constructed the cosmos in accordance with a heavenly plan.³⁶ Crucially, Yahweh’s design is the cause of a profound cosmic exuberance: the stars sing together, and the angels shout with joy!³⁷ In scorning his own creation, Job has forgotten that the material world

is essentially wonderful. The American essayist Marilynne Robinson writes that “Existence is remarkable, actually incredible ... materiality is profoundly amazing, uncanny.”³⁸ The very existence of the cosmos brings the angels to sing. Yahweh’s first response to Job is an exultation. Yahweh is the divine artist of a masterful painting. He is the ordering principle of a beautiful materiality.

After establishing his authority to order the wonderful cosmos, Yahweh responds directly to the presence of evil in creation using the well-worn Hebrew metaphor for chaos and evil: the ocean.³⁹ He questions Job: “Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb ... and

prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?’⁴⁰ Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the ocean serves as a metaphor for chaos and darkness; it is often juxtaposed with Yahweh’s divine ability to set the cosmos to order. With these images, Yahweh establishes his ability to control the presence of evil in his creation. He is the divine hydrologist, building levees and dams to impound and control evil.⁴¹ Importantly, Yahweh sets himself in opposition to the oceanic forces of evil. He did not initiate its birth “from the womb”; he only orders and controls it within his creation. As the divine author of a beautifully ordered creation, Yahweh has the omnipotent ability to control and restrict the chaotic action of evil.

Not only can Yahweh control evil, he also hates it and will ultimately destroy it, as the perfect judge over his creation. Yahweh illustrates his coming destruction of evil as the rising dawn. He asks Job, “Have you commanded the morning since your days began and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it?”⁴² Yahweh continues the metaphor with the revelatory power of the morning light: “It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment. Light is

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withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken.”⁴³ Yahweh promises to reveal the horror of evil with the coming of the dawn, as hot wax reveals every facet of a seal in sharp relief.⁴⁴ He will break the uplifted arms of the wicked, and they shall be shaken out of the earth. This is harsh language, but it is comforting. Yahweh possesses a deeply righteous hatred of evil, and he promises to destroy it on the hope of the dawn, when the morning stars sing together.



In his speech to Job, Yahweh establishes his authorial power over creation and his ability to restrain the evil present in creation. He clarifies that he did not create evil, and that he will ultimately triumph over evil. Taken together, these claims form the beginning of a response to Job's lament. Yahweh is the cause of every blessing that Job has experienced, he is not responsible for Job's current suffering, and he will one day bring an end to all suffering, for Job and for all mankind.

They are not, however, a complete answer, and Yahweh recognizes this. His response to Job continues for several more chapters. Yahweh spends little time talking about evil and much more time talking about his own nature. After settling Job's specific challenges about evil, Yahweh offers a dramatic picture of his primal power over creation. Because Yahweh is wildly separate from creation, he has the ability to control it omnipotently. He challenges Job: "Have you entered into the spring of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? ... Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?"⁴⁵ Yahweh has access to the most remote parts of his creation; the most inaccessible summits and hardest depths are available to him, because he made it.⁴⁶ He has complete knowledge and dominion over the expanse of the earth. "Have you entered the storehouses of the snow?" Yahweh asks, "What is

the way to the place where the light is distributed, or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?"⁴⁷ The most isolated corners of the natural world—the highest summits, the upper atmosphere where rain and snow precipitate out of the clouds—these places are Yahweh's territory. There is no such thing as a godforsaken land; every barren desert and unreachable alpine cliff are intimately known by a wild and powerful God. The expanse of the stars, too, fall under Yahweh's domain. He challenges Job, "Can you bind the chains of Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion?"⁴⁸ In his supremacy above creation, Yahweh can access the most lonesome exoplanets and distant galaxies.

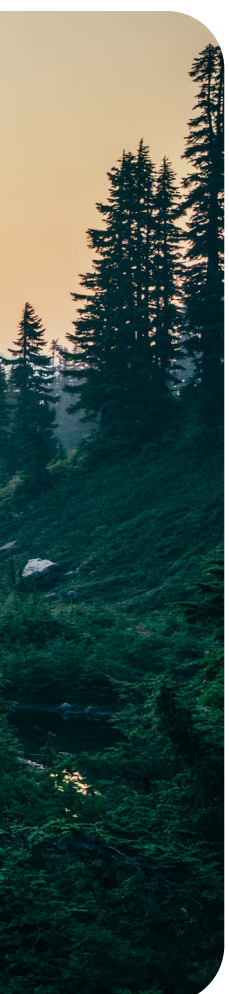
More than any distant location, the wild ferocity of the animal world reveals God's primacy over his creation. He asks Job, "Do you observe the calving of the deer? ... The young ones become strong and do not return ... Who has let the wild ass go free? ... It ranges the mountains as its pasture and it searches after every green thing."⁴⁹ He goes on, "Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes it nests on high? It lives on the rock and makes it home, in

the fastness of the rocky crag."⁵⁰ Yahweh continues for several stanzas, mentioning nine animals in total; each one is undomesticated.⁵¹ In his creative command over every wild beast, Yahweh establishes his complete primacy over creation. Job cannot "range the mountains as his pasture" or make the "fastness of the rocky crag" his home, but Yahweh can.⁵² The terrible splendor of a mountain spine and the desolate awesomeness of the gray-green ocean reflect God's wild beauty. Job is scared and small, and Yahweh created these wonders by the power of his word. The author Mike Mason writes that, in the brilliant mystery of the wild, "there is something of the enigma of God himself, whom we must go out to meet in the wilderness. ... He is a wild, alien God."⁵³ In his command over the most terrible wilderness, Yahweh establishes his complete separateness from humans. The book of Isaiah records a prophecy from Yahweh: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."⁵⁴ The blazing splendor of the natural world evinces God's complete primacy over humanity. Isaiah continues: "The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands ... it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."⁵⁵ The Earth's wild beauty is a "memorial," that we may be reminded of God's holiness over creation whenever we look upon it.⁵⁶

Why does Yahweh respond to Job's problem of evil with an appeal to his wild holiness? First, Yahweh uses his primacy over the natural world to remind Job of his incapacity to understand the divine. Job cannot see the snowflakes form in a stormcloud; much less can he see into the mind of Yahweh, whose design for creation outlasts any individual. Second, Yahweh reminds Job that his design for creation is essentially and deeply good. For proof, Yahweh offers the wonder of creation, visible in the natural world. The stolid splendor of the mountains, the habitual brilliance of the sunrise, the plaintive expanse of ocean—these remind us of Yahweh's steadfast care for creation. He sustains the world as surely as the sun rises in the morning.

"A FUNDAMENTAL DELIVERANCE"

In the length of his response, Yahweh never explicitly answers the question, "where does evil come from?" He establishes that he can control evil, but he never addresses the problem raised at the beginning of the book of Job. Why does Yahweh allow the Accuser to test Job? If Yahweh were all-good and all-powerful, would he not prevent the Accuser from causing harm to Job?



Yahweh implies two answers to this question: one when he responds to the Accuser, and one when he responds to Job. When Yahweh allows the Accuser to cause Job's suffering, he implicitly agrees with the reasoning that the Accuser offers in defense of his actions. The Accuser asks Yahweh:

Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.⁵⁷

The Accuser wants to test Job's faith in Yahweh; he wants to prove the strength of his devotion. In this sense, it is not hard to see why Yahweh allows suffering. We allow suffering into our lives for the same reason. Exercise, schoolwork, a dieting regimen: all of these practices use suffering to strengthen the sufferer in the long run. We are willing to give up immediate pleasures for a long-term goal. Yahweh applies this same logic to Job: he experiences intense suffering so that his devotion to Yahweh may be strengthened.

The objections to this answer, however, come easily: one may choose to suffer for themselves, but why does Yahweh have the right to allow others to suffer for his sake? Is Yahweh a selfish God, who does not care for the well-being of his devotees? Yahweh's second response attempts to answer these objections. When he responds to Job, Yahweh repeatedly emphasizes the goodness of his creation. His allusions to the wonder of the heavens and the glory of the wild animals establish Yahweh's complete benevolence for those he has made. Yahweh communicates to Job that, though Job cannot comprehend the heavenly design for creation, it will ultimately work together for his good. Though we cannot understand the reaches of the starry heavens, or the vast expanse of the ocean, their goodness is self-evident. The natural world is proof that Yahweh's wild omnipotence is essentially good.

Yahweh's design for creation is incomprehensible to us. His response to Job makes this clear. Though unsatisfying, Yahweh's incomprehensibility can provide us a degree of comfort. The theologian Karl Barth writes that God is "wholly Other, the fundamental deliverance from that whole world of man's seeking, conjecturing, illusion, imagining, and speculating."⁵⁸ God is utterly separate from us and all of our faults. Our own redemption is incomprehensible to us because it is made possible by an incomprehen-

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ble God. But it is its incomprehensibility that makes God's redemption so incredible. God, in the person of Christ, offers a "peace that surpasses all understanding."⁵⁹ He delivers us from ourselves and our "illusion . . . and speculating."⁶⁰

In the end, God does not answer the question about the origin of evil. He does establish his dominion over his creation, his ability to restrain evil, and his ultimate hatred of evil. He also establishes that he will allow evil to exist in the world in order to strengthen us, and bring us closer to him. But these answers are incomplete; Job's story never solves the problem of evil. We are left wondering: why did Yahweh allow the Accuser to harm Job?

Rather than answer this question, Yahweh challenges it: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding."⁶¹ In his complete holiness and omnipotence, Yahweh is incomprehensible to us. We were not there when he laid the foundation of the earth; we do not have understanding. Though we cannot understand him, in his love Yahweh reveals himself to us. When "the mountains burst into song," we see Yahweh's incomprehensible goodness, revealed for us.⁶² ♣

1. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 22.
2. "Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution," accessed September 6, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution>.
3. Wiesel, 22.
4. Editors of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Gulag," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 6, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gulag>.
5. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 168.
6. Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "What Is the Origin of the Term Holocaust?" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 25, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-the-origin-of-the-term-holocaust>.
7. Solzhenitsyn, 168.
8. Michael Tooley, "The Problem of Evil," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), last modified March 15, 2015, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/evil/>.
9. In this essay, I use both "Yahweh" and "God" to refer to the Christian deity. I use "Yahweh" when in the context of the Hebrew Bible and "God" when in the context of modern theological sources.
10. Job 1:1 (NRSV).
11. Job 1:2 (NRSV).
12. Job 1:2-5 (NRSV).
13. Job 1:6 (NRSV); many translations of the Bible, including the one used here, translate "the Accuser" as "Satan." The word in Hebrew is *ha-satan*, which literally means "the accuser." I use "the Accuser" to avoid the modern connotations of the word "Satan," and to remain faithful to the text as its original readers would have read it.
14. Job 1:9 (NRSV).
15. Job 1:10-11 (NRSV).

16. Job 1:12 (NRSV).
17. Job 1:13-19 (NRSV).
18. Job 1:2 (NRSV).
19. Job 1:20 (NRSV).
20. Job 1:21 (NRSV).
21. Job 1:22 (NRSV).
22. Job 2:5 (NRSV).
23. Job 2:6 (NRSV).
24. Job 2:7 (NRSV).
25. Job 2:8 (NRSV).
26. Job 2:11 (NRSV).
27. Job 2:13 (NRSV).
28. Job 3:1 (NRSV).
29. Job 3:2-3, 11 (NRSV).
30. Job 3:23 (NRSV).
31. Job 4-37 (NRSV).
32. Job 38:1 (NRSV).
33. Job 38:2 (NRSV).
34. Job 38:3 (NRSV).
35. Job 38:4, 7 (NRSV).
36. Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 378.
37. Job 38:4, 7 (NRSV).
38. Marilynne Robinson, "Givenness," in *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2015), 56.
39. See Gen 1:1-10 (NRSV); Exod 14 (NRSV).
40. Job 38:8, 11 (NRSV).
41. Ash, 380.
42. Job 38:12-13 (NRSV).
43. Job 38:14-15 (NRSV).
44. Ash, 384.
45. Job 38:16-18 (NRSV).
46. Ash, 384.
47. Job 38:24 (NRSV).
48. Job 38:31 (NRSV).
49. Job 39:2, 5, 8 (NRSV).
50. Job 39:27-28 (NRSV).
51. David J.A. Clines, "Job" in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Coogan, Michael, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 767.
52. Robert Alter, "The Writings," in *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), 3:570.
53. Mike Mason, *The Gospel According to Job: An Honest Look at Pain and Doubt from the Life of One Who Lost Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 401.
54. Isaiah 55:9 (NRSV).
55. Isaiah 55:12-13 (NRSV).
56. Isaiah 55:13 (NRSV).
57. Job 1:9-10 (NRSV).
58. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 36.
59. Phil 4:7 (NRSV).
60. Barth, 36.
61. Job 1:2 (NRSV).
62. The title phrase of this essay is from Isaiah 55:9 (NRSV). Many thanks to Isaiah Menning, Emil Liden, and Najma Zahira for advice and edits.