

## **The Book of Job and the Pastoral Care of Covid 19 Patients**

*Underson Musina, O.Carm.*

### **Introduction**

The book of Job is one of the books of wisdom literature. This book deals with various questions such as theodicy, the justice of the Lord, suffering of just person and retribution. The book of Job is very relevant in today's world as it touches on contemporary problems. It is in light with this regard that this article intends to discuss the possible contributions of the book of Job to the pastoral care of the sick for Covid -19 patients. The first part will give a summary of the major themes which are found in the book of Job. The second part will expose what is found in the book of Job which is useful in the pastoral care of those infected by Coronavirus. Finally, a conclusion will be given.

### **Synopsis of Major Ideas in the Book of Job**

The book of Job focuses mainly about the importance of God who is always loving even when one is in pain and is suffering. The story in this book explains how people experience suffering and the most important thing the book exposes is how people should respond to suffering and how God remains supreme in the midst of suffering.<sup>1</sup> This idea is supported by Hartley; who acknowledges that as the book of Job discusses human suffering there are six prominent themes which are noted about suffering.<sup>2</sup> First, a person even if he is righteous, he may suffer; second, the dimension of human suffering; third, even a righteous person struggles to overcome suffering; fourth, qualifications to the doctrine of double retribution; fifth, the question of theodicy and finally an encounter with God.<sup>3</sup>

The book of Job shows that a righteous person can terribly suffer even though he did not sin (Job 1:8). As noted by Neiman, 'calamity is not necessarily a hostile witness against a righteous person's integrity'.<sup>4</sup> Job greatly suffered in his life. He lost his family and property in one day (1:13-20), he also suffered because of a great disease (2:7-10). Socially, Job was affected as he was isolated from the rest of the community.<sup>5</sup> Job said, "my family has withdrawn from me, my friends are wholly

estranged” (19:13).

The writer of the book of Job intends to challenge directly a simplistic understanding of the doctrine of double retribution.<sup>6</sup> This doctrine teaches that those who are righteous before the Lord are blessed (cf Job 29) and rewarded while and the wicked are punished and they suffer. The three friends of Job clearly exposed this doctrine in the book (4:1-27). They encouraged Job to repent so that God would restore his fortunes (22:21). Eliphaz has the view that people are responsible for their suffering (4:1-5). Zophar urges Job to repent so that God will bless him again (11:1-14). Jobs’ friends encouraged him to repent so that he will enjoy God’s favour. If Job had followed the advice of his friends, “he would confirm Satan’s proposition that human beings are totally self-serving in their worship of God”.<sup>7</sup> The main point of the audiences of Job and his friends was to defend the righteousness of God and uphold the doctrine of retribution (13:1ff).

Theodicy is clearly exposed in the book of Job. The book aimed at answering the question which is very prominent in human experience. The question of suffering. Theodicy is focused on why good and gracious God permits evil. Elihu in his speech shows that God is always merciful in his dealings and God does not benefit anything from acting unjustly (Job 34-35). The Book of Job clearly confirms that the world was created by God and is the one who sustains it (Job 38). The question is why then suffering exists.

### **Suggestions of the Book of Job to the Pastoral Care of Covid-19 Patients**

In the pastoral care of Covid -19 patients there is a problem of how a pastor could talk about God who is all loving and gracious in a situation that is featured by sickness. Gutierrez notes that it is also problematic to talk about God of life to people who die prematurely and unjustly.<sup>8</sup> The major themes found in the Book of Job are useful in the pastoral care of the sick as presented in this section. As noted by Beguerie, “historically, pastoral care of the sick has been in the form of four special functions; namely, healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling.”<sup>9</sup> These four

features are also deduced in the Book of Job and applied in the pastoral care of those infected with Coronavirus.

### **The Pastoral Care of Patients with Coronavirus and the Community**

The book of Job helps in pastoral care of those infected with Coronavirus as it points to the importance of one as a minister to visit the sick in order to comfort, pray and anoint them. In his time of suffering, Job was visited by his friends who intended to support and comfort him. When the sick people are visited there is a need to use proper theological language which will not make people feel that they are sick because they have sinned. Although social distance is maintained, the community should ensure that the sick person is supported. The book of Job helps us to realise that pastoral care of the sick is the responsibility of the whole community. According to Klein and Wolfe, family members, friends, doctors and priests have a responsibility in the ministry of comfort; through encouragement and prayer.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the book of Job helps one to understand that pastoral care of the Covid -19 patients is not a private affair between the priest and the sick person, but it is a communal act of care and worship.<sup>11</sup> Like what Job's friends did, there is a need for the community to show solidarity with those who will be infected by the virus. St Paul warns that, if one member suffers, all the members suffer together (1 Cor 12:26). The community and family take care of the sick by praying with them, providing all their necessities.

After all the challenges Job faced, he was not isolated from his community because he was able to be visited by his friends (Job 4) although at one point because of his severe suffering he also felt as being isolated by his community. This is a vital point which shows that in the pastoral care of those infected with Coronavirus, those infected should be integrated into the community. Although Covid -19 patients are being quarantined, the book of Job suggests that the community have a task of being close to those who are sick spiritually and if possible, physically, visiting them and praying with them. In this digital period the community can continue being united with the sick person through social media such

as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram.

### **Sickness as Part of Human Life**

The Book of Job suggests that sickness is part of human life. There are various theories which have emerged regarding the origins of the Coronavirus. There is a school of thought which argues that the virus is a punishment which came from God. The book of Job suggests that Christians should teach others to embrace the challenges which are faced in life such as being affected or infected by the Coronavirus. For one to be tested positive does not mean that one has sinned. In the Zimbabwean community others believe that sickness comes because one has offended the ancestors or God. This view is the same with one which the friends of Job had concerning his problems (4:1-27). Consequently, this clearly shows that the doctrine of divine retribution which is exposed in the book of Job is very useful in the pastoral care of the sick and it points that a Covid -19 is not caused by the fact that one has sinned or God has turned against one.<sup>12</sup>

Even in times of sickness human dignity is to be promoted. Although God allowed Job to be tempted, he cautioned Satan that he should not lay his hand on Job (1:12). It is the duty of the community to ensure that the dignity of those who are sick with Covid -19 is upheld. This can be achieved through catechesis, preaching and disseminating authentic information about Covid -19. The faithful should be aware that true meaning of human suffering is found in Jesus Christ. As noted by Buguerie, the cross of Christ is God's answer to human suffering.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Language of Contemplation**

The book of Job assists those who take care of Covid -19 patients to have proper language to speak with them. The sick people should be encouraged to have complete trust in the Lord and they should bless God even in times of sufferings. Job said when he suffered after his loss, "naked I came forth from my mother's womb and naked shall I go back there.... blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). As noted by Gutierrez, this verse has made Job to be referred to as a person who was patient.<sup>14</sup>

The sick people ought to be encouraged to realise that everything comes from God and in times of sickness they should practise patience. It is the role of the minister to make sick people to have sense of the sovereignty of the Lord.

The sick people should be encouraged to hold on their faith the way Job did (1:21). Job did not follow the bad counsel of his wife who told him that he should “curse God and die” (2:9). In pastoral care to the sick there is need to encourage them to follow wise counsel from others. In times of sickness, medical practitioners and family members can advise things which are contrary to gospel values. For instance, a doctor can advise one to have euthanasia which is against the teaching of the Church. Hence, the sick person should be bold enough in his belief like Job who did not sin in his suffering (2:10).

### **Prayer and Hope**

The Book of Job suggests the importance of prayer in the pastoral care of those infected, and Coronavirus is not an exception. In prayer, the sick people will be strengthened to be honest in prayer. Job gives a vital example of how to approach God in prayer. Job says that when he appears before God he spoke from the bitterness of his soul (10:1). Job felt that the Lord had abandoned him (13:24) and perhaps this is the experience of most people when they are tested positive for the virus. Even in such cases the sick will be encouraged to hold firm despite the challenges and suffering they will be facing. The sick members of the Church will be encouraged to proclaim with Job that their vindicator lives (19:25). Hartley attests that the story of Job can be used by one especially a minister to teach and encourage people to realise that even a righteous person can feel sick and continue hoping in God.<sup>15</sup> The sick people should be encouraged to say what they think about their suffering like what Job did (10: 1-22). Many times, Job wished to die (3:11). He also talked about his distress when all people turned against him (19:13). Modern psychology talks about the importance of openness even in prayer as helpful to troubled people.

The book of Job is useful in the ministry of Covid -19 patients as

it helps those who are suffering to always keep the faith and hope even when understanding fails.<sup>16</sup> In the midst of all the challenges that Job faced and his complaints he kept hope in the Lord. Job's hope was not in vain as the Lord at last vindicated him. A person with Covid -19 should be encouraged to have such hope that God will heal him in his own way and time. The sick people should be made aware that God can do all things and no purpose of his can be hindered (cf 42:1).

Furthermore, the Book of Job stresses the idea that even righteous people also struggle with suffering (Job 1). Using this book, the ministers and all members of the Church can inspire the sick to embrace their suffering with patience the way Job did and also to be aware that sickness is part of human life. The book of Job points out that human beings should not limit God. Although Job lost everything at the beginning but at the end everything was restored (42:6). Sick people should be helped to make sure that they continue having faith in God. However, they should not expect that God will heal where there is faith because like in the case of Job faith is not the issue at all.

### **Job 38 and the Pastoral Care Covid -19 Patients**

God responded to Job in Chapter 38 and there are insights which are found in this chapter which are very useful in the pastoral care of the sick. The Lord asked Job if he was there when he created the universe and if Job was the one who determined the size of it (38:4-7). Job is also asked if he is the one who commands the light to shine (12-14). For Murphy, these questions raised Job's sight from his own troubles to the wonder of the order that braces up the world.<sup>17</sup> Using the book of Job, a person with Coronavirus may be reminded that the Lord is the one who is all powerful and he rules the world in righteousness. The Lord who is able to bring light to shine is capable of containing suffering, sickness and wickedness. Hartley attests that, "although God grants a measure of freedom to people, the wicked never move outside his control."<sup>18</sup> Hence, at the end God has the final say about people's lives.

In addition, in chapter 38, the Lord made Job to realise that his knowledge was limited. Job is asked if he had entered the sources of the

sea (16), if he had ever seen the gates of death (17), if he had ever seen the heights of heaven and if he knew how to part winds (22). If Job was able to answer such questions of the Lord this could mean that he had comprehensive knowledge about the world and understood the way it was governed.<sup>19</sup> Chapter 38 may be used to make the sick people realise that sometimes it is difficult to have knowledge of why they are suffering. Chapter 38, as argued by Neiman, teaches that suffering is useful as it brings the mystery of life.<sup>20</sup> “In case of Job it is a mystery of the positive and negative forces that affects humanity, society and health”.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Chapter 38 is fundamental in pastoral ministry as the sick will be inspired in their lack of knowledge that they should continue trusting in the one who knows everything.

### **‘My eye has seen you’**

In pastoral ministry to those infected with Covid 19 there are other people who will be healed by God. After receiving such a gift, the Book of Job suggests that it is the duty of a minister or community to make those healed realise that the “Lord has opened their eyes” (42:1). The minister and the community are to make people meet God so that they might overcome the dark night of the soul which St John of the Cross talks about. At the end Job’s fortunes were restored (42:7) and through other members of the community God will use them to restore the sick person to his friendship.

### **Conclusion**

The Book of Job is very relevant in the pastoral care of those infected with Covid -19 as it gives an example of faith and trust in God in overcoming suffering such as sickness. The themes such as theodicy and retribution are useful suggestions provided by the Book of Job in the pastoral care of the sick. It suggests that a righteous person can suffer and even righteous people struggle with suffering. The most important suggestion from the book is that sickness, Covid -19 included, comes not as a punishment from God and that God heals and restores his people at his appointed time in his own way.

- <sup>1</sup> Murphy, Roland. *The Book of Job*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999.), 5
- <sup>2</sup> Hartley, John. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. 'The Book of Job.'* (Michigan: Ferdmas Publishing Company, 1988.), 47.
- <sup>3</sup> Hartley, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. 'The Book of Job.'* 47
- <sup>4</sup> Neiman, *The Book of Job*, (Givatayim, Peli Printing, 1972.)3.
- <sup>5</sup> Hartley, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. 'The Book of Job.'* 48
- <sup>6</sup> Hartley, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. 'The Book of Job.'* 48
- <sup>7</sup> Hartley, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. 'The Book of Job.'* 48
- <sup>8</sup> Gutierrez, Gustavo. *On Job. God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1987.), xvi
- <sup>9</sup> Beguerie, Philippe. *How to Understand the Sacraments*. (London: SCM Press, 1997.), 147
- <sup>10</sup> Klein, Gregory, *Pastoral Foundations of the Sacraments*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1998.), 120.
- <sup>11</sup> Klein, Gregory *Pastoral Foundations of the Sacraments*, 120.
- <sup>12</sup> Murphy, *The Book of Job*, 108
- <sup>13</sup> Beguerie, *How to Understand the Sacraments*, 80.
- <sup>14</sup> Gutierrez, *On Job. God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, 53.
- <sup>15</sup> Hartley, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. 'The Book of Job.'*, vii.
- <sup>16</sup> *The African Bible*. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2001.), 83.
- <sup>17</sup> Murphy, *The Book of Job*, 108.
- <sup>18</sup> Hartley, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. 'The Book of Job.'*, 497.
- <sup>19</sup> Hartley, John. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. 'The Book of Job.'* (Michigan: Ferdmas Publishing Company, 1988.), 488.
- <sup>20</sup> Neiman, *The Book of Job*,3.
- <sup>21</sup> *The African Bible*, 830.