

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

**Transcript of**

**“Disability and Advocacy in the Book of Job”**

**presented on October 4, 2018 by  
Dr. Andrew R. Davis**

**Fr. Thomas Stegman, S.J.:**

On June 1 of 2008, the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry was formed, and thus this year marks the tenth anniversary of the School. As we celebrate this milestone throughout the 2018-19 academic year, we are showcasing the excellence of STM faculty, which brings me to introduce today's presenter, who is one of our own. Now, I have to go off-script, because before I introduce our speaker, I wanted to introduce the two people who brought him into the world. We have Andrew's parents with us, Peter and Mary Davis, please stand up. We're so grateful you came all the way from North Carolina.

[APPLAUSE]

And while we're at it, how about the better half? Emily, you want to stand up, please, because we have to [INAUDIBLE].

[APPLAUSE]

We're honored by your presence. A native of Raleigh, North Carolina, Andrew R. Davis first discovered his love of ancient languages in Mrs. Ruth Ann Morton's seventh grade Latin class. That early encounter led eventually, through a long series of studies, to doctoral studies in Hebrew Bible at Johns Hopkins University, where research for his dissertation included a year as Kress Fellow at the Albright Institute of Archeological Research in Jerusalem.

Dr. Davis is also an alum of the Weston Jesuit School of Theology. He taught at the Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry for four years, and since 2014, has served on the faculty of Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, where he is associate professor of Old Testament.

Dr. Davis has a strong interest in Jewish-Christian dialogue, an interest nurtured by fellowships at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. In addition, Dr. Davis's research interests include literary and historical approaches and method in biblical narrative, the prophetic literature, feminist approaches to the Old Testament, ancient Israelite religion, and the Book of Job, the topic for tonight's presentation.

A productive writer, Dr. Davis has published numerous articles in scholarly biblical journals, as well as "Weekday Homily Helps" for St. Anthony Messenger Press. His first monograph was *Tel Dan in its Northern Cultic Context* published by SBL Press. He also wrote the commentary on the Book of Job in the newly published *Paulist Biblical Commentary*, which,

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as Melinda mentioned, will be launching here three weeks from tonight at the Dean's Colloquium. No extra charge for that commercial.

He's also the author of *Exploring the Old Testament: Creation, Covenant, Prophecy, and Kingship*, which will be available this December from Twenty-Third Publications. And this book will serve as the text for the new Crossroads online course, Old Testament Narrative, to be offered this April. And if that's not enough, he has two more books in the works to be published by Oxford University Press and by Paulist Press. So, well done, Andrew.

A popular teacher at STM, Dr. Davis's courses include The Prophets, Women in Scripture, Isaiah, Genesis to Kings, which is kind of our bread and butter Old Testament course, and a course called Job and Suffering. An up-and-coming Scripture scholar, I'd say he's pretty darn close to being there. Teacher, husband, and father, please join me in welcoming Dr. Andrew Davis, who will be speaking on "Disability and Advocacy in the Book of Job."

[applause]

### **Dr. Andrew Davis:**

Thank you all very much. And thank you, Tom, for that introduction. I'm excited to be here tonight to talk about two of my favorite subjects, one being parenting and the other being the Book of Job, which as Melinda said, syncs up very nicely with the Weekday Lectionary, and to reflect on the impact that disability studies has had on both of those parts of my life.

I'm honored to offer this year's Pyne Lecture, and I'm grateful to the family of Professor Margaret Pyne and the Pyne Endowment Trust for making this lecture series possible. I've attended this lecture series every year that I've been at STM, and I've always found the lectures to be illuminating and inspiring. And I really hope I don't break that streak tonight.

I also want to thank two colleagues at STM to who made this evening possible, first Jane Regan, who is the director of the Office of Continuing Education, and also Melinda Donovan, who attended to many details that made this evening possible. Lastly, I want to thank you all for being here tonight. And I also would like to recognize in a special way my parents, who were able to be here at the beginning of their weekend visit. And I hope you will honor their presence by not asking any hard questions at the end of the talk. [laughter] Only easy ones I can answer very easily.

I'd like to begin tonight by telling you a little bit about my two boys whom you see on the screen behind you. I do this as a way to lead into my discussion of the Book of Job, but also because this picture may well be the best part of the presentation. So if everything else is boring tonight, you can at least go home having seen a picture of two happy and handsome boys.

The first thing I want to tell you about this photo is that it came from last Christmas Eve. And I still consider it a Christmas miracle that both boys agreed to wear a tie for Christmas Mass. Or maybe it was a last-ditch effort to get themselves on Santa's "nice" list. But whatever the cause, it led to this unique picture, because my boys almost never dress up. At least they don't dress up with ties.

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This is closer to our dress up. On the right is Michael, who is eight years old and in third grade. And his stage name in this picture was Professor Happy Smile, which I always wanted to adopt as my alter ego in the classroom. And on the left is my son Peter, who is six years old and in kindergarten. And as you can probably tell from the photo, Peter has Down syndrome, a condition that results from having an extra twenty-first chromosome. This genetic variation is expressed in a number of traits, including physical and intellectual disabilities.

Of course, like any parent, I could spend the whole evening talking about my kids, both of them, and all the ways that they delight me, inspire me, and challenge me. But for tonight's talk, I want to focus on one part of my experience as a parent; in particular, my experience as a father of Peter, though I'll bring in Michael at the end of the talk. And I'll share some of the ways that parenting a child with Down syndrome has intersected with my day job as a professor of biblical studies.

For my wife Emily and me, one of the hardest parts about raising a child with a disability is correcting people who use hurtful language around him. Although this challenge is not unique to us, all parents work to shield their kids from harmful words and deeds. Parents who have kids with Down syndrome have the added challenge of a particular word, the R word, which is still prevalent in today's speech as a derogatory term, synonymous with stupid or foolish.

I'll never forget the moment I heard this word spoken aloud for the first time after Peter had been born. The four of us, my wife Emily, Michael, and Peter, were at Seward Park Playground in Seattle, and Emily and I were standing near a zip track. And this is actually it, the zip track at Seward Park. You can find anything online.

We were standing near the zip track, and we were pushing Peter in a swing while Michael was digging in the sandbox, and a young man and woman, maybe in their twenties, were goofing around on this zip track. And the man fell off, and the woman yelled after him, "You are such an R word." And in that moment, I was hurt and offended, but I was also paralyzed, not knowing if I should insert myself into their conversation to confront their use of this word. We didn't, and both of us wondered later, and I still wonder today if we made the right decision.

There have been other incidents over the years, and in some ways, the most challenging ones have involved people I know and people I like. You would think it would be easier to call out friends, that the friendship would provide a safe space for fraternal correction. But oddly, it has had the opposite effect on me. I'm not proud to admit that it actually makes me quicker to gloss over a *faux pas*.

I've thought about this reluctance a lot, maybe too much, considering there's only been a few incidents like this. But I think there are several factors at play. In part, I'm often stunned when I hear the R word and can't think of a response before the conversation moves on. And then it seems like too much trouble to go back and redress it.

But if I'm honest, another part of my reluctance is an unwillingness to call out harmful speech in someone I like and respect. It's easier to pass it off as an anomaly, not a representative of my friend's true character and not something to make a big deal about.

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And this unwillingness to call out friends is where I find an intersection with my work as a teacher and scholar of the Bible. For if it is difficult to confront peers, by how much more is it difficult to criticize biblical characters when we find them speaking or acting in ways that might insult Peter's or anyone's dignity as a child who is created and loved by God, just as he is?

Does the sacredness of Scripture mean that its characters are unassailable? Perhaps not, for obvious characters like Pharaoh or Haman, whose wickedness makes them pariahs and obvious negative examples. But what do we do when a biblical character who we consider one of the good guys, acts in a way that offends our modern sensibilities? Should we gloss it over with a "that was then, this is now" attitude? If we call out offensive speech or behavior, do we diminish the positive power of that biblical character? Do we diminish the sacredness of Scripture itself?

These are questions I would like to explore this evening with you by focusing on the biblical character Job, from the perspective of disability studies. A welcome development in biblical studies over the last couple of decades is the establishment of a sub-discipline dedicated to the study of disability in the Bible. The goal of this sub-discipline is to examine how disability is represented in biblical texts and what that representation means for readers today.

For the most part, the Book of Job has been considered a positive resource for readers interested in disability studies. Job is, for many, a model of empowerment, a character who presents himself to God without masking the broken parts of his life and body. On the contrary, his brokenness is a point of emphasis in his speeches to his friends and to God.

In the first part of my talk, I will affirm this positive view of Job, because I agree that, for the most part, he offers an empowering example to people with disabilities. Following this affirmation, however, I will turn our attention to some less edifying glimpses we get of Job's character, especially as it relates to the care of the poor and people with disabilities.

For me, these aspects of Job's character elicit the same discomfort I feel when I hear someone I know, perhaps even a friend, use the R word or some other insensitive language. Fortunately, I do have an answer, not the answer but an answer, for dealing with the question of Job's character. And I will conclude this talk by sharing it with you, and will finally reflect on what this means for me as Peter's dad.

So the Book of Job. It is a story you are probably familiar with. Job, the man from Uz, who is blameless and upright, fearing God and turning away from evil, the one who is the greatest of all Eastern people, rich in property and offspring, loses everything. And that's just the first chapter. There's 41 more chapters to go after that.

He loses everything as part of a bet between God and the Adversary. And the Adversary here is not Satan with a capital S, but simply a member of God's divine council, a tenured member of God's faculty whose job it is to be a naysayer and a nitpicker, a contrarian. Maybe you know the type. And if you don't, maybe you are the type. [laughter]

I'm not looking at anyone in the room right now, looking down, looking down. If the Adversary were here today living in Boston, he would be a sports radio host, because

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Boston is the only city in the country whose baseball team can win more games than any other team, 108, the most in team history. But all you hear about on sports radio is that the Red Sox are flawed and they are going to get bounced out of the first round of the playoffs. And after watching the Yankees last night, I might agree with that. But beside the point. So sports radio, I think, captures the sort of contrariness of the Adversary in the Job story.

So the bit between God and the Adversary concerns the motivation behind Job's God-fearing ways. In the Adversary's famous words, does Job fear God for nothing? That is, does Job pursue righteousness and turn away from evil simply because he thinks righteousness is a ticket to wealth and prosperity? Would Job be so God-fearing if that wealth were taken away?

The rest of the book explores this question through a series of speeches by Job and various companions and finally by God. We could spend this whole evening or a whole course, which I do every other year at the STM, unpacking these speeches. But what I want to highlight here is one feature of Job's speeches which is especially significant from the perspective of disability studies. That is the attention Job draws to the disfigurement of his own body. For after his wealth and his children have been destroyed, the Adversary attacks Job's body, covering it with itching and oozing sores which make him absolutely unrecognizable to his friends.

Job's emphasis on his body is easy to overlook, because the book consists mostly of speeches which focus our attention on words and language. But the contents of Job's speeches reveal him as, above all, an embodied character. Job's body may be broken, but that doesn't stop Job from bringing it before God and bringing it before us, the readers.

This makes the Book of Job exceptional in the Bible. Most biblical texts, especially in the Old Testament, betray a strong aversion to physical and psychological abnormalities. Those who bear them, these abnormalities, are shunned, and only allowed to re-enter polite society if and when they are cured.

Elsewhere, disabilities are depicted as opportunities for God to display his miraculous power. The deaf will hear, the blind will see, the lame will walk, et cetera. Blindness, deafness, and the like are almost never depicted as parts of a valid personhood made by God in God's own image. Rather, these disabilities are aberrations. They are signs of divine disfavor that ought to be corrected.

What makes Job stand out is his refusal to be shunned. Job puts his broken body front and center, for us and for God to behold. His physical condition is his way of being human, and he is not going to hide it, even if it makes those around him uncomfortable. He announces, for example—and here, all the passages from Scripture I'll put on the screen, or on a handout if you want to look back. So if I've moved on, you have a handout where you can go back and refer to them.

So just to give a sampling of some of the texts where Job focuses on his own embodiment, this is one from chapter 7, where he describes that his flesh is clothed with worms and dirt. "My skin hardens, then breaks out again."

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He goes on to address the social alienation he feels that comes with his physical ailment when he describes his estrangement from family and friends. He says, "My breath is repulsive to my own wife. I am loathsome to my own family. Even young children despise me. 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 with the skin of my teeth."

Perhaps most striking among Job's descriptions of his disability is his insistence that God is the one responsible for the suffering that he endures. In the following passage, we read again about Job's social alienation, but also his identification of God as the cause of his physical condition. He says:

They have gaped at me with open mouths. They struck me insolently against the cheek. They mass themselves together against me. God gives me up to the ungodly and casts me in the hands of the wicked. I was at ease, and God broke me in two. God seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces. He set me up as his target. God's archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy. He pours out my gall on the ground.

And one last example will suffice to show the persistence of Job's focus on his own embodied suffering. "God has made me a byword of the peoples, and I am one before whom people spit. My eye has grown dim from grief, and all my members are like a shadow."

These passages from Job's speeches highlight what makes him such a powerful resource for people with disabilities. Besides his description of social marginalization, which many people with disabilities will recognize as all too familiar, Job's courage and honesty are exemplary. He is unwilling to be pushed to the margins. The outward signs of his suffering, which normally would have marked him as an outcast, he makes no effort to hide. On the contrary, he draws our attention to them, forcing his audience to take account of his physical difference as an essential part of his personhood.

Moreover, he insists that this is how God made him. His physical condition does not separate Job from God, but it's a profound point of connection between them. Job doesn't ask for a cure. Physical restoration is not a precondition of his relationship with God. Instead, he asks for an explanation, and he wants to know how his physical condition fits into God's plan.

And in the end, he gets what he wants. God shows up to answer Job. Job may not like the answer he gets, and we may not like the answer Job gets. After all, the divine speeches at the end of the book are complex, and it's questionable how much they answer Job's request. Nevertheless, God meets Job where he is and as he is. And in doing so, God affirms Job's physical condition as worthy of encounter with God.

The epilogue of the Book of Job invites us to push this reading a little further. As you probably know, the book ends with God restoring, indeed doubling, Job's possessions. So he lost 7,000 sheep, and he gets 14,000 back. He lost 3,000 camels, he gets 6,000 back. He lost 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and he gets back 1,000 of each. He gets new children also, but only 10, same number, so that doubling doesn't carry through.

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Many readers find this conclusion disturbing, because the restoration seems pat and unsatisfying. There is no time tonight to deal with all the questions raised by the ending. Instead, I want to highlight a part of the epilogue that's often overlooked. And it's easy to overlook because it's something that's missing from the epilogue, that for all the restoration Job enjoys in the last chapter, the one thing that isn't restored is the wholeness of his body. His disfigurement, which has been a point of emphasis throughout the book, is not cured at the end.

The omission is significant and reiterates our preceding view of Job's disability and personhood. His physical difference is not an aberration, something to be reversed as part of his restoration. Rather, it is who Job is. This will be Job's body for the rest of his 140 day—140 years, not days—years, the body that will be seen, touched, and loved by others, including God. Yes, even God. This divine touch comes in verses 8 and 9 of chapter 42, when God says to Job, "I will show him favor." And then God does show Job favor.

And the Hebrew idiom for showing favor is to lift the face, to lift the face. And so at the very end of the book, we have this beautiful image of Job, whose body is disfigured, being touched by God and having his face lifted, as the idiom for being shown favor. Thus, the Book of Job ends with God reaching out and touching the disfigured face that has been shunned by many, but not in the end by God.

These features of the Book of Job are what make the book important for disability studies. And these features don't just apply to people with disabilities. After all, most of us are dealing with some kind of brokenness in our lives. And if not, we will be soon enough, for even those of us who are temporarily abled or those who for the time being are able to hide our infirmities, disability is the fate of us all sooner or later. And when that time comes, we will be wise to remember Job as a model of how to bring ourselves before God just as we are, with faith that we will be received by God just as we are.

But there's more. Yes, there's more, because there's another aspect of Job's character that is relevant to disability studies. Besides encouraging us to present ourselves before God, Job models a life of service to those who are disabled. This is not a prominent feature of the Book of Job, but it deserves our attention nonetheless.

It comes in chapter 29, which is part of Job's final testimony, his last speech where he reaffirms his righteousness. Part of this closing argument from Job is a litany of all the good deeds he performed before he was afflicted.

So he says in chapter 29, he says:

Because I delivered the poor who cried, I delivered 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 for the blind, and feet for 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 mouth."

This passage highlights Job's exemplary service to the vulnerable members of his society. The members include not just the classic biblical trio of the widow, the orphan, and the

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stranger, but also people with disabilities. Job attests that he was eyes for the blind and feet to the lame. This pairing of the blind and the lame occurs often in the Bible, six times in this order and twice more in the reverse order. And based on its prevalence and also evidence from a few particular instances of the word pair, some scholars have taken this as an example of a merism.

A merism is a literary device that uses two examples to express totality. So when I misplace my car keys and I tell my wife that I looked high and low, she knows that I have looked everywhere and not just on the floor and on the top shelf. And then she'll mention somewhere I haven't thought of. And then I'll find the keys.

We have similar expressions in the Bible. Most famously, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad in the Garden of Eden is a tree that contains all knowledge, not just knowledge of good stuff and bad stuff. So if we take "the blind and the lame" in verse 15 here as a merism, then the verse has a much broader significance than we might first attribute to it. Job supports not just the blind and the lame but all people with disabilities.

Moreover, it's worth noting that Job's description of his care involves more than doing a good deed. It's an act of empathy with the blind and the lame. He becomes the eyes of the blind. He becomes the feet for the lame. He identifies with their disability and serves them in a spirit of solidarity.

So at this point you may be asking, what's the problem? At this point, you may be asking, it seems like Job is bearing a double fruit for disability studies? Yes, he is a character who models integrity in his own disability, and he also models advocacy for others with a disability. So what's the problem?

Well, here's the problem. The problem is not what Job does for others, but why he does it, not what he does for others, including the blind and the lame, but why he does it. In this same chapter 29, it's clear that Job's motivation for serving the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the blind, and the lame, is not concern for their welfare.

What Job is more concerned with is the esteem and praise he receives because of his service. Just before this description of his service, he describes the ways he makes a grand entrance to the public assembly, so these verses immediately preceding the passage I just showed you. So he arrives at the gate of the city. He says:

When I went out to the gate of the city, I took my seat in the square. The young men saw me and withdrew. The aged rose up and stood. The nobles refrained from talking, and they laid their hands on their mouths. The voices of princes were hushed, and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths. When ear heard, it commended me, and when eye saw, it approved.

This detailed picture of Job's revered position in the community is linked to his advocacy for the poor and disabled by the beginning of the "because" in verse 12. [coughs] Excuse me. He says, "When ear heard, it commended me, and when eye saw, it approved, because I served the poor, because I was a helper to the orphan, because the blessing of the wretched came upon me." Because Job helps the widow, the orphan, and the alien,



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because he is eyes for the blind and the lame, he enjoys an exalted status within his community.

Then after this description of his service, Job can't help but reminisce about his former standing. He says, "They listened to me and waited, and kept silence for my counsel. After I spoke they did not speak again. I chose their way, and sat as chief." And then finally, "I lived like a king among his troops."

At a minimum, I think we can say this is not the best look for Job. He begins his last speech, the last speech he'll make in the whole book, by longing for the good old days, when he enjoyed a prestigious position in the city. He was chief, king among his troops. This walk down memory lane also includes helping those less fortunate than he. But this description of helping others, including those with disabilities, is sandwiched between self-indulgent memories of his own self-importance.

For us, it raises a question, a variation, actually, of the Adversary's question which set the book in motion. Does Job serve the disabled for nothing? Is his care for the blind and lame offered without expectation of something in return? Or is it motivated by concern for their well-being? Or is it self-interested?

It is hard to read chapter 29 and not think that Job's service is a means to an end. His care for the poor and disabled is a means to an end, here the end being his place at the top of the social hierarchy. Things get even worse in the next verses, when he complains about the present humiliation he endures, and reveals what he thinks about the underclasses of society, the ones he was just bragging about having helped. He says, "But now they mock me, they make sport of me, those who are younger than I, those whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock. They are driven out from society, but now they," of all people, "mock me in song. I am a byword to them."

I always find this section of the Book of Job hard to read, because we see a side of Job that's unflattering, to say the least. He can't believe that he, Job, who once sat atop the social hierarchy, now ranks below the underclasses he used to help. In the good old days, he would never have even let his dogs hang out with these underclasses, these outcasts. And now he's counted among them? Or even worse, these underclasses look down on him?

Looking back from this section to Job's description of his service to the poor and disabled, we see that Job is willing to help the vulnerable members of his society, but he is in no way willing to be counted among them. This is a point that is often missed by interpreters who are eager to lionize Job and quick to make him an ally of the people he serves. For example, one famous critic writes, quote, "Job's life bears witness to his solidarity with the poor and the helpless." But the opening verses here from chapter 30 reveal otherwise. They show a man who is incredulous to find himself on the margins with those he believes are beneath his dignity.

So not the best look for Job. But here's a question. Does his self-importance undermine the service he has performed? Is Job's care for the poor and the disabled diminished because he is motivated by self-interest and has no desire to be counted among those whom he serves? Every time I teach the Book of Job, I ask them to write a one-page paper on this very question. And for the most part, they say "yes." They say that Job's self-

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servicing motives do diminish his service. And I have to say I agree with these students, and I'll give you three reasons why.

First, Job's motives are not some marginal issue of the book but lie at the heart of its testimony. It is the Adversary's questioning of Job's motives that set the entire book in motion. So for us to call out Job's motives is not an imposition on the text from our modern perspective, but it's consistent with the book's own preoccupation. From the beginning, the book invites us to reflect on Job's motives, and so we should not be afraid to do so.

Secondly, Job's lack of solidarity is especially problematic from the perspective of disability rights. One of the core principles of this movement is "nothing about us without us." That is, services and policies for people with disabilities must include input from people with disabilities. They must be active partners in the management of their lives, not passive recipients of charity. Job's support for the blind and the lame fails to meet this standard of disability advocacy.

Third, Catholic moral theology has a long tradition of recognizing that intention matters. It is as essential to moral action as the act itself. Our actions may be the right ones, but their goodness depends on motivation. You cannot deduce goodness from a right action. This focus on intention and action can be found in Aquinas, who distinguishes between the two and states that both are factors in moral reasoning.

And I know all this because it's written in my class notes from 2003, when I took Fundamental Moral Theology with Professor Jim Keenan. As you can see, you cannot deduce goodness from a right action. [laughter] Goodness is about motivation, and Aquinas distinguishes between intention and execution of an action. It says right there in my class notes. I don't see how you could disagree with it. Of course, I did look up the Aquinas reference. I felt like I had to. So don't just take my word for it.

But actually [coughs], excuse me, actually, I remember vividly Jim Keenan's lecture on this topic of goodness and rightness. And the thing that I remembered most was not his reference to Aquinas, as much as I like Aquinas, but I had to look it up this week. What I remember from that lecture is actually he had a quote from T.S. Eliot that always stuck with me. At one point in Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, the main character Beckett contemplates martyrdom but recognizes the selfish motives that underlie his desire to become a martyr. This recognition leads him to a famous line where he states, "The last temptation is the greatest treason, to do the right deed for the wrong reason."

Job, I think, in chapter 29, has done the right deed for the wrong reason. He has helped the poor and disabled, not because he has sympathy, compassion, or even pity for them. He helps them because his aid reinforces his preeminent position within the community, and it feels good to be on top.

So what do we do with Job, then? Do we reject a Job as a model? If we reject him as a model, do we have to relinquish the positive aspects of his character, which can be empowering for people with disabilities? Or should we just let this problem slide? Should we just let this problematic characteristic of him slide? Let's just focus on the good deeds and not get caught up in the messy business of motivations. Let's just pretend like we

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didn't read chapter 29 and 30, and then we can keep Job on his pedestal as an exemplar of embodied honesty and righteous protest.

Just like the times I've glossed over when I've heard a friend or acquaintance use the R word or other language denigrating people with disabilities, it's easier to pretend we didn't just hear Job instrumentalize the poor and disabled for his own vainglory. But the problem is, once you hear it, you can never quite shake it from your consciousness. Even as you try to focus on the positive, the negative looms in your peripheral vision.

There is a way forward, I think, and to explain it, let me return to my students and that one-page paper they write about chapters 29 and 30. Many of them criticize Job for his self-serving motives in these chapters, and sometimes they just stop there. But a few of these students push further, and they use the critique as an opportunity to examine their own motives in ministry. Some of these students reflect on the times when their ministry or their volunteer work has become more about themselves than it has about the clients that they were serving.

Or maybe their service was altruistic, for the most part. But if you look closely, there was a sliver of self-interest, such as—and these are real examples from student papers: "This volunteer work will look good on an upcoming application." "This service trip will take me to a country I'd like to visit." "I want to do ministry this way because this is the way that I'm good at doing it, and I have more ego invested in this ministry than I usually admit to myself."

These students find in Job's shortcomings an invitation to self-criticism and a recognition that there are mixed motives in any ministry situation. They are sensitized in new ways to a pastoral question that they might not have confronted without Job as an interlocutor. What these students grasp is that the Book of Job is about more than the character Job. The meaning of the book, its moral, theological, and pastoral implications, is not reducible to its main character.

This is true not only for the Book of Job, but for all of the Old Testament. Its sacredness does not depend on the perfection of its characters. A biblical character is one part of a larger and more ambitious discourse created by the biblical authors, and our reading should take into account the cumulative witness of the whole text.

It's tempting to read biblical characters as moral types, such that Abraham epitomizes faith; Ruth, loyalty; Job, patience; and so on; though that last one I totally disagree with. Job is not patient at all. So strike that one entirely from the record. These traits, these characteristics are part of the characters, but they are not the only parts of these characters. The moral significance of Scripture does not lie only or even primarily in the way biblical characters exemplify virtues for us to emulate. What makes biblical stories compelling is witnessing these characters in morally complex situations which put their virtues and character to the test.

In this way, biblical narrative mirrors the moral complexity of our own lives and invites us to compare the two worlds. If we find biblical characters behaving in morally ambiguous or even downright rotten ways, the text is no less revelatory. It just requires a different kind

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of reading. Using Scripture to ask WWJD, What Would Job Do, is a fine approach for some texts, but it's not helpful when we encounter biblical characters acting in questionable ways.

As the student papers show, problematic passages in Scripture can and should lead us to reflect critically on our own lives, our work, and our relationships. These passages may well expose blind spots that would otherwise remain hidden from our view. From this perspective, although Job's self-centeredness might at first seem like a problem for a disability reading, it may be just the opposite if this problem, in fact, leads us, the readers, to stronger advocacy for people with disabilities and a greater solidarity with them.

This has been the case for me as I have reflected on the Book of Job. While so much of Job's character inspires me, my first reaction to his self-serving motives in chapters 29 through 30 was repulsion. My second reaction, which only took me a few short years to come around to, was self-reflection. And now that I have kids, including one with a disability, this passage has forced me to think about times in my role as a parent when I've fallen into a trap similar to Job's.

Without turning this conclusion into a mini-therapy session, let me mention a couple of instances that are related to Peter's Down syndrome. One aspect of parenting that is distinctive for parents of kids with disabilities is that everything goes a little bit slower. It takes Peter a little bit longer to make his bed, to get dressed, to put on shoes, to unpack his backpack, to climb in and out of the car, to use the bathroom, or to lift weights. The list goes on.

And some days, I really love the effect that this slowness has on our family life, because it forces us to slow down. It feels like a slow parenting movement amid the many parts of our lives that are driving us towards hyperactivity. [coughs] Excuse me. But there are days when the school bus is waiting in the driveway, when we're already late for soccer practice, when it's already past bedtime, et cetera, and instead of letting Peter finish the task that he had started, I'd jump in and do it for him.

These are days that I recognize in myself some of Job's self-serving motives in chapter 29. In the moment, I, like Job, might trick myself into thinking I'm doing Peter a favor. I'm helping him complete a task he is struggling to finish. But really, this help is more about expediency for me than it is about meeting Peter's needs.

Moreover, insofar as advocacy for people with disabilities is about empowerment, my help is actually having the opposite effect. It is stunting Peter's development of independent skills and reinforcing a mindset of dependency. I think if you ask most parents of kids with an intellectual disability what they want for their kids, they would say, "to live as independently as possible." But many of us parents struggle to give them the opportunity to develop the skills they will need to achieve such independence in their lives. Real empowerment of our kids and real solidarity with them takes time, patience, and commitment. And some days, my track record is no better than the help Job bestows from on high upon the blind and the lame.

Fortunately for me, I have another role model in my life who regularly inspires me with his commitment to Peter's self-sufficiency. This is Peter's big brother Michael. You know, one seminal moment in my parenting journey came at Michael's baptism, when the priest,

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Father Rich Bozzelli at Corpus Christi in Baltimore, told my wife and me that while he was instructing us to teach Michael, it was just as important to let Michael teach us. And that advice made a deep impression on me, and it's been true for both boys.

In a particular way though, Michael has taught me to foster Peter's independence by not shortchanging the things that he is capable of doing when he has the time. Michael nurtures Peter, but also insists that the accommodations we make for his disability do not go beyond what is necessary. So when we're putting away toys at the end of the day, Michael usually cleans his mess up faster than Peter does. And in that moment, I am tempted to finish the job so that we can get on with the bedtime routine. But Michael is usually adamant that Peter clean up his own mess.

Or at meals, I might cut Peter some slack on his manners because it's hard for him to eat with utensils and to close his mouth when he's eating. In those moments, it is Michael who insists that Peter can and should have nice manners at the table. Not that Michael always has nice manners, [laughter] but he insists on Peter's nice manners. Nor does Michael always clean up after himself.

I don't want to make him out to be the perfect child, and I'm also not saying that Michael's motives are totally pure. [laughter] He's probably less motivated by concern for Peter than he is by the injustice of a double standard. But still, in his own way, the hard line that Michael takes with Peter is rooted in more of a sense of solidarity than I find in myself sometimes. Peter is his brother and his peer and can make an equal contribution to our family and to the world.

So what, in the end, did the Book of Job offer those of us who love someone with a disability and want to create a church and a world that will welcome their gifts? The answer, I think, is a lot. But part of its contribution requires us to rethink how we understand biblical characters and their function within their own stories. The revelation of Scripture is not only in the inspirational passages which give us a vision or ideal to strive towards, but also in the difficult and problematic passages. The revelation in these passages lies not so much in a model to be emulated but in a theological reflection generated by the biblical text. Thank you. [applause]

Are there any comments or questions or remarks people would like to share that came up in your small group discussions? Please.

**Participant:** Yes, we were just having a conversation here among some members of the Down syndrome community, family members, parents. And one thing that we feel is that people with disabilities in general, and people with Down syndrome specifically, have much to give, much to teach, much to convey about life. I sometimes just use the word enlightenment. You know, if you love a person with Down syndrome, that brings you some enlightenment.

And you made the distinction in your talk between Job helping people with disabilities just for self-importance, social standing, and so on, versus altruism, genuinely caring about the well-being of the disabled person. But I wanted to bring up this other possibility of another reason to become involved with people with disabilities, is that they have so much to offer. And we have so much to gain. And I wondered what you would think about that.

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**Dr. Davis:** Yeah, I absolutely agree with that. It's just something, I wish that point was made in the Book of Job, because I would absolutely highlight it. One thing I found in my own parenting, and my wife and I have talked about this, when we found out that Peter had Down syndrome, we thought to ourselves, "But won't it be nice he has an older brother to model for him and to show him how to do things?"

And we were not prepared for all the ways that Peter would be an instructor for Michael and for us. And so there are so many ways that our paradigm had to shift after Peter arrived. And we learned that very lesson, that Peter would not just be the recipient of instruction from us or from Michael, but Peter has so much to teach us. And so the words that I heard at Michael's baptism, as I said, have been true for both boys. And I absolutely agree with what you said. Yes?

**Participant:** In disability studies, the word pity often comes up, right? And as part of your conversations, you felt that Job was not necessarily acting out of pity. But I was wondering, for your thoughts in the Old Testament, how does pity come up in the context of disabilities? So in today's modern day society, right, you hold a walk or a fundraiser, and people, the action of giving money is great. But oftentimes, it's given out of pity. Oh, the poor people with the disabilities or the families that have, quote, "the burden," right? And so the motivation is pity.

Or you run into someone with a disability, and you give them a hug, which is a nice action. But it's motivated by, "Oh, they're so cute and they need a hug," right? And many people with disabilities find pity to actually be more disabling. And in the context of the Old Testament, how is pity treated toward the individual with a disability?

**Dr. Davis:** Unfortunately, there are so few positive resources, I think, in the Old Testament for disability studies. And so I think the best we could do, as I said, most often disability is regarded as some sort of defect and marginalized and in some ways shunned. And so I think the best we could do is to think about pity as it comes up in other categories, say around the poor or the widow or the orphan, and try to draw an analogy from that into disability studies. But the resources specifically for disability studies are rare.

And so in that case, I would say, if you were to look at it like pity in terms of social justice, care for the poor or the oppressed, I think a lot of that in Old Testament discourse is rooted in reminding Israel that they come from a situation of oppression and poverty, that through their slavery in Egypt, they know what it's like to be poor, oppressed, enslaved; and therefore they should have a special heart, a special mercy for those who are in that situation now. I don't know how we translate that into disability studies, but I would say that as a concept, that's our best resource for it in the Old Testament. Yes, Megan?

**Participant:** Thank you. So I had a question specifically about the concept of wholeness, like bodily wholeness. I have never read Job carefully enough to notice that his body is not restored when God looks at him or raises his face. And your insight really prompted me to think about how God's idea of wholeness is not necessarily ours. And I was just wondering if you had any more insights into that idea, or anything else in the Old Testament that touches on that, because it isn't just that God ignores it, but God actually looks at him, or as you said, like raises his face and still doesn't fix it. So I just thought that was a really

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important insight that I appreciated and wanted to know if you had anything else to say about it.

**Dr. Davis:** I do. Job's wholeness, that word is an important word in the Book of Job, the Hebrew root *tmm*. And it comes out in the adjective *tam*, what is often translated in the opening verses as blameless. But what it really means is perfect, like whole, something is whole or perfect. So when Job finishes his speeches, when his speeches are all done, they say that Job's words are *tam*. They've come to an end. They're totally complete. And I think is also a word to describe offerings that are made in the Temple, that animals for sacrifice should be perfect, should be unblemished.

And so this concept is an important one in the Book of Job. It comes up in some key places to describe Job's wholeness of his body, and so the physical defects that he has end up compromising that wholeness. I mean, people have pointed out that he has these sores all over his body that are oozing. And so literally, the boundary between his interior and exterior has been compromised.

And so there's an irony that the book focuses so much on his wholeness, when it's actually the disintegration of that wholeness that's happening bodily. And so I think for that reason, it highlights all the more, the epilogue, that he's not restored, and yet he is restored. And so I think the author is self-consciously attending to that irony in the book, and it contrasts then with the way that this word *tam* is used elsewhere in the Bible where it does connote perfection and lack of blemish, immaculate. Oh, Gus?

**Participant:** Sometimes in literature a character who is presented as disabled or deformed is presented in a way that's meant to show them as inherently evil, and this is part of that. A classic example would be Shakespeare's hunchbacked Richard III. Do any instances of characters who are presented in this way appear in the Scriptures, thus presenting a challenge to those who are differently abled?

**Dr. Davis:** Yes. I mean, if you look at characters who are blind or deaf, I mean, in the Old Testament often blindness and deafness is correlated with spiritual or moral obduracy. And so I think, by and large, this is coming from a book that Saul Olyan wrote on disability in the Hebrew Bible. And he basically shows that physical abnormalities, psychological abnormalities are usually correlated with negative moral or social positions.

And I think that's largely true in the New Testament, but I don't know that quite as well. But there's a few instances. Third Isaiah, that is to say, Isaiah 56, is one example that stands out as an exception where a physical difference is not regarded as something socially marginalizing but something that is welcomed into the Temple, and sacrifices are welcomed by those who are different.

Yeah, Mary Jo?

**Dr. Mary Jo Iozzio:** Thank you so much, Andrew. This was a fun presentation.

**Dr. Davis:** Thanks.

**Dr. Iozzio:** I really like the connection between, the relationship that Michael has with Peter and his both patience and challenge that Peter should be doing all the things that he's

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required to do, he's expected to do. So nothing about us without us. He can do this. He might take a little longer, but he can do it. So kudos to Michael.

Jacob at the Jabbok has a deform. . . he gets injured when he's wrestling with the angel. And that injury lasts through his lifetime. So there's an example of a physical disability that happens that doesn't prevent Jacob from being the person Jacob becomes. So there's a lot of materials there. The danger piece is huge for any kind of disabilities, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, the demoniac in the New Testament being perhaps the most frightening of people.

Then you have *The Disabled God*. So you posted Nancy Eiesland's book cover there, and that's critically important for the Christian tradition.

I know I'm going all over the place here, and I apologize for that. I'm just so excited of your retrieval of this particular part of what's going on in Job, and the value of re-examining the texts that we have inherited, that disability studies is offering us a new way of thinking about them. So thank you. Thank you very much.

**Dr. Davis:** Thank you, and I totally agree. And I think that disability, and as I said, the fruit of a disability hermeneutic is not just for people with disabilities, for people who love them, but they end up opening our eyes to parts of the text that are relevant to every reader of the text. And so that's what I find most life-giving about it, is that the conclusions you often draw from this hermeneutic are often relevant widely.

**Participant:** This is not an intellectual observation at all, but I wanted to just share something that I was just sharing with my seatmate here. And that is when my son made his First Communion in second grade, he put the host in his mouth and he said, "Oh, this tastes disgusting," and then gave it to his father. And for the next four years, he walked up with his hands across his chest to get a blessing.

Then we started going to a tiny church actually inside of a Jewish hospital in Denver. And the priest had the ministry to the developmentally disabled, and he asked me why Brendan did not take Communion, and I told him. And he said, "Have him bring in a piece of bread, and I will bless that, and that will be Communion for him and for me." And I was just so moved by his desire to meet Brendan where he was, and that his overriding goal was to have Brendan experience the Eucharist.

**Dr. Davis:** Mm-hmm, that's beautiful. I love that story. We're very, very grateful. We go to St. Ignatius here. And actually, Lara Ericson, who's the director of religious ed, is here tonight. And so she helps with the Family Masses, and she knows that when they do the collection, she is often administering these kids.

And Peter loves to help with the collection. So he takes the basket and goes up and down the aisles getting the collection. And when he first started doing that, it took every ounce of willpower to restrain myself from standing up and helping him do it. Now, whatever was going to happen with him holding that basket was going to happen. And one time, he went in the back, like in the back where you can't see him, and he was out of eyeshot. And I just thought, oh my God. I was just praying, like "Please come back with that basket full of money." [laughter] Don't let me hear, like, change clanging in the kitchen. And he did come



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back. But it was such a lesson to me. And it is getting after the same thing, like creating opportunities within our worship spaces for them to feel at home and comfortable. And I feel like Lara does a great job of that at St. Ignatius, and we're very grateful for it. I wish more parishes were able to do those sorts of things for families with disabilities. Yes, Mike?

**Participant:** Thank you for a brilliant talk. I'd like to suggest a different way of dealing with Job than the way you did, Andrew. And that is the critique of Job because his motivations were bad. I would like to suggest a different way of looking at it, because in chapter 29, which you quoted, and chapter 30, the opposite, and 30 I'll use: "They've made sport of me, those who are younger than I, whose fathers I have disdained. They have driven me out from society."

It seems to me a more fruitful or authentic way of understanding Job in his social context was he was not dealing in a place where morality is determined by matching up actions with motivations. And therefore T.S. Eliot's critique would be far from that experience, but rather in a society where honor-shame is the grid upon which one understands one's actions. That is, how does this appear to the community in which I am? And it's from them that I get that positive value.

That's what Jesus is doing all the time. And the honor-shame society manifests itself in the challenge-riposte arguments. They've said this, "I say to you," and back, and who wins the argument? And Jesus is the one who's seen as the valued one.

Here, I think, it's the same thing happening with Job, is not have bad motives—he does from a twenty-first century perspective. But in his own society, the grid is honor-shame and not motivation and action connection. I think that becomes more with Jesus. I think that's one of the things that Jesus does within his own tradition of emphasizing the importance of motivation. But I think it's on a continuum of honor-shame that is really far from our experience today. Could you comment on that?

**Dr. Davis:** Yeah, I agree with that, actually. I agree that honor-shame is an important rubric for the ancient world and the Old Testament and the New Testament. But I still think that in the Book of Job the question of motivations is paramount. I mean, that's the question that the Adversary asks God at the beginning, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" But what are Job's motivations behind his piety, behind his God-fearing ways?

And so I think the Book of Job, I agree with you to a large extent, that a lot of the Old Testament is not interested or explicitly engaging with the interiority of its characters. But I think the Book of Job is exceptional for that, because in all sorts of ways, the author is playing with the idea of how much Job's inside matches his outside. And the author is playing with it so often it does seem to be a lens through which the author is presenting the character Job. And so I would agree with you broadly, but not in the Book of Job, actually. I think motivation is there.

There's a funny part in the prologue, where the question is, "Will Job curse God to his face?" That's the question, that's like the criteria for establishing if he's going to do it or not. And it says that Job lost all his stuff, "but in all these things, Job did not sin with his lips."

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And that little "with his lips," the medieval rabbis spent a lot of time talking about that, saying Job did not sin with his lips, but he certainly did in his heart. And that the author, by putting this little tagline on, "Job did not sin with his lips," is alerting the reader to the fact that what was happening on the inside is not necessarily matching what's happening on the outside. And so I think that the way the author is playing with how much does our interior process match our external actions is something that the author is attentive to. Yes?

**Participant:** Hi. In line with the question about Shakespeare, I wonder how can a blind person going to Mass, say, and listening some of the descriptions of blind people, how, I cringe when I read or hear those passages of the Bible I don't know how to interpret. And if there is a blind person next to me, it just breaks my heart. How is a blind person to take and to keep the faith in light of that treatment of their disability?

**Dr. Davis:** That's a great question. I wish I knew. I mean, I think part of it, I think it requires homilists who are willing to name it as a problem and not celebrate it as miraculous healing and ignorant of the effect it may have on people who experience that condition as part of their everyday life, as part of their personhood. And so I'd like to see more sermons that address this. But beyond that, I don't have many suggestions.

Yes? One more. I think we're going to have one more question. I could go all night, but I realize not everyone feels that way.

**Participant:** It might be similar to hers, but with respect to I guess what I would call invisible disabilities, especially people struggling with mental illness, and I think, I don't know if I'm right about this, but that sometimes the stories of possession, those may have been people with mental illness. And they're treated as though they're full of sin or they're possessed by demons. And I don't know what Scripture scholars are saying these days or how we look at those stories in either Testament with respect to those kinds of disabilities, because that, I think, can also be misinterpreted.

**Dr. Davis:** I think so. I don't know about the demoniac possessions in the New Testament, but where this has come up in the Old Testament is depictions of Saul. During Saul's downfall, he's inhabited by an evil spirit, and he exhibits a lot of characteristics of poor mental health or depression. And in the overall narrative, this poor mental health becomes part of the case for pushing him aside. So it's contemporaneous with his downfall and David's rise. And so the narrator is clearly using lack of mental health for Saul as a disqualifying part of his character for kingship.

And so beyond, again, naming, it's another example of a negative depiction or a depiction of psychological abnormality or difference that takes on this negative freight. And I think that part of what scholarship has done in the depiction of Saul is to name that negative freight and try to unhinge it from Saul or from our reading of it and name it for what it is. And beyond that, beyond naming it, I don't know how much we can rehabilitate it, because the depiction is negative.

With that, thank you all for being here tonight. [applause]