

Clinton Emerson Memorial Lecture

The Irony OF ORTHODOXY

February 19, 2022 – Loma Linda University Church

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Charles Weniger not only left an enduring mark in twentieth-century Adventism, his ideas can also help inspire Adventism in this century. How?

I am not referring to his wholistic approach to public speaking—that the speaker must prepare her or his heart in advance, and always with humility. I am not referring to the way he reminded speakers to invite their listeners to respond in some way—to call people to embrace the kingdom, because sermons must change lives.

Nor do I have in mind his passionate call to seek “enriching experiences,” to live the good life. And I am not even referring to his excellence in the classroom. Rather, I focus on Charles Weniger’s understanding of the Bible as literature.

This essential conviction shaped his work with Genesis as narrative, Deuteronomy as persuasive oratory, the Psalms, Lamentations, and Song of Solomon as poetry, Isaiah and Joel as prophecy, and Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as philosophy. And his conviction of Scripture as literature underlay his love of the book of Job. It is why he took it seriously—as a poem inside a narrative.

Dr Weniger encouraged students to notice Job as a person, to imagine him sitting devastated on an ash heap, and in doing so to contemplate the experience of the dark night of the soul. While the specific causes vary from person to person, part of our shared human experience is numbing despair at great loss.

I learned from Richard Utt’s biography of Charles Weniger that he wanted his seminary students to preach on Job. One student who remembered well Weniger’s “Biblical Literature” class, recalled his mantra: “When you are out in the field, I want to drop by your church on a Sabbath and find you preaching on the book of Job” (Utt, 139). While the pastor interviewed for the biography said that Weniger had not been able to drop by his church, if he had, he would certainly have found him preaching on Job!

In his own work on the book, Weniger identified not just one response to the problem of human suffering, but several. He found them in various places within the work—the prologue, the first and third speech cycles, the response of the whirlwind, and in the epilogue. These responses were

articulated in the creative language of an artist in both prose and poetry, the vehicles for God's revelation.

In recognizing the book's artistry, Weniger heard multiple voices—conversations both within and between sacred texts.

Job

Readers will recall that the book of Job begins with a story—of a righteous human who becomes the focus of the adversary or accuser.

Sitting on an ash heap mourning the loss of children and physical health and financial security, Job hears from friends. They present the sacred tradition, arguing the standard orthodox answers to his problems: sinners bring suffering on themselves; God punishes sinners for their sin (retributive justice); if Job repents, God will show mercy. Sabbath School memory verses, they represent biblical theology found throughout the law and the prophets. They are received tradition.

Yet, the “irony of orthodoxy” in the book of Job is that its readers know that the orthodox answers are not true.

Leland Ryken uses the phrase “the irony of orthodoxy” (Ryken, 343) noticing that:

- Because we have the prologue, we as readers know that Job *isn't* suffering because of his sins.
- Because we have the prologue, we know that God is *not* punishing Job.
- And because we have the prologue, we realize that God's mercy is *not* dependent on Job's repentance.

The irony of this orthodoxy is that we, the readers, know that the orthodox tradition isn't true. What lessons, then, might there be for those who insist on orthodoxy today? A caution? A plea for humility?

At the end of the book, no one asks the orthodox to pray for Job. Just the opposite! God asks Job to pray for them.

Lest we too quickly align ourselves with Job, however, we should notice that he, too, is wrong. God was not inflicting suffering, and certainly not delighting in it as Job contends. Considering God as cruel is also wrong theology. We must not infer that suffering indicates sin (Job's friends were wrong). And we must not assume that it indicates the enmity of God (Job was wrong too).

The irony of orthodoxy is that we know that orthodoxy isn't true. At least not always. And not right now. But our own rebellion against orthodoxy is also wrong. It is certainly not satisfying, not sufficient.

So where does that leave us?



The Visit of Job's Friends. Chromolithograph, published in 1886.

The orthodox tradition is inadequate. But so is our push back against it.

In a year of so much loss since our last on-line-only Charles Weniger Society celebration, what is our hope?

If God's retributive justice just does not work as an answer—that those suffering are *not* sinners—then what *does* make sense? What is a more adequate response?

Enter the book of Job, a complex prose-poem of complaints and rebukes and theophanies. Poetry in conversation with the prophets, it is sacred texts wrestling with each other, all in the search for greater understanding.

Up to this point in Israel's written tradition, the law and the prophets tended to focus on an elect group—Israel whether living within or outside the covenant. What would eventually be called “wisdom literature,” on the other hand, emphasized the universality of human experience—what all people have in common.



Engraved illustration of Job and His Affliction Map Engraving from *The Popular Pictorial Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments*, Published in 1862. Copyright has expired on this artwork. Digitally restored.

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If the law and the prophets emphasized the huge chasm between Israelites acting righteously and Assyrians acting wickedly, wisdom, in contrast, emphasized how Assyrians and Israelites were so very much alike in knowing both joy and sorrow.

The shift in thinking required a new kind of literature. Instead of prophetic proclamation focusing on collective Israel's guilt before God, the story of Job zeros in on an individual without even stating his nationality. The key character is Job, whose experience is so very *human*.

This isn't about law vs. grace—all Job's friends believe in a gracious God.

Nor is it about social justice. Job had followed the prophets and done justly.

Instead, this is something new.

As Russian literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, a new ideology emerging from a specific social situation requires a new genre, for new ideas are inseparable from the form in which we find them. And here in Job we find a new form.

Wisdom's creation poetry allows a shift from God as covenant-maker to God as creator of all life.

And its new form highlights that God is sovereign.

When the whirlwind answers Job—when he experiences a God-appearance (theophany), readers encounter a transcendent Creator creating and creative

in ways that humans cannot comprehend—yet in which they participate.

When the whirlwind arrives, readers encounter something new ...

- A Creator of abundance and variety, one unhindered and surprising
- One unimaginable yet shaping human imagination
- A creator of creative creatures
- A God of unlimited possibilities
- One who will not be boxed in by retributive justice... or anything else!

Job's complaints paved the way for theophany and theophany for theological breakthroughs ... for new ways of thinking about God. They include:

- Covenant maker is better understood as surprising Creator!
- God is even more compassionate than we thought!
- People who suffer can also be innocent.
- Evil is somehow both outside God and yet controlled by God ... so that mystery remains.
- Perhaps silence before such mystery is the best human response of all.

New insights about God call for new literary forms and multiple voices and possibilities and progress!

Within this one book, we hear the prophets still protesting and the continued influence of retributive justice.

We hear wrestling with the human experience of suffering and innocence and the inadequacies of orthodoxy.

And the voices that expose the irony of orthodoxy are themselves sacred texts!

Seeing the Bible as sacred literature enables us to see the book of Job's theological breakthroughs.

Furthermore, seeing the Bible as sacred literature—that the Bible is to be read literarily, rather than literally—helps us to understand God in new ways.

Two brief examples:

I. First, if in reading Job, you find the ending inadequate, not satisfying to your sensibilities ... that might be precisely the author's point!

The prose ending for the most part reinscribes orthodoxy. The tradition is so strong that it returns as a way of affirming that Job—who refused orthodoxy—is correct! So that he receives blessings for challenging the notion that blessings don't work that way! Readers must continue to wrestle with the contradictions between the creation poetry of the whirlwind and the retributive justice of the prose.

Suffering as punishment for sin has been exposed as false. The irony of orthodoxy is that here orthodoxy is wrong. Yet, questions remain ...

- Is it that suffering doesn't have moral meaning? To suggest so would itself be evil?
- Is it that suffering requires the supernatural for an adequate reply?
- Is it that suffering is not the result of judgment nor its cause? But somehow the stage for new creation?
- Is it that suffering is placed into a cosmic context? (Does that help?)
- Is it that suffering is part of humanity's story... and that God knows that?
- Is it that suffering is part of God's story too? Since the whirlwind joins Job?
- Is hope for suffering possible when it is placed next to a transcendent God of unimaginable creative ability?

Suffering isn't explained. Instead, it becomes something to be transformed, an opportunity for a whole new system in which the causes of suffering are eliminated.

II. Here's the second brief example.

A literary reading would notice the book of Job's *inclusio*. To see an *inclusio* is to notice that a work's beginning and ending have similar elements. They mirror

each other, if you will. If we read the beginning and end of Job carefully, we find so many similar elements.

But *inclusios* are also fascinating when the ending is significantly different in some way. As is the case here. And what is a major difference between the beginning and ending of Job?

Have you ever noticed that the accuser *isn't* part of the epilogue?

The accuser is absent--gone! While key to the cause of Job's suffering at the start, in the end he has vanished! The character credited with causing Job's pain is no more.

Just restoration is not sufficient! Creation moves from the language of this-for-that to a new paradigm: the wonder of God's creative work. Transcendence goes beyond restoration to transformation—in which the accuser is no more... death is no more... mourning and crying and pain are no more...for the first things have passed away...behold *all things* are new! (Revelation 21).

Conclusion: the Bible as Literature

So, is the whirlwind still whipping around? Even in a pandemic? Or are we all sitting on ash heaps trying not to further annoy each other while we wait for the whirlwind?

Can there still be something new? Something not yet considered ... but possible because of a creator God who will not be confined? Not even by our best questions?

What words of poets and prophets will help us think in new ways? What have we learned?

- Reading the Bible as literature recognizes and emphasizes the on-going conversations between the various voices within and between the books of Scripture—dialogues that extend well beyond Job.
- Reading the Bible as literature tells us that words that challenge orthodoxy become themselves part of our sacred texts. Words that push back on our memorized answers to questions can become sacred...are sacred!
- Reading the Bible as literature involves noticing that its content includes not only professions of faith and theological prose ... but also poetry and prayers. After the laws and the lists, finally comes the poet.
- Reading the Bible as literature notices that in Job, after the whirlwind and worship—and even as orthodoxy's dominance is reinscribed, the one behind Job's suffering—the one that brought the suffering is gone!

- Reading the Bible as literature embraces the varied literary forms of God’s revelation...

More than ever, our community of faith needs to learn to appreciate our sacred texts as sacred literature. It needs to absorb the implications of this hugely important truth. As we navigate our way through the cross currents of the numerous theological conflicts, problems about past and future, and debates about what it means to be an Adventist that trouble the waters of our community in the twenty-first century, understanding Scripture as literature—sacred, inspiring, authoritative literature—will help us avoid spiritual shipwreck.

God is a God of creative activity that began long before creation week, and has certainly not ceased since!

What new thing is God doing in our time? What rebirth of images? What bringing forth of things old and new...?

Because our pictures of God remain inadequate, American poet and theologian Amos Wilder anticipates that “As in the past, the Spirit will prompt new tongues, new names, new songs to clarify these quests” (Wilder, 11).

What insights are on our horizons? What new theological breakthroughs await us? How might our current complaints and protests pave the way for a theological breakthrough?

Along with the author of Job, we celebrate sacred texts that both hold onto orthodoxy and those exposing its inadequacies.

Charles Weniger not only left an enduring mark in twentieth-century Adventism, his ideas can help inspire Adventism today. Because the Bible’s meaning is much

more than literal—it is grounded in the literary!

And we stand next to Job not only because we know loss, but because we’ve heard at least a faint rustle of the whirlwind.

So let it be. Amen.

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