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The Problem of God in the Presence of Grief: Exchanging "Stages" of Healing for "Trajectories" of Recovery

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Abstract. The bereaved Christian faces not only the difficult task of grief, but also the morally charged evaluations of the grief process: whether it should be fast or slow, whether God is necessary or unhelpful, and whether grief is "proper" for Christians in light of their call to "not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13).[1] *This article (1) showcases these tensions involved in defining a "proper" Christian approach to grief, (2) retrieves resources born in the engagement of similarly problematic tensions in the field of grief theory, and (3) conscripts these resources in order to read the book of Job through a new lens, which relieves some of the tensions which arise in Christian considerations of grief. In sum, Christians commonly read the book of Job through the "stage model" of grief — as if Job's experience throughout the book conforms to and requires a logically sequential grief-progress. Conversely, a "trajectory model" of grief, a new advancement in grief theory, opens the door for reading each pericope in Job as supplying a unique and independently legitimate path for grief that does not require any preceding or subsequent stages. In the same way that Job accommodates these variegated trajectories of grief, so also the Christian faith entertains equally legitimate grief trajectories, each appropriate for the various felt needs of the bereaved.*

"If there is a God
what did he ... have to do with the death
of this person I love?
So much."[2]

[1] All Scripture taken from ESV unless otherwise noted.

[2] Tom Zuba, *Permission to Mourn: A New Way to Do Grief* (Rockford, IL: Bish Press, 2014), 8.

I. Introduction

Sam is a twenty-seven-year-old member of a conservative Presbyterian church. His unbelieving mother, with whom he had not spoken for several years due to relational conflict, died unexpectedly. Sam uses phrases to describe his grief among his close church friends such as, "I'm sad, but God brings me joy," "All things work for the good of those who love God," and "Even in this tragedy, I can feel the presence of Jesus sustaining me."

Abigail is a forty-year-old mother of two. Her husband, a Methodist pastor, recently received a cancer diagnosis that has given him only weeks to live. Abigail feels betrayed by God, and uses phrases with her counselor such as, "How could God take such a loving father away from his two daughters?" "If this is God, I don't want church or salvation or any of it," and "This is the nail in the coffin. First my father, and now my husband."

The bereaved Christian faces not only the difficult task of grief, but also the morally charged evaluations of the grief process: whether it should be fast or slow, whether God is necessary or unhelpful, and whether grief is "proper" for Christians.

This article (1) showcases these tensions involved in defining a "proper" Christian approach to grief, (2) retrieves resources born in the engagement of similarly problematic tensions in the field of grief theory, and (3) conscripts these resources in order to read the book of Job through a new lens, which relieves some of the tensions which arise in Christian considerations of grief. In sum, Christians commonly read the book of Job through the "stage model" of grief — as if Job's experience throughout the book conforms to and requires a logically sequential grief-progress.

Conversely, a "trajectory model" of grief, a new advancement in grief theory, opens the door for reading each pericope in Job as supplying a unique and independently legitimate path for grief that does not require any preceding or subsequent stages. In the same way that Job accommodates these variegated trajectories of grief, so also the Christian faith entertains equally legitimate grief trajectories, each appropriate for the various felt needs of the bereaved.

II. Transitions in the Theories of Grief

1. The Problem of Faith in the Process of Grief

In this section, we will explore two tensions which Christian theology causes for grief. First, the emotional dissonance which is caused by the presence of God has created polarity among the bereaved — some insisting on the necessity of explicit dependence on God for successful grieving, and others warning about the danger of incorporating God into the grief

process. Second, Christian theologians have been torn in two directions by this common dissonance: in the direction of classifying grief as "erroneous," and in the opposite direction of classifying the condemnation of grief as "inhuman nonsense." This tension puts Christians in an awkward position as they process loss, charged in the wake of theological reflection with moral requirements.

A. Contrasting Experiences of God in Grief

The place of God in grief has fractured the Christian imagination. In the wake of Nietzsche's death of God in the West, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has stated outright that "the belief has long died that suffering here on earth will be rewarded in heaven. Suffering has lost its meaning."[3] Yet, grief can also drag God back within the purview of the modern heart, for good or ill. For some, God's presence brings various forms of positive aid to the process of grief:

> *Consolation:* "There is disappointment, sadness, and confusion, but oddly, there is no retreat from God. Instead, I find myself drawn to God."[4]
>
> *Care:* "Only one Person can pick you up in the darkness and carry you into the light."[5]
>
> *Commencement:* "It *is* worth using our best theology at a funeral."[6]
>
> *Compassion:* "Each day make a point to look beyond your situation to the all-knowing God of truth, who will not leave you nor fail you. Learn about His attributes and cling to them in hope."[7]
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> *Collaboration:* "[A] responsive God may play a critical role in generating resilience in the face of significant loss."[8]

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[3] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*, Scribner Classics (New York: Scribner, 2014), 15.

[4] Frank A. James III, "In the Shadow of Mount Hood: Meeting God in the Mystery of Grief," *Christianity Today* 54, no. 9 (September 2010): 60.

[5] Paul Tripp, "When Grief Enters Your Door," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Winter 2005): 8.

[6] Brian Wentzel, "Expressing Grief and Proclaiming Hope: Toward a Proper Hymn of the Day for Funerals," *Word & World* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 52.

[7] Bill Dunn and Kathy Leonard, *Through a Season of Grief: Devotions for Your Joy from Mourning* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 198.

[8] M. Kelley and K. Chan, "Assessing the Role of Attachment to God, Meaning, and Religious Coping as Mediators in the Grief Experience," *Death Studies* 36 (2012): 222.

Yet, for others, God's presence further compounds difficulty and guilt in the processing of grief. For some, "sadness over loss is well understood, whereas in others it is perceived as a lack of sufficient faith in God."[9] Moreover, "Belief in God ... can become a major stumbling block in your grief process."[10] Therefore, the danger of addressing grief with theology is that it can "inevitably reduce a complex and often bewildering phenomenon to a constraining ideology that may even result in the imposition of harm rather than relief."[11] Similar to Job, "parents of murdered children often and understandably feel betrayed by God, and are furious at him for allowing the murder of their child."[12]

The helpfulness of God for grief is therefore not uniformly felt.

B. Contradicting Expressions of God and Grief

God's presence in grief certainly complicates what "proper" grief is. After all, Paul states — with the felt power of God's ethical standards behind his words — in 1 Thessalonians 4:13: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." Commenting on this passage, Hans Boersma insists:

> Grief, on the traditional Christian view, is ultimately a mistake in judgment; reason erroneously judges the loved one's entry into a better place to be a loss, and hence we grieve. If only we recognized our loved ones' newly acquired heavenly bliss, we would stop our grieving.[13]

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[9] Therese A. Rando, *How to Go on Living when Someone You Love Dies* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 54.

[10] Ibid., 32.

[11] David G. McNeish, "Grief is a Circular Staircase: The Uses and Limits of Models of Grief in the Pastoral Care of the Bereaved," *Practical Theology* 6, no. 2 (2013): 191.

[12] Brad Stetson, *Living Victims, Stolen Lives: Parents of Murdered Children Speak to America* (Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2008), 108. Eric Klinger writes, "The essence of tragedy is that humans are the playthings of the gods: that people's lives are vehicles for the expression of cosmic forces, that people's fortunes must often submit to forces beyond their control" (*Meaning and Void: Inner Experience and the Incentives in People's Lives* [Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997], 137).

[13] Hans Boersma, "'Numbed with Grief': Gregory of Nyssa on Bereavement and Hope," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, no. 1 (2014): 54. Boersma further claims, "In no way do we allow the contents of our hope to contradict the reasons of grief. The result is that 'hope' turns vacuous—a well intended but ultimately meaningless gesture," ibid., 59.

Yet, J. I. Packer issues the counterclaim:

> Bereavement shakes unbelievers and believers alike at the foundations of their being, and believers no less than others regularly find that the trauma of living through grief is profound and prolonged. The idea, sometimes voiced, that because Christians know death to be for believers the gate of glory, they will therefore not grieve at times of bereavement is inhuman nonsense.[14]

Christians are thus caught in a difficult position with regard to their own bereavement. God charges grief with the threat of naming it "obedient" or "disobedient," depending on its form. There are laments in Scripture, but they are a small collection of prayers, and their proper application to grief today depends on our understanding of what grief today *is*.

It is toward the end of exploring the contours of "proper" Christian grief that we look to recent developments in grief theory, which may help to mitigate certain of these tensions.

2. *The Problem of Stages in the Progress of Grief*

The story behind our modern notion of "grief" is fraught with the conflict that commonly accompanies dogmatism, most likely because of the oft-perceived instability of the bereaved. There are mortal dangers in mishandling those who have been wounded by the loss of a loved one. And yet, embedded in recent developments in the study of grief are resources which can sift the chaff of confusion from conflicting emotions that often enter into the Christian experience of grief, between the promise of God and the presence of pain. In this section, we will briefly examine the history of grief theory in the predominance of the "stage model," as well as the tumultuous and recent birth of the "trajectory model," which will later help us to read Job afresh.

A. Reiterations of the Stage Model

Sigmund Freud first codified grief as a progressive sequence, with necessary components which perpetuate personal progress toward grief's successful end: resolution.[15] This trend to conceive of grief in "steps" caught

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[14] Packer, *A Grief Sanctified*, 10.

[15] Freud pathologizes grief as a unique sequence. David E. Balk summarizes: "The bereaved individual finds nothing worthwhile or enjoyable in the world whereas the depressed individual finds nothing worthwhile or enjoyable in himself," (*Dealing with Dying, Death, and Grief during Adolescence* [New York: Routledge, 2014], 115). Freud says, "Mourning has quite a precise psychical task to perform: its

fire in America through the work of John Bowlby[16] and Colin Murray Parkes,[17] who popularized what was then called "phase theory," a four-step sequence for grief that defined healthy bereavement, which eventually merged into the Bowlby-Parkes model — the four phases were (1) numbness, (2) yearning and searching, (3) disorganization and despair, and (4) reorganization.[18] In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross set grief theory ablaze, building on the Bowlby-Parkes' "phase theory," with her infamous book *On Death and Dying*. Kübler-Ross tabulated the phase theory in a "stage model" — five stages, to be exact — which has, since the book's publication, engrained itself in the popular American self-concept.[19] The stage model can be defined as "the idea that mourning unfolded in predetermined phases."[20] Drawing on the Greek metaphor of "steps" of progress, "[t]he step metaphor pictures the griever moving through a series of sequential stages, progressing onward toward health and recovery from grief."[21]

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function is to detach the survivor's hopes and memories from the dead," ("Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. and trans. J. Strachey [London: Hogarth], 268). Psychoanalysts today posit a prototype of the stage model of mourning — defined as "the mental process by which man's psychic equilibrium is restored following the loss of a meaningful object" — positing a succession to the loss and recovery of one's ego through their grief in three stages: (1) acceptance, (2) withdrawal from the lost object, (3) resumption of a emotional life ("Mourning," in *Psychoanalytic Terms & Concepts*, ed. Burness E. Moore and Bernard D. Fine [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press and The American Psychoanalytic Association, 1990], 122).

[16] John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* (New York: Basic, 1969–1980). Bowlby's contribution to grief theory is his emphasis on the relationship between personality attachment styles which, in the event of loss, manifest in respective "grief styles," beginning with a child's grieving their separation from parents in acute moments of distress.

[17] Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 1996); idem, "Bereavement as a Psychosocial Transition: Processes of Adaption and Change" in *Death, Dying, and Bereavement*, ed. Donna Dickenson, Malcom Johnson, and Jeanne Samson Katz (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 325–332. Parkes comments on, for instance, "how numbness, the first stage, gives place to pining, and pining to disorganisation and despair, and it is only after the stage of disorganisation that recovery occurs," Parkes, *Bereavement*, 27.

[18] For a brief and updated explanation of their merged view, see Colin Murray Parkes, "Grief: Lessons from the Past, Visions for the Future," *Psychologica Belgica* 50 (2010): 7–26.

[19] George Hagman comments, "With the advent of Kübler-Ross's work ... the stage model began to dominate the Western cultural perspective on bereavement" ("Beyond Deathexis: Toward a New Psychoanalytic Understanding and Treatment of Mourning," in *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*, ed. Robert A. Neimeyer (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 16.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Marilyn McCabe, *The Paradox of Loss: Toward a Relational Theory of Grief* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 5.

Kübler-Ross's five stages, which necessarily follow one from the other, are:[22]

1. Denial and Isolation
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

The theory is not open for arrangement. Kübler-Ross comments, for example, "Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process ... The more you truly feel it, the more it will begin to dissipate and the more you will heal."[23] Two things are pertinent here: (1) a semantic point: the sequence of stages is what defines grief *per se*, and (2) a point about implementation: healing is conceived in terms of progressing through the stages. It was thus the stage model which began to own the term "grief work" — the metaphor implying that every person who suffers loss must not only process their grief, but must also successfully promote themselves through the five progressively unfolding emotions.

B. Rejections of the Stage Model

The stage model, while popular, has never been without its critics. The common empirical criticism is, of course, that many do not experience grief in these five stages. Yet, stage model proponents respond that those who do not grieve in the proper sequence of stages are merely "stalled" in a certain stage.[24] However, the dissonance among the bereaved who held to the stage model became so intensified that it required theoretical adjustment: "The major problem with these ideas [stage models] is that they tend to create rigid parameters for 'proper' behavior that do not match what most people go through."[25]

Most of these criticisms are made to defend the spontaneity of the existential experience of grief — how unpredictable and disorganized the

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[22] Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying,* 37–132. The radical contribution that Kübler-Ross really made to American society was to grant a *positive function* to negative emotions. Yet, a common critique of Kübler-Ross's research is that her direct research was with *the dying*, not with those who are bereaved *after death* — an important qualitative difference when addressing grief.

[23] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 12.

[24] See Paul K. Maciejewski et al., "An Empirical Examination of the Stage Theory of Grief," *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 297, no. 7 (2007): 716–723.

[25] George A. Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us about Life After Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 22.

experience of loss can be, and how such spontaneity should be immune to correction. Thus, opponents of the stage model often find the search for meaning as the essence of grief, as opposed to the progressive dissolving of successive stages. For example, Phyllis R. Silverman and Dennis Klass do not posit "closure" or "recovery" as necessary goals for grief: "rather than emphasizing letting go, the emphasis should be on negotiating and renegotiating the meaning of the loss over time. While the death is permanent and unchanging, *the process is not.*"[26]

Even the DSM, which was once indebted to the stage model, has moved away from such a rigid conception of grief. Once, because "depression" was considered a natural "stage" of grief, the DSM-IV contained a "bereavement clause" that allowed clinicians to refrain from diagnosing Major Depressive Disorder if the symptoms occurred in certain proximity to a significant loss: "The bereaved individual typically regards the depressed mood as 'normal.'"[27] However, the DSM-5 has suggested that a bereaved person who meets the criteria for major depressive disorder should be diagnosed with major depressive disorder, indicating that the assumption that depression is "normal" (which was based on a stage model) no longer retains theoretical consensus among the authors of the DSM.[28]

Thus, the stage model operationalizes grief as a function of progress. The metaphor includes notions of advancement and success. What is prior serves merely to make way for what is subsequent. This has created cognitive dissonance in those who attempt to grieve according to the stage model but do not find it appropriate to their own process. The population of those who have been failed by the stage model has grown to such a size that there

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[26] Phyllis R. Silverman and Dennis Klass, "Introduction: What's the Problem?" in *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, ed. Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman (New York: Routledge, 1996), 18–19, emphasis added. The stage model is a natural fit for religious counseling contexts, because of the system's inclination toward dogmatism. See Richard W. Roukema, *Counseling for the Soul in Distress: What Every Religious Counselor Should Know about Emotional and Mental Illness* (New York: Haworth Press, 2003). However, Roukema says that "the stages are not necessarily sequential, nor do they last an equal amount of time" (144), which indicates both a lack of familiarity with the nature of the stage model, as well as undercut the usefulness of the system for what it does offer to those it helps — consistency, coherence, and guidance.

[27] American Psychiatric Association, "Bereavement," in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 684.

[28] Donald W. Black and Jon E. Grant, *DSM-5 Guidebook: The Essential Companion to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2014), 188. The DSM-5 removed this "bereavement clause," which caused "unwanted controversy whereby critics claimed it [the removal of the clause] would medicalize the normal process of bereavement," ibid., 103.

is now space in grief theory to place new metaphors at the center of its conception.[29]

C. Recruiting the Trajectory Model

The model which has promised to replace the stage model in the twenty-first century is the trajectory model — which explains grief, not in terms of "stages," but proposes that "individuals exhibit *different patterns* of distress following [loss]."[30] The central metaphor for this model is not the enforcement of stages of progress, but on identifying "patterns" of process. People respond to grief differently, and the response to that, according to the trajectory model, is not to police them all through the same sequence, but to identify which of many legitimate directions their grief takes them. The primary proponent of the trajectory model is George A. Bonanno, professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University.[31]

Bonanno stands as the primary modern critic of the stage model, and proposes, rather than five stages of grief, these five possible trajectories of grief:

Resilience (Relatively unaffected)
Relief (Nearly immediate sense of resolution)
Recovery (Return to pre-loss emotional life)
Recurrence (Chronic grief)
Reprieve (Delayed grief/Trauma)

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[29] David G. McNeish records his grieving friend's evaluation of stage theory: "At work I taught Kübler-Ross's stages to people with long term degenerative conditions and their carers. Then my brother committed suicide. The ground opened up and swallowed me in the space of an hour. When I returned to work that model was in my face every day of the week. There were some bits that didn't touch me. What was there to deny? I couldn't deny it. I didn't feel angry with him and depression never really happened for me. I think that model works better when you have time to reason it out but suicide is just such a shock. For a year I said nothing to God and he said nothing to me, but I had a deeper experience of God in the silence than if we had talked. Something dropped in my middle that I just had to accept it even though life would never be the same," McNeish, "Grief is a Circular Staircase," 198.

[30] George A. Bonanno et al., "Resilience to Loss and Chronic Grief: A Prospective Study from Preloss to 18-Months Postloss," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, no. 5 (2002): 1,151.

[31] If there is any precursor to Bonanno in the "stage model" generation, it was J. William Worden. Worden swerves from the rails of traditional Stage Model, and insists, "Each person's experience of grief is unique to him or her, and people's experiences shouldn't be saddled with the term 'abnormal grief.' I much prefer the term 'complicated mourning,' which affirms some kind of difficulty in the mourning process that brings the person to the attention of the mental health worker" (*Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* [New York: Springer, 1991], 9). Thus, Worden's contribution to grief theory is his insistence on "complicated grief," which is the multiform mixture of variables in every individual's experience of their own grief. His emphasis on complexity forged an eclecticism to his theory, which was starkly uncharacteristic of the stage models of his day which insisted on *some* dogmatic sequence.

Bonanno's approach is refreshing in that the metaphor of "trajectory recognition" rather than "stage progression" leaves his taxonomy open to additional trajectories. He even admits that these five trajectories "may not capture the full range of grief outcomes."[32] The trajectory model changes — at the framework level — the entire dynamic of grief from one of progress to one of process. It is here — in the modern exchange of "stages of progress" for "trajectories of process" — that we encounter Job. And the reader of Job will benefit greatly from Bonanno's recent exchange.

III. Trajectories in the Laments of Job

The twenty-first century bereaved Christian encounters Job in this unique recovery of "process" over "progress." Job represents the intersection of the problem of God — and the problem of stages — in the presence of grief:

> Job is not an anomaly within the narrative arc of the Hebrew Bible. It is, rather, a culmination and explicit avowal of the human critique of God that has percolated throughout the biblical text ... though always somewhat muted or reticently presented.[33]

Job is the penultimate sufferer to Christ, who is often taken to "model" grief for all humanity.[34] We are in a unique position in the history of grief theory to highlight a link between the "these present-day descriptions of clinical syndromes and mental processes with the Bible descriptions of the personality of Job." [35] It is, in fact, common to read Job through the lens of the stage model of grief — as though the book's discursive unfolding

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[32] George A. Bonanno, Ralph M. Nesse, and Camille B. Wortman, "Prospective Patterns of Resilience and Maladjustment During Widowhood," *Psychology and Aging* 19, no. 2 (2004): 260.

[33] Robert A. Burt, *In the Whirlwind: God and Humanity in Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 151.

[34] For instance: "If God was patient with Job, I reasoned, he would be patient with me too," Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 36. "Job is our model here," J. I. Packer, *A Grief Sanctified: Through Sorrow to Eternal Hope* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 10. "When I am with someone whose losses ring of Job, I pray my faith would withstand ... what appears senseless and unbearable," Tara Edelschick, "A Grief Transformed," *Christianity Today* 58, no. 6 (July/August 2014), 95. "It was insane for Job to question the Lord's verdicts or oppose his decrees. God is supreme, not Job," Steven J. Lawson, *Holman Old Testament Commentary: Job* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2004), 365. "As [in] Job, we can indeed cry out in our confusion. We have a warrant for being in deep distress," Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 127.

[35] Jack Kahn, *Job's Illness: Loss, Grief and Integration: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1975), 34.

corresponds to an unfolding of grief-progress that is both prescriptive and linear. For instance, one commentator writes:

> It is a familiar phenomenon. A person faces sudden disaster or bereavement with remarkable calm and presence of mind, but when the initial numbness wears off, the full weight of grief seems more than the person can bear. At first Job reacts to catastrophe with exemplary submission to God's will.[36]

As noted above, numbness as a characteristic initial stage was the original proposal of the Bowlby-Parkes model. This passage of commentary presents readers with language for grief that is intuitive for Western ears that are inundated with such a model, but may not be native to the text, nor helpful for a definition of "proper" Christian grief. And the tendency to assume that a stage model is at work in the book of Job is quite common. One commentator insists that the epilogue of Job signifies "the renewal of Job's mind," and another claims: "The book is not about justifying God's actions; it's about Job's transformation."[37] The "stage" metaphor that construes all grief in terms of "progress" comes through clearly in these comments.

On these sorts of readings, which render Job as a book more about *progress* than *process*, Job's grief experience in the beginning of the book should be understood as infantile compared to his later experiences, which represent more mature stages of grief-progress — more advanced stages of "grief work." But if Job is read, rather than through the lens of a stage model, as presenting various and legitimate grief trajectories, each helpful and appropriate in their own right, for a certain season and a certain person, we may encounter the text in its more naked and raw form in which it is intended to be read.[38] If the book of Job is not organized according to a stage model of grief, but rather is read as less progressive and linear, which the trajectory model of grief allows the reader to do, then the book may be-

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[36] Kevin Perrotta, *Job: A Good Man Asks Why* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001), 24.

[37] Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (New York: Cowley, 2001), 142.

[38] "The marked contradiction between the silent, patient Job of the prose account and the verbose, defiant Job of the dialogue—a contradiction taken by some to be so sharp that they are irreconcilable—is an intended tension, fundamental to the book's message," John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 24. "The proper way to translate from Hebrew into a modern language would be to preserve the contradictions, not to resolve them one way or the other, to insist on Job's self-abhorrence and recantation or on his abhorrence of God's misconduct," Burt, *God in the Whirlwind*, 164–165.

come more readily utile to the bereaved who stumble into its pages looking for solitude and refuge.

Regarding Bonanno's five "trajectories" or "patterns" of grief — Resilience, Relief, Recovery, Recurrence, and Reprieve — Job takes advantage of the new space to further expand "the full range of grief outcomes"[39] by adding three: Resistance, Recompense, and Re-evaluation (each God-related trajectories, yet diverse in their nature nevertheless).

1. Resistance Trajectory: The Desire for Answers (Job 3)

In light of Job's cataclysmic circumstantial downfall, Job 3 initiates lament in the process of grief that voices one's agony through existential questions, implicating but not yet condemning God's responsibility in his loss.

Job 3 begins with words uttered from the silence of the concluding chapter. "In words addressed to no one but himself, and therefore in words which deepen his solitariness, Job speaks."[40] What words will Job choose to speak? Job 3 has long puzzled commentators with its blending genre of curse, lament, and soliloquy.[41] After a brief introduction (3:1–2), Job's opening lament divides into two major units: a curse directed at the day of his birth and the night of his conception (3:3–10), and a lament that cries out in anguish the repeated question "why?" of his own existence (3:11–26).[42] Job's descent into despair fuels and generates the ensuing drama of dialogues. We will briefly observe the contribution of each movement.

In Job 3:3–10, Job offers forth a curse on "the day of his birth" (3:3*a*, 4–5) and the "night of his conception" (3:3*b*, 6–10). Instead of cursing God (as he was encouraged to do by the accuser in 1:5 and his wife in 1:9), Job curses the "day" and "night" of his own birth and conception (3:3). Many commentators have noted that the language Job utilizes to portray

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[39] Bonanno et al., "Prospective Patterns of Resilience," 260.

[40] J. Gerald Janzen, *Job,* Interpretation: A Bible Commentary (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 61.

[41] Though Job 3 contains traditional "why-questions of lament" as well as itemizing of suffering and grief at the end, scholars have struggled with the lack of biblical parallels for curse-complaints that contain no direct address to God or complaint of enemies. C. L. Seow, after summarizing recent scholarship points to ancient Near Eastern parallels that also contain curses against the "day" and "night" as suggestive as well as the possible absence of direct address to deity so that Job "never reviles God to the face" in *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 314.

[42] Cf. David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–17,* Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 75–77.

the "day" and "night" of his curse ironically echo creation language itself.[43] Instead of God speaking, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), Job's curse cries out, "Let that day be darkness" (Job 3:4). Job also calls upon a rousing of the Leviathan, symbol of the primordial chaos waters that threaten to destroy the order of creation (3:8b).[44] The reason for Job's curse is stated in one line: "because it [the night] did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, and hide trouble from my eyes" (3:10). Here and throughout, Job personifies night (and day) as life forces that he wishes to negate, a theme which he will expand in his subsequent lament.

Job then moves from curse to lament. Though the repetition of "may" in 3:3–10 is the primary concern of Job's curse, 3:11–26 turns to the existentially poignant question "why?"[45] The lament is divided into two major sections introduced by the plaintive Hebrew interrogative *lammah*, "Why?" (3:11–19, 20–23).[46] This particular interrogative *lammah* "why" functions as a rhetorical question that does not seek an answer.[47] Job asks, "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire," (3:11), and "Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul" (3:20), not to resolve his lack of knowledge, but to adequately express his grief.[48] It is a

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[43] It was Michael Fishbane who first proposed that the sequence and rhythm of Job's seven curses are "exactly paralleled" by the seven-day pattern in Genesis 1, the thrust of which calls for a systematic "reversal" of creation ("Jeremiah IV 23–26 and Job III 3–13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern," VT 21 (1971): 152, 154). Leo G. Perdue has appropriated and expanded upon Fishbane's work in several significant studies, cf. "Job's Assault on Creation," HAR 10 (1987): 295–315; idem, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job*, JSOTSup 112 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991), 96–98; idem, *Wisdom in Creation: The Theology of the Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 131–137.

[44] Samuel E. Balentine, *Job*, Smyth and Helwys Commentary (Macon, GA: 2006), 86.

[45] Arguing for the prevalence of "unanswerable questions" in the book of Job, Ryan Tietz writes, "Unanswerable questions function both to open up new possibilities and also to limit what can be discovered," in "Unanswerable questions in Job," *Concordia Journal* 38, no. 2 (2012): 128.

[46] Gerald H. Wilson, *Job*, ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 39.

[47] Tietz argues that while other interrogatives can be classified as "information seeking," the *lammah* of Job 3 functions as a rhetorical exclamation, intended to express emotion instead of a question of fact or circumstance that seeks out information ("Unanswerable questions in Job," 128–129). Norman C. Habel comments: "The emotional exclamation 'Why?' ... is evoked in response to the injustice of the sufferer's situation" (*The Book of Job: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975], 6).

[48] Tietz argues that while *lammah* has the apparent locuntionary of a question, its illocutionary force is that of a complaint ("Unanswerable questions in Job," 129).

cry of anguish, despairing of life and implicitly aimed at the creator.[49] Job 3 returns once again to his reversal of creation, "Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?" (3:23) Though Job's despair deepens, he still has not yet directly cursed God. The reader is thus still left in suspense, knowing that Job has still not yet sinned "with his lips."[50]

In his anguished first cry, Job offers an existential lament, cursing the day of his birth and questioning why his life should continue. This first lament navigates Job's pain through voicing the despair of his own existence, which has occasioned the pain of his suffering. Though God is implicated, he is not cursed. Job's heart heaves its pain, offering a model for voicing agonized despair, which begins rather than ceases the dialogues that will ensue.

The trajectory which Job takes is one of resistance. Job resists the very order of creation itself, cursing its order by rejecting the value of his own existence. Rejecting and reversing the "day" and "night" of his own birth, Job issues a resistance against God's order which has made possible the tragedy of Job 1, creating in Job an unquestionable sense of meaninglessness. This trajectory, centered on the concept of resistance, is not inferior to subsequent trajectories which we will examine below. Nor is it logically necessary to experience or enact in order to initiate the subsequent trajectories, but is rather a pericopic orbit of Job's resistance into which those bereaved who are needing to resist are invited.

2. *Recompense Trajectory: The Demand for Actions (Job 29–31)*

In Job's final plea (Job 29–31), Job demonstrates a movement of lament from past reflection and present anguish, to final oath, simultaneously insisting on his own innocence, and yet urgently longing for a judgment in response.[51]

Following the prolonged dialogue of Job and his three friends (Job 4–28), we find Job once more return to lament (Job 29–31).[52] In these con-

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[49] Westermann notes, "The lament is not a construct of thought; it is a living reality. It arises in a cry of pain. It is a cry that has become an utterance" (*The Structure of the Book of Job*, trans. Charles A. Muenchow [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981], 33).

[50] Ibid.

[51] Melissa M. Kelley comments: "There remains little explicit consideration of the particular features, dynamics, and consequences of grief that is a result—direct or indirect, partial or whole—of injustice" ("Author Response to Reviews of *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*," *Pastoral Psychology* 63 [2014]: 118).

[52] Arguing that Job 3 and 29–31 provide a framework of lament for the Joban dialogues, Westermann suggests that in his final plea, "[h]is lament is the language of one who clings to an incomprehensible God" ("The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28, no. 1 [1974]: 32).

cluding chapters of Job's speech, he affirms with longing the goodness of his past life (Job 29), portrays the humiliation of his present (Job 30), and concludes with a desperate, extravagant set of oaths (Job 31) that at the very end pleas for a response from God (31:35).

Job opens with the wish that he might be restored to his former favor from God: "His lamp shone on my head, and by his light I walked through darkness" (29:3).[53] His memory is *framed* by the blessing of friendship enjoyed with God (29:2–6) and his community (29:7–11, 21–25), and it is *centered* on his indissoluble commitment to being clothed by "righteousness" and "justice" in his relationships with others (29:12–17).[54] It is only the thought of his hopeless future that reveals the dread still within (29:18–20).

The contrast in Job 30 between Job's past and present is emphasized by the threefold repetition of the word "but now" (30:1, 9, 16), followed by a final contrastive particle "yet" in Job 30:24. Job despairs of the company in which he is now cast (30:1–8, "a senseless brood" in 30:8), he is dismayed in terror as his honor slips away (30:9–15), and his very bones gnaw at him (30:17). He has been cast by God into the "mire" (30:19), now becoming like "dust and ashes" (30:19). This word-pairing ("dust and ashes"), is elsewhere found in Genesis 18:27 and the conclusion of Job 42:6 which we will examine below. The pairing "dust and ashes" captures the despair of his lowly mortal existence, a realization of the earthiness and finitude of his being, and an abandonment of his hope that God has any regard for him (e.g., Job 30:20).[55] Job concludes with an agonized depiction of his own pain, stating that where light was expected darkness has come (30:26, 28).

In Job's final statement, the imagery turns to a law court where Job offers forth a fivefold oath that he is not guilty of any wrong. In fact, "the ethical and moral code by which Job swears is so comprehensive, so lofty, so far beyond most any imaginable reproach that commentators yield to hyperbole to describe it."[56] Clearly at stake for Job is a final plea for justice, one in which Carol A. Newsom suggests Job has envisioned a moral ethos that seeds and sustains an ethical society.[57] Ultimately, Newsom argues, this envisioned world of ethical stability and mutual reciprocity projected by Job is rejected by God.[58]

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[53] Janzen argues that where Job's cry in chap. 3 had been one of unfiltered raw emotion, he now speaks with intentional ordered resolve, particularly by the returned theme of "light" from chap. 3 no longer rejected but now remembered wistfully when his faith was secure (v. 4) (Janzen, *Job,* 202).

[54] Balentine, *Job*, 440. Balentine points out that though some interpreters are suspicious of Job's high estimation of himself, it is God who claims Job to be "blameless and upright" (Job 1:8).

[55] Ibid., 458.

[56] Ibid., 471.

[57] Cf. Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job," in *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 4:552; idem, *The book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 195. She suggests five topical groups of oaths, interrupted by Job's wish for a hearing in vv. 35–37.

[58] Ibid., 199.

Though Job may of course be wrong in his belief that he is innocent, there remains an implicit and open-ended suspicion that something is still needed in response to Job's tragedy. There remains a demand for recompense that is left unfulfilled by God's lack of response.

Robert A. Burt goes so far as to claim: "Job was most explicit in demanding an admission of wrongdoing from God. Job did not approach God deferentially; he was not a supplicant."[59] Job demanded recompense for the deeds of God and his moral persecution at the hands of his friends. This may be the trajectory on which the bereaved journey for years, especially following the at-fault death of a loved one. Job 31 ends with the words "the words of Job are ended" (Job 31:40), which signifies the conclusion of this grief trajectory in Job, transitioning into the next independent but related trajectory.

3. Re-evaluation Trajectory: The Decision for Acquiescence (Job 42)

Job 42 showcases a re-evaluative lament; a resolution to the narrative arc of the book. This trajectory does not deal not in answers to Job's questions, but in renewed self-perception as a result of an encounter, involving recognition of his own frail mortality in relation to the creative wisdom of God.

After an initial non-response (40:4–5) in which Job declines to answer God's questions, Job offers forth his response (42:1–6) to the onslaught of God's previous rhetorical questions (Job 38–41).[60] Job begins with, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (42:2). An ambiguous reference is made to Yahweh's former words (42:3a, 4), which elicits a changed perspective on Job's part ("I uttered what I did not understand" [42:3b]; "I have heard ... but now I see" [42:5]). A seismic shift has occurred internally for Job in the appearance of Yahweh that has required a re-evaluation of his own suffering, however after a book filled with dialogues of contention, what is the essence to Job's change?[61]

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[59] Robert A. Burt, *In the Whirlwind: God and Humanity in Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 171–172.

[60] Tremper Longman III, *Job*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 448. "The earlier response was not sufficient, and God continued the torrent of questions addressed to Job. But here the interchange comes to resolution. God is satisfied and will no longer upbraid Job."

[61] Note that here the book of Job confronts the interpreter with the question of whether or not Job has at this point sinned and therefore needs to repent (so Longman, Hartley, Clines), or whether Job's insistence of innocence and God's approval of Job's words ("my servant Job has spoken rightly" in 42:7) means that some other resolution through the theophany encounters have been offered (so Janzen, Balentine, Wilson, Newsom).

Climactically, Job 42:6 provides the claim: "Therefore I despise *myself* and repent in dust and ashes." The verb "I despise" in the Hebrew however does not contain "myself," instead the inclusion reflects the interpretive decision of NIV, ESV. The NASB, HCSB, and NLT therefore contain the other possible meaning "I retract" or "I take back my words."

The other interpretive dilemma of this passage comes in the phrase: "I repent in dust and ashes" (ESV). However, yet again, the verb "repent" is multifaceted, also being capable of "to regret," "to be sorry," "to console oneself," and "to be comforted."[62] The meaning of "repent" even more importantly is dependent on the final word pairing "dust and ashes," which recent scholarship argues contains the interpretive crux of v. 6 (and therefore possibly the meaning of the entire work). The word pairing occurs together in the Bible only twice — previously in Job 30:19 and here in 42:6 — "God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes," and in Genesis 18:7, "Abraham answered and said, 'Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.'"[63]

In both occurrences, the phrase "dust and ashes" offers an emphasis on the mortality and frailty of the human condition before God.[64] Therefore, the "repentance" of Job may not be a turn from sin, but "a change of perspective" from a sense of entitlement to explanation for suffering to an acceptance of finitude and explanatory agnosticism. The turn in Job's mind is a change from an attitude of entitlement to an attitude of humility, which recognizes his status as "dust and ashes."[65]

Job 42:6 offers us a glimpse into resolution which would highlight, not a preoccupation with repentance, but an attainment of a new self-understanding. Job has endured the fiery trials of excruciating suffering and has voiced his lament before God. Instead of silence, Job resolves to accept, not answers, but his own condition, which is humbled before his own encounter with God (42:5).

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[62] L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, eds., *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Brill, 2002), 1:698 notes that for the forty-seven occurrences of נחם *niph'al* LXX has as many as sixteen various translations. Pieter van der Lugt, "Who Changes His Mind About Dust and Ashes?: The Rhetorical Structure of Job 42:2–6," *Vetus Testamentum* 64, no. 4 (2014): 630.

[63] J. Todd Billings comments: "The penitent Job responds not by repenting for his lament (for God's people can and should lament) but by a recognition that God is God, and God is not our debtor" (*Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015], 8).

[64] Balentine argues that each occurrence indicates something about the human condition in relation to God While Job earlier lamented that God had thrown him into the "mire" of human mortality (Job 30:19), and Abraham acknowledged that he was a mere creature of "dust and ashes" who had entered into the dangerous territory of questioning God (Balentine, *Job*, 695).

[65] So Balentine, 697, who notes "God's disclosure of himself has invited a transformation of Job's understanding about what it means to be 'dust and ashes.'"

IV. Conclusion

Let us revisit Sam — a Christian who genuinely believes that God can and will bring him immediate joy, even after the death of a loved one — and Abigail, whose faith is wounded by her husband's cancer diagnosis.

How then does the book of Job fit into a trajectory model of grief, transposed into the difficult task of Christian lament? The first section of this article highlighted the tension between Hans Boersma — who classified grief as "erroneous" Christian theology — and J. I. Packer, who finds such classifications "inhuman." Boersma and Packer represent directions among the possibilities of grief, and are figureheads of two *kinds* of trajectories that are available for those who grieve.

Through a conscription of the trajectory model over the stage model of grief, we have seen in Job the legitimacy of variegated shapes of grief, which are not organized under a "progress" or "step" metaphor, requiring advancement or resolution. The overarching narrative conflict and resolution present in the book of Job should thus not be confused for a prescriptive sequence of conflict and resolution in the grief process.

Sam may be more inclined to find solace in Boersma's emphasis on resiliency, while Abigail clings to Packer's defense of her right to grieve. To repent from grief according to the admonishment of Boersma, and to give oneself over to the grief experience according J. I. Packer's claim, are both legitimate trajectories of grief — mutually exclusive though they may seem.

Both trajectories are possibly appropriate responses rooted in truth, and neither are uniformly necessary for "proper" Christian grief. Each person must judge for herself or himself what feels appropriate to the unique form that grief has taken in their experience. In the end, however, after all our theorizing has finished, we each of us must admit: "Managing grief ... is easier to talk about than to do; we are all bad at it."[66]

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[66] Packer, *A Grief Sanctified*, 10.

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