

## Not Exactly Job

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### **Book Reviews**

"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed." Francis Bacon (d. 1826)

### **Not Exactly Job**

Nathan Brown, Norman, OK: Mongrel Empire Press, 2007.

### **Reviewed by Al Staggs,**

Sante Fe, NM

As I read Nathan Brown's compelling poetry, *Not Exactly Job*, I was reminded of a statement made by Rabbi Irving Greenberg, "Let us offer, then, as a working principle the following: No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children." Nathan's treatment of Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, demonstrates the hazards of providing easy answers to human suffering. And yet so much of what one hears in the stuff of popular devotional books, as well as in Sunday School lessons and sermons, are attempts at "answers" to the tragedies of human existence. I must confess that I had many answers after I completed my degree from Southwestern Seminary in 1974. During the intervening thirty-plus years, my own trials as well as the adversities of my parishioners and hospital patients, have left me with far more unanswerable questions than answers to the vicissitudes of life. Much of contemporary post-Holocaust theology, particularly the writings of Elie Wiesel, have shown that sometimes it is the questions, as opposed to quick answers, that can be more instructive and lead us to new plateaus of faith.

As Nathan points out, many sufferers do not experience a good end to their travails, hence his title *Not Exactly Job*. The account of Job's latter days indicates that he was completely vindicated and that those days were spent in prosperity and happiness, as if the agony of his former life was made right. This reminds one of the tendency, during the Easter season, for churches to speed hurriedly past Passion Sunday and Good Friday and run hastily to the Resurrection without taking into account the ongoing identification that Jesus STILL has with the suffering of this world through his experience

of the cross.

I found Nathan's treatment of Eliphaz the Temanite to be particularly relevant to our "age of Empire." Eliphaz's statement to Job that "He thwarts the plans of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success" makes one wonder what God thinks about our present Romanesque empire, an imperial empire whose power is predicated on military might and characterized by extreme affluence in the face of widespread world poverty. Such a question indicates that perhaps, like Eliphaz, our spiritual answers have precious little to do with the reality of global suffering and our complicity, as a nation, in what is happening to this world.

Nathan's candor and honesty regarding his own encounters with adversity is refreshing. His protests are reminiscent of Job, Jonah, Jeremiah, Elijah and of Jesus himself who cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" How tempting it must have been to some biblical scribe to delete such troubling statements and protests at some point. The author's questions and protests afford readers a certain permission to voice their own feelings in the face of trials. Nathan's honesty in dealing with adversity indicates that any relationship that has worth and true intimacy must be a relationship in which feelings can be aired without the fear of retribution. Do not our protests and groaning to God become a form of prayer and give indication that in our relationship to God we are allowed to question and complain, with the knowledge that our negative expressions will not change our relationship as God's beloved children? The author's tribute to his father, Lavonn Brown, at the beginning of the text, provides a profoundly moving foundation upon which Nathan can voice his protests and questions. In this tribute Nathan says of his father, "Dad has fielded every blunt question I've asked and every profane poem I've written over the years with grace, openness, and wisdom." Certainly God, as a good parent, can hear our questions and our cries of anger and protest with grace, openness, and wisdom.

**Editor's Note:** Lavonn Brown was pastor for many years of the First Baptist Church of Norman, Oklahoma, and also served as an early leader in the foundational years of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

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