# *Job's Lament: Towards the Theological-Ethical Significance of Job 29-31*[347]

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**Abstract**

*In this essay, 'lament' is taken to be a form of human response to the problem of suffering. This leads us to the investigation of Job's experience of suffering and his final lament and declaration of innocence in Job 29-31 as a case study of a human lament that was directed toward God ultimately, asking for God's response for justice and clarity in terms of his suffering. Within Job's lament, we tried to see what motivates Job's ethics and the significance it could have to our human experiences of suffering and the question of lament. 'Lament' in this essay is not just a daring speech that expresses deep sorrow and/or anger but more so it is seen as an openness into the reality of God. It is a deep submission to the ultimate verdict of the God in a difficult situation which is beyond human reasoning. Thus the end of reasoning in this discourse is not the collapse of faith but rather its daring openness to God for the last word, whatever that may be. This sense of deep openness to God in both good and bad situations in life is the humbling thought that we hope helps us to summarize and reflect the legacy of our beloved theologian, Mrs. Debbie Colvin who once explained 'faith as no faith until it is the only thing one is holding onto' in the presence of God. We present this lecture to her in deep appreciation for her many years of service at ECWA Theological Seminary Kagoro, and hope*

[347] This essay is presented as an Honorary Lecture to Mrs. Debbie Colvin at ECWA Theological Seminary Kagoro in appreciation to her many years of service as one of the leading teachers of the Old Testament in the history of the Seminary. 4th April 2017.

*that her life, and her husband's and all those she loves will continue to be opened in the presence of God in all circumstances.*

Keywords: The book of Job, Lament, Human Suffering, God etc.

## 1. Lament[348] and the Book of Job

One of the recognizable realities of the book of Job is the fact that it deals with practical human existential questions. The narrator portrays the man Job as the central character whose life was full of surprises, complexities, paradoxes and piercing thoughts and questions within himself, towards his (Job's) friends and ultimately towards God. Job was a man who was introduced in the prologue to the book that bears his name as a righteous, upright and blameless person who enjoyed great gifts of riches and progeny (Job 1:1-5). Suddenly, disaster stroke his house and life (1:6-2:10) which doubtless, caused deep sighs and inner contemplations in his life. His friends arrived later to sympathize with him and comfort him (2:11-13) although at the beginning of their stay with him they lacked words on what to say until much later when the silence of suffering was broken by and with Job's own words of groaning and lamentations (chap. 3) which opened the floor for a long dialogue between Job and his three visitors (4-27).

Considering the dialogue section of Job, we could see that the long debate in the book of Job has some gradual escalation from normal advice to a mourner, to a very contentious argument in order to prove a point as to why Job was suffering. Job's friends argued seriously from the retributive dogmatic perspective in which they concluded that Job was sinful as the reason why he was suffering, yet Job himself was not convinced of such

348 The word "lament" occurs more than once in the book of Job, and in various forms as in many other sections of the Old Testament. Thus the description as 'lament' or 'laments' would be used interchangeably in this study. It is noteworthy here that this essay does not study the concept of lament per se but rather leaves it open for further and better critical investigation. Thus 'lament' would be used in the following discourse more as a genre than a particular concept.

presupposition nor was he willing to accept their advice to just repent before God and stop claiming any rights. Job firmly carried his quest further by trying to fulfill one of his basic wishes, which is to confront God and ask why he was suffering. He tried doing that in his replies to his friends and possible soliloquies and finally he 'lamentingly' declared his innocence before God (chap 31). This declaration of innocence helps us to investigate Job's piety and its motivations within his declaration of innocence and how that has to answer our theological-ethical quest of being a 'good person' of which Job stands as a good example from an ancient context (cf. Musa, 2014).

Fohrer (1968:333) sees lament in Job as a recurring reality especially in Job's speeches which forms a challenge for a confrontation with God as a narrative account of distress and protestation. Westermann (1981; 1992ab) traces the genre of lament as a recognized and recognizable paradigm for understanding the book of Job. He further considers the laments of Job as essential aspects of Job's suffering thus seeing the book of Job as a dramatized lament. Yancey (1992:141-49) also considers the laments of Job from a faith critical perspective in that he tries to point his readers to the reality of what could be the sustaining idea in lament as well as its final result. Thus faith becomes his main thrust in interpreting Job's suffering. Hartley (1992:68) also considers the reality of the genre of lament across the book of Job which in Gordis's (1965:31,44) view could describe an aspect of Job's wisdom. In a similar sense, Brueggemann (2003: 293) sees the interface of genres especially of lament and hymn within the books of Job and Psalms, in the person, Job, in which he sees the possibility of "a new coherent dialogue," and "an emotional, artistic, and theological extremity."

von Rad (1972:190-226) discusses the problems of human suffering from the theological perspective of life's reality and the reality of an individual who may be seen and known like Job in and through lament. This shows us the reality of suffering and

pain in this world which could be seen as a general human experience as in the words of Dillard and Longman III (1994: 208) when they assert that, "no one escapes the pain of life" although it does not necessarily mean that no one would like to avoid pain and suffering. Pain as suffering is not an easy or comfortable experience that is why it is agreeable that "[w]e are all anxious for an insight into the reason for our plight and perhaps some easing of the anguish." In the same point of concern with Dillard and Longman III in the preceding lines, Ackermann's (2000: 213ff) contributions reminded us that we are in a broken world, a world in crisis, an age which is difficult to name.

Among critical Job scholars there are many literary critical approaches to the book of Job and the question and possibilities of lament and its possible significance. For example, Perdue (1991) describes the possibility and the power of lament through analyzing its literary potentials towards metaphorical imaginations of the interconnectedness of life and the cosmos. Fyall (2002) discusses the significance of Job's thoughts and words towards the possibility of a meaningful encounter with God. Job's lament is discerned in Newsom's (2003) discussion of his plight considering the reality of his being broken in pieces and he also took to breaking words in pieces within ambiguity, anxiety and limitations (see Newsom 2003:130-68). Ceresko (1999: 73) also from the literary perspective observes the use of individual lament in Job "as a vehicle for Job to pour out his distress and to appeal for deliverance."

This act of pouring out one's distress in lament or by lament is not an easy task either, although in many ways it is hardly an option but a reality and we sooner or later realize that it confronts us and pushes us into asking more questions than listening to possible answers. Ackermann (2003:111) helps us to practically observe the daily activities of life in order to discern the possibility and hardness of lament when she says, "Lament should be generous and not grudging, explicit not

generalized, unafraid to certain petitions and confident that they will be heard." She also points out the possibility and ambiguity of lament as risky speech which is possible but never an end in itself (Ackermann, 2003:111ff). In like manner, Gutierrez (2005) discusses Job's laments as a possibility of engaging with God amidst realities of suffering. This remains an ambiguous exercise and encounter, yet, it could be a meaningful engagement that shows us what it means to suffer and be poor as a human being in God's world. Thus from a general practical observation of Job's laments through his thoughts and words we could also agree that Job was no longer alone in his suffering but rather he could represent the cry and thoughts of humanity (Balentine, 2006:5).

To the feminist interpreters, the person and book of Job poses more problems than solve them. This could be discerned in the following observation by Maiaer and Schroer (1998: 178) when they write the following words, "The biblical character of Job also carries a problem, that is, this fictitious[349] character becomes the literary vehicle for fundamental ideological and theological questions of certain social groups.[350] Job not only laments his misfortune but, above all, also reproaches his friends, circumstances, the world order and the God behind all this.[351]"

From health and human dignity perspective, Claassens (2013:169-183) critically discussed the possibility of discerning and adopting a new pattern of speech as a deconstruction of destructive stereotypes to persons with disability thus she carefully paves the way into discerning new language for dignity

[349] It could be a quick and uncertain generalization to conclude that the book of Job is fictitious let alone its main character.

[350] Their failure to explicitly give examples of these 'certain social groups' further confounds their assertion here.

[351] This sounds beyond the textual testimony of the book of Job into wider assumptions and suspicion.

within lament .[352] In a similar discourse, Byrne (2002:255-64) has also discussed the genre of lament, especially from the book of Job within the context of health disability or illness which is also in line with the quest and contributions of Louw (2008) from a practical theological perspective. Byrne (2002:256) points out that lament is a lonely reality in mostly painful situations when she writes, "Not only Job required[353] to mourn his multiple losses, but by nature of the novelty of his plight and his struggle to define it through new language, Job travels the road of his demise and rebirth alone." Through this lonely and painful experience, Byrne (2002:257) further points out that Job's experience of suffering and laments gave him the ability to "live with unanswered questions and ambiguity" which may always remain a serious challenge or a complete puzzle to our lives in the contemporary world.

In his analysis of the literary features of the book of Job, Westermann (1992:53) sees lament as a dominant feature of the genre of the book of Job in that lament is seen as a natural reaction to suffering when he observes that "[t]here are various kinds of reaction to pain and suffering, such as screaming or remedial action. When the reaction is verbal we call it a lament." On a seeming contradictory note he tried to distance lament and suffering from each other after showing their connection as quoted above when he says, "A lament is something fundamentally different from a treatment of the problem of suffering. A lament does not arise out of a mournful reflection on suffering. . . a lament is an existential process which has its own structure." In this study, we shall see Job's lament, in contrast to Westermann's attempt to distance it from a mournful situation, as an attempt to present a personal concern, or complaint concerning his suffering and mournful situation before God and other people in search of justice and

[352] For more on anthropology around the questions of being human and the possibilities for new speech, see Kelsey (2009); Rogerson ( 2010) and De Gruchy (2006; 2011).

[353] This "requirement" could most primarily be understood from human nature itself and sometimes God.

acquittal or condemnation in God's righteousness if he was wrong in any area of his practical life at the moment of his experience of suffering.

Lament is a process of voicing out or writing out ones feeling of pain, discomfort or agony. Louw (2000:21-24) explains that lament is a painful process of responding to suffering and engaging with the reality and the questions of the presence or absence of God in our suffering. Lament may come as a cry for help, a prayer/petition, a critical confrontation or as a complaint on the injustice of suffering and the uncomfortability of life (see also Westermann 1981; Brueggemann, 1995 and Seow, 2013:56-8). The book of Job provides us with ample examples of the latter meaning and practice of lament.[354] Brueggemann (2002:118) also explains that lament is a daring speech to God to intervene in order to decisively alleviate or overcome the problem of evil as a serious need that human beings face in the world.

Lament came from Job as a result of the loss of dear ones thus constituting an existential contemplation in which many questions would be asked and not all could have cogent answers directly or immediately. De Gruchy (2013) experienced such contemplation and questions in which his faith sought answers in life and death as a result of the death of his son Steve.[355] Thus the possibility of lamenting goes beyond acting drama but rather brings the fears, doubts, hopes, faith, and life of people closer to the question of fragility and ability which could also serve as an opener towards other possibilities beyond lament. This is not always an easy road to walk, yet, it is not impossible or totally unacceptable. It should be understood

[354] The book of Psalms also contains many laments of different kinds (see Brueggemann, 2002:118f).

[355] Steve was the oldest son of John de Gruchy, he was a professor of theology at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in Pietermaritzburg. He tragically died on 21st February, 2010 at 48 years. See De Gruchy (2013). For more on lament of loss of a dear one, see Wolterstorff (1987) and Hauerwas (1990).

from very cautious points of view. Within these possible and similar discourses, we wish to further consider Job's laments as part of his existential experiences as a pointer to our general human experiences in one way or another.

## 2. The Form of Job's Laments in Chapters 29- 31

The first section of the book of Job is a pleasant one in that Job is seen as a happy person with a lot of wealth (1:1-5). Suddenly tragedy strikes as a result of the discussion of Yahweh and the Satan (1:6-2:10). Job was highly devastated to have lost almost everything that life would have to offer. He sat in an ash hip where his three friends met him to sympathize with him (2:11-13). In such bitterness, Job broke the silence of his friends by a curse-lament (chap. 3), which also opens the doors of further conversations with his three friends (chaps 4-27). These chapters are known to be replete with words of serious discourse of complaint, explanations, retributive accusations, replies of protests and contention between Job and his friends. Job's knowledge and tenacious hold on his integrity and the failure of his friends to come to terms with that confounded him the most. Thus, he pushed harder, beyond asking for human response or explanations, but now towards God. Job raised very serious questions towards God (chap 10; 13; and 27) all as an attempt to have God respond to him. When all attempts were seemingly not working, Job now takes the last step of inquiry, protestation and quest. He made his declaration of innocence in chapter 31 amidst backward (chap 29) and present (30) reflections on his life and situation.

Newsom (2003:183) sees Job 29-31 as his "self-witness" which is primarily addressed to God. She notes that "This speech is not apparently addressed to the friends and contains no introductory angry response to their words." Nevertheless, Job's tone in chapter 31 is full of personal desperation and anger at the lack of clarity on the kind of "justice or injustice" done to him all alone. She further clarifies that "Job engages much extensively and systematically in acts of self-

representation and the representation of the social and moral world within which he understands himself."

In line with Newsom's thought above, Perdue (1991:182) also sees Job 29-30 as an extended complaint addressed to God. He further mentions that chapter 29 presents a description of Job's former days, before the onslaught of disaster, when his relationship with God was strong and good, and he was a highly respected leader of his community" (Perdue 1991:183). Going back to Newsom (2003:184), we could see that Job 29-31 display Job's simple and sincere speech format in which his moral qualities and representations are at home. This could be as a result of his experience of brokenness from the tragedies that befell him and led him into a more reflexive form of thinking and speaking before God and human beings.

Janzen (1985:201ff) sums up the division of these chapters 29-31 as recollection of things in the past, recognition of things present and a final oath, respectively. He goes further to show the flow of Job's thoughts in chapter 30 as follows: Job sees the people in his present suffering context as "a senseless disreputable brood (30:1-8)," he sees himself as "one whom God has humbled (30:9-15)," thus he likens himself to "dust and ashes" (30:16-23). He further reflects on "the total scheme of things (30:24-31)" (Janzen, 1985:205-10).

In this study more attention would be given to Job 31 for it forms Job's highest point of discourse in the book that bears his name.[356] His declarations were done in order to further accentuate his innocence before people and God, amidst serious measures, namely imprecatory utterances[357] that

[356] This is also my focal point of departure in my MTh thesis titled, "Job the Pious? The Theological-Ethical Potential of Job 31 in Contemporary Africa." Supervisor; Prof. Hendrik L. Bosman, Submitted to the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Unpublished, September, 2014.

[357] Regarding such swearing of curses, "The swearer usually suppresses the actual curse either with evasive language or abbreviated formulas, no doubt fearful of the very verbalizing of a specific curse. But Job is so bold that four times he specifies the curse that should befall him if he

should be activated upon him 'if'[358] what he claims to be and say is false in any way. Considering the inner dimensions of Job 31, it is noteworthy here that the text is formed by four kinds of expressions: questions (vv. 2-4, 14-15); statements of facts (vv. 11-12, 18, 23, 28, 30, 32); statements of hope/expectation (vv. 35-37); and oaths (the "if I have' and "if" not sayings) (see Balentine, 2008:329).

This is a legal rhetoric that extends his quest to bring God to trial (Job 9-10; 13; 16; 19; cf. 35-37). This rhetoric "accents Job's pursuit of justice, his need for a fair and impartial hearing of evidence, his belief that innocence and guilt are not disposable qualities, either in law or in life, and his presumption that if God is just, then God will bear witness to his truth" (Balentine 2008:330). There are also attitudinal assertions which are beyond actual human verification and judgment for example, issues of inner enticement to evil or wrong doing, and failure to uphold moral values (see vv. 5-8, 16-18, 32, 33-34, 24-28).

Balentine (2008:330) succinctly describes the function of Job's oaths when he says: "They accentuate personal integrity, the belief that personal ethics make a vital contribution to communal solidarity, the presumption that an honorable declaration of personal virtues gives God the opportunity to affirm God's own commitment to relationships that are moral and ethical."

Different scholars have different views of Job 31 that can be seen from the way they title it and also discuss its focus or purpose, which is to either openly declare Job's innocence from

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be guilty (vv 8, 10, 22, 40). His wreckless bravery reflects his unwavering confidence in his own innocence" (Hartley, 1988:406-7).

[358] "There are more conditional clauses than result clauses, for sometimes two or three 'if' clauses are lumped together ending with one consequence clause. Each conditional clause mentions specific sin, often mentioning who might have been wronged by the sin, and then states what the consequence should be if Job is guilty of that sin" (Habtu, 2006:591).

a moral/ethical perspective or to confront God in order to force God to respond to him, while others see Job as one displaying honorable virtuous worth considering and emulating, for example, Gordis (1965:283) titles Job 31 as "The Code of a Man of Honor" in which he sees Job 31 as a "soliloquy". He further explains the oath by saying: "These are not gross crimes, which are totally beyond the realm of possibility for him, but subtler sins that often prove a temptation to the respectable and respected citizen" (Gordis 1965:283-4). About Job, he says: "He has not feared the tyranny of the mob, nor has he been ashamed to confess his errors in public."

Pope (1973:227) sees Job in chapter 31 as one who "rests his case on a series of oaths of clearance. The oaths are in some case complete, with the sanction of self-imprecation fully expressed (Num. v 20-22)." He further explains that "[b]elief in the efficacy of the oath made it the ultimate test of probity; cf. Exod xxii 9-10; I Kings viii 31-32." Additionally, he briefly mentions that there are striking similarities of Job's oaths in this chapter and those in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, in which a person who was about to be killed by Osiris enumerates a long list of sins that the person claims not to have committed.[359] Although the similarities are amazing, Pope (1973:227) refers to the document without necessarily showing any reason for interdependence: "Both catalogues of sins reflect high ideals of social ethics. The Egyptian list is a mixture of ethical and ritual concerns, while Job's, with one exception (Vss 26-28), is entirely ethical."

Fohrer (1974:11) also discusses Job 31 in search of the righteous man, in which he sees Job's oaths as originating from a legal community rather than from a cultic ethics, although there are striking similarities between the two spheres of ethics in terms of the grand presence and person of God as the leading

[359]Habtu (2006:592) also highlights the origin of Job's oath from the background of the ancient Near East as a necessary start to establish one's clearance or 'innocence' in public. See also Dick (1979:37-50).

motivation behind them all. Moreover, "…the oath of purity undoubtedly represents a high point of Old Testament ethics" (Fohrer, 1974:14). About the oath, he observes that "…Job is concerned about attitudes in man which cannot be controlled legally, attitudes which can only lead to sinful acts, or about secret sins among the suspected crimes which had not been exposed. This concern is based on the wisdom teaching and not the Law" (Fohrer, 1974:13).[360]

Hartley (1988:407) discusses Job 31, saying, "In this oath Job enumerates a long list of sins that he has never committed. The sins he denies, however, follow no order attested elsewhere in the OT or related documents. They appear to be those sins that were foremost in his mind." He further adds that "Instead of denying blatant acts of transgression punishable by law, Job scrupulously tests his attitudes and motives. His primary interest is to demonstrate that he has maintained right relationships on all levels." About the pious flavor of Job towards morality, "[i]t is clear that Job knows that one is accountable not only for overt acts of sin but also for contemplating immoral behavior and cherishing cruel, vengeful thoughts against others" (Hartley 1988:408). Thus, he adds that Job swore his oaths of innocence out of his desperate need to hear from God, not out of arrogance.

According to Flesher's (see Kroeger and Evans 2002:284) comment, Job 29-31 is one long speech that builds rhetorically, incorporating elements typically found in the lament, to Job's final request for a hearing. The utterances of Job in Job 31 do not only stand in contrast to Elipaz's former speeches in accusation to Job, but also it stands "in sharp contrast to the accusations Job makes against God (Job 24)." She carefully weighs the tension and plight of Job within divine awareness

[360] Although it could be comparable to the Law (*Torah)*, yet we cannot claim any necessary interdependence of Job's clearance and the Law except in the ideals they motivationally portray.

and sustainability when she says, “The only constant in which we may have hope is God’s grace.”

Westermann (1992:317-19) discusses Job 31 as “Job’s Asseveration of Innocence,” in which he asserts that “The asseveration of innocence (*Unschuldsbeteuerung*) is a fixed form in the psalms of lamentation. Under certain circumstances it can take the place of the confession of sins”. From a wider (con)textual comparative analysis, Dick (1992:321-334) considers the oath of Job in relation to the ancient Near Eastern civil law in which he explores the place and voices of the defendant, as well as that of the plaintiff. On the example of the defendant, he cites other biblical examples like Gen. 44:3-12; (see v 9) and 1 Sam. 24:10-16; 18 (see vv 13,16) about which he points out that “Although the two texts from 1 Samuel and Genesis are not juridical documents *sensu strict*, they do reveal that the options open to the defendant in the OT are quite similar to those isolated in the cuneiform records” (Dick 1992:325). Chapters 29-31 signal a new strategy. In these chapters Job recapitulates the internal dialectic of his earlier speeches by completely turning away from his friends to face his real *ʾîš rîb* “opponent,” “God.” (Dick, 1992:330). Thus “[t]he oath of clearance was a common juridical procedure in civil cases throughout the Near East from Babylon to Elephantine” (Dick, 1992:331).

Fyall (2002:67) explains that “The emphasis in this chapter is on inner attitudes rather than on outward actions and this again has a choric function.” According to Wharton (1999:132), “His (Job) affirmation of innocence proclaims his unswerving integrity toward people; that these affirmations are addressed to God and no other (31:35-37) expresses his unswerving integrity toward God.” He also adds that, “The single thread that runs throughout Job’s oath of innocence is a human center of thinking and deciding and acting that is simply not influenced by the kinds of external seductions and pressures that so easily nudge ordinary people morally off course” (Wharton, 1999:132).

Janzen (1985:210) explains that recent analyses of Job's oaths have emphasized the formal character and the legal setting of such verbal acts. The result is an interpretative procedure that examines the text within strict categories of social behavior and principles of moral or legal logic. The catalogue of possible offenses portrays sin as the violation of concrete social relations-indeed, as the unfeeling disregard of primal sympathy as educated into social and moral sensibilities rather than of abstract principles (Janzen, 1985:213). Thus, he warns that "Job's self-imprecations are not to be interpreted, therefore, merely at the level of abstract moral logic, and as re-statements of a rigid reward-punishment dynamic which he has earlier both denied and presupposed. These self-imprecations, rather, serve to affirm Job's loyalty to the human community and to God, and to lay the basis for his appeal to an answering loyalty to God" (Janzen, 1985:213).

Newsom titles Job 29-31 as "The Moral World of Biblical Patriarchy and the Problem of Solidarity," in which she fears within a seeming definite personal conviction that the problematic context of the patriarchs distorts the image of God when she says, "Indeed, to some extent the biblical image of God is drawn from the model of the patriarch" (Newsom, et al 2012:212). In her understanding, "[t]he moral world of ancient patriarchy was an essentially paternalistic and hierarchical one" (Newsom, et al 2012:213). This might impinge on the role of Job's friends and God in terms of trying to ascertain the truth about Job's claims and plight. Thus, she sees Job in his last speech as a "proud patriarch."[361]

Job was "pushed to the wall" by his friends (perhaps wife too) and personal confusion on his plight. His protestations and ultimate declarations are not a mere show off of personal pride

[361] This is no doubt evident in the texts but it should not be seen as a manifestation of empty hubris for Job's actions testify compellingly to the reason why he appears to be "proud" of himself, which is seen as "personal confidence" in this study, exhibited within pious consciousness and cautiousness.

or 'goodness' but rather decisive actions necessitated by his horrible experiences described in the entire book. Thus, Job's last wrestle was with God, for God's acquittal/exoneration or condemnation. In chapter 31, "We are being asked to imagine what it might mean to persist in one's integrity in its most extreme form; on the part of one who has been cast down from unparalleled God-blessedness to unparalleled godforsakenness 'for no reason" (2:3)" (Wharton, 1999:131).

From his declaration of innocence, we can see that, "The standard by which Job wishes to be judged are all ethical and deal more with honor and integrity than with outright violation of a law code" (Bergant, 1982:149). Bergant continues regarding Job's life by saying, "He has been more than righteous, he has been exemplary in his conduct." If the oath has any purpose it is seen as "He (Job) is actually putting God to the test by his challenge. If God is truly just and Job is culpable then disciplinary measures will have to be taken" (Bergant, 1982:150). Perdue also sees the declarations of Job's innocence as having the intention "to force God into the open, i.e. to appear and defend divine integrity in the governance of creation. For if Job is indeed innocent, God by implication must either be guilty or forced to respond to the indictment of misgoverning creation. And deafening silence as a response would only underscore divine culpability" (Perdue 1991:183, cf. Pelham, 2012:333-354). Thus, in view of Amit's (2000:241-49) narrative analysis of hidden polemics in the biblical literature, we could at this point refer to Job 31 as an open polemic,[362] seeing that it is an open confrontational avowal in quest for a decisive response.

[362] "Polemic" in rhetorical discourse can be understood as a rhetorical presentation or persuasion of an argument in dispute. "The argument articulated within a text defined as polemical, and pertaining to some war of ideas, is intended to strengthen or to reject an explicit or covert position taken by that text, in other biblical texts dealing with the same subject, or in frameworks external to the Bible" (Amit, 2000:7).

Nevertheless, it may not be too hard to see from Job 31 that "This code of conduct and honor describes Job as a man of integrity with impeccable social morality" (Bergant, 1982:150). Good (1992:335-344) agrees with Bergant so much in the presupposed purpose and ethical sense of Job's oath when he says, "I have argued that the curse is a way of forcing [God] to respond, requiring his attention, because the curse cannot be unattended" (Good, 1992:340). He also adds that, "The series of curses demonstrates that he has been the very model of the ethical man, the assiduous follower of all the rules and the attitudes that the ancient Hebrew super-ego inculcated" (Good, 1992:343).

From the foregoing discourses on Job 31, we would agree that the chapter contains the yearnings of a desperate, honorable, wearied human being who seriously wanted to discuss his ethical life which in his view and ultimately in God's view was blameless especially in regards to the calamity he had to suffer. All the above discourses are valuable towards various degrees of making sense of the oath of Job's innocence which was given in a poetic fashion as a "powerful rhetorical poem" (Clines, 2006:978). Brueggemann (2003:296) from a socio-rhetorical perspective, provides a good observation and summary of the section we are dealing with in this essay when he writes that "In chapters 29 and 30, Job contrasts his wondrous past when he was socially significant and socially responsible (29) with his present state of powerlessness and social humiliation (30)" (cf. Pelham, 2012:333-354). In light of all that we have reflected upon about the man (Job) and the form of the text for his last major response, we shall now proceed to the theological-ethical significance of our focal section namely, Job 29-31.

### 3. The Theological-Ethical Significance of Job 29- 31

Job 29-31 are the last chapters of Job's critical engagement in terms of his quest for justice in his suffering. In these chapters, we notice a shift in focus from his three friends to God. Job dares to pour his heart to God in the hearing of his friends. He

searches for evidences in his mind in order to accurately and finally presents his case before God and to his accusing friends. This last resort of Job brings us to the highest point of his personal desperation and bravery in speech which presents us with some theological-ethical points of concern in terms of theological propositions from Job's perspective as well as his socio-rhetorical perspective of what doing good entails and what it means to speak daringly before the highest authority.

In chapter 29, Job casts his mind back into his blissful life to see how he has conducted his life and see the kind of expectation that his kind of life might have called for in such an ancient Near Eastern context. The days he remembered were the days of intimate friendship with God, and days of enjoying God's guidance and blessings (29:1-6). Those were the days of serious social consideration and respect before his peers and younger ones in the city and around his household (29:7-17, 21-25). Job's respect was earned from his people because of his humanitarian and humane sensitivity to the plight of the needy and oppressed. Job did not hesitate to bring justice and satisfaction to those who needed them (29-11-17).

Such a 'good life' in his past raised his expectation of receiving great reward of goodness and blessings from God throughout his life and led him to a blissful end (29-18-20). Yet things do not just work out the way we plan or expect. Good people are seen and known in what they choose to do to help and be a blessing to the people around them. Job as a person exemplifies ethics of responsibility as a person towards other persons, and as a leader towards the people he led. He was a human being who could see, understand, and conduct himself towards helping and guiding those under him. He is a good example of a religious, social, and political leader. Although in all this we must understand his limitations as a human being, he cannot determine what happens to him at the end of the day (29:18-20).

Job 30 is more of a socio-rhetorical reconsideration of his present state of suffering and loss. Job took his eyes and mind from "long ago" to "But now" (29:2; 30:1). He now struggles with derision, and disdain from much younger people than he was. He was struggling to make sense of the kind of life and attitude that people in his present suffering were showing him and why. These were people much lower than he was in the society, they had no high influence, they had no blissful future, they were not in control, in fact, and they can be seen as nobodies (30:1-8). Yet, it is pathetic that "now their sons mock me in song," said Job (30:9). In his imagination and experiences, he saw that now "God has unstrung my bow and afflicted me" (30:11). Job experiences worthlessness, and meaninglessness of life and in life in his suffering. "Terrors overwhelm me; my dignity is driven away as by the wind, my safety vanishes like a cloud" (30:15). This is a language of loss and despair, the language of sorrow and gloom. He continues by saying, "And now my life ebbs away, days of suffering grip me. Night pierces my bones; my gnawing pains never rest" (30:16,17). Job continues to describe is suffering and despair in pathetic language. This is another ancient picture of a man of sorrows painted in his own words. This is another picture of a man full of lament reduced to "dust and ashes" (30:19). He had no strength to fight, no mind enough to comprehend whatever was happening to "me." "My skin grows black and peels; my body burns with fever. My harp is tuned to mourning, and my flute to the sound of wailing" (30:30,31). Job had no one among humans to clearly understand and explain to him. All he could do was to think through, pose questions and wish to see and hear from God.

The foregoing chapter points us to the unreliability of human beings in this fragile life. Yes, life in itself is fragile and unreliable, only a fleeting breath. It can be broken down to pieces with words and various calamities. Other human beings can be reliable but not all and not always and not totally. Job was forsaken by those he knew, those who could have helped him, to provide for him, to respect him, to care delicately for his suffering body not to add to his afflictions with their careless

words or judgmental worldviews. Human physical life is fragile and one day will break into pieces. When that time comes, there is nothing anyone can do but to submit oneself into the hands of God and turn into dust and ashes. This should challenge us on how we live and how well we ought to live and what we do in the present in light of the future.

In chapter 31, Job strictly directs his address, confessions, declarations, and testimonies primarily towards God. This reality invites us to reflect on the significance of the passage in terms of the activity of the Divine, the place and activity of God/Yahweh as perceived, understood and declared by Job. This could provide us some important theological propositions that may not necessarily be different from the assertions of the rest of the Scriptures about God; nevertheless, it may add some freshness, and revelatory impact to see how Job and the author/compiler of the book that bears his name understood and described God in this passage, namely Job 31.

Job 31 is Job's avowal of innocence before people and God. He made his declaration of innocence in accordance with the ancient Near Eastern view of the crucial resort of one's process of exoneration from an accusation in the sight of the gods. As earlier referred to, Dick (1979; 1992) has given a good exploration of the place of legal metaphors in Job's declaration of innocence and its possible connections and significance in the ancient Near Eastern context.[363] Brueggemann (2003:296) sees chapter 31 as a declaration of innocence out of the best ethical norms of life. "In making this case of innocence for himself, Job moves to refute decisively the traditional assumption of his friends that his suffering is rooted in guilt.

[363] Also note that the impact of the legal metaphors in Job 31 cannot be overestimated in projecting the picture of God as the ultimate judge. God is one who is on high and sees all the ways and counts all the steps of Job (and human beings altogether, hence, what applies to Job, applies to all ). God gives portion or consequence of every act (31:2-4); to the wicked God brings disaster, and to the righteous, blessings.

Job's bold assertion is a denial of guilt and an insistence on his right."

In his declaration, Job was very meticulous in search of his personality and conduct in the sight of God and human beings to see if there is anywhere in his life that he has done anything wrong, sinful and vile worth punishing by such calamities that befell him. Job in doing this does not deny the fact that he may fail in his moral conduct and 'spiritual commitment' which may call for a just punishment according to the rules of life in those days. But in his case, he was all the more perplexed at his calamity especially in light of the interpretations that his three friends gave to what has happened to him right from the beginning of his suffering.

Job then searched his whole life in all possible ways even going beyond what any human being could contest, thus searching through his heart to see if there was any wrong that he has committed. He was motivated by the fear of God, from God's knowledge of his 'every way,' to God's judging eyes, and final act of judgment to give justice to all people (31:1-15). Job's understanding that God sees and knows every step he takes (31:4,7,9) shows his self-surrender to the sovereign arbitrariness of God in justice. Job knew that God would one day stand up to give justice to every human being thus he was motivated to live appropriately lest he fall to God's wrath when it comes (31:13-14). In the same way, Job's piety motivated his understanding of human worth as being created from the same God although not necessarily in the same way/manner. From the foregoing discourse, we could see that God is the defender par excellence of the weak and the vulnerable (31:13-14). God has the sovereign power of judgment towards all people and for all things that people do (31:6, 14). God is given "monotheistic" fidelity (31:26-28); thus, Job's piety stands as a great challenge to African syncretism (Habtu, 2006: 592), which should prompt us back to religious firmness, fidelity and loyalty to God.

Job's theology motivated his ethics in that he lived a disciplined life with moral and 'spiritual purity'. He gave good attention and justice to the needy (31:16-23), and did not allow himself to slip into physical or spiritual adultery and idolatry (31:9-10, 24-28). He did not allow materialism to cloud his brow from seeing the splendor of God and God's demands and justice and righteousness. He did not allow his human quest for vengeance to override his spiritual attitude even to his enemy (31:29). He was sensitive to what his mouth say (31:30) as well as listened to what the mouth of the people in his household say about him and against him if need be (31:31, cf. 13). His theological piety also influenced how he treated those who are not directly part of his household by birth or ownership, as servants, the strangers from different parts of the world he did not put off but also accepted and respected (31:32, cf. Gen 19; Judg 19).

As earlier indicated above, Job's piety is demonstrated also in his "monotheistic" fidelity in 31:26-28. The concept "monotheistic fidelity" is used liberally (generously) in making this point with regard to Job's religious life, yet he testifies that he has not been enticed and inclined to worship the creatures instead of the Creator. If he had, that would have been a serious crime against him, which is punishable publicly (31:28). Thus, Job's piety was anchored in a faithful, loyal fidelity to the only Supreme Creator and Controller of the universe; God is perceived, understood and described by Job and Job's author as a powerful, active, Supreme Being. This strikes the difference between Job's story which is recorded in the biblical literature from other similar texts from the ancient Near East. [364]

Job's theological ethics made him to be a man of integrity even towards spiritual shame and disgrace if he has sinned against God (31:33-37). Job's vulnerability in this passage accentuates his personal self-understanding and theological seriousness

[364] The book of Job is unique among other ancient Near Eastern texts that have similar burdens and characterizations, namely, the "suffering of the righteous" in "the direct theophonic intervention of God and His direct speeches (chaps. 38-41)" (Parsons, 1994:405).

which manifests itself into his practical life. He gave justice to whom justice was due (31:21, 38-40). And he did not shield his head from God's justice as well. From the study of the book of Job we could discern with Newsom (2003:180) that "The disposition of piety and the moral habit of turning from evil are the way in which one will know wisdom and understanding."

## 4. Conclusion

Job's lament as a complaint towards God and against the interpretation of his friends is a pointer to his theological and ethical conviction that shows us how our theology could and should influence our ethics. The person who has good theology will live a good life even amidst horrible situations in life. Job 31 is the climax of his laments from chapter 3 of the book that bears his name. Throughout his responses to his friends, Job lamented in one way or another. His laments were mostly of complaint against his friends' understanding of his situation and towards God to come out of his hiddenness and show Job why he was suffering.

Job 29-31 forms the climax of Job's struggle in suffering and struggle towards justice. He shows how good and responsible he was in the past (chap 29), and how people in his context of suffering deserted him and despised him (chap 30), and ended on an insistence to hear God's version of the whole trial or experience (chap 31).[365] Job's insistence in 31:35-37 is definitely a challenge to God but not against God's personality seeing that Job recognizes that he will accept God's verdict and wear God's indictment around his neck as a sign of 'carrying his own guilt and shame upon his own shoulders,' while God remains God to whom Job is willing to give account of every part of his life in question (31:37).

From the foregoing discussion, we can see that lament is part of human life. Lament is another way of self-expression before

[365] Fyall (2002:53) sees Job's final speech as an appeal to Almighty God to hear him (31:35).

God and people. It is not always a sign of disrespect or spiritual weakness for a person to lament in a given situation and it is not a spiritual arrogance to pose definite questions to God,[366] only that when we do, we should not allow our past or present experiences to overwhelm our knowledge and understanding of the person and power of God. Like Job, we should learn to ask God to come in our troubles and address our situations in his own way not ours; seeing that human beings, no matter how knowledgeable and critical or speculative as Job's friends were, do not have definite answers to our problems and laments as God does.

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[366] We can be truly human in responding to our suffering situations in lament like Job. Here we can do lament as cry, lament as song, lament as a prayer of petition, intercession or supplication.

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