

## Ashes, Potsherds, And Grief: A Biblical Study of the Symbols of Suffering in Job 2:8

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### Abstract:

*Suffering is an inseparable part of human life and has always been a central theme in biblical and theological reflections. The Book of Job, in particular, presents suffering not only as an existential crisis but also as a profound challenge to theological understandings of God's justice and human faith. Within this narrative, Job 2:8 offers unique symbols—ashes, potsherds, and grief—that vividly express the depth of human suffering. Previous studies have discussed Job's faith and the general meaning of suffering, but have largely overlooked the theological significance of the symbols in Job 2:8. These symbols are often treated merely as cultural signs of mourning, leaving a gap in understanding their role in broader reflections on divine justice and human suffering. This study seeks to address that gap by exploring the theological meaning of ashes, potsherds, and grief within the context of Job's suffering and their implications for understanding God's justice and the human experience of affliction. The method used is a qualitative biblical exposition with a literature study approach, examining the original Hebrew text and its historical-cultural background. The findings show that ashes and potsherds function as tangible signs of sorrow and brokenness, while grief represents the deep emotional experience of suffering. Together, these symbols highlight human fragility, brokenness, and deep emotional struggle, conveying a theological message about the human condition and God's presence amid suffering. This article concludes that the symbolism in Job 2:8 invites readers to face suffering with honesty and faith, recognizing it as part of the relationship between God and humanity that shapes spiritual resilience in hope.*

## INTRODUCTION

Suffering is an inseparable part of human life and has become a central theme in numerous theological reflections and biblical narratives. The Book of Job, in particular, presents suffering as an existential event that not only tests one's faith but also challenges theological understandings of God's justice and love. Job 2:8 offers a distinctive visual portrayal of suffering through symbols such as ashes, potsherds, and grief—each implying profound grief. These three symbols are not merely depictions of physical distress but also carry deep theological significance.

Various previous studies have examined Job's suffering from different perspectives. For instance, Sirait, Aritonang, and Tarigan emphasize Job's piety and its relevance for contemporary Christians. Their analysis views Job's suffering as a means of strengthening faith and devotion to God, without specifically addressing the material symbols used by Job to express his suffering.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Mariani and Betaubun explore suffering in the Book of Job as a form of divine participation in human affliction, highlighting its relational and theological meaning within the framework of retribution and divine wisdom. However, their work does not explore the symbolic aspects of Job 2:8 in detail.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Stevanus adopts a narrative-critical approach to emphasize awareness of God through Job's suffering, yet he does not examine the concrete symbols used in the text.<sup>3</sup> From a review of these three articles, it can be concluded that there is a gap in scholarship concerning a focused analysis of the symbolic meanings of ashes, pottery shards, and grief in Job 2:8. The study conducted by Ellen van Wolde, critically examined the syntactic and semantic aspects of Job 2:8. She argued that the subject of the verb *laqah* ("to take") is not Job but *haśśatān*; that the term *heres* (הָרֵס) should be understood as "a clay vessel" rather than merely "a potsherd"; and that the verb *hitgāred* (הִתְגַּרְדֵּ) refers to the act of draining pus from sores rather than simply scratching an itch. Van Wolde's interpretation therefore shifts the traditional understanding, which often views Job's action as a straightforward symbolic gesture, toward a more concrete and horrifying portrayal of suffering, namely a body afflicted with festering wounds. This

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhard Florentino Sirait, Hanna Dewi Aritonang, and Iwan Setiawan Tarigan, "Kesalehan Ayub Dalam Kitab Ayub 2:1-13 Dan Refleksinya Bagi Orang Kristen Masa Kini," *Lumen: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Katekese Dan Pastoral* 2, no. 2 (October 14, 2023): 129–45, doi:10.55606/lumen.v2i2.221.

<sup>2</sup> Evi Mariani and Robert Betaubun, "Volume 4, Nomor 2, 2024 Memaknai Penderitaan Orang Hidup Dalam Kristus Dalam Kitab Ayub," *Danum Pambelum: Jurnal Teologi Dan Musik Gereja* 4, no. 2 (November 29, 2024): 89–104, <https://ejournal.iaknpy.ac.id/index.php/pambelum>.

<sup>3</sup> Kalis Stevanus, "Kesadaran Akan Allah Melalui Penderitaan Berdasarkan Ayub 1-2," *Dunamis: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristiani* 3, no. 2 (April 29, 2019): 111–34, doi:<https://doi.org/10.30648/dun.v3i2>.

finding is important because it highlights the depth of the text’s linguistic details, yet her analysis remains confined to the philological and linguistic dimensions and does not extend to the symbolic meaning of ashes, vessels or shards, and silence as theological expressions of suffering. Although previous studies have provided significant contributions, there remains a gap in research on Job 2:8, particularly with regard to its symbolic analysis. The symbols of ashes, shards, and silence cannot be regarded merely as narrative details or cultural objects, but should be understood as material signs that carry theological and existential significance. This article seeks to address that gap by offering a symbolic-theological analysis of the visual and material elements of Job’s suffering. In doing so, it opens new hermeneutical possibilities for understanding the relationship between human suffering and the presence of God.<sup>4</sup>

This is where the scholarly novelty of the present article lies. It offers a symbolic and theological study of the visual and material elements of suffering employed by Job—elements that have received limited attention in academic discourse. This study highlights how these symbols serve as both concrete expressions of human suffering and theological metaphors reflecting the tension between faith and divine justice.

The central research question of this article is: What is the theological meaning of the symbols of ashes, potsherds, and grief in Job 2:8, and how do these symbols enrich our understanding of human suffering in relation to God? To address this, the study employs a qualitative method through exegetical and historical-cultural analysis of the Hebrew text. Unlike previous research that has often treated these symbols merely as cultural expressions of mourning, this article contends that they function as theological metaphors: ashes embody human frailty and repentance, potsherds represent brokenness yet resilience, and grief conveys the existential silence of suffering. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in offering a symbolic-theological framework that expands hermeneutical engagement with the Book of Job beyond the confines of retribution theology, demonstrating how material symbols convey profound theological meaning about the divine-human relationship. At the same time, its practical application provides faith communities with a theological lens through which suffering can be understood not merely as punishment but as a transformative space where faith, resilience, and hope are cultivated, thereby informing pastoral ministry,

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen van Wolde, “The Problem of the Potsherd: Job 2:8 in a New Perspective,” *Old Testament Essays (OTE)* 31, no. 3 (December 14, 2018): 697–702, doi:<https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2018/v31n3a16>.

liturgical practice, and spiritual care in contemporary contexts of affliction.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a literature review method to analyze the symbols of suffering in Job 2:8. The main focus is the biblical text of Job 2:8, which prominently features the symbols of ashes, potsherds, and grief as representations of human suffering and as reflections on divine justice. To enrich the analysis and provide stronger theoretical grounding, this study incorporates insights from well-established theories of ritual and symbolic action, particularly those developed by scholars such as Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz. These theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for interpreting the symbolic dimensions of Job's actions.

The research utilizes both primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the Hebrew text of Job 2:8, which is examined through close reading and exegetical analysis in order to uncover the theological meanings embedded in key terms and narrative structure. Secondary sources include a broad range of theological literature, biblical commentaries, academic journal articles, and scholarly books that address the themes of suffering, biblical symbolism, and the socio-cultural context in which the Book of Job was composed. The research process begins with a detailed analysis of the Hebrew text to identify the theological significance of the symbols present in the passage. This is followed by a historical and cultural study that aims to understand how such symbolic practices were expressed in the context of the ancient Near East, particularly in relation to human suffering. The study then applies the selected theoretical perspectives in order to interpret Job's symbolic actions as meaningful cultural expressions, as understood through Clifford Geertz's concept of culture as text, and as part of a transitional or liminal process, as conceptualized by Victor Turner. This approach allows for a more nuanced and theologically informed understanding of the symbolic elements within the narrative.

The article is structured systematically. It begins with an introduction that outlines the background and relevance of the study, followed by a literature review that highlights the contributions and limitations of previous research. The methodology section then explains the research design and analytical process. This is followed by a comprehensive analysis and discussion of the meaning of the symbols of suffering in Job 2:8. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the main findings and offers theological reflections on the nature of suffering and the human relationship with God.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Narrative Context of Job 2:8 in the Book of Job

Job 2:8 marks a pivotal turning point in the prologue of the Book of Job, portraying the climax of Job’s suffering as his losses culminate in physical and existential devastation. This verse signals a transition from external calamities to the embodied experience of affliction, making it central for understanding the symbolic and theological dimensions of Job’s plight. The Hebrew text reads: **וַיַּקְרֵב לְחַדְרָתָאָפֶר יְשָׁב בְּתוֹךְ**. The term **חַדְרָתָאָפֶר**, rarely occurring in the Hebrew Bible, is associated with something broken or destroyed. It mirrors Job’s own fractured condition in both body and soul. The verb **לְחַדְרָתָאָפֶר**, derived from the root **גַּדֵּר** in the hitpael stem, means “to scrape” or “to scratch intensively.” Lexical authorities such as Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon and Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon note its limited occurrences (e.g., Lev 14:41; Isa 22:17), each indicating an act of forceful scraping rather than a casual scratch.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that Job’s action was a desperate attempt to relieve excruciating pain, perhaps even to drain the sores afflicting his body.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the potsherd becomes more than a physical instrument: it symbolizes Job’s shattered existence, reflecting both his vulnerability and his futile struggle for relief.

The phrase **וַיַּקְרֵב לְחַדְרָתָאָפֶר יְשָׁב בְּתוֹךְ** adds further symbolic depth. The word **אָפֶר**, “ashes,” frequently appears in Scripture as a marker of mourning, devastation, and humility (e.g., Gen 18:27; Jonah 3:6; Esther 4:3). Job’s sitting among ashes conveys more than despair; it is an existential image. Once seated at the city gate as a figure of authority and honor (Job 29:7), Job is now reduced to sitting on an ash heap—a place of impurity and disgrace in ancient Israelite culture.<sup>7</sup> This shift underscores not only his social alienation but also his ritual impurity, comparable to the status of those declared unclean under the Law (Lev 13:45–46).

Taken together, Job 2:8 presents a threefold portrait of suffering: **חַדְרָתָאָפֶר** embodies destruction, **לְחַדְרָתָאָפֶר** dramatizes a futile struggle against pain, and **אָפֶר** signifies humiliation and estrangement. Job’s silence intensifies the symbolism: he utters no words but allows his body and actions to speak on behalf of his anguish.<sup>8</sup> The verse, therefore, does not provide

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, ed. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1813).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew E Hill and Jhon H Walton, *A SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT*, IV (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 283–92.

<sup>7</sup> Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*.

<sup>8</sup> EL Greenstein, *Job: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 1–10.

immediate answers but instead introduces the theological problem of suffering through symbols—concrete and culturally resonant acts that open the narrative to deeper reflection on divine justice and human endurance.

### **Ashes as a Symbol of Grief and Repentance**

In the tradition of the Hebrew Bible (פָנִים), ash (אָפֶר) holds deep and rich symbolic meaning, particularly associated with suffering (צֻעָר) and the acknowledgment of human mortality (שְׁבִירָה "brokenness"). Literally, *apher* means the residue of combustion or the black dust left from something consumed by fire (שָׁרֶפֶת).<sup>9</sup> However, in the texts of the Tanakh, its meaning goes far beyond its physical form. Ash becomes a visual and emotional emblem of destruction (קָרְבָּן), mourning (אָבֵל), restoration (קָרְבָּן "hope"), and the hope of divine mercy through repentance (תְּשׁוּבָה).

One of the most moving symbolic uses appears in the story of Abraham, when he speaks to God with profound humility: “Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes”—(עַפְרֵן אָפֶר) (Genesis 18:27). In this phrase, Abraham fully humbles himself (קָשְׁפֵלָה גָמוֹרָה) before God, recognizing the existential limits of his humanity. The phrase has come to represent complete surrender (הַתְּבִלָּה) before the Divine. The use of ash as an expression of grief (אָבֵל) and repentance (תְּשׁוּבָה) was common in the cultural context of the ancient Near East.<sup>10</sup> In times of profound sorrow, people would often wear sackcloth (שָׁקָל) and scatter ashes (אָפֶר) upon their heads—a symbolic act known as הַתְּאַבֵּלוֹת (mourning). This was not merely a sign of personal sadness, but a public expression of suffering or remorse.<sup>11</sup> We see this practice in the story of Job, who “sat among the ashes” (יִשְׁבֵ בְּתוֹךְ הָאָפֶר) (Job 2:8) after losing everything.<sup>12</sup> In this context, ash is more than a symbol of ruin; it becomes a setting for inner purification (פָהָר פְנִימִי) and an encounter with God (מִפְנֵשׁ עַם קָאָלָהִים).

In the book of Jonah, even a foreign people—the Ninevites—understood the

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Rancour Laferriere, *Death Imagined: From Mother Earth to Dust and Ashes in the Mind of Job* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 5–51.

<sup>10</sup> Karen and Steinert, Ulrike Sonik, ed., *THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF EMOTIONS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 545–84.

<sup>11</sup> Ulf Bergström, “The Discourse Functions of Overspecified Anaphoric Expressions in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: Genesis 12–24 as a Test Case,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 65, no. 2 (September 2, 2020): 275–96, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/jss/fgaa001>.

<sup>12</sup> Zoltán Schwáb, “Does the Reader Fear God for Nothing? A Theological Reflection on the Divine Speeches in Job,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 73, no. 2 (July 6, 2022): 439–73, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flac078>.

symbolic power of ash. Upon hearing Jonah's prophecy of judgment, the king of Nineveh removed his royal garments, donned sackcloth (שְׂקָלָת), and sat in ashes (יִשְׁבֵּן עַל הַאָפָר) as an act of repentance (Jonah 3:6). This shows that the symbolism of ash as an expression of remorse and humility (כָּנָעַנְוָה) was not exclusive to Israel, but widely recognized in Semitic cultures. The theological meaning of ash runs deep.<sup>13</sup> Ash represents human lowliness before the holiness of God. It is not merely the residue of destruction, but a confession that humanity is mortal (בָּנוֹת אֹתֶר), "a child of clay"), fragile (שְׁבִירָה), and powerless without divine grace (חַדְרָה אֶלְוָה).<sup>14</sup> In Psalm 102:10, the psalmist writes: "For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping" (כִּי־אָכַלְתִּי אָפָר כָּלָתָם וְשִׁקְוֵי בְּבִci מִסְכָּתִי)—a powerful portrayal of existential suffering (סְבִּיל קִיּוּמִי) that touches every part of life. Yet the Bible also offers hope that rises from the ashes.

In Isaiah 61:3, there is a divine promise to bestow "a crown of beauty instead of ashes" upon those who mourn in Zion. In Hebrew, the phrase reads: לְשִׁוּם לְאַבְלֵי צִיּוֹן לְמַתָּה לְהַמְּפַאֲר מִתְּחַת אָפָר "to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes." This is a divine declaration that suffering and repentance are not the end of the story. Ashes, though symbols of ruin, can become the beginning of restoration and new glory.<sup>15</sup> Thus, epher in Scripture holds a vast range of meanings: from destruction and mourning to the acknowledgment of human mortality (אָנוֹשָׁה), and ultimately to a bridge of repentance that leads to divine restoration. In the world of the ancient Near East—and especially in biblical theology—ash is a medium of humility and grace, humbling humanity yet simultaneously opening the path to God's mercy.

### Potsherds as a Symbol of Ruin and Resilience

In the Hebrew tradition, potsherds—fragments of earthenware—carry profound symbolic weight, representing both destruction and resilience. The primary term used in Hebrew texts to describe such objects is "חרש", a word that refers to the clay-based material molded, fired,

<sup>13</sup> Abraham Kuruvilla, *Psalms 102-105: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2024), 10–12.

<sup>14</sup> Malachi Udochukwu Theophilus, "THE VIRTUOUS NINEVITES: ECHOES OF IGWEBUIKETHEOLOGY IN THE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF JONAH 3:1-10," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* 3, no. 9 (January 2020): 37–39, doi:<https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.30563.78888>.

<sup>15</sup> Jakub Slawik, "Exegesis of the Book of Isaiah 61:1-11: Redaction Criticism and Inquiry into the Identity of the Prophet Known as Trito-Isaiah," *Collectanea Theologica* 90, no. 5 (March 1, 2021): 251–53, doi:[10.21697/CT.2020.90.5.11](https://doi.org/10.21697/CT.2020.90.5.11).

and used as everyday vessels in the ancient world.<sup>16</sup> What is particularly striking, however, is how these broken pieces—often still referred to by the same term in Hebrew—acquire deep theological and anthropological significance in the narratives of Scripture, especially in the story of Job.

Etymologically, heres points to something shaped from dust (*aphar*) and water, then hardened by fire. This directly mirrors the biblical creation narrative in Genesis 2:7, where God forms humanity from the dust of the ground and breathes into it the breath of life. Thus, a clay pot—or its fragments—is not merely a utilitarian object, but a symbol of human nature itself: fragile, finite, yet formed by the hand of the Creator. Even when it breaks, the shard still bears the imprint of its maker. It is no longer whole, but it does not lose its origin. In the ancient world, broken pottery was not immediately discarded. It continued to serve—whether as a writing surface, a small container, or even a cleaning tool. This historical reality offers a profound anthropological insight: that in ancient cultures, brokenness did not negate usefulness.<sup>17</sup> A damaged object retained its functional value, not because it remained perfect, but because it could still serve a purpose. The worth of an object was not defined solely by its completeness, but by its continued capacity to act—even in a fractured state.

The story of Job brings this symbolism into a more intense theological dimension. In Job 2:8, after enduring unimaginable losses and being afflicted with painful sores, Job sits among ashes and uses a potsherd to scrape himself. The choice of this object is not incidental. Job, a man broken in body and spirit, now takes up a symbol of destruction itself—a shard of clay—to respond to his suffering. There is a profound identification between Job’s shattered body and the object he uses. The shard becomes a mirror of his condition: discarded, wounded, yet still functional.<sup>18</sup> In his despair, Job does not reach for gold or fine linen, but for the humblest object—one that matches his state most honestly. This is a theological statement: even in brokenness, a human being can still “serve,” can still act.

Moreover, Job’s use of the potsherd illustrates that human suffering need not be evaded through luxury or escape, but can be met by embracing the “broken” condition itself. In Job’s theology of suffering, heres is not merely a symbol of ruin, but also a medium of endurance. It is not only evidence that something has been shattered, but that the shattered

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<sup>16</sup> CL Seow, *Job 1 - 21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2013), 6–9.

<sup>17</sup> David. J.A Clines, *Job 38-42 (Word Biblical Commentary 18B)* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2006), 137–39.

<sup>18</sup> Sekundus Septo Pigang Ton, “SUFFERING AS A PROCESS OF PURIFYING FAITH IN GOD (COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF JOB 2:1-10),” *Jurnal: Matetes* 4, no. 1 (April 1, 2023): 31–33, doi:<https://doi.org/10.47154/matetes.v4i1>.

can still be used—can still respond, still endure, still partake in an authentic spiritual struggle. Thus, the Hebrew heres, as used in the narrative of Job, becomes a symbol that fuses ruin with resilience, destruction with endurance—offering a vision of hope that even in the depths of brokenness, humanity still bears the imprint of the divine hand that shaped it.

### Grief as an Emotional and Existential Response

What is most striking about Job 2:8 is not only what Job did, but also what he did not do. Job did not utter a single word. There were no complaints, no pleas. There was only a profound silence—a suffering so deep it defies expression in words. This is a form of **הַקְתָּנָה**, a silence that carries the weight of a heavy heart and profound sorrow.<sup>19</sup> The word **בָּשֵׁבֶת** means “to sit” or “to remain.” Job was not merely sitting physically; he chose to remain in that state—immersed in silence and deep grief. Job did not run away or try to escape his suffering. He stayed there, amid the ashes—which, in Hebrew tradition, symbolize destruction or grief.

Job’s silence is not a sign of weakness. In Hebrew, this silence is **תַּקְוֵנָה**, a heavy, meaningful calmness. Job neither wept nor cried out; instead, he was fully present in his suffering. The grief Job experienced was not just ordinary sadness but something profoundly deep that touched his entire being. It was as if Job had lost not only those he loved but also his sense of security and understanding of himself and of God. Remarkably, the text does not blame Job for his suffering. He is still portrayed as righteous and faithful, even though his faith was being severely tested.<sup>20</sup> This demonstrates that grief does not necessarily signify punishment or wrongdoing but can be part of life’s mysterious journey.

Job 2:8 clearly reveals that grief is a total response—a condition in which one feels utterly broken, like the ashes left after a fire has burned out. Yet, even while sitting in the ashes, Job remains present. He remains *yoshev*—still there, still silent, still confronting his suffering. Perhaps it is precisely within this silence and devastation, in the midst of the ashes, that space begins to open for a new encounter with God. It is not a God who always provides easy answers, but a God who is present alongside the grieving human, even in the darkest

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<sup>19</sup> Abbie F. Mantor, “Caring for the Sufferers Among Us: Job 3 Through the Lens of Classical Rhetorical Theory and Modern Psychological Trauma Studies,” *The Asbury Journal* 75, no. 2 (2020): 232–35, doi:10.7252/Journal.02.2020F.04.

<sup>20</sup> Kalis Stevanus, “Keprabadian Ayub,” *SOPHLA: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen* 1, no. 2 (December 28, 2020): 103–6, doi:<https://doi.org/10.34307/sophia.v1i2.12>.

and most painful moments.<sup>21</sup> Grief, in its deepest form, becomes a place where one can sense the mysterious and comforting presence of God.

### **The Theological Meaning of the Symbols of Suffering in a Contemporary Context**

Suffering remains a mystery that has never been fully resolved. The Book of Job, one of the most profound texts in the Bible, presents a narrative that not only moves the reader but also challenges conventional ways of understanding the relationship between human suffering and the presence of God.<sup>22</sup> Through simple yet deeply meaningful symbols—such as ashes, potsherds, and grief—the Book of Job reveals a spiritual reality that transcends human logic.

When Job sits on ashes, scratching his body with shards of potsherds, he is not merely depicting his physical and social devastation. Rather, he is presenting symbols of suffering with far deeper significance. Ashes represent total ruin and human helplessness before God. The potsherds reflects the fragility and brokenness of the human body. Meanwhile, the sorrow expressed through Job's words and his silence reveals a cry of the soul that cannot be answered with simplistic explanations.<sup>23</sup> The Book of Job does not offer a logical solution to suffering. Instead, it invites the reader to dwell within the mystery of suffering—not as a problem to be solved, but as a sacred space where one may encounter the Divine.

The symbols within Job's story offer believers a new way of understanding suffering. In a culture that often seeks quick answers and immediate resolution, Job teaches the value of silence, of sitting in ashes, and of making room for radical honesty before God.<sup>24</sup> In the ashes, we learn to release our desire for control; in the potsherds, we are reminded that wounds and brokenness are real; and in grief, we are given permission to cry out to God—even if that cry takes the form of lament rather than praise. It is precisely through Job's silence and protest that faith emerges—not as unshakable certainty, but as the courage to

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<sup>21</sup> Rosmina Berutus, Elisamark Sitopu, and Bernard Lubis, "Penderitaan: Suatu Kajian Teologis Kitab Ayub Dan Relevansinya Keluarga Kristen Masa Kini," *Sinar Kasih: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Dan Filsafat* 1, no. 4 (November 2023): 302–3, doi:10.55606/sinarkasih.v1i4.231.

<sup>22</sup> Humphreys Frackson Zgambo and Angelo Nicolaides, "A Brief Exposition on the Notions of Human Suffering, Theodicy and Theocracy in the Book of Job," *Pharos: Journal of Theology* 103, no. 1 (2022): 5, doi:<https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.10325>.

<sup>23</sup> Józef Stala, Elżbieta Osewska, and Krzysztof Bochenek, "The Sufferings of the Biblical Job as an Icon of Postmodernity: The 'Loneliness' of God and the Human Being in a Consumerist Paradise," *Journal of Religion and Health* 62, no. 1 (February 1, 2023): 328–30, doi:10.1007/s10943-021-01323-5.

<sup>24</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, The Suffering of Job and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academy, 2021), 99–127.

remain in relationship with God despite not fully understanding.

This narrative carries profound theological implications for the Christian faith. The Book of Job sharply critiques an overly simplistic theology of retribution—the idea that the righteous are always rewarded and that suffering is necessarily the result of wrongdoing. At the same time, it is important to note that Job's symbolic gestures in 2:8 do not resolve his anguish; rather, they mark the threshold of a much deeper lament. Job is still in the midst of expressing his suffering, which culminates in chapter 3 when he curses the day of his birth (Job 3:1). Far from signaling resolution, the symbols of ashes, potsherds, and grief in 2:8 intensify the tension between Job's lived reality and traditional theological frameworks. This continuity shows that the critique of retribution theology is not an abstract claim imposed on the text but arises organically from Job's ongoing struggle, which combines silent gestures, raw lament, and protest against his condition. Job subverts this pattern: he is a righteous man, yet he suffers. Through this inexplicable suffering, believers are invited to see that God is not a mechanical dispenser of justice, but a free and sovereign presence who acts in ways that are often beyond human comprehension. When God finally speaks from the whirlwind, God does not directly answer Job's questions.<sup>25</sup> Instead, God offers His presence—and that presence itself becomes the answer. Though it does not explain everything, it is sufficient to assure humanity that God is indeed present in their suffering.

In today's context, the symbols of suffering in the story of Job remain profoundly relevant. Ashes can be seen in the faces of those experiencing deep loss—whether through death, illness, or the collapse of life as they knew it. In this sense, the ancient symbol continues to resonate as a contemporary image of devastation and mourning. Likewise, potsherds may be understood not as a direct allegory, but as a symbolic reminder of human fragility that finds new echoes in bodies afflicted by chronic pain or wounded by emotional trauma. These applications do not replace the original meaning of the symbols in Job's context but extend their theological resonance, allowing them to speak meaningfully into the realities of suffering faced today.

The grief envelops the souls of many who struggle alone in a society that has little patience for sorrow. The Church, as the body of Christ, is called to be a place where these symbols are not merely remembered but embodied—through liturgy, through pastoral care,

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<sup>25</sup> Jean Tris Zalukhu, Iwan Setiawan Tarigan, and Ratna Saragih, "Iman Dalam Penderitaan: Kajian Biblika Kitab Ayub 1-2 Sebagai Upaya Peneguhan Iman Kristen," *Jurnal Teologi Injili Dan Pendidikan Agama* 2, no. 3 (May 2, 2024): 4–16, doi:10.55606/jutipa.v2i3.307.

and through a faithful presence that does not rush to offer answers, but simply walks alongside in solidarity. In the Indonesian context, a striking parallel can be found among the Dani people of Papua, who practice *iki palek*—the cutting of a finger joint as a tangible expression of grief at the loss of a family member. This ritual is usually carried out by women, especially mothers or sisters, as a sign that the pain of losing a loved one is not only internal but must also be marked upon the body.<sup>26</sup> The wound, which remains visible throughout life, becomes a permanent reminder of sorrow and solidarity with the dead.

Anthropologically, *iki palek* demonstrates that grief is never merely emotional but is embodied and enacted through symbolic action. This resonates with Victor Turner's insight that ritual symbols function within the liminal phase, when a person stands “betwixt and between” old and new identities, stripped of the former status yet not fully incorporated into a new one.<sup>27</sup> From this perspective, the cutting of a finger or sitting in ashes can be seen as a liminal performance that externalizes inner suffering and places it within a cultural and religious drama that the community can interpret together.

This understanding is further enriched by Clifford Geertz, who argues that culture is a “web of significance” spun by human beings and that symbols are “texts” that must be read and interpreted within their cultural framework.<sup>28</sup> Ashes, potsherds, and severed fingers are therefore not merely material objects but cultural texts that articulate suffering in symbolic language which the community is able to understand.

Within this framework, *iki palek* resonates with the biblical symbols of ashes and potsherds. Ashes signify devastation and humility before God, while potsherds reflect brokenness and human fragility. Likewise, a severed finger embodies the irreversible reality of loss, inscribing grief upon the body in a way that can be collectively recognized. Here we see what Turner describes as *communitas*, a bond of solidarity that arises through shared vulnerability and suffering.<sup>29</sup> *Communitas* reveals authentic human connection not through formal structures or hierarchies but through the common experience of fragility and loss.

Thus, whether in ancient Israel or in contemporary Papua, these symbols of mourning show that suffering calls for recognition, embodiment, and communal

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<sup>26</sup> Helena Wonawai et al., ““THE MEANING OF THE FINGER-CUTTING TRADITION IN THE PAPUA DANI TRIBE (STUDY IN SANOBA VILLAGE, NABIRE DISTRICT)”,” *PLURALIS: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial* 2, no. 1 (2024): 370–83, <https://ejurnal.undana.ac.id/index.php/JuP/article/view/20068>.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 95.

<sup>28</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5–14.

<sup>29</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 128.

participation. In Geertz's terms, such symbols function as both “models of” and “models for” reality, for they not only describe the experience of loss but also shape how a community interprets and responds to it.<sup>30</sup> Through these symbols, grief is never borne in isolation but is woven into a larger web of meaning. The story of Job and the Dani practice of *iki palek* together affirm a timeless theological truth: suffering does not negate faith. Rather, it is within suffering, whether expressed through ashes, potsherds, or the severing of a finger, that faith is tested, refined, and opened to the mysterious presence of God.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the symbols of suffering in Job 2:8—namely ashes, potsherds, and grief—carry profound theological significance. Ashes represent human devastation and humility before God; potsherds symbolize the fragile yet enduring condition of human life; and grief reflects a sorrow so deep it defies expression in words. These three symbols not only signify physical suffering but also serve as emblems of a genuine and honest spiritual experience in the face of affliction. Through symbolic analysis and an exploration of the cultural context of Job's time, this study successfully addresses its primary aim: to understand the theological meaning of these symbols and how they illuminate the relationship between humanity and God in the midst of suffering. The findings affirm that suffering is not always the result of wrongdoing or sin; rather, it can be part of a process of spiritual growth and a deeper encounter with God. The symbols in Job 2:8 invite readers not to evade suffering but to embrace it as a dimension of life that can mature one's faith. In suffering, people learn to surrender, to acknowledge their limitations, and to open themselves to God's presence—a presence that may not always provide answers, but consistently remains. Thus, suffering becomes a meaningful space for encounter between humanity and God, not merely a burden to be swiftly removed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study open up opportunities for further research on symbols of suffering in other parts of Scripture, particularly in prophetic literature and lament texts. Future studies could employ an intertextual approach to explore the connections and continuity of symbolic meanings across different biblical books. Additionally, comparing the meanings of these

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<sup>30</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 93–94.

symbols with contemporary Christian understandings and practices—especially in the context of pastoral ministry—could enrich theological insights with greater practical relevance. A contextual hermeneutical approach is also highly pertinent for examining how the symbols of ashes, potsherds, and grief can be embodied and interpreted in spiritual care for those currently experiencing suffering. In this way, these symbols can serve as a bridge between the biblical text and the pastoral needs of the congregation amid the wounds and realities of life.

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