


## **Vesely, Patricia (2019): *Friendship and Virtue Ethics in the Book of Job*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 284 pp. ISBN: 978-1108476478**

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This volume is a revised edition of Patricia Vesely's 2017 dissertation, completed at Union Presbyterian Seminary (UPS) in Richmond, Virginia, under the supervision of Samuel E. Balentine. As a Hebrew Bible Scholar, Vesely currently holds teaching positions at both UPS and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). In this work, Vesely aims to expand upon and refine Balentine's thesis, which posits friendship as the central theme of the book of Job. However, Vesely offers a distinctive interpretation by foregrounding the theme of friendship within the framework of Aristotelian virtue ethics. The intended audience for this book comprises theologians and academics who are interested in exploring the ethical dimensions of friendship as a virtue, as evidenced through interpretations of the book of Job.

A fundamental weakness of this book is its excessive focus on a narrow perspective of virtue ethics, which inadvertently obscures the significant role of deontological ethics as a crucial "entry point" for a comprehensive understanding of the theme of true friendship in the book of Job. Vesely's conclusion, which asserts that Job's friends have entirely failed to apply virtue ethics, is questionable. Is it truly necessary to judge Job's friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) so harshly? Could their role not be understood as a deliberate device to introduce the concept of virtue ethics as we conceive it today? In my view, it is more accurate to suggest that Job's friends are constrained by rigid traditional understandings rather than outright failures (I will elaborate on these critical comments at the end of this review). Nonetheless, Vesely's work is commendable and can serve as a valuable reference that underscores the importance of friendship in the book of Job.

It should be noted that this book serves as a refreshing "oasis" that expands the horizons of biblical studies by exploring the crucial theme of friendship, which I have termed ethical-virtuous practice, particularly within the context of the book of Job. Loftus observes that Vesely's careful application of Aristotelian virtue ethics has yielded insightful references to friendship, a relatively under-explored topic in previous Job scholarship (2020: 65). Katherine Dell further affirms the innovative nature of Vesely's approach, suggesting its potential to stimulate future research (2020: 306). Consequently, I highly recommend this impressive book to colleagues interested in delving into the biblical understanding of true friendship.

Friendship, as a virtuous-ethical practice, must be considered a moral obligation incumbent upon all parties without exception. This thesis constitutes the central argument of Vesely's work. Acknowledging that the narrator of the book of Job may not have been explicitly aware of the framework of virtue ethics, Vesely proceeds to systematically explicate the concept of friendship as a virtuous-ethical practice across seven chapters of her book.

Vesely centers her analysis on the terminology of friendship employed in the Old Testament (OT), juxtaposing it with the perspectives of contemporary ethical scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre (2020: 33), Bruce C. Birch (2001: 293), John Barton (2016: 26), and Adam Zachary Newton (2015: 8). For instance, MacIntyre elucidates the role of narrative as a framework for comprehending all facets of human morality. Similarly, Barton and Birch emphasize the intricate and specific nature of human moral dilemmas through a narrative lens. Consequently, for MacIntyre, Barton, and other virtue ethicists, narrative possesses a unique capacity to convey the complexities of human experience, surpassing other literary forms in terms of content and structure.

As cited by Vesely, Aristotle posits that true friendship cannot exist without mutual good intentions. In the book of Job, Job's intentions are clear; the problem lies in the moral values prevalent in his social world. Rather than adhering to rigid, traditional norms, true friendship requires a nuanced application of virtue, fostering natural and appropriate bonds. Vesely concludes that Job's struggle with divine justice should be interpreted through the lens of friendship. The failure of Job's friends to embody virtue ethics as a foundation for genuine friendship is evident in the book's epilogue (Job 42.7-10). This underscores the importance of virtue ethics as a tool for self-reflection, prompting individuals to identify and rectify personal shortcomings. The seven virtues highlighted by Vesely—loyalty, compassion, courage, friendliness, honesty, humility, and practical wisdom—are essential components of authentic friendship.

The rationale for Vesely's adoption of Aristotelian virtue ethics to illuminate the theme of friendship in the book of Job likely stems from Aristotle's pioneering role in developing this ethical framework. This is corroborated by scholars such as Kevin Morrell and Frederik Dahlmann, who argue that Aristotelian virtue ethics offers a corrective to Kantian deontological ethics (2022: 11). While Vesely accurately distinguishes between Aristotelian virtue ethics and Kantian deontological ethics, her exclusive focus on the former is problematic. A more nuanced approach is required, one that recognizes the tension between these two ethical frameworks within the context of the book of Job.

I contend that a balanced integration of both deontological and virtue ethics is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of true friendship. While the narrator of the book of Job may not have explicitly articulated this concept, contemporary readers can employ both frameworks to analyze the characters' actions and motivations. For instance, the deontological perspective is evident in the friends' retributive justifications for Job's suffering. This initial, negative phase sets the stage for the application of virtue ethics, which seeks a positive resolution to the problem. It is crucial to maintain a delicate balance between these two ethical perspectives, as they are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. It is evident that Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, remain trapped in a preliminary phase characterized by negative judgment and a failure to offer constructive solutions. In contrast, Job demonstrates a more advanced ethical stance, embodying virtue ethics by praying for his friends' forgiveness, as instructed by God (Job 42.7-9). This act exemplifies the goal of virtue ethics: the cultivation of authentic friendship and the attainment of human flourishing. Therefore, our contemporary task should not be limited to a mere comparison of virtue ethics and deontological ethics. While these two ethical frameworks differ in their approach and methodology, they ultimately share a common ethical goal. This shared objective is underscored by Victor Lee Austin's assertion that friendship is the quintessential human experience (2020: 5-6).

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