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## The Book of Job

Appreciation of the Bible means appreciation of the Bible as literature. The book of Job wears ugliness on its sleeve. Its hero is covered in boils from head to toe, but the way in which ugliness is faced by the author prompted Tennyson to call this book the greatest poem in world literature. The first two chapters are plain Hebrew prose, but we could call it a prose poem if we insist that the entire book of Job has only one author who is demonstrating a range of writing styles. The poem proper begins in chapter 3, which is Job's bill of complaint to God and against God. Imagery of the courtroom dominates the book, not just in the heavenly court scenes in the first two chapters.

Job is unaware of the satan - it's always 'the satan' in this book. 'The satan' is best translated as 'the prosecutor' with a lower case 'p'. If we say 'the adversary' we are putting the satan on an equal standing with God. That destabilises the idea of monotheism, which is the risk run by 1 Chronicles (chapter 21) which talks about 'Satan' without the article. This personalises and thereby magnifies the impact of what was originally a middle management apparatchik in the Persian security service. The author of Job co-opted such a figure into his cosmic drama because of piety. Piety demanded that God not be the direct cause of the assault on Job and on his children and property. Piety equally demanded that God must not have an equal. So God delegates to the prosecutor what God could do but won't do because that would be indecent. In those first two chapters it looks as though all references to the prosecutor have been added to the Hebrew to distance God from the crimes against Job. Piety hides a multitude of sins.

The author's piety is expressed in Job's obsessive piety, but the author consciously or unconsciously challenges himself through the character of Job by making Job's piety obsessive and excessive. Job has offered extra sacrifices on behalf of his children in case they have accidentally broken the religious law. Yet Job does not claim to be without sin, only that nothing he has done or failed to do could justify his current suffering. The orthodoxy of just desserts found in Deuteronomy is rejected over the 42 chapters of the book of Job. Jesus also dismisses this retribution theory of suffering when faced with the man born blind in John 9: 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.'

Making the best of things in the face of suffering is something that Job does by the end of the book. The last words of Job are usually translated, 'I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.' The correct translation has the exact opposite meaning, namely 'I repent of dust and ashes' or 'I turn away from dust and ashes'. In other words, 'I've had enough of feeling sorry for myself.' We are then told that Job prayed for those who persecuted him – his so-called comforters, who were more interested in comforting themselves by repeating their view of the world instead of trusting the process of active listening and allowing Job to form his own new view of the world. Job was anything but patient, so whereas the epistle of James in the King James version spoke of the 'patience' of Job, the NIV speaks of the 'perseverance' of Job, and the NRSV speaks of the 'endurance' of Job. It is no accident that these more recent translations came after Freud and Jung demonstrated how much work is done by the mind. 'Patience' does not convey the sense of work done by Job in a cycle of speeches made by himself and the three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. This is less of a dialogue than a competition. After three rounds of speeches, the friends have failed to persuade Job that he is in the wrong. The young onlooker Elihu is disgusted by the failure of the old guard, and makes his own attempt to defend the theory of just desserts. This takes him six chapters (32-37).

Because Job makes no response, it is sometimes thought that the character of Elihu was inserted by a reader equally disgusted by how this story was turning out. But the silence of Job in these chapters may be saying something else, namely that he is listening for once, from a new place of calm within himself. Moreover by bringing in the young character of Elihu, the original author or a later redactor is conceding that wisdom does not come with age and that age is not the guarantor of wisdom. As we have seen in the Arab Spring, the new generation must be given freedom, and new ideas must be allowed to fend for themselves. Old Job must sit lightly to the ideas of his old friends, the ideas which he had once shared. He thereby gives himself permission to be still, and it is in this stillness that he hears God, the God who challenges him and thereby integrates him. Integrated Job is new Job, with or without the Hollywood ending in the final chapter when his family and wealth increase in size.

As you can see, I am more interested in literary criticism of the Hebrew text as we have it, than in speculation about the earlier forms of that text. But I have mentioned some of the more interesting points about the text's possible redaction history, as well as noting something of the text's afterlife in the New Testament and beyond. The main thing that I have learned from Job is to sit lightly to ideas about Job. Job has more than its fair share of obscure words. Since 1990, liberal translators have been content to render these words with three dots and admit their ignorance. This would never be allowed by editors of a complete Bible translation. Why not? Bibliolatry would never allow that kind of silence to infect the word of God. So guesses are inserted and prayed over, and any doubts are consigned to footnotes. The regrettable effect of this sleight of hand is to distance us from the character of

Job and from everyone who is not given access to heavenly certainty. In other words we are distanced from ourselves. The need felt by editors, past and present, to cross the 't's and dot the 'i's is the reason for strong-willed Elihu's inclusion in the book of Job. The author of the book was as conflicted with himself as Job was with himself. The book distances the author from himself but towards the end it gives him a new, more integrated self. It can do the same for us. That's why Tennyson acclaimed it. That is what we mean when we call a piece of art powerful: it is the power to pull the mind apart and bring it together in a new configuration. This is work. The work of spiritual development is our own responsibility, no one else's, but it is good to have colleagues with whom to talk about this work, as Job himself found.

I'm told that there is a tribe in Uganda where adults and children will laugh if they observe a child falling into a fire. For the laughing observers, no trauma took place because that was not the interpretation that they put on the incident. Trauma is caused by transgression. Trauma can also generate transgression, which I'll come back to later. Job feels traumatised because he interprets his experience as a transgression of what he thinks his life should consist of. A practitioner of rational emotive therapy might say that Job has succumbed to the naturalistic fallacy: he confuses what should be with what is. If only Job had no expectations in life, he could not be disappointed. This is not realistic and so needs to be qualified. I expect that if I step outside, I shall not be hit on the head by a meteorite or by a bird that has had a heart attack mid-flight. But I have no evidence that such a thing will not happen. So I live my life with a model of what life is likely to throw at me but with no certainty that it will not be very different. Assumptions, therefore, are built into my model of living, and where there are assumptions there can be transgressions. Job learns to sit more lightly to his assumptions in the aftermath of the events he has interpreted as traumatic. Time heals all wounds, but how? In the case of psychological trauma this happens through the adjusting of assumptions that goes by the name of rational emotive therapy. Job is his own therapist. His work on himself makes use of the moderately helpful prompts and challenges issued by his friends, if only in thinking about where he disagrees with them, and continues with his rethinking of what God is and what God does. The outcome can only be described as humility – the humility of accepting the world as it is instead of anxiously trying to make it conform to what Job had thought it should be.

Trauma can also generate transgression. The book of Job itself transgresses the Deuteronomic theology of retribution held by the establishment and by every neighbourhood – the twitching curtain brigade. The establishment values the sort of thinking found in Deuteronomy because it justifies their claims to power in order to bring about the sort of 'if this, then that' narrative sacralised in the final instalment of the Torah. The neighbourhood values it because, again, it provides a narrative of power relations in which everyone can find a place, although places can be exchanged, which accounts for the nervousness of Job's friends – they cannot be certain that they will not be visited by the same events in which Job found himself.

The book of Job is a counter-narrative that transgresses several literary conventions of Ancient Near Eastern literature. Just as the opening chapters of Genesis lose their bite when we no longer read them as a corrective to the Babylonian account of creation, *Enuma Elish*, so Job needs to be read against its parallels, which happen to be outside the Bible. These comparisons are the most technical area of my research and I shalln't go into them here. I can say that there are signs of continuity and signs of discontinuity with ideas and structures found in texts from Egypt, Babylon, and elsewhere in the region. Scholars use the shorthand of referring to the Babylonian Job, for example, but that obscures the differences with the Hebrew story of Job.

Although the writer of Job is going against the establishment, he is caught up in power relations himself without being fully conscious of them. The text gives us clues as to what these social markers might be, since language and power can never be separated.

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There is a book of Job because there was a social, gender and political need for it. There was also a psychology of the author which is implied by the text. The text was called forth by a complex of social needs, but it would not have been written if there had not been an author who was able and willing to produce the work. Its production presumably satisfied a personal psychological need of his. The implication of texts in general is that they come into being at the decision of authors, who feel some internal compulsion to compose them, and derive personal satisfaction, and a lowering of interior tension, from completing them.

The text can be considered as the author's dream. The author has imagined his story from much the same material and in much the same way as he nightly created his dreams. The author was no doubt unaware of the psychological drives that gave rise to his work. He would have described his work in terms of conscious intentions and of the work's overt content.

The book of Job is a death-wish, the kind of dream in which the unconscious explores the possibility of ceasing to be – either altogether or ceasing to be what one is at the moment. In fantasy too, the imagination plays with fictional scenarios in which our worst fears become reality. Again, in entertainment, horror and tragedy are established genres that meet a need: the outworking of the author's, and the audience's, death-wish.

If the author is a well-off man, he is compelled to, for his own psychic security, play out in fantasy or imaginative literature his fear that his wealth may not last, and to imagine himself as someone other than a member of the wealthy ruling class. He needs to affirm his identity, and his role within his class, by contrasting his present

identity with other potential identities he could be obliged to adopt. He creates the character Job as an image of himself, and dreams himself as Job.

The book of Job is not a poor man's dream since poor people do not fear becoming poor. It is the dream of a man with something to lose. In this fantasy, the dreamer not only gives shape to the death-wish but wills its overcoming by writing of the restoration of what he has simultaneously feared and wanted to lose. The dreamlike happy ending assuages the fear in the death-wish by the excitement of a dream of wish-fulfilment.

There is a further principle of realising in textual form the psychic pressures that generated the text. It is the principle that all the characters in a dream represent aspects of the dreamer. The author dreams himself as Job, and is the hero of his own dream, but he is also Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu, God, and the narrator. The implication is that the author experiences a conflict over the issues he raises in the book. He has created a fiction of a dialogue about innocent suffering in which different speakers adopt different points of view because he himself, whatever his conscious mind thinks, feels uncertainty about the answer. The book is an expression of the author's psychic conflict, especially between the fitness of the concept of retribution and the experience of suffering.

The conflict appears at the overt level of the book because it is never clear what the message of the book is, what God's answer amounts to, and what the restoration of Job does to the case presented by Job throughout the book.

Below the surface the book is also involved in a deconstruction, affirming that piety does not lead to prosperity and then concluding that Job the supremely pious becomes Job the supremely wealthy. This deconstruction is a literary manifestation of the author's psychic uncertainty.

Consciously, the author may have believed that he had resolved the problem he was writing about. Yet the plurality of characters represents a psychic fragmentation in the author. Through the literary process, through naming, distinguishing, externalising and distancing, he hopes to achieve a psychic equilibrium – but only at the cost of alienating parts of himself. So it is not surprising that his project falters literarily, given that it is the manifestation of his psychic disorder.

The disturbed character of this book raises the question of how it is to be read ethically. Rather than write a typical history of interpretation that seeks to understand interpretations in their historical context, ideological criticism seeks to critique them by current standards.

There have been four strands in the history of interpretation. In the first, Job has been seen as the ideal patient man, piously and fatalistically accepting his suffering

as the will of God. This view prevailed in Jewish and Christian interpretation until the Renaissance. There then appeared the reading that saw Job as the champion of reason against dogma, of empirical observation against tradition. In the modern period, a third image of Job has been developed that sees him as the victim of a cruel and absurd world, and that finds in the divine speeches a defence of a cosmic irrationality. The character Job, in other words, has been constructed according to the ideals of each epoch. The fourth strand, which has persisted up to the present, is the labelling of the book as wisdom. In traditional interpretation this meant that the speeches as well as the narrative were didactic or moral literature, and moral truth could be supported equally by the speeches of the friends and by Job's. The friends' speeches were more serviceable for sound morality than the angry and intemperate speeches of Job. In modern critical interpretation, the categorisation of the book as wisdom continues by claiming that there was a wisdom movement in ancient Israel. This questionable idea is currently the prevailing paradigm for reading the book.

The effects of these interpretations have been either a misreading of the book, or an unnatural and dogmatically conditioned limitation on the interpretational possibilities for it.

In the case of the most ancient, and (to judge by its longevity) most persuasive, interpretation – of Job as the ideal patient sufferer – the reading is so palpably untrue to the book as a whole that its genesis deserves some explanation. There is some evidence for this reading in the first two chapters, but there is always some ground for misreading. Perhaps readers have rarely proceeded beyond the first two chapters and therefore thought that the character of Job was adequately presented in these chapters. Or it could be that the portrait of Job in the first two chapters has determined how readers have read the later and quite different portrayal of Job in the rest of the book. It is most likely that the misreading of Job as a patient sufferer stems from readers' resistance to the portrait of Job's intemperate and near-blasphemous speech, and to their refusal to accept that the hero of a biblical book could be so hostile to God. In this case, what the book of Job has done to its readers is less than what the readers have done to the book of Job. The book has so provoked them to moral outrage that they have felt it necessary to suppress the evidence on the page.

The second strand of interpretation – that sees Job as representing reason and experience over against dogma – has much more grounding in the book of Job itself, but it nevertheless represents a projection of the interpreters' self-understanding upon the book, and a distortion of the book itself. On the one hand, it neglects Job's attachment to the conventional theology of his age. For while he dissents from his friends' views of exact retribution, he nevertheless believes in some kind of retribution, and in every other regard he stands for the religious dogma of his time rather than for unfettered rationalism. On the other hand, such a reading turns the book of Job into nothing but a collection of Joban speeches and a vehicle for Job's

ideas, underplaying the prologue, the friends' speeches, God's speeches, and the epilogue. In this case, the book has engaged its readers' sympathies for the character of Job to such an extent that the book as a whole is lost sight of.

The third strand of interpretation – that reads Job as representing humanity as the victim of an absurd universe – takes God's speeches into consideration, making them an affirmation of the irrationality (from a human perspective) of the divine activity. Again, this approach essentially focuses on Job's speeches and ignores the book as a whole, with its prologue, its epilogue, and the speeches of the friends.

Finally, the categorisation of the book as wisdom has functioned to protect the argument of the book and its assumptions from criticism. This is supposedly a technical designation for the 'wisdom school of ancient Israel', but in practice commentators describe the book as a masterpiece of world literature, thereby announcing that they have the same aesthetic sensitivity as Tennyson. The result has been that Job himself, or the book as a whole, has been virtually immune from criticism. Yet the book is clear that Job's defence of his innocence is a product of ignorance: his ignorance of the reasons for his suffering. Moreover, the friends' speeches, the largest component of the book, are said by God to be wrong. If Job is under a misapprehension and the friends have not spoken what is right, where is the truth of the book? There is something perverse about regarding as wisdom a book that is, by its own admission, mostly wrong.

This foray into the history of interpretation shows that the book suppresses critical instincts and persuades the reader to adopt the book's implicit ideologies. The reader is victimised and made to think that this is natural. Conscientisation - the raising of awareness so that critical instincts are allowed to be voiced – is the ethical treatment of all victims and the ethical way of reading the book of Job. The character of Job is constructed with the author's ideological imprint and thus cannot be as naive and pure as the author presents him as. Yet the character is inserted into a thought experiment - the book's scenario – and undergoes something of this process of conscientisation, as does the author, at least for the duration of the book's creation.

Overall, however, the book continues to have four general effects on readers, each resulting from the author's presuppositions.

Firstly, it persuades its readers that there is a causal relation between piety and prosperity. Christian readers might say that the converse – that there is a causal relation between sin and suffering – is ruled out after reading chapter nine of the Fourth Gospel, but room can still be found for this positive equation, which is at the centre of the 'prosperity gospel' preached in some churches.

Job is a pious and prosperous man, whose prosperity is the consequence of his piety. That is a given, and it is never challenged in the story. What the book raises as an issue is whether a poor and suffering man can be pious. By focusing on the piety or otherwise of this atypical man, the book deflects attention away from the deeper question of why anyone should think that there is any connection between wealth and godliness.

In short, while the problem raised by the book overtly is whether a suffering man can be an innocent one, the problem constituted by the book itself is a different one. It is inscribed in the first *waw*-consecutive<sup>1</sup>: Job was a perfect man and he had seven thousand sheep...(1:1-3). In the false naivety of the narrative, this ‘and’ means ‘and therefore’. Here the real problematic of the book is embedded, but the narrative persuades readers that the stage is still only being set for the real action later on.

If there never was the idea of a causal connection between piety and prosperity, the satan could never have asked his question, God could not have authorised the testing of Job, Job could not have suffered, and there could not have been a book of Job.

Moreover, the book as a whole affirms the truth of the doctrine of reward for piety, since Job the most perfect of humans ends up as the wealthiest. His poverty was only temporary. Again, readers have their attention deflected from this subliminal assertion of the work, for the narrative has presented Job as unjustly treated – Job himself has made this case eloquently – and the narrative has aroused a desire for Job’s vindication which means, in his terms, the restitution of his wealth. The happy ending appeals to the reader’s need for closure. Yet readers tend not to notice that the idea of piety-prosperity causality has thereby been upheld.

Furthermore, the flow of the narrative and the attractiveness of the character of Job suggest that Job has not been treated unjustly – not unless the doctrine of retribution is true. Job’s protest against the injustice of his treatment is *sympathique* and easily overcomes the resistance of the reader. Yet unless his piety should have been rewarded with wealth and health, there is no injustice in what he suffers, and his restoration is not deserved.

Secondly, the book persuades readers that wealth is unproblematic ethically speaking. It takes wealth for granted as a good thing and represents extreme wealth as commensurate with great virtue. It persuades its readers who are wealthy that it is perfectly all right to be wealthy, that they should not feel bad about it, and that they should not stop to think about it.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew letter *waw* means ‘and’ but can mean ‘and therefore’ (a *waw*-consecutive) depending on the context.



Thirdly, it convinces readers that explanations of reality are worth having, especially causal explanations. Job is suffering and the question of the book is why. What is the cause? The book is structured so as to supply an ostensibly complete answer to that question. That is the function of the prologue.

It is an intellectual attitude to view explanations as worth having. This attitude delights intellectuals by confirming their orientation, without their noticing that this is happening. So the book is not questioned in this regard. This orientation is not obligatory. There is also the option of changing things without attempting to understand them, or of using things, or of enjoying things. There is no reason to think that understanding the origin of suffering will have much value. Knowing how to handle it, how to behave while suffering, and how to retain one's identity while suffering might all be more important. The book of Job, meanwhile, subtly affirms that understanding origins is the one thing worth doing.

Finally, the book persuades readers that it somehow answers the problem of suffering. Readers are generally content with the conclusion of the book. They do not feel that it raises more questions than it solves, or that its whole approach is mistaken. Whatever explanation of suffering it has been thought to proffer, the book of Job's explanation has been thought to be the best. In other words, readers have almost always agreed with it.

So successful is the book at persuading readers of the rightness of its position that readers rarely notice the paradox the book presents: the book is generally regarded as dealing with the problem of human suffering in general but the narrative is clearly about an exceptional occurrence. For Job is an atypical person, being the most perfect and the wealthiest man of all.

If this conclusion is resisted and it is claimed that the book is not principally about Job but about humans generally then there is a problem. If the testing of Job is meant to establish not just whether Job himself serves God without thought of a reward but whether it is possible for human beings in general to do so, then Job's maintenance of his piety under the onslaughts of the satan has resolved the question once and for all. Yet the reason for Job's suffering is unlikely to be the reason for anyone else's suffering. The book, however, persuades readers that they are reading about a universal human problem, when in fact they are reading about Job's problem and no one else's.

The book of Job inveigles the reader into a willing or unconscious suspension of disbelief. By charm, by force, by rhetoric, by passion, it renders the reader defenceless against ideas that should not be defended. It engages sympathy for a character who is labouring under an illusion. It presents the problems of universal suffering in its own idiosyncratic terms. It leaves the reader more or less content with the answers it gives. That is the testimony of the ages to the book of Job. It has had

its way with readers. Perhaps this is what is meant by calling it a great and powerful work of literature.

*Tim Pownell-Jones, 2014*