

Power and Conflict Management: The Joban-God Talk

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Abstract

Sara Cobb (2013) begins her book, *Speaking of Violence* by stating that “stories matter. They have gravitas; they are grave. They have weight. They are concrete. They materialize policies, institutions, relationships, and identities” (p. 3). Applied to the Book of Job 1-2, one can ask, how grave is the story of Job? What conflict does it create? What is at stake in this conflict? What does the story concretize? In this paper I point out that there are two narrative approaches to reading Job's conflict with God. One is that Job does not resist divine power and the other is that he does. If we take it that Job does not resist divine power, we implicitly begin fostering stories that can create docility/passivity in the face of imperial power. If we argue that he resists divine power, we create stories that enable people to stand up for their freedoms/rights, hence fostering the idea that conflict cannot be solved by docility but by confronting the powers-that-be, which create conflicts in the first place. In this paper, I argue for the later position.

Key Words

power; imperialism, postcolonial; resistance; conflict; resolution

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‘Passivity’ and ‘Protest’ in Job

The idea that the Job depicted in the poetry sections of the Book (Job 3-41) is largely a protesting Job has overwhelming support among scholars.¹ What is contested is whether the Job of the prose (Job 1-2) is a protesting Job or a passive Job. Those who argue for passivity state that Job obeys God even in the face of God’s cruel treatment of him. For example, Elmer Smick states that Job’s statement 1:21 shows Job’s “supreme faith and total resignation to the sovereign will of God,” foiling the accuser who hoped that Job would curse God.² But in order to determine whether Job of the prose is passive or protests, one needs to raise further questions: What is the nature of Job’s response to the divine in the prose? What is the nature of the powers that Job has to confront? How do Job’s speeches and actions respond to the powers? Is it possible that Job’s responses, rather than acquiescing to the divine will, are subtle gestures of resistance that utilize irony and intentional ambiguity?

In order to attend to the questions raised, let me consider the question of how the book of Job employs irony.

Irony and the Book of Job

The possibility that the book of Job employs irony as a communicative tool has been raised by a number of scholars. Hoffman³ goes as far as saying that without considering irony as an interpretive tool it is doubtful that one can understand the story of Job. He identifies four kinds of irony in the book. These are; ironic remarks voiced by different characters, the ironic attitude of the author towards his protagonists, irony which the author directs against the reader, and irony which the author directs against his work. The focus of Hoffman’s work is simply to show that there is irony inherent in the text of the book of Job and to illustrate how it is employed in the texts.⁴ In this paper I would like to push Hoffman’s assumptions further to argue that irony (in selected passages) functions politically to resist divine tyranny.

Another scholar that discusses use of irony in Job is Edwin Good.⁵ Good sees the book of Job as possessing “irony of Reconciliation.” The central message for him in the book

¹ See Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, translation, and Notes* (New York, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), 16 and Carol Newsom, “The Book of Job,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IV (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 317-637.

² Elmer B. Smick, “Job,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* Vol. 4 (ed. Frank Gaebalein; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 841-1060.

³ Yair Hoffman, “Irony in the Book of Job,” *Immanuel* 17 (1083): 7-21.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Edwin Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield, UK: The Almond Press, 1981), 196-98.

of Job is faith that is threatened by occult power and that Job moves from “magical dogmatism to [an] ultimate stance in faith.”⁶ For Good, the most intense use of irony emerges from “the persons of the drama, who are basically Job’s friends.”⁷ In the friends’ use of orthodox assertions that evil people perish and good people are rewarded, they ironically criticize Job for failing to acknowledge his wickedness, which is surely the cause of his suffering. But their charge becomes doubly ironic when the narrative affirms Job’s righteousness and exposes their orthodoxy as misplaced belief.

Good (1981) contends that Job holds the same presuppositions in that he views his own suffering as a punishment. For this reason Job protests to God for unjust suffering. He doesn’t know what sin he could have committed to warrant such divine destruction of his life. He ironically criticizes his friends for having empty wisdom. Job calls on God to justify him hence subjecting himself to the magical formula. But by the time Job reaches the last cycle of speeches, Good (1981) thinks Job has come full circle to where he began: the belief that magic does not work and only the divine has the last word. So God’s answer puts Job back in his place, namely, the place of human ignorance and impotence in contrast to the potency of God. Good (1981) argues that not only is God’s appearance ironic, but God’s answer in and of itself is also ironic in the sense that, instead of answering, he asks questions, “He gives an answer that is no answer.”⁸ Job therefore is reconciled to God on God’s terms. “He demanded acquittal of an unknown...sin [but] received acquittal for a known and admitted one.”⁹ In this case Job neither loses nor wins his case, but becomes reconciled to God who acquitted him.

While Good’s attention to the use of irony in the book of Job is admirable, he nevertheless neglects the irony in crucial statements that Job makes. He ignores completely the prologue and the epilogue, which I believe contain some of Job’s subtle ironies against the divine. Moreover, Good’s argument that God is not punishing Job is unconvincing. I would counter that God punishes Job, or at least inflicts pain upon him, to satisfy God’s doubt about Job’s piety. Thus in his attempt to push the themes of faith and reconciliation, Good misses completely the import of the oppressive divine power over Job’s life, the power that occasions the story, pervades its discourses and shapes Job’s protest.

Robert Fyall (2002) also reflects on irony in the book of Job. He reads Job 1-2 as making use of “dramatic irony, whereby the author and the audience know more of the events

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 240

of the plot than the characters do.”¹⁰ Job, unlike readers of the story, does not understand what is taking place in heaven. For Fyall this dramatic irony does two things. First, it allows Job to operate in dualistic suspense between good and evil. Only much later does he discover that God can do all things. Job comes to a realization that there is no dualism in God. Second, the dramatic irony militates against deconstructionists who would read injustice and suffering in Job. Like Good, Fyall declares “Job is not typical of the human condition; there is no injustice in what he suffers and no deserving in his later prosperity.”¹¹ Fyall takes 1:20-22 and 2:10 as anticipating 42:7 where God justifies Job for righteous speech. However, just like Good, Fyall allows his apologetic agenda in defense of the character of God to muzzle the essence of the story. As Leo Perdue points out, the energy that drives the plot of this story lies in God’s tyranny and Job’s potential rebellion.¹² The decision taken in the heavenly court and enacted upon Job’s life is nothing less than suffering and torture, even if such a torture is depicted as fulfilling particular interests other than punishing the victim for any crime.

The question that demands attention now is the import of Job 1-2.

The Gist of Job 1-2

Dariusz Iwanski’s gives the following as the structure of the prologue of the book of Job:¹³

| | Earth | Heaven |
|----------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1:1-5 | Introducing Job | |
| 1:6-12 | | I. Yahweh-Satan wager |
| 1:13-22 | First trial | |
| 2:1-6 | | II. Yahweh-Satan Wager |
| 2:7-10 | Second Trial | |
| 2:11-13 | Introducing the friends | |

¹⁰ Robert S. Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You: Images of creation and Evil in the Book of Job* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37

¹² Leo Perdue, *Wisdom in revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (Sheffield, UK: The Almond Press, 1991), 69.

¹³ Dariusz Iwanski, *The Dynamics of Job’s Intercession* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), 49.

Iwanski then goes on to argue that the first scene (1:1-5) and the last scene (2:11-13) are passive expositions that simply introduce the characters. He views the God-Satan scenes as dynamic dialogues which hold the future of Job. Each of the God-Satan dialogues is bracketed by trials of Job, first an attack on Job's property and children, and later on Job's life. I would like to argue rather, that whereas the first and last scenes introduce Job and his friends through the narrator's voice, the dialogue and trial scenes introduce the character of God—and that it is this characterization of God in Job 1-2 that drives and determines the events of the story.

Let me now turn to how God is characterized in these chapters.

The Power Inherent in the 'Almighty' God

There are several formulations in the prose section of Job that assigns God absolute power. Here I focus on a number of them. In Job 1:6 we are introduced to the designation 'the sons of God' (Job 1:6). Here the text implies that God as a progenitor has power over his 'sons.' The certainty of this claim is sustained by the sons' accountability and answerability to their 'father-God' in that the text states that the 'sons of God' came to set/take their stand or station themselves before God.¹⁴ In order to understand the implication of taking a stand before God, we need to explore how the same word is used in other contexts. In 2 Chronicles 20:6 "to take their stand" (hithpael infinitive construct form of the verb *אָמַד*) would be translated as, "oppose" or "stand against" God. According to the story, Jehoshaphat strengthens himself against impending foreign aggression with the hope that no one can oppose God. The same idea is found in Numbers 22:32 where God tells Balaam that God had come to oppose him since Balaam's mission is an ill-fated one. If we apply this understanding to Job 1: 6, we can conclude that 'taking a stand before God' is a power-packed term. It depicts a God who has absolute authority over the 'the sons of God' who have to stand before God to pledge their loyalty and accountability and to do homage, recognizing him as the ruler of the assembly.¹⁵

In addition God has absolute power through his privilege to speak, while others in the story don't. This power reveals not only God's distinctive nature but also his power to

¹⁴ The Jewish Study Bible (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1506 gives others examples where the divine council assembles before a majestic God as in 1 Kings 22:19–23; Isaiah 6; Psalm 82 and Daniel 7:9-10. The Divine council is under the control of God and only acts according to God's will.

¹⁵ Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 89.

manipulate, control, and respond to others on God's own terms.¹⁶ Besides controlling speech, God also occupies a central location over others. Thus space and location combine to give God preeminence.¹⁷ In the context of Job 1-2, God is situated in the context of a council meeting where he is the presiding chairperson. It is from here that God exercises power through dispensing decisions that affect others. Then there is the question of what J.P. Fokkelman calls characters "entrances and exits."¹⁸ Although Fokkelman does not use Job 1-2, the idea applies to this section too. Using the story of Isaac and his sons, Fokkelman notes that Isaac and Rebekah are stationed in one definite place, with Jacob and Esau moving in and out. In this way, they (especially Rebekah) become the focal characters around which the story revolves.¹⁹ In Job 1-2, God is stationed in one location with the sons of God moving back and forth to perform what the character at the center bids them to do (Job 1:6 ff.; 2:1ff.). God is therefore a central subject, the focal point of the story's activity, the initiator of the plot, and the one from whom other characters draw their identities.

God's question: "Have you set your heart upon my servant Job?" in Job 1:6 indicates the nature of the relationship between God and Job. It is that of a master-slave relationship. As Perdue points out, the notion of human beings being slaves of the gods was prevalent in the ANE cultures.²⁰ Although the Hebrew word עֶבֶד (servant) does not always communicate an abusive master-servant relationship in the Hebrew Bible, Kenneth Ngwa argues that in the context of the Book of Job and the Exodus tradition, we are invited to see this master-slave relationship as oppressive.²¹ Albert Memmi observes that under slave-master-relationship, the oppressed is hardly considered a human being. He/she is dehumanized to the level where he/she is simply treated as an object. He/She only exists as a function of the needs of the colonizer where the oppressor does not exercise any human obligation towards his object, except in the matters where the object has to survive to serve his/her functions.²² These

¹⁶ Robert Alter points out how speech-act is an extremely important event in Hebrew Bible narrations. See his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1981), 67-70.

¹⁷ Yaira Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 121-123.

¹⁸ J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An introductory Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 97-99.

¹⁹ One may also consider the story of David, Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam. 11:1ff.) where the power wielding David is stationed in one place whereas all other characters come in and go out to serve David's interests.

²⁰ Leo Perdue, *Wisdom in revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (Sheffield, UK: The Almond Press, 1991), 66-69.

²¹ Kenneth N. Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the 'Happy' Ending in Job 42:7-17* (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 131-133.

²² Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston, MA: Beacon press, 1965), 86.

functions are not far removed from how Job is treated in Job 1-2. Here Job is simply God's bait in God's quest to assert his authority over and against Satan.

As a result of this, God's question, "Have you set your heart upon my servant Job?" suggests a strong determination—a kind of fixation that leads to action. One can see a God who determinatively sets in motion events for Job's testing, by implicitly pushing *Ha-Satan* to move into action against Job. In Matitiahu Tsevat's words it is God who "has provoked him [*Ha-Satan*] to probe and shake the foundations of the beautiful edifice of righteousness, serenity and happiness [of Job] and finally wreck it completely."²³ Consequently when *Ha-Satan* raises the question, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9), we might wonder whether this expresses Yahweh's uncertainty more than it does *Ha-Satan's*. *Ha-Satan's* question seems to be externalization of God's doubt of Job's piety.

But there is more in Job 1-2 than just the characterization of God. There is also a huge gap differential in terms of knowledgeability of events. Let me reflect on this knowledge differential.

Knowledge versus Lack of Knowledge

Along with the questions "Who speaks?" and "Who acts?" we must also ask, "Who knows?" If we assume that God does not know the status of Job's piety, we can then imagine that Job's punishment has to do with God's struggle for mastery of knowledge. God's confessional statement, "although you have incited me to swallow him for no cause" (Job 2:3) indicates that he knows that he is punishing Job for no reason. He is being cruel to a creature that does not deserve the cruelty that has been meted to him. However, for God, this cruelty is a necessary evil—a required collateral damage—to satisfy God's quest. Through this cruelty and bizarre actions against Job, God seeks to extend his knowledge concerning Job's piety.

But God also gains knowledge by hiding knowledge. As Stuart Lasine states, "Job is never granted access to the information about the divine council meetings..."²⁴ Even when he publicly confesses that what has happened has been by the hand of God, he does not know why God should do these things. One of Job's spirited desires is to comprehend the reasons for what has happened to him. By Job 9, Job is no longer content with staying out of the loop. He is no longer contented with the idea that God should have full control over the

²³ Matitiahu Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (New York, NY: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1976), 341-374.

²⁴ Ibid.

dissemination of information.²⁵ Unfortunately when God finally appears after Job's protracted protests (Job 42), God does not solve the problem. Rather than answer Job's questions, God evades the questions by hijacking Job's questioning genre. God asks his own questions that are meant to showcase his superior knowledge over that of Job (Job 38-41). In the end Job has to confess that his lack of knowledge will never be met. He does, however, come to the knowledge of who God is: a tyrant who does not come clean with his actions. Whereas God knows what he knows by torturing Job, Job knows what he knows by protesting against God. Similarly, whereas God's desire to know is manifested in the fact that God puts himself into an adversarial position vis-à-vis Job,²⁶ Job's desire to know is motivated by a desire to end the conflict between him and God. As a matter of fact, Job 1:1-5 shows how Job was so concerned for peace to prevail between him and God that he did everything within his power to ward off divine anger. But because of God's spirited efforts to create conflict through abuse of power, Job was never wholly able to maintain peace with God through peaceful non-protest means.

Thus we can see, therefore, that the master-slave framework permeates Job 1-2. This relationship marks a structural irony in the prose section of the book of Job. The irony of the narrative is that it is this master-slave relationship that generates revolt and resistance. It is natural that when human existence is experienced as slavery with all its attendant cruelty, revolt becomes the unstoppable response.²⁷ Thus in the context of the dynamics of Job 1-2, we are invited to anticipate not civility and compliance to the divine will but rebellion.

The questions we need to address are: what is the characterization of Job in Job 1-2? How does this characterization depict Job's response to divine tyranny?

Irony Inherent in the Characterization of Job

Job 1:1 describes Job as "a man was perfect and straight, and feared God and turned aside (away) from evil (Job 1:1)."²⁸ Job's character is stated in two adjectives and two verbs. In the words of Iwanski, these two pairs depict Job as "morally irreproachable," and "religiously impeccable."²⁹ He is a man of "untarnished character and devout faith...one who

²⁵ Ibid., 179.

²⁶ Jack, Miles. *God: A Biography* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 308.

²⁷ Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 69.

²⁸ For a full description of the import of these terms see, Iwanski, *The Dynamics of Job's Intercession*, 71-116.

²⁹ Ibid., 72, 87.

walks in close fellowship with God.”³⁰ Outside the book of Job, Job is mentioned together with Noah and Daniel in Ezekiel 14:14, 20, as an example of great integrity and righteousness.³¹ Of the adjectives, Job is described as ‘blameless/or spotless’ a term that is normally used in reference to clean animals used to offer sacrifices to the divine (Lev. 22:18-20).³² Implicit then in the characterization of Job, is the idea of an ideal man who deserves every bit of patronage protection from the divine. This depiction sharply contrasts with God’s cruel actions against him, thus allowing no identity for God rather than that of a tyrant.

So what is Job’s relationship with this tyrant?

Job’s Fear of the Tyrant God

Concerning the description of Job as one who “feared God and turned away from evil,” Iwanski argues that the fear here refers not to literal fear but to figurative fear that is equivalent to awe—an expression of an intimate relationship between Job and God.³³ However, we need to note that Job’s fear for the Lord is closely connected with Job’s fear for his children. In Job 1:5, Job gives offerings to God to sanctify his children with the fear of the unknown that they may have *baraked* (cursed God in their hearts) God in their dealings. In other words, Job is worried that his children may have crossed the line in their relation with the divine. So he remedies the supposed error by sacrifice in order to appease God and avert God’s wrath against his children. Job clearly assumes a cause and effect relationship between humans and God. By making sacrifices for his children, he expects to affect God’s behavior positively in reaction to his sons’ wrong doings.³⁴ In other words, divine punishment exerts influence on how Job reacts.³⁵ Job reasons that improper thinking or speaking about God is understood as a grave sin.³⁶ Job’s fear therefore, is not fear that leads to reverent worship as Iwanski asserts. It is rather fear of the terror of God. Other references in the book of Job point to this same conclusion. For example, in Job 3:25, Job states that he feared bad things happening to him, but it is precisely these bad things that God has inflicted upon him. Similarly in Job 6:4, he claims that the terrors of God have been unleashed upon him. In 9:28

³⁰ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 67.

³¹ Walter L. Michel, *Job in the Light of Northwest Semitic* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1987), 13.

³² Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You*, 35.

³³ Iwanski, *Dynamics of Job’s Intercession*, 90-102.

³⁴ Albert Kamp, “With or Without a Cause: Images of God and Man in Job 1-3,” in *God’s Job* (ed. Ellen Van Wolde; London: SCM Press, 2004), 9-17.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁶ Michel, *Job in The Light of Northwest Semitic*, 15.

he holds God responsible for his suffering and in 9:34 he appeals to God to take away the terror. Thus in retrospect of happens in Job 1-2, one can argue that Job's actions are motivated by his deep fear of what God might do if proper human-divine conduct is not maintained. To be on the cautious side, Job does everything possible to protect himself from God's terrorism, and he feels secure about that until God strikes out of nowhere and for no apparent fault on the side of Job.

With this structure of cause and effect in the background, the text invites us to begin imagining that any disruption in Job's order will call not for praise but protest. Scott observes that one of the factors that precipitates open confrontational conflict is, "massive and sudden changes that decisively destroy nearly all the routines of daily life, and at the same time threaten...livelihood..."³⁷ We can arguably make a case that this is so in the life of Job. His life has been disrupted violently beyond measure and he would stand up to protest it.

However, after the total destruction of his property and family, and the affliction of disease, Job 1:20 states that "Job rose and he tore his robe, and he shaved his head, and he fell (down) towards the ground and bowed down)." The first of the three actions can easily be explained. In the Hebrew Bible, the idea of tearing cloths and shaving the head is almost always followed by laments, sadness or cursing.³⁸ Job has received a great devastating report. His life has been reduced to nothing within a very short time. So Job does what anyone would do in his circumstances in the social context of his life and time: cry, mourn and lament his losses.³⁹

But what is hard to reconcile with the rest of the actions is the last action, "and he bowed down." Some translations⁴⁰ as do some commentators,⁴¹ render this term as worship. In this case Job is seen as having torn his clothes, shaved his head and worshipped God in total submission.⁴² However, other scholars think that to 'bow' should be interpreted in light of its Ancient Near Eastern context usages. For example, Michel points out that the Arabic and Akkadian cognates refer to the action of a recoiling snake, and in an Assyrian text, the term is used in reference to bowing down before a king.⁴³ In both references there is the nuance of the exercise of power. A snake often recoils as a defense mechanism against

³⁷ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Every Day Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 1985), 242.

³⁸ See for example: Gen.37:29ff.; 44:13ff.; Judges 11:35ff.; 2 Kings 22:11.

³⁹ Walter, L. Michel, *Job in the Light of Northwest Semitic* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1987), 22.

⁴⁰ TNK, KJV, NRSSV, NIV, RVS, among others.

⁴¹ Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 75, Rowley, *Job*, 34-35.

⁴² H.H. Rowley, *Job* (Ontario, Canada: Thomas Nelson and sons Ltd., 1970), 35.

⁴³ Michel, *Job in the Light of Northwest Semitic*, 22.

danger. And a subject person bows before a king in recognition of the king's (superior's) overwhelming power. It is this sense of power imbalance that governs the use of the term in some Old Testament contexts such as Gen. 23:7, 33:3, 43:28; Josh. 5:14, 1 Kings 1:23, 1:53. The inferior bows down to recognize the superior. I want to argue that Job's action needs to be seen in this light. His act of bowing before God suggests a mood of helplessness, resignation, annoyance, and self-protection. It is an ironical surrender, but one that expresses the opposed effect—one of expressing anger at God rather than acceptance of God's action. Scott explains this idea very well when he argues that one way that oppressed people confront their oppressors is by flight or "avoidance protest."⁴⁴ Rather than voice their grievances, the victims choose to repress their open anger against their oppressors in a response that would communicate the opposite of their inner feelings. This is done to avoid further repercussions from their oppressors.⁴⁵ For this reason a victim's indication that "they do not object to the oppressors actions does not imply a normative consent to those realities."⁴⁶ We can then argue that Job's bowing down may not in any way indicate acceptance of the reality or inevitability of his destroyed life. On the contrary, it protests that reality by bowing down. Bowing down, as it were, becomes a protective disguise against the divine.⁴⁷

What Job says next is even more controversial. After bowing down he states, "Naked I came out from the womb of my mother, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken, blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). The Hebrew term עָרָם (naked) appears in other contexts with the nuance of utter helplessness.⁴⁸ If we take this into consideration, I argue that "naked I came...naked I go" can then be taken to be expressing Job's helplessness. It is a helplessness that expresses anger at the senselessness of creation, hence by implication the anger against the creator. "Come...Go" encompassing Job's total life from birth to death, expresses the idea that nothing belongs to Job in the whole range of life. And for that reason "God gave...God has taken..." indicates how Job is a (and indeed all creation as Job sees it) helpless puppet in the hands of the divine. "Taking away" negates the very idea of "giving" indicating Job's protest against a God who gives by not giving at all. In this context then, "Blessed be the name of the Lord" is a sarcastic statement. It mocks the

⁴⁴ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 245.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 246.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 284

⁴⁸ For example, see: Gen. 3:7; I Sam.19:24; Isaiah 58:7; Ezekiel 16:7,22.

God who can dispossess his creature of what he has given. It also portrays God as arbitrary—giving and taking for no apparent reason.

Job's linguistic expression can be illumined by what David Morris states. Morris argues that "how we talk about suffering and how we talk when suffering is always shaped and constrained by the speech genre of specific discourse communities."⁴⁹ For this reason, 'genre molds the facts and events to fit its contours...'⁵⁰ Speech genre then shapes meaning of not only the said, but speech itself. Morris gives an example of a courtroom testimony. He argues that courtroom language "not only shapes content and sways understanding, but it constrains what we are permitted to say."⁵¹ If we were to assign Job's words a speech genre, we would call it 'political irony.' Job speaks from a weak position in the context of power hierarchies. Consequently, he protests subtly with language that veils the feelings behind the words.

It is this same understanding that should govern our reading of Job and his wife's exchanges.

Job's Ironic Answer to His Wife's Proposal

Ha-Satan had challenged God to withdraw Job's property and afflict him with disease in order to see how Job would *barak* (Curse) God upon his face (2:5). In other words, *Ha-Satan* posits that Job will confront God openly (to his face) and blaspheme against him. According to him there is no disinterested piety. The wife's imperatives *barak* (curse) God and die in 2:9, which then encourages Job to do exactly what *Ha-Satan* hoped would happen; that is face God in an open confrontation. The words of Job's wife might reflect a tradition that assumes the penalty for cursing God is death (Exodus 22:27; Leviticus 24:15-16). It appears that Job's wife hopes that this open confrontation will incite God to kill Job hence end his misery. Job seems to be aware of this. He knows that facing God in an open confrontation is a hopeless venture since God possesses power that Job does not.⁵² Having considered the wife's proposal and its consequences, Job answers his wife thus: "You speak

⁴⁹ David, B. Morris, "About Suffering: Voice, Genre, and the Moral Community," in *Social Suffering* (ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock; Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 25-45.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Gerald J. Janzen, *Job: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), 49, argues that Job's wife articulates Job's inner feelings. Her question becomes an externalization of Job's turmoil. In her question we have a Job thinking aloud. This is a plausible line of thought. We have argued elsewhere that *Ha-Satan's* question in 1:9 is God's externalization of his suspicion of Job's integrity. In this sense both *Ha-Satan* and Job's wife are simply aiding characters for internal thoughts of God and Job.

as would speak one of the senseless (women).”⁵³ Indeed shall we receive from the hand of the Lord the good and not evil (2:10)?” Gerald Janzen proceeds by translating Job’s words as a question rather than a statement, just as the NRSV of the bible does. He then argues that Job raises the question in the context of changing the “I” language of 1:20-22 to “We” language in 2:8-10. This change according to him, shows that Job has lost confidence in objective language. For the “We” language masks the “I” language. However, this masking enables Job to gain the freedom to delineate “I” from “We” and to recognize that calamity is no longer the withdrawal of once extended divine blessings, but it is also the reception from the divine realm of bad things alongside one’s reception of good things.⁵⁴ Thus according to Janzen (1985), Job is one step ahead of his confession of total confidence in God as expressed in Job 1:20-22. This implies, according to Janzen, that he still maintains some faith in God.⁵⁵ Hartley reaches the same conclusion by arguing that Job declares the wife’s counsel as folly and shows that the faithful must trust God no matter the circumstances.⁵⁶

What if we proceeded from the premise that Job’s words are not in the form of a question, but a statement as the Hebrew text indicates? We can then argue that Job refuses that God can let evil happen to righteous people. What is senseless then is not that the wife asks Job to *barak* God, but that she asks him to engage in a public protest against God. Job perceives God as having monstrous unchallengeable power. To face him in an open challenge is a dangerous endeavor. For Job this will be tantamount to what Lasine calls inciting “his Creator into committing assisted suicide.”⁵⁷ As Job later says in 9:12 “If he (God) seizes, who can stop him? Who can ask him, ‘What are you doing?’” Job is terrified of this God. He recoils at the thought of the massive power that God exercises over him. With the questions he raises in 9:12, Job confesses his total inability to face God publicly and call him to account for his actions. Instead he puts into use an ironical language as the appropriate mode to face God.

But what is God’s answer to Job’s protests?

⁵³As TNK (p. 1507) points out the noun נבל is translated in Gen. 34:7 as “outrage” and “shameful thing” in Deut. 22:21 in the contexts of sexual misconduct. This indicates how strong Job admonishes his wife for her utterance. נבל as folly or reckless behavior points to a crossing of social boundaries – doing things to people that shouldn’t be done – treating them in ways inappropriate to their status. This is what’s significant about Job’s response to his wife – she’s encouraging behavior that would break social boundaries that would treat God as if he belonged to the same class and had the same status as Job. Job clearly wants through his “public transcript” to maintain the boundaries.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 52-53.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 84.

⁵⁷ Lasine, *Knowing Kings*, 181.

Divine Whirlwind Speech

God answer's Job's protests in a series of speeches in the form of endless questions and questioning (38:1-40:2 and 40:6-41:34) which frames Job's two responses (40:3-5 and 42:1-6). Contrary to Tryggve Mettinger who argues that God's speeches answer Job's questions by showing God's mastery of chaos and evil and hence divine righteous,⁵⁸ the content of Yahweh's speech completely ignores Job's questions.⁵⁹ God offers no explanation or excuse for Job's suffering.⁶⁰ What God shows, rather, is his superior power, experience, and character over and against Job in statements that show there is no comparison between God's realm of person, character, and knowledge between God and Job.⁶¹ All of God's speeches refer to nothing but his power. God subsumes his justice to his power, for God must be always right.⁶² God appears under the guise of a whirlwind, a signification of mystery and terror. Job had asked of God questions about justice/injustice. Instead of answers, God asks Job questions about his power. Thus God scapegoats responsibility for his cruelty against Job by hiding under his power. Under this power, God puts Job on the defensive asking him to respond to God about his place and relation to God's power.

How does Job respond to God's answer (no answer)?

a) Job's first response (40:3-5)

Several speeches punctuate Job's response to God's *answerlessness*. In Job 40:3-5 Job states:

Behold, I am slighted (diminished by you). What shall I answer back to you? I put my hand upon my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will no longer respond. Twice and I will not add anymore.⁶³

On the surface, Job's words seem to indicate his acquiescence to God's power. As I have argued, in the face of such show of power, Job has to maintain a public transcript that suggests being in line with the will of his master. But the reality is that Job refuses to engage in God's rhetoric. Job had spoken at length about his unjust suffering and demanded that God

⁵⁸ Tryggve Mettinger, *In Search of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 189-200.

⁵⁹ Athalya, Brenner, "God's Answer to Job," *VT* 2 (1981): 129-137, states Job's questions as: (1) Physical, economical, social and emotional suffering (2) Isolation and the question of religious disharmony (3) the question of moral injustice, why Job has to suffer unjustly for no crime.

⁶⁰ Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (New York, NY: Doubleday and company, Inc., 1965), LXXIV.

⁶¹ See Millar Burrows, "The Voice From the Whirlwind," *JBL* 47 (1928): 117-132.

⁶² Jack, Miles. *God: A Biography* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 314.

⁶³ The translation is my own.

appear and answer the charges. But when God appears, God refuses to answer the charges. Instead, through a lengthy discourse on God's power, God demands that Job answers back about God's power. Just as God's answer is no answer, Job mimics God by answering with no answer.⁶⁴ His answer is an ironic subversion that gives Job room to create his power-space against his tyrant.⁶⁵

b) Job's second response (42:1-6)

Job also answers God in Job 42:1-6 saying:

I know that you have power over all, and that none of your purpose can be thwarted...therefore I have declared what I did not understand, (things) beyond me, that I did not know...I have heard of you by the hearing of ears, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I reject and [I am] sorry upon the dust and the ashes.⁶⁶

Some Bible translations and commentators have taken these verses to refer to Job's total submission to the will of the divine. For example, NRSV renders 42:6 as: "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." And Perdue (1991) argues that Job recants his position after God's speeches. Job finds a new language to talk about God and re-affirms divine sovereignty.⁶⁷ Rowley sees Job's words as a "submission and surrender."⁶⁸ He argues that Job did not find answers to his questions, but found fellowship with God. The problem, according to Rowley, was not about theodicy, but about broken fellowship. So with fellowship restored the book reaches its climax.⁶⁹ Hartley states that Job contritely confesses God's power, admits of having limited knowledge, recants his case against God and believes now that everything that happens in the cosmic world lies within the framework of God's wisdom.⁷⁰

However, several considerations militate against the above kinds of conclusions. First Job has consistently and at length argued for his innocence. Secondly, Job's innocence is supported by God himself several times (1:8, 2:3 and 42:7). Finally, most readers would

⁶⁴ It is Homi K. Bhabha who coined the phrase 'mimicry' to refer to the idea of how the colonized subvert the colonizer by mimicking the colonizer's language in ways that seem to support the colonizer's power when in effect such mimicry is a strategy to resist the colonizer's power. See his book *The Location of Culture* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 85-92.

⁶⁵ See Miles, *God*, 317, who argues that silence communicates defiance and that is what Job does.

⁶⁶ The translation is my own.

⁶⁷ Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 234.

⁶⁸ Rowley, *Job*, 341.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 535.

agree that Job is innocent.⁷¹ So what do we make of Job's words? In order to engage this question, let me use the work of two scholars as my entry point.

John Briggs Curtis

John Briggs Curtis (1979) examines linguistic nuances inherent in Job 42:6b. He argues that the word, 'repent' occurs 48 times in the Old Testament, where rather than be translated as repent, should be translated as "be sorry", "be relieved", "be consoled," or "to have pity."⁷² With these semantic possibilities in mind, Curtis urges us to move away from the assumption that Job is repenting for his previous stand against God, but consoling himself. In this way Curtis translates 42:6b as: "I am sorry for frail man."⁷³ Turning to 6a he argues that "to reject" should be read as "loathe" or feel "contempt," as is indicated by other contexts in the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁴ Curtis notes that the verb 'reject' has no object. Some readers have taken Job's prose protest as the object of the verb. But Curtis argues that in all the *qal* uses of the term in Job (7:16, 34:33, 36:5 and 42:6), the implied object of loathing is God.⁷⁵ Curtis then concludes that Job in his final words rejects "the god who responds to the anguished plea of his devoted worshipper with contemptuous and arrogant boasting."⁷⁶ The object of rejection then is God.

Jack Miles

Miles (1995) sees both of Job's speeches in 40:3-5 and 42:1-6 as acts of subversive silence. He argues that God had tortured Job by silence so in retaliation, Job puts God in agony by his near-silence.⁷⁷ Job acknowledges God's display of his superior power and the fact that by use of his power God can fulfill whatever he wants to accomplish. By re-stating God's question ("Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"), Miles suggests that Job mocks God by arguing that it is insulting to repeat what someone has just said in his face.⁷⁸ Miles sees Job's statement that he has spoken 'things too wonderful for him or beyond him' not as a confession of ignorance about what God had said, but about his (Job's) own speeches. Job had hoped that God would come forth and either vindicate him or convict

⁷¹ J.P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible: At the Interface of Prosody and Structural Analysis* (Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2004), 325.

⁷² John Briggs Curtis, "On Response to Yahweh," *JBL* 98:4 (1979): 497-511.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ For example, see: Jer. 14:19; Lev. 26:43-44; Lam. 3:45.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 503-504.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 505.

⁷⁷ Miles, *God: A Biography*, 318.

⁷⁸ Miles, *God*, 320.

him. But God does neither. In this way, God exceeded Job's worst fears. So Job confesses that he spoke beyond his knowledge of what God could do. Taking Job by surprise, God establishes himself as having and exercising merciless power.⁷⁹

Miles, like Curtis, reads 'repent' as an idiomatic expression expressing something like "I shudder with sorrow for frail (mortal) man," which is taken to express Job's fear for others in the wake of God's ruthless and merciless power. Miles argues that Job has his friends in mind.⁸⁰ The object for Job's sorrow is not his words contained in his speeches against God, but all of humanity who must face a divine tyrant.⁸¹ Miles argues that Job continues to protest and to stay consistent with his earlier protest when he said that, "naked he came and naked he goes..." thus remaining true to the pursuit of justice even if it means by death (13:15).

The arguments of Curtis and Miles have much to commend them. If we take 42:1-6 at face value, the meaning would be incompatible with the character of a Job that has complained and waited for so long to take God to task. It would be inconceivable for him not to present his case before God when God finally appears (see Job 23, for example). I would extend the arguments of Curtis and Miles, to suggest that that Job's words are purposefully ambiguous. Job does protest, but in a language that is politically ironic. The public transcript must show alignment with the oppressor. In this case I would read the *kethib* ("I know") instead of Miles' *qere* ("you know") that you have power..."(42:2). By making himself the subject rather than God, Job's public transcript indicates acknowledgement of God as though he is giving in to God's way of doing things. But underneath the words there is the hidden transcript—a deeper meaning weighted toward resistance against God's powers—an acknowledgement of divine power that has been abused. Job's hidden transcript is an acknowledgement of God's ominous power that has been used to destroy his life.⁸² When Job repeats God's question, he publicly acknowledges that he understands what God has said. But Job's hidden transcript shows mockery as Miles has noted above. While Job's admission that he has 'spoken things too wonderful for him' publicly confesses ignorance about what God

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 320-22.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 324-25.

⁸¹ See Miles endnote on this question, 425-430.

⁸² The best illustration of Job's avoidance strategy is perhaps illumined in Chapter three where Job issues a diatribe against God's creation. If God creates only to destroy, Job sees senselessness in such a creation. He calls for its reversal within the words of cursing his day of birth. But in doing this he avoids any direct explicit indictment against God. He makes himself and his life the subject of his discourse.

had said, the hidden transcript communicates instead that he confesses his prior ignorance concerning the nature and the dimensions or extent of God's injustice. Curtis' observation regarding the objectless verb 'reject' is purposely so rendered. In this way, the public transcript of Job portrays him as rejecting his own professed arguments contained in his speeches, while the hidden transcript is, as Curtis and Miles note, a rejection of God.

Curtis and Miles help us re-read Job's words as protest rather than acquiescence to divine will. However, neither can account for the rhetorical subtlety that allows for the logic of God's absurd restoration of Job. My argument is that the power imbalance between Job and God leads Job to adopt the ambivalent language which on the surface level agrees with God, but on a deeper level functions to resist him. Perhaps Elie Wiesel's words summarize this point well: "...by repenting sins he did not commit, by justifying a sorrow he did not deserve, he communicates to us that he did not believe in his own confessions; they were nothing but decoys..."⁸³ Or as Hegel, quoted by Emil Fackenheim, states, "in the very act of renunciation, he [Job] renounces renunciation [itself]."⁸⁴

Joban Way for Conflict Resolution

Conflict is often caused by those in power—those who have the sociopolitical and economic resources to tell the dominant story.⁸⁵ This dominant story often ensnares the victims into doomed silence denying, as Cobb states, the very humanity of the victims.⁸⁶ As Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o points out, the overall agenda of the imperialistic power is to annihilate people to the core, where they lose a belief in themselves.⁸⁷ However, rather than be cowed into silence, imperial power often puts what Frantz Fanon calls the "Wretched of the Earth" in direct conflict with the ruling imperialistic elite. The imperative question then is: *how do these wretched of the earth engage the powers-that-be, which not only reduce them to nothingness, but continue to exert cruelty on them in their nothingness?* I think Job's protests against divine tyranny represent a story of survival for the marginalized—a survival that seeks to end the colonizer-colonized conflict by calling on the colonizer to be answerable for

⁸³ Elie, Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York, NY: Summit books, 1976), 235.

⁸⁴ Emil Fackenheim, "The Children of Rachel, of Haman, of Job: Post-Holocaust Possibilities of a Fraternal Jewish-Christian Reading of the Book belonging to Both," in *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A Re-Reading* (Bloomington/Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 71-99.

⁸⁵ RS Wafula, *Biblical Representations of Moab: A Kenyan Postcolonial Reading* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014), 19-25.

⁸⁶ Cobb, *Speaking of Violence*, 28.

⁸⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 3.

their actions. Thus, although Job has to maintain a public transcript in the face of his oppressor, his hidden transcript is veiled in ironical speeches which eventually bring God out of silence. Even though God's appearance does little to address Job's questions, it at least provides a point of contact for the meeting of the tyrannical imperialist and the victim(s). It also provides a window through which we can hear the oppressor's hidden transcript. God acknowledges that Job is right and hence by implication that God is wrong. It is perhaps this acknowledgement that is the thread to hang on for change. Ngwa (1986) argues convincingly that the epilogue of the book of Job (Job 42) constitutes open possibilities. Rather than be viewed as a closure to the book, it should be viewed as a condominium between the past, the present and the future. The epilogue looks back on Job's former life, not so much to imitate or reenact it, but to surpass or transcend it.⁸⁸ It acknowledges that although we cannot undo the past—in this case a past that includes the death of Job's children and wanton destruction of his property—through protest, a resolution to conflict is found that ensures the imperialist will never repeat their crimes.

The "never again" resolution is supported by the way God goes about in resolving the God-Job conflict in the epilogue (42:7-17). God not only acknowledges his mistakes, but also provides restitution for the destruction. If we take it that God follows the torah as is stated, that a thief should restore double what he/she steals when got (Ex. 22:1ff), we can argue that God acknowledges that Job has found and exposed God's thievery. God becomes then, not a despotic adamant tyrant, but a tyrant who is willing to see his folly and change. Although the change leaves the pain of the past intact and the deaths as irreversible, it leaves the possibility that the future will be devoid of any such extravagant misuse of power.

One can also make a strong case that the 'never again' conflict resolution is only possible between tyrants and their victims through victims' protests and not acquiescence. This militates against an understanding whose view is that imperial subjects need to obey no matter what imperialists do to them—as is the case with one reading of Job by Sylvia Scholnick (1982). She states that "Job's error is believing that man's fate is entirely the result of God's judicial decisions...[that] the author of the book is trying to expand the understanding of the nature of God to include a realization that he is king of the universe. [And that being king of the universe his] use of sovereign authority [like], removing property, and family of a subject [are necessary] for the smooth operation of his realm, something

⁸⁸ Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the 'Happy' Ending in Job 42:7-17*, 92.

which is clearly within the jurisdiction of a human king.”⁸⁹ The danger with this kind of understanding is that it sustains the status quo of those in power in relation to the victims, granting sweeping right of tyrannical autocratic systems of power to do whatever they wish to the victims of their power. Job offers a better alternative, a protest that is not meant to generate more conflict with the imperialist, but one that calls on the imperialist to answer for their crimes and create justice, and hence end the conflict.

⁸⁹ Sylvia, H. Scholnick, “The Meaning of Mispat in the Hebrew Bible,” *JBL* 101:4 (1982): 521-529.

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