THE BOOK OF JOB: TWO QUESTIONS, ONE ANSWER*

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The book of Job asks two questions, but it only answers one. Once we see this and accept it, the structure of the book becomes clear. Once the refusal to answer the second question is recognized, the integrity of the book can be preserved.

The first question is asked by the Accuser (the satan; *ha-satan*): "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9). The same favourable answer is given twice: "In all this Job did not sin" (1:22; 2:10). The text involved is not coextensive with the prose; the issue is ended with 2:10, but the prose continues to 2:13. The treatment of the first question is restricted to 1:1–2:10 along with 42:10b-17—a move away from the traditional approach.

The prose text reporting the arrival of the friends, like that giving the LORD's judgement on them, belongs to the central core of the book (chs. 3–41, more or less). The friends are not associated with the first question; their concern is with the second one. Nothing from an older story need be assumed to have been suppressed.

The second question is asked by Job: "Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul?" (3:20). The book's refusal to answer this question is clearest at the end: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (42:5)—when, in the text, Job has not seen anything at all. However this sentence is to be translated (and many options are open—see below) one thing is abundantly clear: in the book, Job has not seen anything at all. The text focused on this second question includes some of the prose, beginning with the arrival of the friends and ending with the dismissal of their answers, 2:11–42:9.

The structure of the book emerges as follows: a framing story, dealing with the first question (1:1–2:10; 42:10b-17); embedded within it, the core of the book dealing with the second question (2:11–42:9).

The first issue addressed is that of religious altruism; do God-fearers relate to God because it is right to do so or in the hope of reward for doing so? YHWH points to Job's goodness (1:8); the satan points to Job's

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prosperity (1:9).[1] In the satan's view, Job will be a God-fearer while he is prosperous. Take away the prosperity and the truth will emerge; "he will curse you to your face" (1:11). YHWH shamefully—but this is theology by storytelling—gives in and gives the satan his head. Goaded, Job refuses to curse God, does not charge God with wrong-doing (1:22), and does not sin with his lips (2:10). The issue is resolved; the satan is proved wrong. Religious faith is possible for the rightness of it rather than for reward—because it is right, not because it is rewarded. Faith that has integrity is possible. The fact that it is possible does not mean that many of us, if indeed any, live our faith that way. What it does mean is that such faith in God is not an impossible goal to aim for.

Within this framing story, YHWH allows the satan first to strip Job of everything except what pertained to his own person; it included the lives of his children. Then YHWH allows the satan to move on Job's person, with the sole exception of sparing his life. It may be storytelling, but any sense of human decency is outraged by it. Life may do these things to people, but a half-way decent God should not. Possibly the only excuse for the story is that such things happen. A story, allowing for an all-powerful God, can hardly explore the issue without allowing for the horrors that do happen. At the end, the story has YHWH attempt to make amends for what had been done: "the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before" (42:10b). For many, this compounds what was shocking enough at the beginning. For the story, it brings to a close the unfortunate episode with which the story began.

The source of such revulsion needs to be made clear. In human experience, lives and fortunes can be lost. The loss needs to be grieved (which the text of Job does not allude to in the framing story but, at another level, embodies in the book's core). It may be that, in due course, fortunes are restored and other children born. That life does this to people is a source of grief and pain; it is also a fact of life that such things happen. What is shocking is that God should be presented as responsible for such fate, apparently motivated by pride, and inflicting such disaster on a faithful follower. Even in the unreality of the story-world, such behaviour appears appalling. The only possible excuse for such storytelling is its goal, the affirmation of the possible integrity of religious belief.

It is unwise to dismiss the framing story as "this ancient folk tale" which presents "the traditional pious and patient saint", reflecting an

[1] YHWH will be used here as a reminder that the personal divine name is hardly used outside this story. Within the core (after 2:10 until 42:6), it is almost entirely absent, occurring only at 12:9; 38:1; and 40:1, 3, 6. This phenomenon has long been observed and has contributed to the claim of a prose story framing the poetic core.

authentic "patriarchal background".[2] The antiquity of the figure of Job (cf. Ezek 14:14, 20) says nothing of the time of composition of this text. The issue of the integrity of religious belief is disturbingly serious. St. Teresa of Avila's claim, "though you damn me, I will love you still," is shared by few. To explore the issue in story may unfortunately but necessarily involve stripping a faithful God-fearer of their prosperity and well-being. The stylization of the story is not foreign to the stylized series of exchanges between Job and the three. The framing story may be of a piece with the rest of the book (so Habel, Janzen); it may be a little earlier or a lot earlier. A link is there in 42:10a, perhaps no more than the three words in Hebrew, "when he had prayed for his friends".

The story provides the perfect setting for the central section or core of the book. According to the story, Job is sitting among the ashes, with a potsherd to scrape himself, covered with loathsome sores (2:7-8). So the core begins with Job's three friends hearing of his trouble and coming to commiserate with him. One has to admire their tact. They are said to have sat with him seven days and seven nights "and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (2:13). The core has its brief prose introduction and its equally brief prose conclusion (in 42:7-9).[3]

After seven days, the question is put in Job's agonized cry:

> "Why is light given to one in misery,
> and life to the bitter in soul? ...
> Why is light given to one who cannot see the way,
> whom God has fenced in?" (3:20, 23).

After a life of affluence and respect, Job on his dunghill with his potsherd is in misery; no one denies that. Ironically, his misery results from "acts of God" in both senses of the term. Some human suffering can be attributed to the effects of human freedom, but certainly not all. Like hurricanes, earthquakes, and plagues, what happened to Job, war and weather, were the events of nature, "acts of God", that are independent of human freedom.

[2]Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (AB 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965/1973) xxiii-iv, xxxii.

[3]42:7-9 uses YHWH (twice each in vv. 7 and 9). This detracts from the mechanical rightness of the structure proposed here. However, if the divine speech is presented as from YHWH (38:1; 40:1, 3, 6), it is appropriate that the divine rebuke ("you have not spoken of me what is right") should also come from YHWH. In the final analysis, the book of Job is in Israel's canon of scripture and speaks of Israel's God. If the book is delphic in not saying what is right, it is theologically appropriate to put on YHWH's lips the condemnation of what is theologically wrong.

For forty chapters the understanding of human life is pondered and plumbed, in all its aspects of misery, bitterness, and meaninglessness. No answer is given. Job is said to have spoken rightly of God, and Job's only answer is 42:5—but in the book Job has not seen anything at all. The three friends, putting forward the standard apologetics of what was orthodox theology, are declared not to have spoken rightly of God. But no answer is given to the issue that has been raised and discussed for forty chapters.

To accept this, we need to look closely at the two verses that bring the poetry to a close, 42:5-6.

We may begin with 42:6. Many a translation is a classic case of church tradition winning out over syntax and grammar. The NRSV renders it: "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Norman Habel remarks that "the meaning of the verse depends on the object supplied."[4] So much for clarity when we need it.[5] No object is provided nearby for this first verb.[6] Habel has to go to Job 31:13 to find a suitable one. Edwin Good is unsurprisingly blunt: "The reflexive sense 'despise myself' is impossible."[7] Ink could well be spilled for ever. Gerald Janzen's comment would be disputed by no one: "The translation 'I loathe *myself*' is interpretive."[8] To reverse the direction of the principal character in an entire book on the grounds of a single uncertain verse is risky and suspect interpretation—especially a book which has the three other major players declared by God to have been in error.

The verdict on "repent in dust and ashes" is even more forcefully dismissive. From Maimonides in the twelfth century to Patrick and others in the twentieth, "in dust and ashes" is out.[9] Says Janzen: "If usage determines meaning, then general usage is all against the meaning 'repent in

[4]Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (OTL; London: SCM, 1985) 576.

[5]Two of the great figures from a classical past, S. R. Driver and G. B. Gray, comment simply: "The v. seems to be defective" (*The Book of Job* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921] 347). In Job 7:16 (NRSV, "I loathe my life"), the Hebrew has no object for the verb; the context is unassailable in the direction of its meaning. Such is not the case with 42:6.

[6]An object, "dust and ashes", is provided nearby for the two verbs, taken as a pair; see below. In this case, a translation such as "I despise myself" is out of the question.

[7]Edwin M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990) 26. He is consistent; he renders 7:16a as "I refuse! I won't live forever" (p. 67). Driver and Gray: "I refuse (it)!" (p. 72).

[8]J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 254.

[9]See Dale Patrick, "The Translation of Job XLII 6," *VT* 26 (1976) 369-71; also L. J. Kaplan, "Maimonides, Dale Patrick, and Job XLII 6," *VT* 28 (1978) 356-58; John Briggs Curtis, "On Job's Response to Yahweh," *JBL* 98 (1979) 497-511.

dust and ashes' and in favor of 'repent concerning ... '."[10] Good gives the analysis of the syntax: " 'Dust and ashes,' then, does double duty as the accusative of both 'I despise' (*ʾemʾas*) and 'I repent' (*nḥmty*)."[11] His translation is adequate: "Therefore I despise and repent of dust and ashes."[12] The interpretative debate then turns to the meaning of "dust and ashes."

For Habel, it is Job's position of lamentation among the dust and ashes. Following Patrick, he says: "Thus the text ought to be rendered 'I repent/relent of dust and ashes,' meaning that he forsakes his position of lamentation among the dust and ashes and forswears remorse."[13] Habel assumes that "God has actually appeared and Job has 'seen' God."[14] In my judgment, the text does not support this assumption. Habel suggests that Job's final reply is deliberately ambiguous. "While the language suggests a mood of submission, the text functions as a formal retraction of Job's suit against his adversary and a public announcement that his role as a lamenting litigant among the ashes has terminated."[15] For Janzen, "dust and ashes are an apt figure for human destiny."[16] For Good, " 'dust and ashes' has to do with lowliness and mourning, with death and with sin."[17] He agrees with Habel and goes beyond him to assert that " 'to repent of dust and ashes' is to give up the religious structure that construes the world in terms of guilt and innocence. It is to repent of repentance."[18]

These observations are selective; but there is little point in being comprehensively exhaustive. Two conclusions emerge with clarity. First, the openness to interpretation of 42:6 allows adequate scope to the interests of its interpreters. Second, little or no scope is allowed for Job to reverse his claim of innocence and its consequences. The weight of the book is not to be overturned by the unusual and uncertain syntax of a single verse.

The Hebrew of Job 42:6 has a pair of verbs in its first part (despise, repent) and a pair of substantives in its second part (dust, ashes). The preposition linking the two parts is, in such a context, to be rendered "concerning". If, with Habel and Good, "dust and ashes" can be under-

[10]Janzen, *Job*, 256.

[11]Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 376.

[12]Ibid., 26 and 375. Curtis, after full analysis of the verb, rejects "repent" as its meaning and advocates "I am sorry for" ("Job's Response," 499-500). "Repent concerning" and "be sorry about" are not far apart. A "change of mind" is often central to the meaning of the verb.

[13]Habel, *Job*, 576.

[14]Ibid., 579.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Janzen, *Job*, 208. In the context of 42:6, dust and ashes are said to be "not incompatible with royal status" (ibid, 257). This understanding of human vocation differs from the "frail man" of Briggs's translation ("Job's Response," 505).

[17]Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 377.

[18]Ibid.

stood in relation to the "lowliness and mourning", the misery that goes with Job's "position of lamentation", then the verse asserts Job's putting an end to the debate. It is possible but not necessary to see this (with Habel) as a retraction of Job's suit against God, or see this understanding as an anticlimax (with Good). It can be understood simply as an exit line; as far as Job is concerned, the debate is at an end.

It is not possible, therefore, to read some defence of traditional orthodoxy into 42:6. If it is an exit line, attention turns to 42:5. The syntax of 42:5 is clear; its meaning is certainly not. The NRSV translates it with a pluperfect verb and an adversative conjunction: "I **had heard** of you by the hearing of the ear, **but** now my eye sees you." Three elements are well known and, to my knowledge, disputed by nobody.

i) The verbs of hearing and seeing are in the same tense (*qatal*).
ii) The conjunction (Hebrew: *wĕ-*) derives its meaning of "and", "but", etc. from its context.
iii) The verb of hearing can mean either "to hear" or "to hear about/to hear of". The syntax, therefore, allows for a wide range of meanings. Four examples will be enough:

—My ear hears you **and** now my eye sees you.
—My ear hears you **but** now my eye sees you.
—My ear **heard** you **and** now my eye **sees** you.
—My ear **heard about** you **but** now my eye **sees** you.

Two observations need to be made forcefully. First, it cannot be taken for granted that a past situation is being contrasted with a different present (i.e., "I had heard about you, but now I have seen you"). Such an understanding is syntactically possible, but it must be legitimated from the context. Second, in the text there is absolutely no statement of seeing. In the text God does not actually appear. God speaks (cf. 38:1; 40:1, 6) and God questions (cf. 42:4), but in the text God does not appear. There have been words in plenty to hear; there has been no report of vision.

> It is a new activity. ... Job's claim that his eye sees Yahweh is startling, to say the least. Given the strictures against seeing the divine, many scholars argue that his seeing must be metaphorical: Job is now convinced (Pope); he has direct experience in contrast to secondhand (Driver and Gray, Dhorme); his consciousness of the god comes directly from the god and not from his own musing upon experience (Terrien). There are, however, enough instances in the Hebrew Bible of people who see the god that I do not feel the compulsion of metaphor.[19]

[19]Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 373-74.

The text's references to the ear and the eye do not suggest metaphor. While the metaphorical is tempting, it may be better to resist temptation and refrain from indulgence. After all, what emerges is not what the text demands but what the interpreter believes.

Habel assumes that Job did see God. The assumption facilitates making sense of the text. But it is an assumption and it runs counter to the text. The basis for the assumption is the statement in the text: "now my eye sees you." The reader is confronted with this statement and has to come to terms with it. The "now" moves beyond the activity of hearing. For Habel, the seeing remains within the argument of the book: "*In response to Job's earlier demand*, God has actually appeared and Job has 'seen' God."[20] Given the absence of any report of vision in the text, and resisting a retreat to the metaphorical, the possibility needs to be entertained that Job's claim is to something outside the text.

To move outside a text is something no interpreter likes to do; it is close to an admission of defeat. Yet the statement is there; "now my eye sees you" says Job, and the seeing is not in the text. With Habel, it can be assumed and correlated with the argument of the book. Alternatively, because the seeing is not in the text, it is a legitimate possibility to assume that the reference is to activity outside the text, to something of the experience of life. The text has been about words—from Job, the friends, Elihu, and God. To move beyond these words ("and now"), it may be necessary to look to a way of knowing without words.

Today's therapists might speak of balancing the logic of the head with the insight of the heart. In ancient Israel, such language does not seem to have been readily available. Certainly, with Habel, it has become clear that the logic of legal debate does not bring clarity to the issue. Equally certainly, if Job adds vision to hearing, he adds nothing to indicate its potential. The text provides only the statement: "now my eye sees you." The claim that the next verse, 42:6, is "the punch line of the Book of Job"[21] reveals not the meaning of the verse but the interpreter's need for something other than what the verse plainly is: an exit line, an end to the discussion. We may want an answer. The text does not provide a verbal one; it may have already pointed in a different direction.

The text has been preparing for an abdication of further speech; it will shortly negate the value of much that has already been said. As far back as 40:3-4, Job is portrayed as determined to refrain from further speech: "I lay my hand on my mouth. ... I will proceed no further." This is repeated in 42:3, with the reason for it spelled out: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

[20]Habel, *Job*, 579 (emphasis added).
[21] Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 375.

It should not be surprising that the book moves away from words to seeing. The traditional words of the friends are given short shrift. Says the LORD: "you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7). We may be left unsure as to what Job has spoken that was right; it is quite clear that what the friends have spoken was not right. Job's attitude is presented coming out of a profoundly personal experience. The friends are presented imposing on Job attitudes universalized from what was purportedly the experience of others.

A surfeit of scholarly detail may sometimes obscure central truths; the wood cannot be seen for the trees. The outcome needs to be clear for these final verses in the poetry of the book of Job (42:5-6). Job 42:6 is at base an exit line: it is time to put an end to all that has gone on; for now, the discussion is over. An interpretation that has Job regret what he has said ("I despise myself") can only be achieved by violating the canons of Hebrew grammar and syntax. Interpretations in other directions can be built on the verse, but need not be. As for Job 42:5, seeing by the eye is affirmed in the verse; because it is not explicit in the preceding text, it can either be assumed as somehow within the text or assumed as a reference to life outside the text. In either case, no conclusion is articulated from it. It is left pointing in a new direction—and that is all. Neither of these positions come as bolts from the blue. They are prepared for in the text and they are followed up in the text. Basically, therefore, 42:5 does not contribute to the preceding argument but may point the way to a new direction—without developing it; 42:6 also does not contribute to the preceding argument but brings it to a close. The debate—with friends, Elihu, and God—is at an end.

Having noted the text's presentation of the LORD's verdict on the friends ("you have not spoken of me what is right"), it is appropriate to look at what they did say—what it was that God condemned.

Eliphaz is secure within the conviction that the traditional teaching was right.

> "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
> Or where were the upright cut off?" (4:7)

He is comforted by the certainty of personal revelation, personal insight.

> "Can mortals be righteous before God?
> Can human beings be pure before their Maker?" (4:17)

The sound advice he gives Job is cruel in its irony:

> "As for me, I would seek God
> and to God I would commit my cause." (5:8)

The sentiment is pious and beautiful. Unfortunately, readers of the text know that it is from God precisely that Job's misfortunes come. From

being sensitive initially, Eliphaz moves in the context to a position of painful smugness:

> "How happy is the one whom God reproves; ...
> For he [God] wounds, but he binds up;
> he strikes, but his hands heal." (5:17-18)

Bildad is no less certain than Eliphaz; it is difficult to find compassion in his words. Where Eliphaz appealed to personal revelation, Bildad turns rather to the long-held truths of tradition.

> "For inquire now of bygone generations,
> and consider what their ancestors have found." (8:8)
> "Does God pervert justice?
> Or does the Almighty pervert the right?" (8:3)

Once again, the readers of the text are well aware that God has perverted justice and handed over his faithful servant Job to the torments of the satan. What Bildad says holds small comfort for Job. He begins with Job's children; he ends with Job himself, hedged with the condition, if Job is "pure and upright" (8:6).
As to Job's children:

> "If your children sinned against him,
> he delivered them into the power of their transgression." (8:4)

As to Job himself:

> "See, God will not reject a blameless person,
> nor take the hand of evildoers.
> He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,
> and your lips with shouts of joy." (8:20-21)

Zophar lays aside any semblance of care and goes straight for the jugular. Eliphaz began by affirming Job's fear of God and the integrity of Job's ways (4:6). Bildad moved to the conditional: "If your children sinned, ... if you are pure and upright ... " (8:4, 6). Zophar is outraged enough not to be limited by such delicacy.

> "For you say, 'My conduct is pure,
> and I am clean in God sight.'
> But, oh that God would speak,
> and open his lips to you, ...
> Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves."
> (11:4, 6)

The fault for human suffering is with humans (Eliphaz). The fault is not with God (Bildad). In particular, the suffering of the "blameless and upright" Job is less than Job's putative guilt deserves (Zophar). This is the beginning; it gets worse as the exchanges unfold and argument degenerates into abuse. Job gives as good as he gets and provokes the outrage of

the insulted wise. Emotion is given full expression; experience and empathy hardly enter the equation.

Job is dismissive of the three.

> "What you know, I also know;
> I am not inferior to you." (13:2)

The friends are dismissive of Job.

> "Should your babble put others to silence,
> and when you mock, shall no one shame you?" (11:3)

A fundamental attitude toward the sufferer is shared by the friends. "How can a mortal be righteous before God? ... A mortal is a maggot and a human being a worm." (Bildad, 25:4, 6). A fundamental trust is given to God. "He saves the humble. He will deliver even those who are guilty ... " (Eliphaz, 22:29-30). The fate of the wicked inexorably awaits them. "Do you not know ... that the exulting of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless is but for a moment?" (Zophar, 20:4-5).

Job accuses the three of the ultimate sin that any theologian must fear:

> "Will you speak falsely for God,
> and speak deceitfully for him?" (13:7)

God turns the accusation on Job:

> "Will you even put me in the wrong?
> Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" (40:8)

The final verdict in the text favours Job and condemns the friends:

> "For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." (42:7)

Humankind can stand before God. God can stand before humankind. A relationship is possible. The logic of language does not make all clear. Where there is misery in life, there may also be mystery.

Whether God bullies Job in the divine speeches is largely a matter of interpretation, the text allowing for different overtones to be given to specific texts—i.e., the compassionate and caring or the hectoring and angry. There is a place for retaliatory anger; Job has scarcely been presented as polite toward God—e.g., "he [God] destroys both the blameless and the wicked ... if it is not he, who then is it?" (9:22, 24). In the end, it is not important to the argument. The vastness of the created universe was—and is—mystery enough to have been out of Job's league.

What has been said can be summed up around two issues:

1) the structure of the book of Job;
2) the meaning of the book of Job.

Where the structure is concerned, it may be more helpful to divide the book of Job by the criterion of theme rather than that of prose and poetry.

The first theme deals with the question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" It occupies 1:1–2:10 and 42:10b-17. The section is self-contained, with its own issue and an answer to it. The second theme is sounded by Job's question: "Why is light given to one in misery?" It occupies the bulk of the book, from 2:11 to 42:9. It opens with the coming of the friends and ends with the dismissal of their contribution.

Where the meaning of the book is concerned, an answer is given for the first theme and it is positive. The answer affirms the integrity of religious belief; Job's fidelity to God is not dependent on his prosperity.

An answer is not given to the question at the core of the second theme. Job 42:6 puts an end to the discussion. Job 42:5 claims a seeing by the eye that goes beyond the hearing of the ear and the words involved in hearing. It may be a pointer to a way of knowing without words, but any potential is left unspoken. Words given Job have prepared the way for this refusal of an answer: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (42:3). Words presented as the LORD's verdict on the friends confirm this refusal. The answers that they advocated so vigorously are deemed by the LORD to have been in error: "you have not spoken of me what is right". An answer has not been found in words. By its very definition, an answer without words must be left in silence.

While the book may not offer an answer in words, it is important that certain answers are dismissed. Elihu is ignored, and three traditional bits of baloney are declared unfit for human consumption. When the traditional answers put forward by the friends have been dismissed by God, the silent answer of 42:5's wordless seeing can satisfy more safely.