J O B

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"The story of Job," wrote the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, "is a parable intended to set forth the opinions of people concerning providence" (*Guide of the Perplexed*, III.22). That is to say, it is a book which explores the way God acts in the world God has made. Its author does this by reshaping an already existing story concerning the trials and tribulations of the righteous Job (a story that is the basis for the prose prologue and epilogue in the present book [Job 1–2; 42:7-17]), and expanding it with imagined conversations between Job and his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. These conversations, which are in poetry, open with a lament of Job (ch. 3) and continue with three cycles of speeches (chs. 4–14; 15–21; and 22–31). In each cycle except the third, which seems to have suffered some disruption in the transmission of the text, each friend speaks, and to each Job responds. After Job's final speech a fourth character, Elihu, arrives on the

scene (chs. 32–37) and attempts to correct the statements both of the three friends and of Job. (Several scholars believe these chapters, together with a poem about Wisdom [ch. 28] that interrupts the third speech cycle, to be later additions to the book.) The poetry concludes with two speeches addressed to Job by God and Job's response to each speech (chs. 38–39; 41:1—42:6).

"A man there was in the land of Uz" (1:1). These opening words of the book identify Job as a non-Israelite ("Uz" is associated with the land of Edom, south of Israel). The same is true of his three friends, each of whom comes from a non-Israelite locale. Job is called "the greatest of all the people of the east" or "of antiquity" (the word has both meanings; Job 1:21). These descriptions of Job and his friends as non-Israelites from an era long past serve to distance the characters *in* the book from the Israelite reader *of* the book, allowing the book to explore the question of the relationship between God and Job in a

way that does not immediately threaten positions Israelite readers might hold and put them on the defensive.

The Prose Prologue

In the prose prologue we learn that Job is a person of moral integrity and true piety, one "who had integrity and was upright, one who feared (worshipped) God and turned from evil" (1:1). As we read this book, it is important to remember that its description of Job as an upright human being is a true description, one confirmed by God, who describes Job in the same words as the narrator has used (1:8). The terrible afflictions that befall Job are not due to the slightest failing on his part, but are solely the result of a wager between God and the Adversary (an office that in Job seems to be that of a heavenly secret policeman). When God points out to the Adversary the integrity and piety of Job, the Adversary questions the motivation for Job's

behavior: “Does Job worship God for naught? ...You have blessed the work of his hands and his possessions have increased in the land” (1:9-10). This claim that Job’s piety and integrity are rooted in Job’s well-being not only questions the true value of Job’s integrity but also indirectly challenges the moral value of a universe run on a reward-and-punishment basis.

The Adversary bets God that if Job loses everything he has, Job will cease to be a model human being. God accepts the challenge, and Job loses his property, his children, and his health. Despite this, we are told, “Job did not sin with his lips” (2:10), even when his wife said to him, “Do you still hold on to your integrity? Bless (here a euphemism for ‘curse’) God and die” (2:9). Job refuses, for the only thing Job has left is his integrity, and he will not give that up.

At this point Job’s three friends arrive, and they sit with him in silence for seven days, “for they saw that his

pain was great" (2:13). The silence is broken by Job.

The Conversations

The author changes from prose to poetry, as Job curses the day of his birth and wishes for death, where "the wicked cease from troubling and there the weary are at rest" (3:17). (In the book of Job the realm of the dead is not a paradise, but a place where nothing happens, and to Job that seems preferable to his present wretched existence.) Job's language in this lament is filled with anti-creation imagery of darkness; in his personal anguish he would like to see the whole universe collapse into a black hole. This lament of Job shocks the friends into speech.

In their several speeches the three friends set forth the view that in a just universe human suffering can only be the result of human sin. The first to speak is Eliphaz, who intends this doctrine to be a comfort to Job, for

suffering that has a reason is more bearable than suffering for which there is no discernable cause. Moreover, this doctrine of retribution offers hope, for, as Eliphaz says, “Think now, who that was innocent perished?” (4:7). Thus, if Job holds on to his integrity things will turn out all right for him. Of course, Job is suffering, and that suffering needs an explanation. That explanation is to be found, says Eliphaz, in the very nature of humankind: “can a mortal be righteous before God, or a man be pure before his maker?” (4:17). Because, in Eliphaz’ view, the answer to this question is “no,” everyone deserves to suffer; indeed “humankind is born to trouble as sparks fly upward” (5:7). God, says Eliphaz, is teaching Job a lesson, and once the period of instruction is over, all will be well: “Behold, the happiness of the mortal God reproves; do not despise the chastening of Shaddai [this ancient name of God, frequently used in the book of Job, is a part of the portrayal of

Job as a person from remote antiquity], for he wounds and he binds up, he smites and his hands heal" (5:17-18).

Job, however, refuses to accept this view of his state, and his refusal offends the friends, whose accusations of Job become increasingly harsh. Already in the first speech of Bildad we find him asking Job, "Does God twist justice or does Shaddai twist righteousness?" (8:3). Since from the friends' point of view the answer to these questions must be "no," Zophar tells Job, "Know then that God exacts from you *less* than your iniquity deserves" (11:6), and in his last speech Eliphaz says to Job, "Is not your evil great? There is no end to your iniquity!" (22:5). This increasing shrillness of the friends' speeches arises from their fear that if Job's suffering does not have a moral cause, then one is faced at best with an amoral universe, and there is no purpose to the worship of God. Job's railings, as Eliphaz points out, are in danger of "doing away with the fear

(worship) of God and hindering meditation before God" (15:4).

In his responses to each of the friends' speeches Job sometimes addresses them; other times he speaks directly to God. In his responses to his friends, he accuses them of failure to grasp the reality of his situation. "How pleasant are *upright* words," he says to Eliphaz, "but what does reproof from *you* reprove?" (6:25). At one point Job calls his friends "comforters of trouble" (16:2), a wonderfully ambiguous phrase. It can be taken to mean "those who comfort the troubled," which is how the friends see themselves; and it can be taken to mean "troublesome comforters," which is how the friends appear to Job.

When Job addresses God, he points out that what has happened to him is disproportionate to any possible offense on his part. He asks, "Am I the sea or a sea-monster [embodiments of the chaotic forces opposed to God], that you set a guard over me?" (7:12). Yet,

though Job is no threat to God's control of the universe, God treats him as such. Job cries out to God, "Let me alone" (7:16). Even suppose Job has sinned (which he has not), what damage does that do to God? "I have sinned? What do I do to you, watcher of humankind?" (7:20). And since no damage is done to God, Job asks, "Why do you not pardon my sin?" (7:21). Here we get a hint that Job fears that the loss of all that he has in this world may indeed be a sign that God has abandoned him. Job both wants God, who is responsible for his afflictions, to go away so the afflictions will cease and yet, at the same time, is afraid that the afflictions show that God has abandoned him, and he wants God to return.

Job does not expect to win any confrontation with God. In response to Bildad's statement that "God will not reject a person of integrity" (8:20), Job asks: "How can a mortal be righteous (*ṣādēq*) before God?" (9:2). Here Job is quoting earlier words of Eliphaz (4:17-

19), but in so doing twists Eliphaz' meaning. Eliphaz had used the Hebrew word *ṣādēq* in its sense of "do the right thing"; Job uses it in its legal sense of acquittal in a trial. Job then goes on to show the impossibility of winning a case against God. "If one wishes to take him to court, one cannot answer him once in a thousand times" (9:3). The reason that one cannot be righteous / innocent before God is not that human beings are by nature sinners (Eliphaz' point), but because in a trial between a human being and God, God is also judge and jury. "Though I am innocent," says Job, "I cannot answer him," because "I must appeal to my accuser" (9:15). And the way God runs the world does not lead one to expect impartial justice: "The earth is given over into the hands of the wicked; he [God] covers the face of the judges—if it is not he, who then is it?" (9:24). In a monotheistic universe, the responsibility for all that is rests in the last analysis with God.

Nevertheless Job turns to God again and again, demanding to know the grounds for his affliction: “But I would speak to Shaddai, and I want to argue my case to God” (13:3). He wants this confrontation, even though he knows what will happen: “Behold, he will kill me; I have no hope, yet I will defend my ways to his face.” Job wants to confront God with his integrity, which the reader knows is real, and which the reader knows God knows is real, even if this means his death. Job has a desperate desire for justification. “O that my words were written,” says Job. “O that they were inscribed in a book [perhaps we are to think here of a copper scroll, like the Temple Scroll found at Qumran, which will outlast parchment or papyrus], were incised upon a rock with an iron pen and lead, for I know that my *gō’ēl* [one who in family law is responsible for righting wrongs done to a member of the family] lives” (19:23-25). If his words could be kept for future generations to read, Job

believes, someone someday would recognize that God was in the wrong and Job was in the right.

Job's final speech (chs. 29–31) sets forth how good things had been for Job in the past, how wretched they are in the present, and concludes with Job's oath of integrity, an oath which culminates in the anguished cry, "O that I had someone to hear me" (31:35). We are then told, "the words of Job are ended" (31:40). The word which is translated "ended" (*tammû*) is the verb from which the noun "integrity" (*tōm* or *tummâ*) is derived. By using the verb *tammû*, the narrator reminds the reader that Job from beginning to end has held on to his integrity.

The Speeches of God

Then suddenly, unexpectedly, Yahweh appears on the scene, manifest in a whirlwind (38:1), and Job gets the confrontation he has been demanding. But God does not respond to Job

directly in terms of the arguments that Job has been advancing. Instead he confronts Job with the majesty of the Creator. “Where were you,” he asks Job, “when I laid the foundations of earth?” (38:4). This first speech of Yahweh makes a strong contrast with Job’s lament (ch. 3), with its images of darkness, its desire that the universe collapse into a black hole. In Yahweh’s response we have an explosion of light, “when the morning stars shouted together” (38:7). Moreover, in Yahweh’s description of the created order, no reference is made to the human race, and the only domesticated animal mentioned is an out-of-control war-horse. The universe, as Yahweh presents it in his first speech, is not a tidy one, and one in which the human race is reduced to insignificance.

Job, overwhelmed by all this, responds, “Behold, I am of small account” (40:4) and promises to say no more. But this negative response is not adequate, and so Yahweh begins again.

Yahweh's second speech likewise emphasizes the infinite contrast between God and the human race, this time by reference to two creatures, Behemoth and Leviathan, the second of which is certainly and the first probably the embodiment of the forces of chaos. In his opening lament Job had called upon those "skilled to rouse Leviathan" (3:8), thinking he was calling on the chaotic forces opposed to God. Now Job discovers that these forces too are creatures of God. Everything—order and disorder, creation and anti-creation, matter and anti-matter—everything is in the hand of God.

This time Job's response is positive: "by the hearing of an ear I had heard of you, but now my eye sees you" (42:5). The answer to Job is the vision of God. Then, as a result of that vision, Job says, "therefore I despise / reject myself and change my mind concerning dust and ashes" (42:6). It would be natural for the reader at this point to conclude that Job has changed his mind about the

attacks he had made upon God. Yet as we read on into the prose epilogue we find Yahweh saying to Eliphaz, “You have not spoken right about me as my servant Job has” (42:7). If Job was right about God, then Job must have been wrong about himself. It would seem that Job needs to change his mind about his integrity. Job’s wife had asked him, “Do you still hold on to your integrity?” (2:9), and Job’s answer to that question displayed in his speeches was an emphatic “Yes!” The friends thought they had a handle on God and could explain God’s actions to Job. Job knew their explanations were wrong, because Job knew that he was a person of perfect integrity. Yet the prerequisite for the encounter with God that Job desired was not integrity, but the conviction of his own creatureliness. It is not works but faith that brings one into the presence of God.

The Prose Epilogue

The book concludes with God's granting Job "twice what he had before" (42:10). But this restoration, following Yahweh's speeches from the whirlwind, comes as an anticlimax. All the reward, which may have been the point of the original story, has become irrelevant. Since the vision of God has preceded the restoration, the connection of prosperity with a right relationship with God has been broken. The restoration has become as arbitrary as the deprivation, and as irrelevant as a sign of the relationship between God and the human race.

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