

## *Anxiety and Wonder in the Book of Job*

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*The text below is a transcript of my opening statement in a dialogue on the Book of Job with Jonathan Soen. It was presented at the Continental Philosophy Seminar of the French Institute, Tel Aviv, Jan 29<sup>TH</sup>, 2016. The dialogue was in Hebrew. The translation below maintains the talk's casual, conversational tone.*

*Yuval:* I will try to present here something that may be called a 'metaphysical reading' of the Book of Job. I'll explain what I mean by this shortly, but first I'd like to offer a way of looking at the the Book of Job – namely, as a dialogic text. After all, our meetings here are about the notion of 'dialogue' and the Book of Job is a text wherein the multiplicity of voices is particularly distinctive. It's not only the voices of God and *Ha'satan* that are present, but also those of Job, his wife, the friends, Elihu (who is, in fact, the first interpreter who thrusts himself into this inconclusive dialogue, right? It's a later voice...). The text also mixes a few distinct genres and this creates tensions and opens gaps – that's what makes it so fascinating. Here's an example: the book opens and closes, as we all know, with a prose tale, the so called 'didactic narrative' of chapters 1, 2 and the second half of 42: "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright," et cetera. And in many ways it is similar to other didactic narratives in the Bible, such as Nathan's Parable: "There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor..." Didactic narratives have a very distinct style: lots of repetitions, symmetries, the characters are very simple and stereotypical, they are 'closed', so to speak, 'complete'. Job is

righteous, that's it – that's how he is characterized. His righteousness is total. In didactic narratives the numbers are round, the ending is typically a happy ending – even here, in the Book of Job, you get this (quite funky, let's admit it) happy ending. At any rate, this didactic narrative that opens and closes the book operates perfectly within the rules of this particular genre.

Much of the power of this startling opening lies in the brutality with which Job is stripped naked in these first two chapters – de-worlded as it were. The efficiency with which it's done, ending with Job sitting there naked, scratching himself. Then after seven days and seven nights of silence, he begins to speak in chapter 3 and here we are suddenly in a completely different genre. This is the lamentation and the curse of Job – and this chapter belongs to a tradition of – we won't get into it – a tradition of Mesopotamian lamentation poetry that is recognized and known.

[And by the way, what's remarkable here is that this whole story is about a test. God and *Ha'satan* are testing Job to see if he will curse God. And Job's wife immediately tells him: "curse God, and die". Like she immediately knows what this is about, she gets it, she's in on what's going on.]

So in chapter 3, after seven days and seven nights of silence, Job *curse his day*. And when he does this, he comes dangerously close to cursing creation as such, and therefore dangerously close to cursing God, you know, "let that day be darkness" etc. – he is paraphrasing Genesis. That's his first act, to curse. That's why the narrative here is so precise, it introduces the theme of cursing and immediately pushes on it from all directions and almost to the limit.

Then chapters 4 to 27, the heart of the book, what's known as the 'poetic dialogue', belongs to a completely different genre, and in fact it's very similar to a Babylonian wisdom text known as

the “Babylonian Theodicy”. As opposed to the neat closure of the framing didactic narrative, the poetic dialogue is extremely complex, it resists closure. It’s a type of wisdom literature and what it offers – what it reveals, its truth, as far as we can speak of ‘truth’ – is a *dialogic truth*. Despite the fact that the author seems to be on the side of Job (he gives Job the most powerful poetry) despite that, the story as a whole ends along the lines suggested by the three friends. There’s a tendency to read the friends as stupid, as ignorant of the situation, but their point of view is, to a large extent, embraced by the text. There is no obviously ‘dominant’ voice here. And as opposed to the didactic narrative that frames the text, where everything is absolute and settled, here in the poetic dialogue – chapters 4 to 27 – everything is open, everything unravels and whatever is revealed is revealed through competing voices.

There are a few dominant topoi here and I will name a few quickly so we can make use of them. One is ‘the fate of the wicked’ – whether the wicked prosper or not. Job transitions from lamenting his own situation to a general lament about the world as a whole; it becomes about the fate of the righteous in general, the fate of the wicked in general, the world in general. There’s also the forensic theme, the legal theme: Job in fact entertains an impossible trial in which God is the accused, but also the judge, and even the defense. He summons a trial in which God plays all the roles except that of the prosecutor because that is Job himself – this is also a very radical thing about this text.

Then there’s chapter 28, the so called ‘hymn to wisdom,’ which is a different genre altogether. And it is believed that this poem was inserted by a later sources, just like Elihu’s discourses (chapters 32 - 37) – also believed to have been inserted later. These later insertions reveal the text’s early readers’ anxiety over the

radical open-endedness of the text, over its subversive lack of closure – the fact that God’s speeches do not seem to answer Job’s challenges at all. So if we look at the book as a whole there’s the framing prose tale (the didactic narrative, ch. 1,2 and second half of 42) then there’s chapter 3 (Job lament and curse) which is a distinct unit, then there are chapters 4-27, the heart of the book, the poetic dialogue between Job and the friends. We’ll leave out chapter 28 for now. Chapters 29-31 is the section where Job says: “Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me” – it’s where he just stops talking to the friends altogether and finishes this section by swearing his innocence. This gesture, swearing, is like a provocation intended to compel God to answer. Swearing, as Ed Greenstein pointed out, is a way to compel a witness to testify in ancient legal cases. And indeed if we take out Elihu’s speeches which, as we said, are a later insertion, God indeed appears right after Job swears.

Finally we get to the theophany, to God’s speeches (chapters 38 - 41) – clearly the key to the entire work. In what sense does God answer Job? In what sense is there even a dialogue between God and Job? Is God part of the dialogue, or does his appearance mark the limit and end of all dialogue? We were proposing a dialogic reading of the text so the question is particularly pertinent. There’s this couplet by Robert Frost: “*we dance around in a ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows.*” For me, there’s no other book that fits Frost’s image as perfectly. I mean the feeling that we’re turning around and around and there’s this secret ‘sitting’ there in the middle—that we move, and it sits...

What I tried to establish is: Job is a dialogic text, radically so – not just in its multiplicity of voices but also of its multiplicity of genres. The truth of this text cannot be located in some assertion, in some distinct idea. It is a dialogic truth. The dialogue *reveals*

something. The text is a collision of voices and attitudes and that collision *shows* something. Perhaps here the Heideggerian notion of truth as unconcealment (the Greek *Alētheia*) is more appropriate – a notion of truth according to which an experience can be true, a play can be true. I want to offer now a reading of the text using notions that are external to the text, notions like *being* and *world*, *anxiety* and *wonder* – classic metaphysical concepts, specifically Heideggerian. I think of such a reading as analogous to e.g., a psychoanalytic reading (I mean in the sense that the latter also uses concepts that typically are external to the interpreted text – think of Bettelheim’s interpretations of fairy tales).

One of the defining features of metaphysical thinking is its reach: metaphysics concern itself with the whole. Unlike the sciences it does not restrict itself to this or that domain. It’s total. Now the Book of Job is a text that can also be called ‘comprehensive’ in the sense that the questioning there seem to embrace everything, embrace ‘the whole’. It’s a text where the nature of the world, of man, and of God all become at issue. The questioning already starts in the divine court – it’s unclear who really started the questioning, Satan articulates the problem but it is God who provokes him (“Hast thou considered my servant Job?” 1:8). A fundamental question is posed, a question that was never asked before at the divine court: is true piety possible? Perhaps, says the accuser, perhaps these humans are righteous because you (God) make it worth their while, right? Perhaps they do the right thing only because you ‘pay’ them?

At issue are the conditions of the possibility of piety. The test, the experiment that is the Book of Job, begins with a question. It’s very dramatic. And then after *Ha’satan* brutally crushes Job, the scene moves down to earth and Job too begins to ask questions. He asks: is the world really ‘administered’ (by God)

according to the doctrine of reward and punishment? They argue about ‘the fate of the wicked’ – a variant of the same issue. At stake is the moral order of the universe, even its order in general. They argue about the relationship between man and God. They ask what we humans can know, can hope for. The text concerns itself with all the Kantian questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What can I hope for?

The Book of Job is a text of radical questions that have metaphysical-esque totality; they encompass everything.

By way of its structure, the unfolding of its plot, the text even gives a brilliant answer to Kant’s all encompassing question: what is man? What is the ultimate nature of man? Think of Job, stripped of his world completely – de-worlded as it were – everything brutally taken from him step by step by step until he is left there naked. And what remains? What is Job after his world collapsed? He has nothing, but he does something. What? He tries to *make sense* of the situation. This is the essence of the dialogues with the friends – the heart of the book. It’s as if the text tells us that at bottom, peeled down to its core the human being is this craving for sense, this gesture, this struggle to understand. And this attempt is an attempt to ‘grasp’— which means both to understand and to take hold of: Job quite literally struggles to bind himself to the world – this is the full sense of ‘grasp’. The human being is at bottom this sense-making gesture. “Short of Days and Sated with Restlessness” (14:1) – the restlessness of sense-making! A profound answer to the question ‘what is man?’ – more or less aligned with Heidegger’s answer to that question.

Let’s talk about ‘world’. For Heidegger the world is not a multiplicity of things, but rather it is the ‘wherein of an act of understanding’. The world is the network of meaning where sense-making unfolds. And we can look at what happens to Job – I mean

Satan's brutal de-worlding of Job – as an externalization of what happens in an episode of anxiety, where the world stops speaking to us, stops mattering to us, where we cannot understand ourselves in and out of it. The narrative of the Book of Job can really be seen as an enactment of *Angst* in the same sense that, e.g., Oedipus Rex is an (external) enactment of the desires of a developing child. The desires, their repression and especially the revealing of these repressed materials, all these psychological processes receive in the play an external enactment. So we can try to read the Book of Job that way and see where that leads us. Notice, by the way, that at the end of the story (the close of the didactic narrative) Job gets everything back. Of course, if his kids die he can't get them back, but the text does not seem too concerned about this and presents it as if he gets everything back – which is exactly what happens in anxiety. In anxiety everything collapses and shatters and then, miraculously it all comes back – like nothing happened. Recall also how Heidegger describes anxiety in "What is Metaphysics?" as revealing the nothing – where we can think of that nothing as 'nonsense', the absolute impossibility of meaning or of making sense. That is at least, the Heideggerian narrative. That 'nothing', that 'nonsense' that always threatens, that's always in the background, is suddenly revealed in anxiety and our struggle to grasp the withdrawing world reveals something to us. This repulsion from the nothing reveals the *unheimlichkeit* of being-in-the-world – the *not-at-home* of our worldly existence. That we ever try, and ever fail to (truly, really, properly) understand ourselves in and out of the world – that's what Heidegger calls inauthenticity in *Being and Time*. And then there's the question – the fundamental metaphysical question that closes "What is Metaphysics?", namely, 'why are there beings at all and not rather nothing?' This is the question that, according to Heidegger, begins philosophy or

metaphysics. For Aristotle the subject of metaphysics is beings *as beings* – in the sciences we treat beings according to the measure of the relevant sphere of inquiry (e.g. a person as a biological organization, vs. a person as a citizen)– but in metaphysics we ask about beings as such. The question here is: how does a being ‘succeed’ to be a being at all. Not how the table came to be here – because someone built it. And not what something needs in order to be a table (surface, legs). Rather: how this table, this being, succeeds to be – i.e. to be a being – *at all*. That’s the metaphysical question (the traditional answer: because it persists in time).

And anxiety is crucial in this process, because, Heidegger tells us, only as we are attuned by this profound anxiety does the strangeness of a being ‘succeeding’ to be a being at all – and not nothing – strike us! The meaningfulness of things is revealed precisely against the background of the absolute breakdown of meaning revealed by anxiety. And when we stand in this posture *vis-à-vis* beings, we experience *wonder* – this fundamental attunement– where the fact that beings are beings and not nothing ‘hits us’, startles us. It sounds very, I don’t know... but it really isn’t.

Profound anxiety may lead to wonder. Makes it possible. In everyday existence all this is covered over – that which anxiety reveals and enables. So I want to suggest that there’s a movement here – and this really speaks to me personally – that the collapse associated with anxiety, this de-worlding experienced by Job, can lead to this primordial wonder. And here’s where I’m going with this: I think we can read God’s speeches as enacting this primordial wonder. Hence the movement of the text: from anxiety to wonder!

Now what does it mean to read God’s speeches according to the category of wonder? I mean as opposed to the sublime, for



example – because there’s this tradition of reading those speeches under the category of the sublime (Burke, Herder etc.). According to Kant the experience of the sublime has to do with transcending our ability to grasp – I will not get into it here. Wonder, on the other hand (as Heidegger understands it) is very different. It’s actually that experience wherein the usual, what is most commonplace to us, becomes the most unusual. The mundane is estranged. Wonder offers a radical estrangement of the whole. That’s that original wonder (*thaumazein*) that, according to Plato and Aristotle begins philosophy. So we can try to read God’s speeches – “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?”, “Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow?” “Hath the rain a father? ...Out of whose womb came the ice?” –and the descriptions of the animals, of giving birth – along these lines. These descriptions ‘estrangle’, make strange, what we take to be a normal part of life. God asks: how can you stand on the ground if it is made of grains?! (“When the dust groweth into hardness, and the clods cleave fast together?”) *how is it* that the grains coalesce into a hard ground? We never think about this. How does water freeze, where do day and night come from – the most ordinary things are here strange, remarkable! It’s not about the limits of the comprehensible (as in the sublime); it’s about making the ordinary, the common, wondrous; making the most usual into the most unusual (at least much of them are, they are too unruly to fit any single category too neatly...)

To conclude, I suggest seeing the Book of Job as enacting this movement from anxiety – from the de-worlding of Job, from him as the ‘naked that it is and has to be’ – to this wonder in the face of the whole offered by God’s speeches (and these speeches indeed have this totalizing aspect to them, it’s as if they go over everything). That perennial human passage from anxiety to

wonder, expressed in the primary movement of the Book of Job, is perhaps the secret to its incredible power and the fact that it resonates with us for centuries and millennia. I will stop now and let Jonathan comment.