

# THE UNITY OF THE BOOK OF JOB: Reflections on the First Three Chapters

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The Book of Job is a text picked up by many people in a wide variety of circumstances, for a wide variety of reasons. We find when we pick it up that it leads into the deepest questions—religious, philosophical, psychological—and has led many who have written it in contradictory directions. What follows is part of a larger project which is basically the record of my *lectio divina* while my father was dying. The included reflections on the first three chapters of *Job* might be of the most interest since these chapters broach most of the greatest difficulties (of all kinds) found in the text. As a record of meditative prayer it takes scholarship seriously, for the spiritual life too wishes to be exact, but its aim is not so much to understand the text as to have the text open oneself to God.

## Chapter One

The Book of Job has a beginning that is something like a fairy tale; it might easily—with little change of narrative tone—be told to children: “Once upon a time in the land of Uz there lived a man named Job who was faithful to God, a good man who never did evil.” Job’s name, according to Elie Wiesel, “means: where is father—where is our father.”<sup>1</sup> I am unsure whether he is speaking parabolically about the book, or has found a poetic echo in Job’s name in Hebrew which the more traditional Biblical scholars do not note. It is a good parable to put in the name, for the first question we might ask in the suddenness of suffering is where is our father? The father’s name might itself be a question, then, for Job is himself a father, and the question is not about him. We know where he is. He has seven sons and three daughters—a large-sized family, but not so excessive that the children could be thought of only in bunches lacking individuality, as must be the case with some modern tribal kings, and as perhaps was so for those long-lived generations between Adam and Noah, where only the chosen son is named—“and then he lived 800 years and had other children” (Gn 5). Job’s was a happy family, one in which the children took turns giving feasts, to which all of the sons and daughters would come. The number of Job’s happiness is ten, the number signifying perfection, and his familial happiness is surrounded by multiples of perfection—the animals (seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels) are nature’s halo around the just man.

Though the scholars generally deny it, I like to think that Job and his wife perhaps were with the children on occasion, but we know that in every case the morning after the feast Job would get up early and offer sacrifices for each of his children to purify them, lest by some unintentional fault they might have

sinned. What is clear, and what we can say without importing anything foreign into the social interactions of Job's day, is that the round of feasts is a week, and if the sons "each on his day" supply the feast, we can understand that Job's family accomplishes a liturgical mimesis of God's creative work. As each day is given its work by God, so each son takes up on his day the appropriate feast of praise. The familial and social world, under the patriarchy of Job, is the liturgically perfect response to the world created by God. It is no wonder that nature is a fruitful halo in Job's world. Perhaps Job offers his sacrifice of atonement each day, perhaps he offers it on the morning of the first day, after the round of feasts has concluded, before the next begins. But for what is he atoning?

What Job must have been afraid of was that his children might not be thankful enough for all they had received, that they might not have been thanking God for every delicious mouthful and every morsel and moment of joy together. Like Job, his children know where every good thing comes from, but Job offers his purificatory sacrifice because one or another might have at some moment of their happy feast forgotten the presence of God, and so unintentionally insulted the giver of the feast, present and invisible. Job's sacrifice is made lest his children enjoy their good gifts rather than use the gifts in enjoyment of the giver. Job's life is a constant liturgy; this is its perfection, the picture of his wealth is its visible halo, an impasto of gold to draw our attention and instigate our wonder.

Job does not *know*, indeed he does not even suspect, that any of his children have been at any moment less than perfectly grateful, less than perfectly faithful and responsive to the giver of the feast; he thinks that one of them might *inadvertently* have been so.<sup>2</sup> But if he did know that one of them had been for a moment ungrateful, and perhaps not inadvertently—though how anyone as blessed as his children could be so purposefully ungrateful as to neglect, much less to curse, God would be a terrible mystery to Job—if any of them had been so, had done so, what would Job not have voluntarily sacrificed to keep his child safe from the eternal memory of that ingratitude? What would he not have suffered to spare his child from the just wrath of the creator of heaven and earth? Would he not willingly suffer the loss of all his property, his health, even his life? Is that not what his sacrifices mean? For Job worshipped God and was faithful to him. Nothing could be more important to Job than this: that his children be as constantly grateful to God as he.

But what am I speaking of? There is not even the breath of this scandal. In his fear of unpurposed ingratitude Job's holiness appears. He is absolutely concerned about even the smallest thing in this regard. To be ungrateful or forgetful of one's parents or the good one has received from other human beings in the constant flow of human interaction is both forgivable and forgettable, for our debts in regard to all of these are relative, and our memories decay with our bodies. Job's concern is over a debt that is absolute, the debt of creation, the good of being and being able to know God, and so to be forgetful or ungrateful

is to forget that one exists and is able, or to wish not to be and to wish not to be able to know God. That wish is impossible for Job to imagine, so his fear is the momentary forgetfulness, the kind of thing that, among men, is excusable, a trifle, and has but small importance even among things relative. But in regard to God constant gratitude is but our duty. This Job knows. There was no one like Job in his time, for his happiness lies in his constant gratitude, which is his constant awareness of God; his gratitude is so constant it is purificatory. Upon such as these the weight of creation rests.

To think about Job, even in this happy time, is to feel something of that weight. Who could accept this burden of constant gratitude? Of constant awareness of grace, of God's gifts. After only *writing* this much I prefer to stop for a while and take a nap so that I might forget this thought, but Job rises early to offer sacrifices for each of his children. To do so is his happiness. May your sacrifice be acceptable for me, too, Job; let me turn the other way on my pillow. I do not wish to seem ungrateful, but I do not wish to have it as my constant and ever present task. But what does that feeling really mean? It means I wish for part of my life to be absolutely independent, not a gift, but mine to give, to use, to spend. I want my self to be my own. I wish to be independently wealthy, not to be living on capital given by someone else—someone to whom, even if he would say "do whatever you like, there is no need for accounting," I would with every penny at least still owe the unaccounted for debt of gratitude. Far better to say thank you once and for all, or perhaps on the anniversary of the gift send a card; but to be in debt for absolutely everything at all times, even for the word of thanks, even for the capacity to utter it, the capacity for the lips and tongue to move as the heart and mind direct—who can bear this? But Job does not merely bear it, Job is happy. As happy as Francis of Assisi naked and begging for old corn. As happy as Thomas Aquinas, who, rising for matins, writes of his happy love until three, until six in the morning, and goes out to teach. Already Job is too much for me. There is none like him upon the earth.

For gratitude is not at all a weight to Job, not at all a burden. He gets up early, and this is the first thing he does. He gets up early—as if the day after the feast, or the round of feasts, is the day of great celebration. He gets up early and he sacrifices once for each of them, not by rote, but by name. And the numbers themselves reveal the perfection of Job's sacrifices: seven signifying completeness, the unity of odd and even, the trinity of heaven united to the four elements of creation. Job's life is a conscious participation in and reminiscence of that creation, of the constant repetition of the seven days—the things and Sabbath rest of time proceeding from and returning to the eternal word. And ten children: the number of the law and perfection of life; the three women the commands oriented to contemplation and fear of the lord, the seven men lining out the responsibilities of the social life (and fulfilling them)—eschewing evil. And the women are always made a part of the feast, as if every element of the social life is imbued with contemplative prayer. Martha and Mary are not in separate rooms fulfilling separate duties in this family life. And this life has its

source in Job, in his perfect justice; he is its father; and Job's gratitude is eager, he names his gifts individually, it is perfect and complete; Job joins heaven to earth each day, early. Gratitude is not a weight, but an exaltation.

The folk or fairy tale aspect of the Job story reverberates through the fabulous counting up of his herds—"seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred she-asses, and a great number of work animals, so that he was greater than any of the men of the East" (1:3). There is no counting of the number of servants, no estimate of the number of tents, the number of families, the number of servant-children who both share in and are part of Job's wealth. And like all fabulous wealth there is no story of how it was accumulated. There is only a boundary condition: Job was careful not to do anything evil, so much so that he will say later that no man can make a case against him. God, we will soon discover, agrees. We must believe, then, that to the traveler Job gave refreshment, to the homeless and unemployed a home and employment, to the hungry food, to the sick comfort, to the outcast and distressed refuge and respect. If he fears even a passing instant of forgetfulness of God on the part of his children, how could he do less than all these things himself—at every turn of opportunity? And again Job is too much—at every turn of opportunity. At every turn. He must go out into the highway to look for those in need so they will not have to suffer the embarrassment, the indignity of coming to beg. Have you marked my servant Job? There is none like him upon the earth. A parallel question: have you seen Humility, she is out looking for you.

"When the day came for the sons of God to present themselves before the Lord, the adversary also came along with them" (1:6). With this shift of venue the earthly boundaries of Job's story, pressed to the limit by the fabulous wealth and constant gratitude, are entirely evaporated: we can no longer be sure of the separation, of where the earthly ends and the heavenly begins. Suddenly we are at a particular day in heaven during the legendary once upon a time of Job—heaven's time is folded into earth's story. Even knowing the story, knowing what is to come, we are already marvelously comforted, for the human time of Job is not just a drop in the eternal ocean of God's life, but this human time has *within it* one of the celebratory days of heaven, a day when all the sons of God present themselves to the Lord. A particular Sabbath in Job's life was a day in which all the sons of heaven appear before the Lord. Who would wish for a royal wedding, or a millennial change in their lifetime could one of their days be such a day as this? And just like Job's children, all the sons of God come to present themselves at the feast—even the black sheep of the heavenly family, who answers just like any wayward son or daughter when asked where he's been: "Oh, here and there, roaming the face of the earth" (1:7). The question is asked like a father who knows, and answered like a child who knows that the father knows the answer. In a comic tale the parent would ask "Did you happen to see Paddy at the pub then?" It is almost that clear; he has been roaming to and fro on the earth, no doubt then the adversary has been offered Job's refreshment.

God knows where he's been and what he's been up to, and so he asks directly: "Have you noticed my servant Job, how there is none like him on the earth, blameless and upright...?" (1:8).

Knowing this child of God, the roaming one, the one who, on the day when the sons of God appear, shows up as if by accident, as if just in the neighborhood—knowing this one intimately—I know what he doesn't want to notice and what he doesn't want to have noticed: he has appeared on the commanded day. God, quite naturally and agreeably, doesn't notice. He plays along with the wayward one's wishful thought that he can wander freely and entirely of his own accord; He pays no attention to the fact that the adversary has in fact *shown up* on the day appointed, but presumes it is the accidental visitation of someone with no particular place to go or ax to grind—the wandering of the man of independent means. God seems pleased by this surprise visitation, as if it has been awhile and the two of them have much to catch up on. But if God seems to accept at face value the accidental nature of the free spirit's visitation, his question is a subtle reminder of what the spirit wishes to forget, for to notice Job at all is to notice his constant gratitude, his glorious awareness of infinite debt, his knowledge (we might say) of what day it is. Job, for all his wealth, has never entertained the idea of independence from God.

Naturally the free spirit can—if need be—admit to gratitude, not to do so would be small and slavish *ressentiment*, but to be constantly grateful—what is that but an admission of dependence? And so, like anyone who does not wish to admit to a good immediately before him, he does not answer God's question directly but makes an excuse for the existence of the good—as if it were a fault. There is a kind of petulance here that arises from recognizing that someone who is in some way equal or inferior has surpassed oneself, and has surpassed us precisely where we might have been expected to succeed. For to make an excuse for something's existence is to recognize that existence and, in the moral realm, if a characteristic is not a fault, then the fault is not to have it. So the satan does not answer directly the question about the goodness of Job, for this would involve him in a sticky moral problem in which he would not come off looking well, but it is clear from his answer that he has, in fact, noticed Job; perhaps he has stopped by several times—a particularly impertinent beggar, a trying and sickly visitor—but he has been received generously and graciously each time. He explains away what he has seen, but this makes it clear that he has seen it, he has seen the grateful and gracious piety of Job—indeed, writing an assigned theme on the matter could not make it any clearer. Job has everything, he can afford to be generous and thankful: "Is it for nothing he honors you,...the earth is full of his possessions" (1:9-10). The satan has seen Job's piety, but he explains it into its scientific causes—at least he hypothesizes the cause: put forth your hand and touch all that he has, and watch the causes change the man.

So God allows the adversary power over all that is Job's.

It was a commonplace of medieval criticism to point out here that "Satan cannot harm just men as much as he wishes but only as much as he is

permitted. One should also consider that the Lord did not order Satan to strike Job but only gave him the power, because ‘the will to do harm is in any evil man on his own, but the power is only from God.’”<sup>3</sup> So, wrapped in the cloak of his own will, “the satan departed from the presence of the Lord” (1:12). And these two phrases are equivalent: “wrapped in one’s own will”, “departing from the presence of God”. The satan’s theory is that if we unfold Job’s piety, we will find him wrapped in his own will too. God’s theory—but what am I saying?—God’s knowledge is opposed to that theory. The test is invented by the adversary; the wager is made by the adversary; and the test and the wager are an attempt to exhibit that love has a cause and that the cause of love is always self-love. To one wrapped in his own will this is the only plausible story; such a one goes forth from the presence of God by his will, so his going from place to place in the earth is symbolic of his moral state—always going forth from the face of God. The depth of his being is to be wrapped in his own will, and the secret intention he finds in himself the adversary presumes to be present in all spirits; no doubt he presumes the purpose of creation itself is the self-glorification and self-aggrandizement of God, but to believe so is clearly marked, in *Job*, as departing, departing from the presence of God. Of course, to successfully prove that the secret cause is self-will would be exculpatory to a certain kind of spirit—if, in fact, he were seeking exculpation...

When sorrows come, they come not as single spies but in battalions. Before any single announcement can be finished, on a day of feasting at the house of his eldest son, everything is lost to Job save the four servants who announce the news. The wheel of fortune has turned faster than human language can say. Each of the four servants—if there are four—can barely finish his sentence before the next comes in to pour out more trouble. “And Job began to tear his cloak and cut off his hair, he threw himself prostrate on the ground” (1:20). But Job does not complain of God’s abandonment, of being forsaken or betrayed. All good things are lost to Job; he hugs the ground. The objects of his whole life’s love and care are all destroyed; he throws himself upon the ground. His tears raise insignificant clouds of dust, like tiny footsteps, as they fall upon the ground. As he tears his cloak in sorrow he opens his mouth and intones that most sublime magnificat: “The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” If gratitude is the test of all human happiness, then Job has passed his test.

It is not said whether the four servants—if they are four—notice Job’s response. Who is there on earth like unto Job?

## Chapter Two

It is a feast day in heaven, a day when all the sons of God appear before the Lord. How many of Job’s days are there between these days when the sons of God appear before Him? Is there a day between these days when Job has not appeared before the Lord? And if there is no such day for Job, how much less

could there be such a day for one of the heavenly beings? According to the literal Hebrew each of Job's sons gave the feast on his own day of the week, so that each day it was assigned to one of them to prepare the feast of thanksgiving. But one of the sons of heaven has been looking for a different day—roaming the earth. So he says. We know, however, that he has been very busy in one particular place. This time every reader knows as well as God that the wayward free spirit has been exceptionally busy and in one place. Has he noticed Job? In his roaming; in going through the earth.

This time, among the sons of God, the satan not only comes along, but "presents himself,"<sup>4</sup> he not only comes among them, but comes with them as one whose attendance is expected. We might consider this an improvement, but he is more probably still wrapped in his own will; he has made a bet and he is not so cowardly as to pretend he is not expected. But again, to the direct question he refuses direct answer, not only to the question 'where have you been?', but also to 'have you noticed?'. To answer the latter question would imply a recognition of what Job does, and what the wandering spirit does not. To answer the former honestly would imply that something important hung on the bet and he had been watching (at least!) the game he has instigated very closely. Answers must, at all costs, be avoided; so he offers another *explanation* for Job: "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life, but put forth your hand and touch his bone and his flesh..." Let us explain away gratitude to God that we may not be discovered to be lacking; let us make ourselves clothes to cover our nakedness. The furious business of Satan—so quickly did he act that the messengers trip each other up in reporting their news—and its unaccountable failure, is covered over by "roaming here and there" and then an explanation that the passing incidents with Job were really insignificant: you can't expect good data from an inconclusive and partial test like that.

Perhaps he is not even lying. Perhaps the adversary really thinks that the death of one's children is insignificant; this would be natural, for to think such a thing significant would be an admission of lack of independence, a confession of the extent to which one's own freedom and good is bound to the freedom and good of others—even if originally through one's own choice. That freedom might give its self to someone is not even imaginable to the spirit wrapped in its own will. And a freedom that is bound by its own choice even where it would not choose, even in suffering—which it would not choose, even to sorrow—which it would not choose.... A freedom which does not roam here and there about the earth even when suffering reports day after day as the assignment, a freedom that stays there and suffers—what kind of freedom is that? What kind of slavish, sickly, impotent, sluggish spirit would bear this out even to the edge of doom? The kind that loves its own life of course! The kind that is happy to escape alive—though it lose all else it still has its health and the occasional opportunity for pleasure. Thus thought the wanderer. Job, on the other hand, holds fast to his integrity, but his integrity is not identical with his own will.

“And the Lord said to the adversary, He is in your power; only spare his life.”

“And the Satan went forth from the face of the Lord and smote Job...” (2:6-7). He is quick to leave; quick to smite. And so the adversary is allowed under Job’s skin. And Job in his illness is not taken to a hospital or cared for in a comfortable bed or given the usual medicines, he is instead cast out beyond the walls of the city; he sits on the garbage heap and scrapes his sores with a potsherd. And even Job’s wife appears to suggest the devil’s business: “Why don’t you curse God and die?” (2:9). Now if we were to give a psychological explanation of *Job*, here is where we should begin.

It is not necessary to think, with Jung, and more recently with Jack Miles<sup>5</sup>, that God has aspects of his personality that are dark to him, things that he needs to discover with the help of the adversary. Though He uses the word ‘incite’(2:3), it is not necessary to think that God is incited, like a child by a petulant adversary, against his own good friend. It is perfectly plausible to think that God here is as ironic as the satan. God’s irony is not an attempt to hide any meaning out of fear of discovery or avoidance of love, but to show the hider of meaning that He knows perfectly well how meaning is hid. It is perfectly sensible to hear God here mocking his waywardest son by using his own favorite game rather than discovering a dark side to himself when he says, ‘you moved me against him, and for what—nothing? And see, he stands fast.’ The satan has been given the *carte blanche* of divinity, God is saying, and what has he accomplished? The satan has moved everything in Job’s world against him, and for what? ‘And see, he stands fast’—that last line pinches. And perhaps this mockery would incite the demon to go even further. Let him go to the very rim of being if he must (and if he has not driven Job there already); we will pick this possibility up momentarily.

If we are to talk psychologically, let us stay among the human beings: with Job and his wife. And let us recall that in *Genesis*, the creation of man is not complete until the creation of woman. That Adam must inform God of this lack is rather humorous, but it is Adam who informs God of his own incompleteness, for when Adam sees all the creatures and, seeing them in God, knows all their names without ever having been taught, he sees immediately that there is none that is suitable helpmeet to him (2:20). Being informed that the temporal creature requires, besides knowledge of the eternal, some temporal aid, God answers Adam’s prayer—in the flesh.<sup>6</sup> Adam rejoices. Mankind knows itself and begins. St. Augustine explains the psychological significance of this symbolism by saying that the whole human being has two functions.<sup>7</sup> One, symbolized by Adam, is attention to the eternal; the other, symbolized by Eve, is attention to the temporal. Both are necessary for the continued existence of the human being. In fact, the being is not complete without both. It is as if, without Eve, Adam would not know how to feed himself—would not know that he has to; and without Adam, there are just animals in the garden—none of them knowing what they are, or what for, they do not even have the distinction of

names. We might, without stretching of modern or antique language, call these two aspects of the human being wisdom and science, but the science which deals with the world is to have its head covered by wisdom. Sin comes to be when science forgets wisdom and turns to make itself its own good, or in other words when mankind turns from contemplation of the eternal to make the temporal world it deals with (and the sensible pleasures of which such science speaks) its entire and complete good. So Job and his wife were one; but here their division is exhibited. Here she is introduced as a separate character; until this time we must assume their unity. It is as if, under the weight of this suffering, a part of himself wishes to revolt. She is a part of himself, and until this great suffering she has not had occasion to speak differently; but now this part wishes to curse. And this is true about suffering, and agrees with the psychological data: under terrible suffering do we not wish to revolt? to curse? But do we wish this with our entire soul?

Of course, if one considers the temporal world and its pleasures to be the whole and complete good, then, in lacking it, it makes sense to curse God and die—for everything is already lost. Job's wife suggests exactly what science can know of the truth: if you have none of the goods of the world, the world is no good. So, curse God and die. The psychological symbolism Augustine suggests from Genesis and St. Paul is applicable, too, in *Job*. Job's wife suffers despair, and so does any other half human—male or female—which forgets that the being which makes good is entirely different from the beings that are made so. In the absence of all the good things of the world, can we say that all of being is bad, can we curse God? It is a logical possibility, even an emotional possibility, but if we can ask if it is right, if there is this hesitation of the mind, must it not be because there is some other good thing operating—the mind's ability to judge of good and evil, which is still (is it not?) a good thing. And whence is that good thing, whence its principle and power of...hesitation even under this severe and sudden torment?

Without tracing any of these thoughts so far Job, even when prompted with the appropriate line, does not waver: "We accept good things from God; and should we not accept evil?" If the satan's experiment proves anything, it has now proven that Job loves God for nothing, for no cause (*cf.* 1:9, 2:3). Job's body is delivered over to the adversary and the adversary fails, and we now might expect that even as he fails another feast is toward in heaven, at which the Satan will appear, as usual, having his last excuse: hope lasts as long as life. And one might be persuaded to think that the final act of this unfinished fairy tale drama might seal, from man's side, a new covenant between man and God, one not based on the law, but on love. In that final act God will allow the adversary even to take the just man's life. Perhaps he will allow it over and over and over again, until the last of the just are expunged from the face of the earth. And when the day comes for all the heavenly beings to appear again before the Lord, the adversary will come also, and present—himself; he will have no further explanations to offer. There will be nothing else to turn to. There will be

no stone to turn—except one. On that day the adversary will have to admit that there is no one so faithful as Job and the fairy tale story will suddenly reveal itself as having been not about Job and not about Job's testing, but about God's love and patience even with the most wayward of his sons, a love and patience in whose passionate action some of his other sons are allowed to participate. Such are the just who suffer.

Thus does Job piece up in himself what is lacking to God. For Job willed to be grateful to God in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until even the most wayward can do nothing but notice the single task of all the heavenly beings—even those lowly ones on earth. And if even those sons made of mortal earth can do it, even those who suffer as the upright Job, what makes it so difficult for you? There is no one left to test; the man's love has exceeded the power of his natural life. It is impossible, but it is now noticeable. In fact, now it *must* be noticed; it cannot be avoided or forgotten. The impossible has been achieved—by a man. God, who was willing to bet on man, has won.

*Muß es sein? Es muß sein.* Must it be this way? Must it be suffered blindly and without knowledge, as it is here, as Job himself suffers without knowing the purposes of heaven? If it were possible to volunteer for this position, who could dare it? For might not the volunteer be motivated by pride, or by the desire to prove or repay or justify? Would not knowledge, here, engender hubris? Elie Wiesel says "this is probably the most subtle [of all the injustices done to Job]: *he never learns the full truth.*"<sup>8</sup> But, first, this injustice is universal, for none of us ever learns the full extent of his own story (and in this we might be grateful too); and second, it is only because of Job's lack of knowledge that we can see the extremity of his heroism: the nothing which causes his love. Job does not volunteer for suffering for the glory of God; it is brought upon him, and it is terrible. So terrible that a part of him wishes to revolt. He does not know anything of what it may be worth, and the story does not say his suffering is redemptive, that the adversary (for example) gives up or breaks down or weeps in recognition of his willful heartlessness. But look, Job answers it; and he answers it even though that very part of him which is his wife suggests that he turn his back and leave life cursing God. He will not let go of God or righteousness though he has no cause, no reason, no capacity to guess why he should hang on, or even how he can hang on. Perhaps we should read that little interchange between man and wife as the dialogue of the just man's soul with his mind, and his soul refuses to let go of living before God. For much of life it may well be that the mind suffices to lead the soul in the right way—for the world, too, is a book in which we read of God, but here the soul reaches out where the mind sees nothing, and the nothing is palpable and darkness, and in the face of that darkness the mind desires to revolt.<sup>9</sup> And that revolt might even be ... expected, expected of—

Tarry spirit; whither wander you? There are no further excuses, no available explanations, no further experimental variables and no further subjects for the adversary to place between himself and the face of God. God's will

throughout the story is that the adversary accept the love of God, see his own error, the poverty of his power against love, and the perversity of his proceeding against it. When the adversary sees this (which he will see only when there is nothing else left to see—when the world is a barren wasteland and he alone is returned to tell) he will, of his own free will, turn back from roaming the face of the earth. He can wish Job had never existed, but now wherever in the abyss he roams he knows otherwise, and this knowledge is a sign not only of his failure, but of his self-delusion. And knowledge of a delusion destroys it, and the truth sets free a cry of gratitude. And on that day all the heavenly beings will appear again before the Lord, and present themselves before his face.

But the fairy tale of Job does not continue as this fairy tale I have outlined, in the manner we might expect. At least it does not continue so in the Book of Job. After refusing his wife's counsel, three of Job's friends appear from distant lands; they will counsel him further. They have heard of his sudden trials and have come to give him ...comfort. Seeing his sorrow they weep; they tear their cloaks and sit in silence for seven days and seven nights. All the signs of Job's life repeat themselves. It is as if each day of creation, each act of God those days described, even the day sanctified by God's rest for praise, each of the days Job had handed over to his sons for their liturgy, has now within it some element over which good men must sorrow. And so they do. It is as if all of creation, in each of its days, groans, here, with Job, on his dungheap.

And the prose narrative comes to an end without coming to a conclusion; the folk tale storytelling is replaced by theological discussion, which, so very strangely, is in verse. The counterpointing narratives of country and heaven disappear, and we hear the playing out of an earthly drama, but now a drama of argument, not action, a setting out of *logos* not *mythos*. And the *logos* works only from the side of Job and his friends. And for a long time there is no *Logos* from heaven. What the comforters offer is bare argument, barren science; as if they were deriving a general solution to the problem of a quadratic equation. This barrenness will be, in fact, a great deal of the problem, perhaps the root of the matter, for Job. For Job becomes offended; but that is to come.

"And Job's friends sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (2:13).

### Chapter Three

"After this Job opened his mouth..."<sup>10</sup>

That Job's friends are silent for so long, that they sit with him in dust and ashes, having wept and rent their garments, shows that they are, indeed, Job's friends. Only love can be silent for so long in such an intimate nearness. This is the last element of the folk tale: the long silence of the comforters of Job. It is the deep humanness of this silence, its unspeakable and so unspoken love, its very distance from poetry and speech that perhaps invited the later writer—if

there was a later writer—to insert the speeches that follow, and to know it was necessary to shape them into poetry. It is because he listened to and in this silence that he could write. Just so, it is because of their love, the perfect silent presence of his friends for so long that Job, after seven days, feels able to speak.

It is generally accepted among scholars that the Book of Job has been edited or redacted here; that at this point an old folk tale and a new problematic are joined. And it is generally thought that there are some imperfections in this redaction, that, for instance, the character of Job in the two stories is considerably different; they do not fit together; they are not the same man. But without attempting to guess at the various times and purposes or sources of redaction (about which there might be everlasting, if not eternal, disagreement) let us note that the book as we see it here—breaking from folk tale to speeches of complaint and response, indictment and defense, speeches of lawyerly complexity in some of the Bible's most powerful poetry—this redactive breaking and joining, this cutting and pasting of disparate parts, which makes both the folk tale and the speeches (were each considered separately) into something different, has a mimetic counterpart: it is a lot like life. The fairy tale of childhood (however difficult or happy) is broken by a dawn of rational self-consideration and consideration of the world; the speechless infant learns to speak and later—as the world breaks in—to bless or curse, but the infant, the young child and the embittered or saintly man are all somehow 'redacted'. They are all joined—however diverse their spirits—into the one person's life. We become ourselves. So, too, with the Book of Job as it has come down to us. It has become *Job*. And many of these redactions, as we look at our own life, are surprising and troubling. Some as surprising and troubling as Job's redaction here when he opens his mouth and curses the day of his birth, like Prometheus on his rock, Oedipus at his self-discovery, or Lear's "let chaos come again"—"for why is light given to a man whose way is hidden and hemmed in by God?" (3:23).

As many readers in many generations have considered, the change in Job here does seem to be a change in character, for the patient Job had told his wife "shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (2:10)—a sentence which also confesses to being hemmed in by God. But that Job did not complain. The earlier Job seems to admit that a man does not *know* the way he will travel, but faith in God only requires each step be taken with gratitude and justice, and where the path goes is entrusted to the maker of paths—the Lord who gives and takes away. But here Job curses the very entrance to the path of his life, that path which, it now seems, tempted him forward by joy only to abandon him in the barren waste, more horrible than the grave, which Job now discovers his life to be. He wishes to reverse the command of creation—"that day, let it be darkness" (3:4)—and he is become, it seems, "bitter in soul" (3:20). He wishes to uncreate the day of his birth and the night of his conception, to make them disappear from the calendar of days. His life is more horrible than the grave because here one's hopes are mocked—

“what I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls” (3:25); in the grave it may turn out that the king has only rebuilt ruins for himself—for his city falls again after him, but the ruin of the kingdom is not then the king’s concern, and in the grave even the wicked cease from trouble, and the weary rest, and the slave is free of his master. But Job, above ground and lost, is not at ease. There is not ease forthcoming; he hopes for it and it comes not. He has no rest, but trouble comes:

I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;  
I have no rest, but trouble comes (3:26).

It seems his cursing of life is complete. Though he has not cursed God directly, he has made a long and heartfelt incantation to revoke one of His works. But if we listen closely to his execrations (3-10) and the lament he breaks down into thereafter (11-26), then, just here in the last line of his complaint, we can hear the undertone which connects the complaining Job with the earlier, more openly sublime character, steadfast in his refusal to curse. Job wishes for ease, for rest, not for death. Or, he imagines even death as allowing an activity—rest, surcease of sorrow. Or, more accurately, he imagines death as encompassing the dissolution of earthly passions—those of princes, of the wicked, of prisoners and slaves all equally—but this dissolution of passion is an experience of the living soul: it is experienced as rest. Death is attractive because it offers a calmness of life; and for this rest we hear not only Job’s hope, but his heartfelt gratitude, which he imagines as the gratitude a prisoner and a slave would feel upon their release, or a king unburdened of his majesty, and so in his desire for rest we hear his desire, still, to be grateful even to the God who has hedged his way. To rest in gratitude for rest. For where could the just and perfect man rest but in gratitude? Job wishes to be relieved because in his constant pain and physical and emotional torment he is pulled away from the act which gives meaning to life: gratitude, in the liturgies of which he had brought up his sons. The life for which, until now, he had always been able to bless God now eludes him in the constant pain of his body. He seems now hemmed in, not just by God but from God, hemmed in in such a way that he feels God is unavailable. He would rejoice exultingly (22) in death because he thinks that his path, and God’s making of it, would no longer be hidden from him.

Job does not, like Lear, wish chaos come again; even at the highest rhetorical point of his complaint he does not carry himself off to that. He does not curse God; he does not condemn the world; he does not even repent his daily ineffectual (it now seems) sacrifices; he does not renounce gratitude or call praise foolishness. He does not choose not to be—even if he wishes for it. He finds himself incapable of gratitude or praise or the vision of what God is up to in his life, but *he wishes not to be so*; he wishes to be thankful, in rest, for rest. He damns the day of his birth *because* were he stillborn he “would now be lying quiet” (3:13). He wishes for that good he knows everyone from prince to slave

is grateful for. Beneath his complaint it is almost possible to hear another ancient prayer "eternal rest grant unto me, O Lord; *et lux perpetua luceat me.*" This is not a curse of God.

Job does not believe that the hedging of fate which afflicts him is good, that sorrow is good, that his suffering is spiritually helpful—if he does so believe, he certainly does not say so here—but he does, in the face of his most terrible affliction, wish to be grateful. The character of the original Job, the one who blessed God to his face upon the death of all his household and the loss of all his property, is not completely defaced by the onslaughts of the adversary. He had trained himself in thankfulness, and by so constant an awareness of God's presence, brought up in himself the desire to give thanks constantly, a desire which hides even here in his curse of himself, even among these rocks. We see in the oft-supposed changed Job the heart of the same Job like whom there is no one upon the earth: the Job who rises early in gratitude.

There is a story Elie Wiesel tells of an evening in Auschwitz whose point, I think, is the same as this.<sup>11</sup> Wiesel tells the story of three rabbis, who one night in the camp bring God to trial for the torture and death of his children. At the trial no one spoke on God's behalf, and, in conclusion, He was convicted. The child Elie feels like weeping, but he does not weep. Then the rabbis became aware of the time, that it was the time for the evening prayer; and so they began to pray. The rabbis wished to rest in understanding, but understanding was not granted them. Their trial and condemnation was an expression of this desire to rest in understanding; their condemnation, then, arose from the same source as their prayer—the desire for an understanding with God. And turning from condemnation to prayer does not turn their passion—for the tap-root of both acts is the same. So, too, with Job's curse, which is a curse not of God, but of his life's path, which has taken him to where he feels incapable.

And here, perhaps, another psychological truth becomes visible: it is not possible to lament except in the presence of love and out of love. Love is the deep well from which arises Job's complaint, as it is of the laments of Jeremiah and some of the Psalms. A Stoic does not lament because the part of him that is divine is his reason: it is part of and returns to the eternal fire, and the weeping part, the part of passion is merely animal. But the Judeo-Christian story is that the particular soul, which is more than the function of reason, is the created image of God, the creature comes to life because of God's breath. And praise is only possible for—and is the proper act of—this finite, rational, breathing creature. It is possible, because the creature is finite and must breathe, for our kind of creature to be oppressed by evil, suffering and pain, for breathing to be tortuously difficult, and it is possible that under such pressure the creature may deny or forget or abandon or wish to abandon its function—God knows it has been done under considerably less constraining circumstances—but such apostasy is not necessary. Under the pressure of such evils and the constant distraction of pain that song of praise which is always the proper function of man expresses itself as lamentation. Job laments. Perhaps, in fact, being silent—

as a Stoic—under the pressure of such adversity is a sign that the adversary has won, but the Phalarian bull which the world has become to Job has not stopped his mouth, though it may force his music into a different key.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Job," in *Peace, In Deed: Essays in Honor of Harry James Cargas*, ed. Zev Garber and Richard Libowitz (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> Wiesel suggests that Job had neglected the education of his children; they are having such a good time that Job is afraid of punishment. He puts this together with the fact that Job's virtues are listed in the order inverse from the usual, perhaps indicating that his real motive is fear of sin (*ibid.*, p. 121). But to start with perfection and go down to the smallest virtue might in fact imply that Job is careful all the way down to the least thing; his greatness did not go to his head, so that he exhibits the best and highest qualities, but has feet of earth about the lesser ones. The happiness of his children's feasts exhibits the blessing on Job, not the questionability of his virtue, which God, in any case, considers unmatched. Wiesel also mentions the talmudic and midrashic sources which say that Job was an advisor of Pharaoh's who, when asked whether the Jews should be freed, said nothing. "Neutrality is always sinful for it helps the oppressor, never his victims. That is why he was punished" (*ibid.*, p. 122). Perhaps Wiesel is looking for a way to find fault with Job in order to understand what comes next. God says otherwise to the Satan: there is none like him upon the earth.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Literal Exposition on Job*, trans. Anthony D'Amico (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Thomas is quoting the *Glossa Ordinaria* on Genesis 3:1.

<sup>4</sup> Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1995); *cf.* pp. 309, 408 among others.

<sup>6</sup> I find it difficult to believe that this story is the product of human wit, it seems rather to be the source of it. Were men and women related in any other way there would be no good jokes about their relations: the jokes would be merely abusive of one side or the other (or both).

<sup>7</sup> What follows is motivated by Augustine's discussion in *De Trinitate*, Book 12.

<sup>8</sup> Wiesel, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> A whole philosophy invents itself here; its figure might be Camus' Dr. Rieux, in *The Plague*, or Ivan Karamazov.

<sup>10</sup> In a footnote to his essay, *On Job: God-talk and the suffering of the innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987) Gustavo Gutierrez claims that Aquinas, among others, seeks to "moderate the tone of Job's protests" (p. 110 n1). I do

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not find this to be an accurate representation of what St. Thomas is doing. Job's cursing (*maledicere*), he says, "is nothing else but speaking evil (*malum dicere*)," which can be done in three ways—causing evil, as a judge's condemnation, calling down evil (as our usual sense of curse), or disclosing an evil of the past, present, or future. Job is clearly doing the latter, revealing how evil that day really was which came disguised as a blessing—the day of his birth (Cf. Aquinas, *op. cit.*, p. 100). That it is natural for a sufferer to complain, that no one would choose a life of ceaseless dying, as Gutierrez, quoting Fray Louis de León, affirms (p. 110n. 1), Aquinas too says. E.g.: "For reason cannot remove the condition of nature. Now it is natural to the sensual nature that it be delighted and rejoice in fitting things and be pained and saddened over harmful things" (99). "For even if life itself is desirable, a life subject to misery is not" (p. 105). "[Job shows] that it would have been useless—no, harmful rather—for him to have been kept alive" (p. 106).

<sup>11</sup> See the "Introduction" by Robert McAfee Brown in Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (New York: Schocken, 1995), vii.