

# THE FALL AND RISE OF JOB THE DISSENTER

MOSHE REISS

One of the central theological questions posed by the Bible is debated in the Book of Job. That question is: Why do the righteous suffer? And a corollary question is: If the righteous suffer, then why be righteous? The question of the suffering of the innocent can be expanded to the question: Does a moral order exist in the world? These questions are addressed in the Hebrew Bible in a "strange and wonderful" book written by an unknown Jewish author about a fictitious protagonist who is not a Jew. The question posed by the Book of Job is in fact a universal question. That may be the reason why more has been written about Job than about any other biblical book except Psalms, and why the interpretations are remarkably diverse.

The book disturbs the harmony of biblical teaching about God's moral order of the world. It makes room for chance, for the irrational. It refuses to soften that which everyone seeks to control; suffering and misfortune. It opposes the clarity of a moral order as the law of history. Job therefore finds it necessary to seek an alternative moral order by which to explain his plight.

In the Prologue, the reader is informed that Job's anguish was initiated when God boasted to Satan: *'Did you pay any attention to My servant Job? There is no one like him on earth, a sound and honest man who fears God and shuns evil'* (1:8). Apparently Satan had not noticed Job, until God turns Satan's attention upon him. Satan then challenges God and suggests a direct relationship between Job being *whole and upright* and his wealth. He intimates that Job's behavior is a good investment. Would Job fear God were it not for the benefits? If he were not healthy, wealthy and rich in children, would he would still *fear God and shun evil*? Satan alleges that there are no truly religious people in the world, all men are self-interested. God disputes such logic, and declares Job to be His best example. Satan constructs a wager; he can get Job to curse God. God approves Satan's plan to test Job's faith.

*Moshe Reiss, a former resident of New Haven, Connecticut., is a rabbi and has a B.A. from Brooklyn College and a Ph.D. in economics from Oxford University. He was a lecturer at Columbia University, and assistant to the rabbi of Yale University. He is now a resident of Israel, where he writes and lectures. He has written a book Messengers of God, which appears on his website: [www.moshereiss.org](http://www.moshereiss.org). He was recently a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Leuven.*

God is convinced that Job will respond appropriately even to undeserved suffering. He imposes one condition on Satan: *'Keep your hands off his person'* (1:12). The protection of Job's person did not extend to his children, despite his having taken responsibility for their moral and religious upbringing, and making burnt offerings for each of them in case *'my sons have sinned and in their heart blasphemed'* (1:5). In this sense, the testing of Job could be compared to the testing of Abraham at the Akedah, but not even Abraham merited a statement as glorified as *'no one [is] like him on earth.'*

Job does not curse God. Indeed, he blesses God, despite the loss of his children and his material possessions. When Satan says Job will curse God, the actual Hebrew word for "curse [*k'llal*]" is not used, but rather the euphemism "bless [*barukh*]" (1:11). This word is also used when Job's wife is quoted (2:9). The meaning of "curse" is clear from the contexts, but the Narrator refuses to use the term "curse God." The patient Job defeats Satan when he says: *'The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away, Blessed be the name of God'* (1:21).

God wins the contest. Then God taunts Satan once again, and offers him a second chance. It is said of Job: *'He persists in his integrity'* (2:3). Satan argues that Job *'will give away all he has to save his life'* (2:4). God then responds: *'He is in your power, but spare his life'* (2:4). Satan afflicts Job with ulcerous, foul-smelling boils from his scalp to his soles. He is reduced to scratching his body with a broken piece of pottery; symbolic of how little remains of his property.

With God's approval, he becomes a human guinea pig to prove God's power. The contest with Satan made Job a victim and a scapegoat of God's boasting. Thus Job's suffering is related to what can be considered God's repeated display of pride to His loyal servant. As Job himself notes, the *'country has been given over to the power of the wicked'* (9:24). One could even suggest that God provoked Satan. God finally says: *'You have achieved nothing by provoking Me to ruin him'* (2:3). What can it mean that Satan provoked God? Does God need to prove some point to the Satan? Apparently so:

God . . . [has a] need to know the truth about humankind . . .

Job suffers to prove God's integrity and lay to rest the doubt  
the Satan has raised that perhaps no one in the wide world real-

ly reverences God for his own sake but that everyone is simply trying to use him.<sup>1</sup>

Is this God consistent with the God who speaks out of the whirlwind? God is usually perceived as omniscient, a concept that further aggravates and exacerbates the problem. If God knew in advance that Job would not curse Him, why did He allow the experiment? Why test and punish one of His servants to satisfy one of His subordinates? Why does God not dismiss Satan out of hand? Job's being punished by Satan with God's approval is the equivalent of God punishing Job for no reason.

#### JOB THE SCAPEGOAT

Job defines himself as a scapegoat: *'He has made me a byword of the people and a public scapegoat'* (17:6, author's translation). The concept of a public scapegoat was common among ancient cultures. Evil was considered contagious and was transmitted from the infected person. This process could be arrested by the death or punishment of a public person or animal symbolizing the evil. In ancient Rome, on the day preceding the Ides of March a man clad in white was taken out to the limits of the city boundary and beaten in order to banish the evil from the city. In the Bible, a goat called Azazel was not killed but sent into the wilderness to carry off the evils of the people of Israel. This ritual took place on the Day of Atonement, when God was asked to forgive the people for their sins. The connection with sacrifice was that two goats were chosen, one for sacrifice and one for the wilderness. According to the Mishnah (as distinct from the Bible), the goat Azazel was taken to a cliff and pushed to death (Yoma 6:2-6.)

Job's "friends" and the community make him a scapegoat. They need Job to be guilty, therefore they declare him so. Their concept of religion has a built-in need for a scapegoat. *'Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or were the upright cut off? . . . Those who plow iniquity . . . By the breath of God they perish'* (4:7-9). If Job does not agree, they will effectively excommunicate him:

*'He has alienated my brothers from me, my relatives take care to avoid me, my intimate friends have gone away and the guests in my house have forgotten me. My maid servants regard me as a stranger . . . my servant does not answer me. My*

*breath is unbearable to my wife and my stench to my brothers.  
Even the children look down on me . . . all my dearest friends  
recoil from me' (19:11-18).*

One is led to wonder whether the evil perpetrated by Job's human companions is worse than the evil perpetrated by God. Job has been a model of pious behavior. His experience now disproved the common belief that virtue and suffering are incompatible. He had not deceived people, he had respected women, upheld justice, been generous to the poor, hospitable to strangers, had not been idolatrous and has not hidden his sins (31:1-39). He had respected all of God's commandments and in effect asked God: Why have You punished me? He is wealthy and influential, in fact the most influential man in the community: *'If I smiled at them, it was too good to be true, they watched my face for the least sign of favor, As their chief, I told them which course to take, like a king living among his troops and I led them wherever I chose' (29:24-25).*

The animosity and violence shown by his friends, described as suitable for a sinner, is surprising. From Eliphaz: *' . . . writhe in pain all their days . . . [you] sent away widows empty-handed and crushed the arms of orphans' (15:21, 22:9).* From Bildad: you will be *'driven from the light into the darkness, . . . without . . . a single survivor' (18:18, 19).* From Zophar: he *'used to suck vipers' venom . . . [and] destroyed the huts of the poor plundering houses . . . his avarice never satisfied' (20:16,19-20).* Can this possibly be the same man described by God in such exemplary terms as *'No one like him in the world' (1:8)?* There is a striking dissonance between Job's virtues as defined by God and those accusations voiced by his friends. Job has rebelled against what he had formerly believed to be the natural order of things, that the community – led by his friends – still believes. In their eyes, Job has become the enemy of God and the enemy of the people. The friends became the zealous defenders of God.

#### A TEST OF GOD

This contest between Job and Satan raises questions about the ethical and moral order of the world. Why would God play such a game with Job? The book can be seen as a test of God, rather than of Job. The question asked is: Does a moral God exist or what is the character of God?

By responding out of the whirlwind, God makes this a theophany, comparable to those of Abraham (Gen. 15:17), Moses (Ex. 19:16), and Elijah (I Kg. 19:11-12). Job requests that God respond (31:35). God does not answer, but rather challenges Job himself. What does/can Job know? *'Who are you obscuring my intention with your ignorance'* (38:2). God then talks of Creation, of the nature of the world, and of its wild things -- the lion, the braying donkey, the wings of the ostrich, the flowing-maned horse and the flying hawk. God is not responding to Job's personal quest, and Job does not respond to God. Job's first response is a verse (40:4) that has more varied translations than any this author has seen and includes *'what can I reply?'* Then Job states that *'I spoke once, and I will not answer, twice, and I will add nothing'* (40:5). This is a non-response to God's non-response. It appears that this is not sufficient for God, so God retorts by more clearly challenging Job:

*'Do you really want to reverse My judgment, put Me in the wrong and yourself in the right? Has your arm the strength of God's? . . . I will be the first to pay you homage, if your right hand is strong enough to save you'* (40:8-9,14).

Is God suggesting that even He is unable to control the world that He has created? He asks Job if he knows or ever worries about the birthing and the feeding of the world's undomesticated animals, the ranges necessary for wild animals. You know little and care less about My world. Maybe the world was created for the Behemoth and the Leviathan and not for man, and consequently there can be no moral causality or retributive justice. But Job never questions or denies God's power, only His justice. He asks Him to justify Himself. God responds that He does not need man's justification. God refuses to be a heavenly bookkeeper. God's speeches emphasize the undeniable difference between man and God.

God in effect says to Job: If you cannot understand the mysteries of nature how can you penetrate My relation to man? You are man-centered; I am not. God must be free to be concerned or not about man. Job responds accepting his ignorance: *'Therefore I have uttered that which I did not understand, things beyond me that I knew not'* (42:3). What changed Job's mind? *'Before, I knew You only with the hearing of my ears, but now I have seen You with my own eyes'* (42:5). Job both hears and sees God. This confirms the theophany. *'I withdraw what I have said, and recant [or: repent] as I am but dust*

and ashes' (42:6).<sup>2</sup> What is Job recanting or repenting? He was not a sinner, as God will attest in a moment. He repents that he mistakenly thought the world ran under the basis of a moral order. He has heard and seen that it does not. He has introduced in a very personal way a new dimension of religion.

God has no retort to Job's specific questions because no answers exist. He does not mention retribution, which is the theme of the dialogues and of Job's questioning. God insists on asking questions rather than answering Job's questions. The first series of questions relate to the Creation of the world, Job's lack of knowledge of such and of the the mystery of nature. The world is not Man-centered; thus Man cannot govern the world. The second series of questions addresses the management of the world. In this God seems to admit it is hard to be God. Can anyone vanquish evil? Thirdly, the Behemoth (hippopotamus?) and the Leviathan (crocodile?) may be monsters but they are God's monsters. Thus, God tells Job that in fact he understands nothing. Neither Job nor any human can understand the moral order of the world.

God then rejects the logic, wisdom and orthodoxy of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. The reader may be amazed at this. Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all assume that the suffering of the Israelites is incurred by their being sinners. This is the essence of their messages: Repent you sinners and national disaster will be averted. Yet here God rejects such doctrine.

Job was free of sin, and *spoke right* (42:7). Which of Job's positions is correct is unclear; is it his entire argument, or his words *'I repent in dust and ashes'* (42:6)? Is God approving what might be called Job's heresy or blasphemy? The belief system of the friends is not "truth" or that which is "right"(42:7). An offering is required from them. Job prays for them, and they are forgiven. He who had prayed for an intercessor and found none becomes the intercessor for those friends. He is back in God's graces, as in the Prologue: *and God lifted up the face of Job* (42:9). We, having read the Prologue, know from the beginning that the entire argument between Job and his friends was fallacious.

Job's lost material wealth is restored to him in double measure. (Robert Gordis has noted that in Exodus 22:3,6 theft requires a double repayment.<sup>3</sup> Is God admitting the theft of Job's property?) He has another seven sons and three daughters, his children allegorically resurrected. The reader never hears mention of the wife who begged him to curse God. Does she return, or is Job

awarded a new wife? We do not know. The names of the daughters are given, though not of the sons, and they receive equal rights of inheritance (42:15), though Numbers (27:8) provides for daughters to inherit only when there are no sons.

Is it sufficient for Job to have heard and "seen" God? Apparently so (42:3-5). M. Tsevat has suggested that the message of Job is that God is God; neither a just God nor an unjust God.<sup>4</sup> How would Job have reacted if God had told him *out of the whirlwind* that "Satan and I engineered your suffering"? He is a pawn in a game played by God. Of greater severity, can the death of his seven sons and three daughters be forgotten or forgiven? Can seven more sons and three more daughters ever replace his original children? Can a dead child, let alone 10 dead children, ever be replaced? Elie Wiesel, a living memorial for the slain children of the Holocaust, says he "was offended by [Job's] surrender . . . . He should have said to God: Very well, I forgive you . . . but what about my dead children, do they forgive you?"<sup>5</sup> Can Job die *old and full of days* (42:17), that is, be fulfilled, after having buried 10 children? We are told what a caring father he was (1:5). If Job were cognizant of God's contest, he would be rightfully outraged! Perhaps he would respond more sympathetically as Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev once suggested as a prayer on The Day of Atonement: "So on this holy night, our sacred Yom Kippur, if You forgive us, we will forgive You!"

#### CONCLUSION

The specific issue is what M. Tsevat calls "disinterested piety."<sup>6</sup> Is Job's prosperity the result of his piety as God asserts, or is Job's piety the result of his prosperity as Satan asserts? God states that humanity must love God for the sake of heaven and for love of God. Satan states that humanity loves God for fear of the consequences of impiety. By accepting the challenge, God defines piety as disinterested.

In the Prologue, God rejects the position of the friends even before they utter their words. Their definition of piety is not disinterested. They believe, as do Satan and Job at the beginning, that piety is self-interested. In the Prologue, God denies their claim of causality and retributive justice. The friends' massive and violent assault on the pious Job derives from a need of traditional religion to rely on punishment. This is opposite to God's position in the

Book of Job. It is also opposite to worldly experience that the wicked often prosper and the righteous do not, as expressed in Ecclesiastes: *I observe under the sun, crime is where justice should be, the criminal is where the upright should be* (3:16). It is said in the Talmud: "There is no reward in this world from observing the commandments" (BT Kiddushin 39b), and in Ethics of the Fathers: "It is not in our power to understand the suffering of the righteous or the wellbeing of the wicked" (4:15). These positions acknowledge that piety and reward are not directly connected. Nevertheless, Job demands the connection and demands justice throughout nearly the entire book. It is only after hearing God that he understands what God demands in the Prologue: Piety cannot be self-interested or it is bereft of all value.

Job never learns the cause of his suffering, but as a Man of Faith, after seeing God and speaking to Him, he accepts God's management of the world. Job is disinterestedly pious; at the end of the poem he concludes that to see God and to know God are sufficient rewards in themselves. And he accepts this before the Epilogue when all is returned to him.

If the reader were not cognizant of God's discussion with Satan, as Job and his community were not, and if we believed Job's protestations of innocence, we might have believed that he is fated to suffer. Because the reader knows the Prologue, his perspective must be different from Job's. The friends demand of Job that he accept his sin and his fate. Job accepts his current reality and rejects the position that it is related to his past. He is fighting for his future. Job's friends who profess to be comforters in fact demand confession in lieu of acting as mourners. They demand that he reject his truth. The entire concept of the Book of Job would be different if it began with verse 2:11, when his friends hear of the terrible events that befell him and come to mourn with him, and ended with verse 42:6, when Job finished his response to God: *'I withdraw what I have said and recant, as I am but dust and ashes.'* In such a text, we would not know that he was called *a whole and upright man* at the beginning, nor that God condemned the "friends" at the end. If we did not know the reason for Job's suffering, would we accept the logic of the friends?

The thesis of Job can in some ways be contrasted with that of the Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus*. Both Oedipus and Job are popular protagonists who are accused of terrible crimes and as a result suffer a terrible fall. Both are "enemies of God" and become scapegoats, but "Oedipus is a successful

scapegoat . . . Job is a failed scapegoat"<sup>7</sup> because he refuses to be the victim. Job is in fact innocent. Oedipus did commit the sins of which he is accused, though unwittingly and long unaware of them. He admits that he is rightfully and deservedly cursed. Sophocles and Satan and Job's friends demand retributive justice, whereas God and the Bible demand truth.

The poet-author of Job testifies to the multiple truths of God. This is God who pushes some human to their limits – like Abraham, Jeremiah and Job – versus the God who speaks out of the whirlwind of Man's lack of cosmic knowledge. This God suggests that His sovereignty may be more important than justice. The poet "focuses on Divine freedom and human limits."<sup>8</sup> Then there is the God of conventional wisdom, of orthodoxy against Job's demand for a just God. Each human being, especially those belonging to a faith community, views the reality of Divine intervention differently. Unlike the conventional wisdom that there can be no reality-testing about knowledge of God, Jeremiah and Job share their reality with the reader. They both seek Divine justice as though through a court of justice. Both act as they believed God required them to act, and both suffered. They demand to know Why? When God responds, He uses the same Hebrew word for justice – *mishpat* – used by Job and Jeremiah, but its meaning is different. '*Would you impugn My prerogatives [rather than judgment], would you condemn Me that you may be right?'* (40:8).<sup>9</sup> God uses the term as Samuel uses *mishpat ha-melech* for the prerogatives of the king (I Sam. 8:14). Michael Kigel writes: "God did not promise to be nice."<sup>10</sup> In the Epilogue, the most amazing section of the book, God is not only "nice" but also disproves His own entire thesis. By giving back to Job double what he had before his suffering, God attests that in fact retributive justice works. The book ends up telling the reader directly that the most righteous man on earth is the most wealthy.<sup>11</sup> It seems that someone believed that the book had to have a happy ending. Many commentators have questioned whether that is the same author who created the rest of the text.

When Job declares that he *withdraws and recants* (4:6), he recognizes first that God has responded to him, and secondly that God's essence is more than justice. He is the Sovereign of the world. For God justice and power are congruent, even if not for man. Job searched for justice and found God's truth

and knowledge, just as Abraham having known of God's justice found in obedience to Him God's truth and knowledge.

As Martin Buber said of Job: "He believes now in justice in spite of believing in God and he believes in God in spite of believing in justice."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps as Elie Wiesel comments on Job: "We know that it is given to man to transform divine injustice into human justice and compassion."<sup>13</sup> Thus God has put the onus back where it belongs – on Man.

#### NOTES

1. David Clines in "Deconstructing the Book of Job," in H.G. Reventlow and Y. Hoffman, eds., *Justice and Righteousness*, (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1992) p. 75.
2. Sylvia Huberman Scholnick, "The Meaning of Mishpat in the Book of Job," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 101/4 (1962) p. 528
3. Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job*, (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1978) p. 576.
4. M. Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966) p. 90.
5. Quoted in William Safire, *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today's Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992) p. 35.
6. Tsevat, p. 74.
7. R. Girard, *Job, The Victim of His People* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) p. 35.
8. J.L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) p. 114.
9. Scholnick, p. 527.
10. Philippe Nemo with Emmanuel Levinas and Michael Kigel, *Job and the Excess of Evil* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1996) p. 230.
11. Clines, p.71.
12. Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1949) p. 192.
13. Quoted in Safire, p. 29.