

1: There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil.

PUTTING GOD ON TRIAL

The Biblical Book of Job

Robert Sutherland

P R E F A C E

Every interpreter approaches a text with certain intellectual horizons. These horizons are the products of talent and training, life experience in general. They expand or narrow one's vision, as the case may be. They enable some to see farther than others.

No modern interpreter can approach the text entirely free of the limits of modern horizons. Modern culture is deeply urban, egalitarian, individualistic and scientific. Ancient Jewish culture is deeply rural, patriarchal, collectivistic and pre-scientific. Yet such limitations can be overcome. The psychological process by which any interpreter arrives at his interpretation is forever under the control of the logical process by which he justifies that interpretation. In the final analysis, what really distorts meaning is not perspective, but the deliberate ignorance and distortion of data. Intelligent and intelligible interpretations are possible, even if a full and final interpretation that satisfies all is not achieved.

To appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of an interpreter, the reader should know something of the background of the interpreter before him. It is with that thought in mind that I share something of my own background with my readers.

I hold a four year Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toronto in history. My self-directed, multi-disciplinary program was focused on the History of Ideas from ancient times into the modern world. I first encountered *The Book of Job* in a world literature course in my first year of undergraduate work and it has captivated me ever since. It has deepened and broadened with every reading. It addresses the perennial concerns that have shaped the human condition as no other.

I hold a three year Bachelor of Laws degree from Osgoode Hall Law School and currently practice almost exclusively as a criminal defense lawyer. With sixteen years at the bar, I have had some notable successes. In the case of *R. v. L.(S.R.) [1992] O.J. No.2305 (Ontario Court of Appeal)*, I was instrumental in bringing about a substantial rewriting of the Canadian law on aggravated assault. In the case of *R. v. Claus [1999] 139 CCC (3d) 47 (Ontario Superior Court) aff'd [2000] 149 CCC (3d) 336 (Ontario Court of Appeal)*, I was instrumental in bringing about a substantial rewriting of the Canadian law on solicitor-client privilege. Most recently, I was fortunate enough to defend a modern day Job, a man by the name of Jerome Kerrigan. He was wrongfully accused of a horrific crime, the death of his two grandchildren, and the case received months of national and international publicity. The case was tried in the court of public opinion and Mr. Kerrigan was ultimately vindicated in a court of law. This legal background has given me a deep appreciation of the lawsuit structure of *The Book of Job*

I am a Senior Fellow at the *Centre for the Study of the Great Ideas*, an American think-tank based in Chicago. I owe an incalculable debt of gratitude to its founder Mortimer J. Adler and its president Max Weismann for their writings and their advice. I would not be the person I am without them. In and through their mentorship, I have become rationally persuaded of the truth of natural law ethics and Thomistic metaphysics. Both have profoundly influenced my understanding of the scriptures. This moral background has given me a deep appreciation of the moral dynamics in *The Book of Job*.

I would describe myself as an evangelical Christian, though not a fundamentalist. I believe the traditional doctrines of Trinity, Incarnation, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, heaven and Hell. I am denominationally Anglican, as much by temperament as by default. I value the high value it places on human reason. As I searched for a spiritual home, the Reverends Joan Mitchell and Ed Swayze successively welcomed me into their home, St. Stephen's Anglican, Thunder Bay. They regularly encouraged my writings

and preaching and I owe them a profound thanks. Years ago, two professors, Dr. Richard Berg of Lakehead University and Dr. Don Thompson of Laurentian University, read my early preaching on *The Book of Job* and strongly suggested I publish. I have ignored their sage advice for too many years. I now offer this book, in part, as a memorial to their good friendships.

I have elected to use the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible throughout this work. It is the only translation that is universally accepted by all three branches of the Christian faith: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. I thank Oxford University Press for its permission in using quotations from that translation. I strongly recommend the *New Oxford Annotated Edition* of the *New Revised Standard Version* for its excellent notes.

I have elected to use Benjamin Foster's translation of the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* found in *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. The translation is crisp and clear. The notes are excellent. It is a good place to begin a fuller exploration of Babylonian mythology and I thank him for his permission in using quotations from that translation.

I have elected to use Nicholas Wyatt's translation of the Canaanite *Baal Cycle* found in *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilimiku and his Colleagues*. The translation is excellent. The notes are superb. It is a good place to begin a fuller exploration of Canaanite mythology and I thank him for his permission in using quotations from that translation.

I would like to thank my wife Cindy, my good friend Max Weismann, Justices Glowacki and Kozak and Father Chris Rupert S.J. for their ongoing encouragement in this work and for their invaluable proof reading of the final draft. I absolve them of any failings this book might have and I take complete responsibility for the final form of this book. It is my hope and prayer that this commentary might be as satisfying for readers as *The Book of Job* has been for me.

This work *Putting God on Trial: The Biblical Book of Job* is the first in a trilogy. The second work is anticipated to be *Putting Jesus on Trial: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*. The final work is anticipated to be *Putting Mankind on Trial: The Biblical Books of Genesis, Daniel and Revelation*. Ideally, they will follow this work at one year intervals.

1: INTRODUCTION

A Theodicy

Widely praised as one of the greatest books ever written, *The Book of Job* is a theodicy, an attempt to morally justify the ways of God to man. It is a most provocative theodicy for it is the story of the most righteous man on earth putting God on trial for crimes against humanity and refusing to acquit him.

To the question of why there is evil in the world, *The Book of Job* offers a non-traditional answer.

(a) God created a world of undeserved and unremitted suffering in order to make the highest form of love possible: a completely selfless love of man for God. Selfishness corrupts selfless love. If human beings know with certainty that God rewards those who love him, then they will serve God for what they can get from him. Gratuitous evil is morally necessary in order to bring the existence of God into doubt and to sever any connection between righteousness and reward.

(b) God cannot reveal this explanation for evil in this life without defeating his own purpose in the creation of the world and the creation of man.

(c) God expects man to challenge him for the creation of such a world. *Prima facie*, it is an act of injustice to impose evil for reasons other than punishment or character development. The gratuitous evil God sends is more punishment than any man deserves. And the gratuitous evil God sends destroys character more often than not. Human beings have a moral duty to challenge God for such evil. They have a natural need to know and a natural right to receive the explanation for evil in the world. God expects human beings to stand up to him. They sin if they either prematurely condemn or prematurely acquit God for sending evil into the world. They must wait for the answer that only God can give.

(d) God will reveal that answer on the Day of the Final Judgment. At that time, God will resurrect all human beings to give them that answer. God will grant all human beings a special grace to understand the necessity and sufficiency of gratuitous evil. God is causally responsible for the evil in the world, but not morally blameworthy for it. At that time, all will know and understand God's purpose in the creation of a world of undeserved and unremitted

suffering. And God will then judge all human beings on the selflessness of their love for God.

Traditional attempts to justify the ways of God to man have been proven inadequate because of their inability to deal with the problem of gratuitous evil and the problem of God's non-intervention. Gratuitous evil is evil that is not for the purpose of punishment or character development. The *Book of Job* presents a new and engaging perspective based entirely on the existence of gratuitous evil and a moral requirement that God not disclose the reason for evil in this world.

The Book of Job is a masterpiece in world literature, one that has stood the test of millennia. It is a highly integrated work with a profound message for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

A Lawsuit Drama

The Book of Job presents that philosophical answer in poetry and prose through the vehicle of drama. As drama, *The Book of Job* is understandably a legal drama. The moral issues of theodicy are easily translated into a legal framework of duties and rights. In fact, *The Book of Job* consists of a number of overlapping and interlocking trials. God puts Job on trial. Satan puts God on trial. God puts Job on trial a second time. Job's friends put Job on trial. Job puts his friends on trial. Everything builds to the climactic moment when Job puts God himself on trial and refuses to acquit him.

The Book of Job virtually opens with the God's trial of Job. The time is Rosh Hashanah, the first of the 10 Days of Awe. The place is heaven, the High Court of Heaven. God opens the books of life and reviews the lives of all men and women. He finds his servant Job to be sinless. In God's judgment, Job is "blameless and upright, one who fears God and turns from evil" at every juncture. He is humanity at its very best. He is the type of person all of us could be and should be. God's judgment set the philosophical stage for all the action that follows. Because Job is sinless, the evil that will befall him is not punishment for sin. Because Job has no character flaw, the evil that will befall him is not for correction or character development.

Almost as soon as God's judgment on Job issues, Satan challenges the judgment. It is a profound three-fold challenge.

(a) First, God is wrong in his judgment on Job's goodness. Job is sinner. He has sin in his life God missed. Job may intend the good, but his motive is selfishness. He serves God only for what he can get from God. Satan claims he can show God that hidden sin. Satan claims he can even get Job to curse God. Satan's challenge is a claim to the soul of Job.

(b) Second, God has lost his authority to judge. God is in error. He has passed false judgment. He is no longer a perfect being and should step down from his throne. Satan's challenge is a claim to the throne on heaven.

(c) Third, God is wrong about his plan for mankind. Human beings are not fit for relationship with God. They do not love God. They seek only to manipulate him to get what they can from him. The very idea of a meaningful relationship between God and man is fundamentally wrong. Humanity should be destroyed as a failed project. Satan's challenge is a claim to destroy the earth and all in it.

With this challenge, there is silence in the heavenly court. Satan has put God himself on trial.

God picks up the gauntlet and elects trial by ordeal. He chooses Job as his personal champion to settle the issue of whether love for God can be completely disinterested. God directs Satan as his personal agent to inflict undeserved and unremitted evil upon his beloved servant Job. God's hands are tied. He cannot tell Job what has transpired. He cannot give Job the reason for his suffering, lest that give Job a selfish motive to continue his love for God. God's trial by ordeal is truly an ordeal for Job. While it starts in heaven, the trial is played out on the earth during the 10 Days of Awe. Job is stripped of everything. God casts Job out his Eden into the wasteland that is the world as we know it. Unlike Adam, Job is expelled from his garden not for his sin but for his righteousness. Not surprisingly, Job struggles to keep faith with a loving God in the midst of this world of undeserved and unremitted suffering. He longs to know the reason behind evil in the world. Through five speeches on the Day of Atonement, Job turns that request into a demand. Through an Oath of Innocence, he institutes formal legal proceedings against God to provoke that answer. Job's claim is two-fold. God is the author of undeserved evil in the world. Man has a right to know the reason why God has sent such evil into the world. And Job stakes the propriety of his challenge on the integrity of his ways. He puts his eternal salvation on the line and de-

mands that God answer him. If God fails to appear or appears but fails to give the required answer, then Job is morally and legally entitled to condemn God. The condemnation is by way of a curse. God's trial has built to a feverish pitch. Satan has promised that Job would curse God. And now, Job has set in motion to legal machinery to do it. In the eyes of Job's friends, this Oath of Innocence is blasphemy. But in the eyes of God, this Oath of Innocence is the pinnacle of righteousness.

To the surprise of all, God appears to Job. But, on the terms of his trial by Satan, God cannot give any direct answers to Job, lest those answers give Job a selfish motive to continue his love for God. Through two speeches, God reviews the natural and the mythological worlds, avoiding any discussion of the human world. God suggests the existence of a possible answer. But the suggestions are veiled. God has been called to give a defense for his creation of this world. Instead, God rests his case having hinted at a defense, but having never presenting it. And with that act, God places before Job and all mankind a single question: will they condemn God that they themselves might be justified?

Job understands God's veiled suggestions and draws the proper inferences. Job chooses not to condemn God at this time but to continue to love him. He melts to his knees in worship. Yet Job refuses to retract his lawsuit. He refuses to withdraw his moral and legal claim to an explanation for evil in the world. He will neither prematurely acquit God nor prematurely condemn God. Job grants God the benefit of time to prepare a full and meaningful defense to the charges. Job gives God all of human history to work out his plan for evil in the world. The matter is adjourned to the Day of the Final Judgment for Job to hear from his Redeemer a third time. At that time, Job will pass his final judgment on God. If God fails to give a necessary and sufficient explanation for evil on the Day of the Final Judgment, then Job will condemn God. And he would be right in doing so. In a single moment, Job has become the perfect embodiment of the selfless love and moral integrity for which the world was created.

A moral not an aesthetic resolution

Many scholars find the legal metaphor of an Oath of Innocence inappropriate, though for different reasons.

Some liberal scholars opt for an aesthetic, not a moral, resolution of the question of evil in the world. They find a sublime beauty in

God's review of the animal and physical worlds, Behemoth and Leviathan. And it is certainly there. But that is all they find. They find no suggestions of a moral purpose in God's creation and control of evil. Indeed, they feel none could be forthcoming. God is beyond good and evil so no moral resolution is possible. Since no moral resolution is possible, a legal metaphor such as a lawsuit dramatizing the moral question is inappropriate. They interpret Job to understand that position. And they interpret him to retract the lawsuit in its entirety. They interpret the lawsuit metaphor to be inappropriate because there are no answers to the moral question of evil in the world.

This author feels such liberal scholars miss a moral resolution for four reasons.

(a) First, they fail to give adequate weight to Satan's first speech in heaven setting out the moral solution.

(b) Second, they misinterpret Job's struggle with God to be a request for a restoration of his former position, rather than a request to know the reason behind evil in the world. As such, they see the moral issue Job raises to be nothing more than a retributive version of justice whereby righteousness is rewarded. This is not the moral right Job raises in his Oath of Innocence. The moral right is the right to know the reason behind evil in the world.

(c) Third, they fail to appreciate the moral restrictions under which God has to operate. God cannot reveal any moral answers directly without defeating his very purpose in the creation and control of evil. As a result, they miss the suggestions of moral purpose in God's two speeches and the inferences God would have Job draw.

(d) Finally, they fail to fully appreciate the legal dynamics of the enforcement mechanism of Job's Oath of Innocence. In particular, they fail to appreciate the distinction between causal responsibility and moral blameworthiness. Thus, they do not understand God's comments concerning condemnation and vindication in his first speech to Job. And they do not understand Job's hesitation to proceed beyond his own vindication to a condemnation of God in Job's first speech to God. Ultimately, they fail to see Job's adjournment and continuation of his Oath of Innocence implied by the allusion to the story of Abraham and Sodom and Gomorrah in Job's final speech.

Some conservative scholars opt for a moral resolution of the question of evil in the world, but their resolution is equally unsatisfy-

ing. They interpret Job's so-called excessive words in his speeches preceding the Oath of Innocence to be morally wrong. They interpret Job's raising of the Oath of Innocence to be a sin of presumption. While they accept God's two judgments on Job in heaven, they feel subsequent events show Job sinning. While God is not beyond good and evil, God is under no moral obligation to reveal any reason for sending evil into the world. Thus they would have Job retract his lawsuit in its entirety and repent morally for either his so-called excessive words, his raising of the lawsuit or both. They feel the legal metaphor is inappropriate because while there is an answer to the moral question of evil in the world, no human being has a right to that answer and God is under no duty to give that answer.

This author feels such conservative scholars miss a satisfactory moral resolution for three reasons.

(a) First, they fail to understand the depth of Satan's challenge to God. It is not merely that Job will curse God. It is that God has missed sin in Job's life. Such scholars think their moral resolution is possible, because although Job sins, Job does not actually curse God. The problem they have is that their resolution actually makes Satan right in his challenge of God. Satan claimed Job was a sinner and they feel Job sinned. Thus Satan is in the right in his lawsuit with God and God should step down from his throne and destroy mankind.

(b) Second, they fail to give proper weight to Job's blamelessness and integrity. The raising of the Oath of Innocence is an expression of that blamelessness and integrity. It is what God expects of Job, though he cannot tell him that directly. If Job sins in raising the lawsuit against God, then the sin is blasphemy and God is seriously mistaken in his judgment of Job's blamelessness and integrity.

(c) Finally, they fail to give full expression to God's ultimate judgment on Job. Job and only Job spoke rightly about God. In the face of such a judgment, there is no room to attribute sin or wrongdoing to Job for either his so-called excessive words or for his Oath of Innocence.

My interpretation charts a middle course between these two-fold horrors: a liberal Scylla which places God beyond good and evil and a conservative Charybdis which attributes sin to Job, either for his so-called excessive words, his Oath of Innocence or both. God has


a moral reason for sending evil. Man has a need and a right to know that reason. But God need not provide that reason here and now. An adjournment of God's trial to the day of the Final Judgment and its continuation then is strongly implied. It is implied through the allusion to Abraham. It is implied through the allusion to a Redeemer who stands up in court at the Final Judgment to plead Job's cause. It is implied through the allusion to the apocalyptic destruction of Leviathan at the Messianic banquet and the explanation of all things that follows. The legal metaphor is highly appropriate. A satisfactory moral solution is only possible because of the distinction between casual responsibility and moral blameworthiness embedded in Job's Oath of Innocence. God may be causally responsible for the evil in the world, but not morally blameworthy for it. He has a necessary and sufficient reason for the evil and will ultimately give it. Job grants him that time without denying his need to know and without withdrawing his right to know. This resolution preserves the moral integrity of both God and man.

An Interpretative Challenge

Interpreting *The Book of Job* is a profound struggle for all who read it and hope to understand it.

The book itself offers some help, though it is surprising how many readers manage to disregard the signs and lose their way. The book offers two interpretative aids. The first is God's judgment, repeated twice by God and once by the author, that Job is "blameless and upright, fearing God and turning from evil" on every occasion. The second is God's judgment that Job has spoken rightly in what he said about God. These two aids bracket the work and set the parameters for any legitimate interpretation of the author's message. Any interpretation that calls Job's integrity into question can be summarily ruled out as illegitimate. Any interpretation that attributes sin to Job for demanding that God give an answer as to why there is evil in world can be summarily ruled out as illegitimate. Any interpretation that has Job morally confessing sin for challenging God can be similarly and summarily ruled out as illegitimate.

Within those two parameters of interpretation, four things call for the closest examination a reader can muster: (a) Satan's speech to God, (b) Job's Oath of Innocence, (c) God's two speeches to Job and (d) Job's two responses to God. Only a proper handling of these four keys will unlock the treasures to be found in *The Book of Job*.

The Book of Job demands much of its readers. In all the overlapping and intersecting lawsuits, the book invites the reader to judgment. It demands judgment on the part of the reader. It provokes judgment on the part of the reader. With its provocative language and anti-climaxes, it even tempts the reader to false judgment. And yet it condemns with the harshest judgment those who judge deceitfully or prematurely, showing bias either towards man or God. In many ways, *The Book of Job* is an abyss of eternal peril for as you look into it, it looks into you. 

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