

## ***Gambling With Job***

**Professor Ulrich E. Simon**  
**Dean of King's College London**

**The Ethel M Wood Trust Lecture  
delivered before the University of London  
on 5 June 1980**

[p.1]

He is a bold man who ventures to open anew the pages of the book of Job when this literary Matterhorn has been climbed by so many distinguished and inspired authors and commentators. Indeed, as the Matterhorn is now overrun with ill-equipped and hasty tourists who pour out of cable cars and become casualties or leave a trail of debris, the newcomer to the literary peak may only add to the general confusion. However, the opportunity to draw a balance sheet, as between facts and speculations, is irresistible for one who has spent some forty years in asking: What is the book of Job really about?

No book in the Old Testament can claim to be classed as *sui generis* as this product of an anonymous author. Almost all readers, except possibly some modern Israeli scholars, confront the non-Jewish provenance with amazement. Here is a scroll in the Canon which has nothing to say of, and does not even hint at, the history of Israel, the Lawgiver and the prophets, the covenant and the cultus. Only special pleading can identify Job with the Servant of Isaiah, with Jeremiah, or, more broadly, with the exiled community. Indeed, the form-critical search for a *Sitz im Leben* only succeeds in demonstrating that there is no such thing as a compelling economic, political, or sociological background. The literary structuralist scores a triumph in Jobian hermeneutics by going for the text, and the text alone, unencumbered by irrelevant hypotheses. And this triumph also conquers the scepticism of all relativists who claim that we cannot now understand the culture of a by-gone age. The book of Job is only too contemporary in an age of barbaric evil and alienation. All the issues arising out of human life are raised in radical polarities. Though strongly individualistic in tone, Job speaks as a representative of suffering mankind. Life's experience was once, and should be, good and wholesome, but

[p.2]

for no good reason it is now horrible. Virtue should be rewarded; but only the vicious prevail. Friends and family should offer support in the hour of need, but they turn out to be traitors. Worst of all, God who is alleged to be omnipotent and providentially benevolent, is an opaque power with malicious and vindictive intent. The universe, far from being the seamless robe of creation, crushes the weak, and there is no appeal against the process. Forensic arguments can be multiplied in a wordy RIB, but, since no indictment can be fought in the absence of a competent court and an impartial judge, the effort is as wasteful as the search for Wisdom. If ever there had been contractual obligations they are now torn up. The dialectic of lamentation and consolation, of accusation and defence, of defiance and acceptance, which operates in the great prophetic books, does not operate in Job, for as the curtain rises on the vast canvas of

Ulrich E. Simon, *Gambling With Job*. The Ethel M Wood Trust Lecture delivered before the University of London on 5 June 1980. London: The University of London, 1980. Pbk. ISBN: 0718105637. pp.18.

---

total being and God speaks in the storm, none of the questions are answered, and the contract between God and Man is seen to be quite illusory. The human immanence is swallowed up in the divine transcendence, beyond time and space.

Modern interpreters seize not only upon the absence of theodicy in Job, but perform an act of *bouleversement* so that the divine transcendence is swallowed up by human immanence. Jung's *Answer to Job* with all its flaws has become a classical document for the Gnostic solution to the problem of evil in our 20th Century. In *God the Quaternity* only the female, the divine Sophia or Gnosis, offers integration after fragmentation. In Jung's moralizing psychoanalysis it is God who has lost the trial in his divided Being and the *homo religiosus* acclaims justice as his own transcendent quality. On a more popular level Archibald MacLeish in his drama *J.B.*, first performed in Yale in 1958, finds the 'message' of the book in man's love for God, the one thing for which *God depends* on man. In short, God has need of man. As G. Steiner remarks we can no longer pray to God, who has been outgrown morally, but must 'pray for God'.<sup>1</sup>

[p.3]

Let me spare you the many permutations of this theme, itself the result of wars and chaotic distress. However, there are some notable examples, as the DADA movement in Zurich of 1917 when the celebrated painter Oskar Kokoschka presented in his drama *Job* a cuckolded lover who suffers in a grotesque farce, the world being an immoral cabaret. Or Joseph Roth's novel of 1930 which shows how God tests a simple Jew in a series of disastrous misfortunes and who experiences God only at the point when he ceases to be patient and rebels. But above all we must return to Kafka's *Joseph K. in the Trial*, who, just because he does not mention God, recapitulates all the Jobian themes in the final scene where the priest in the cathedral tells K. the story of the petitioner who could have reached the Law but failed to enter the judgement when it was still possible. The door is now closed, and there is no reply. In a prophetic manner Kafka anticipated the Jobian fate of countless victims in concentration camps for whom there was no exit except through death.

Granting the shift to despair in Jobian hermeneutics is there not after all some hope *after* despair in Job? Perhaps even Kafka hints at this when the execution of K. in a ritual—top-hatted men at the quarry—is watched by faces afar, which *may* be of a friendly disposition.

The axis of hope-despair is perhaps not as explicit in Job as one might be inclined to think at first sight. Despair (*ia'ash*) is a rare word in the Old Testament and only used once by Job about himself (6,26). The case of hope (*tiqvah*), and but once *Iachal* (6,21), is a little more complex. Eliphaz raises false hope (4,6; 5,16) which Job repudiates (7,6), whereupon Bildad accuses Job of losing hope because he is a hopeless case. Zophar concludes pompously that the reformed Job will rest securely in hope, without withdrawing the maxim that the unrepentant have no escape and their hope is like despair, the giving up of one's breath (Buber: *der Aushauch der Seele*). The ambiguity of hope is celebrated in the famous dirge of

---

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt Lecture 1979, A verse in Job, a line in Sophocles, with references to Mandelstam, Kafka, Paul Celan.

Ulrich E. Simon, *Gambling With Job*. The Ethel M Wood Trust Lecture delivered before the University of London on 5 June 1980. London: The University of London, 1980. Pbk. ISBN: 0718105637. pp.18.

---

chapter 14, where Job compares the human lot to that of a tree, only to find that whereas even a felled tree may still have sap and sprout again man cannot

[p.4]

rise again. Hence there is no eschatological hope, unless we interpret the even more famous outburst in chapter 19 as a declaration of faith in the Redeemer, the GOEL, who despite the decomposition of the flesh will come at last, stand up above the dust and thus give to the despairing, to the emphatic I ('*Ani* repeated in vv. 25 and 27), the vision, not of a stranger or enemy, but of God. Does contemplation, here and now, there and then, resolve the dialectical tangle with a synthesis?

Modern commentators certainly lack the Handelian affirmation of 'I know that my Redeemer liveth', if only because they scrutinize the context and find that the rest of Job does not take up the visionary consolation. But before we yield to our own conditioned scepticism we may remind ourselves that this has not always been so. Far from it!

The outstanding exponent of hope and morality in Job is Gregory the Great, whose lectures, begun in the East before 600 A.D., were subsequently edited as the *Moralia*, finished in the first year of his pontificate, and later treated as normative, not only for what it said but also for its method of interpretation. Gregory's dedicatory letter to Leander, Bishop of Seville, ushers in the ideal of medieval Biblical exegesis. It comes from one who, like Job, suffers from very bad health, and who, unlike Job, seeks solitude and is not allowed to indulge in it, since he must assume such responsibilities as the affairs of Rome and the defence of the city against the invading Lombards. The author of Job, for Gregory, is the Holy Spirit, *tout court*—'who wrote the work is completely superfluous to ask'. The *Dedicatory Letter* summarizes the evils of the day, of which the worst is that the love of eternity and the escape from the shipwreck of life do not last for a servant of God: the deep sea of secular affairs roars with activities utterly opposed to the 'inner mysteries'. In these unsought conditions Gregory expounds the Word for edification, and the allegorical method, though not wholly brushing aside historical realism, will yield the typological sense, construct the citadel of faith,

[p.5]

and finally afford the grace of moral instruction. The words themselves, he observes, militate against their literal interpretation. How, for example, could the day of Job's birth stand still (3.2-7)? Yet Gregory does not authenticate wilful eisegesis, for the Word is 'like a river, shallow and, deep, in which a lamb may walk and an elephant may swim': each topic demands nuances of exposition true to its nature. Gregory demands that the varying context be allowed its force, and this includes also the existential role of the spectator or writer, such as Gregory, suffering and chastened like Job himself.

In this way the tradition of a Christ-like Job takes its origin, and descriptive labels, such as optimistic and pessimistic, become pointless. But the visionary hope does not. In Book XIV of the *Moralia* the spiritual conflict comes to the fore and may be summarized under the heading, as given in the edition of *Sources Chrétiennes*,: 'Il faut espérer en la resurrection'. Already the way has been paved in Book XII in a profound discussion of chapter 14.

Answering the question ‘Shall we be transformed?’ Gregory answers that our hope of such a transformation is not vain, and the analogy of the tree evokes hope rather than despair. Moral choice and penitence govern our course, admitted to be frightful before such uncertainties, especially if man seeks his pleasure not in his Creator but in himself. But, returning to the image of the tree, Gregory draws upon the spiritual meaning which equates the tree with the Cross, and once these floodgates of symbolism are open all the tributaries of the Christian hope swell the conviction of a beneficent ordeal, however testing. ‘Faithful Cross, above all other, one and only noble tree’ echoes the hymn of Bishop Venantius Fortunatus of the same epoch. Thus Job is Christianized and the message is for and about the Church. The blessed Job ‘borrows the voice of our Redeemer and of his Church’ and thus articulates not only his, but also our, redemption in his confession: *Scio enim quod Redemptor meus vivit*. Identification is everything and the triumph of the resurrection follows whipping, humiliation, and contempt. The Latin

[p.6]

version *Et in novissimo die de terra resurrectus sum* had prepared the ground for this existential triumphalism, which Jerome may have taken over from his Rabbinical teachers, reading ‘aqum for ‘iaqum.

The passing of many centuries and cultures since Gregory, and the rise of scientific literary studies, have not erased all these presuppositions in our approach to Job. Our presuppositions, too, control our understanding. Thus Christian and Jewish scholars still accept a universalising of Job. If Job is a case history, he is also the representative of the human condition. Thus recently Dr. J. Kahn in his excellent *Job’s Illness: Loss, Grief, and Integration* demonstrates the universality and ubiquity of the neurosis of perfectionism. We cause our own guilt and its consequences, as did Job. Kahn and others make use of William Blake’s illustrations which give the visual counterpart to this pre-understanding.

In his masterly *Dimensions of Job* Nahum Glatzer distinguishes the Christian and the Humanistic veins of exegesis and notes how the Christianizing and the Judaizing expositors ‘avoid a direct confrontation with the text of the book’. But Kahn on the contrary follows the text closely, as did Blake, to arrive at the conclusion that Job is healed. After discussing the Price of Job’s release, Kahn holds that Job is allowed to regain his former state and further to develop his creativity. The tempest of his mind prepares Job for the inner consummation: he began with the *tam* of perfection, he ends with the *tam* of integration—beyond the determinacy principle. Blake also protracts the new harmony: Job has become divine.

Glatzer’s review of the Classical Judaic Interpretation presents us with all kinds of fantasies which steer away from the rebelliousness of Job. The *Testament of Job*, probably a pre-Christian apocryphal composition, celebrates a royal Job, who dares to destroy a popular idol, built in the image of Satan. After the ordeal, which Job endures with firm faith, Satan admits defeat and yields to him. Despite his friend’s

[p.7]

enticing doubts Job wins through his unswerving God-centredness, and at length God kisses him and takes his soaring soul upwards. Rashi in the eleventh century similarly turns Job's protest into an affirmation of faith. Maimonides goes further in rationalising the case of Job, a victim of ignorance until restored by the prophetic revelation of the Lord, which gives true knowledge instead of error. The mystics and the Zohar introduce a more fanciful understanding and entertain a more dualistic stance by giving prominence to Satan. No doubt an aristocratic doctor at court and a Wunderrabbi in the Stetls of Poland read Job differently. Glatzer summarizes their views without giving his own.

The state of the game of Job interpretations is well chronicled and I forbear a further attempt at recapitulation.<sup>2</sup> The most interesting feature in our century is the survival of the belief that somehow this book was intended to, and still maintains to, stabilise and strengthen faith. Dhorme's majestic work, though published in 1926, hardly bears the marks of the disillusionment following the First Great War and its intellectual consequences. Here Biblical criticism is founded on linguistic expertise, and the text in its detailed complexity speaks not against, but for faith in God. Admittedly, Dhorme frees himself from dogmatic Christian presuppositions by allowing the text to speak for itself. Thus he cannot, even if he would, suppress the hero's total repudiation of the moral calculus that the good life rewards the good man. But the extremity of the protestation is somehow curbed by the scholarly neutrality.

Our fascination with a commentary such as Dhorme's is endless and is compounded of admiration for the scholarship and the innocence of its application. One feels that men of that age were not yet conscious of, and therefore not plagued by, an awareness of their presuppositions. Job, he states, develops in virtue of an interior movement—the *motus ab intrinseco* of St. Thomas. He surveys the Being of God, Man's

[p.8]

unhappy state under and with God, Duties and Virtues, Sin and Vice, and the place of retribution. Job, argues Dhorme, has not altogether escaped common presuppositions and hence he espoused the wrong kind of hope. Virtue does not create an absolute right to happiness, because there is a higher law of conduct, namely that of willing sacrifice, and Isaiah 53 is cited to support the Christian approach, for 'Christianity alone will be able to give the final solution'. These last words have for our generation a terrible ring, not intended by the author, but fortuitously they prevent us from accepting Dhorme's own presuppositions, though we follow him gladly in looking for the *Go'el* as one who vindicates the rights of the oppressed, namely God himself, and not an impersonal and uncommitted solicitor who pleads for the dead Job: 'He expects that God, as witness for the prisoner will descend from the heavens, in order to come and assume his defence on earth.' This 'natural interpretation of the text' is Christian, but in debt both to Jewish Apocalyptic and to Platonic idealism. It is remarkable that Robert Gordis in his equally massive *The Book of Job* also identifies the *Go'el* with God and none other.

---

<sup>2</sup> cf. J. Barr, The Book of Job and its modern interpreters in *Bulletin of John Ryland's Library* 54 (1971) pp. 28-46.

Gordis states his presuppositions explicitly and takes stock of the revolutionary changes of our time which must affect even the unchanging text of Job. His comparative method utilises the horizontal aspect, of the peoples and cultures bordering on Hebrew life and thought—the textual difficulties are often resolved in the light of Arabic and Aramaic roots—and the vertical aspect of the historical experience of the Jewish people and post-Biblical literature. These two pillars of tradition enable Gordis to check subjectivity in his highly original translation and exegesis. The language of Job expresses the unknown in concrete, definable speech, and Job is seen not only as a book of sublime analogies, parables, and allegories, but as the Talmud describes him: MASAL, or symbol of man's condition in the world. Like Dhorme Gordis upholds the architectonic structure of the whole against those who see in it a collection of *disiecta membra*. Allusions, affinities, quotations, paradoxes, variations from convention,

[p.9]

expressly transcend the predictable levels of understanding which Western thought would foist upon the book. The result is that Gordis's Job can afford to seek and find God beyond reason while his commentator uses the rational tools of linguistic scrutiny. Only rarely does the tension of the text prove too strong, as when the Hymn to Wisdom is excluded from the continuity of the whole. It may be regarded as a chapel added to a Cathedral without affecting the beauty and harmony of the work. Like his Christian fellow commentator Dhorme, Gordis presents us with an aesthetic grandeur in which endless details create problems to be answered by the unity of God. Thus opposing both the other-worldliness of the past and the secularism of today he comments on Ch. 19: 'God is not merely an arbiter waiting to judge Job fairly, or even a witness ready to testify on his behalf, but a Redeemer who will fight his cause, even at the end of time... earlier he had seen his witness in the heavens; now he sees his vindicator on the earth.'

Gordis on 42: 1-6 goes so far as to claim: 'Job declares that his deepest wish has been granted, for his Maker has deigned to answer him. The beauty of His world constitutes an anodyne for his pain, and serves as the basis for his renewed faith in the justice of God.'

This is more than submission to God—it is reconciliation and vindication for Job as well, for his contention that his suffering is no sign of guilt has not been refuted. Quite the contrary, God's admission that justice is not allpervasive in the universe is a clear, if oblique, recognition of the truth of Job's position...'

In an even more recent book Lawrence L. Besserman explores the *Legend of Job in the Middle Ages* (Harvard 1979). After a masterly survey of Biblical Origins, noting their 'elusive and multifaceted' features, he draws on the Apocryphal and Ecclesiastical Traditions, pride of place naturally being given to the pseudepigraphical Testament of Job of the first century B.C. already mentioned above. This is not the place

[p.10]

to do justice to the astonishing medieval literary heritage, which pertains both to the glory of cathedrals and the misery of starvation and the Black Death. Job always fits in, but never in

predictable ways. The scarred and silent warrior of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, the prophet of Christ's resurrection and ascension, the lamenting medieval nobleman, and even ordinary folk, find a converging symbol in Job, whether Gentile or Jew. *La Pacience de Job*, an anonymous Middle French mystery play of 1475, sprawls in a lively fashion over the whole human condition. 'Creatural realism' is the hallmark which Auerbach identified as one of the most notable stylistic features of vernacular literature in this period. Understandably Besserman asks in his conclusion in Johnsonian terms: 'How could the story be retold so as not to "disgust by repetition" or "offend by violating received notions"?' He replies that some violations of received notions become wholly acceptable, as, say, Chaucer's Troilus, Shakespeare's Caesar, Milton's Adam and Eve. So also Job, which St. Jerome warned is 'as elusive as an eel', will always be interpreted, revised, or refuted.

Neither Dhorme nor Gordis articulate Job in terms of theodicy. 'To justify the ways of God to men' in the twentieth century is plainly impossible. Faith has to be located in the heart of man, in the heart of an enduring and tortured Job. No wonder, therefore, that the attraction to interpret Job as a tragic character in a tragedy proves irresistible. Pope in his splendid work of 1965 cites consistently parallels from Aeschylos and Sophocles to open up this perspective. Some literary parallels are certainly very close. Babylonian and Ugaritic ones abound, but most impressive of all are the evocative cries of Philoctetes, as, for example, 'Death, death, how is it that I can call on you, always, day in, and day out, and you cannot come to me?'

(lines 797-8) which recalls the famous passage in Job 3 and the vain yearning for death.

However, the very mention of Philoctetes really rules out a borrowing or even common origin or vocabulary. You may recall

[p.11]

that Sophocles at the age of 90 gave Athens in 409 B.C. this terrible play of the hero who is exposed on empty Lemnos owing to the stink of his incurable wound. So far the apparent agreement of plot. But the movement thereafter—the intriguing Odysseus, the bow as a symbol of the struggle, the conversion of Neoptolomuss after the great lie, Heracles' appearance, and the promise of healing after the ordeal—not only presents us with event after event, with the chorus of the sailors as essential actors, but also with a development and interplay of characters not to be found in Job.

One may almost call Job an anti-tragedy, as if the author had deliberately eschewed a sequence of events. This huge void in the book is rendered more provocative by the absence of characterisations. Job does not really meet his 'friends', nor do they change their tone because they see, hear, or feel him. There is no encounter, no Neoptolomus who is moved by pity and terror and therefore changes his resolution to be a second Achilles after his father, and submits at length to humiliate himself by helping the humiliated. Tragic events always accentuate tragic problems, but this is not so in Job. For example, Sophocles is credited to defend the aristocratic view, that man carries his nature within a divinely ordered pattern of events - which allows doubts about the gods' moral goodness - as against the rising democratic tendency to allow that man can be moulded by education, the Logos acting in and through Paideia. But where in Job is there such an ideological conflict? Taking the book as it

stands one wonders if it can be democratic, since the complexity of the language and style seem at times to defy an easy understanding, and yet one would hardly admit such a book to be priestly-aristocratic. Above all, whatever we may think of the divine speeches and the great descriptive parts of the end, with ostrich, hippopotamus, and crocodile livening up the scene, and whether we accept the condemnation of the three ‘friends’, the loss from sight of Elihu, Job’s submission, and his final restoration to good fortune, none of these items can with any stretch of the imagination support the tragic aim of ‘catharsis’—whatever that may mean.

[p.12]

There is a limit to which our presuppositions must bow and if the text is not tragic we cannot foist tragedy on Job. Job may *remind* us of Philoctetus, even of Prometheus, but the incidental overlapping of similarities only enhances the contrast. Perhaps it is this impasse that has led some American exegetes to turn their backs on tragic interpretation and to opt for Job as Comedy *tout court*. In a remarkable essay Professor William Whedbee ‘The Comedy of Job’ presents his case which I can only summarize inadequately, that is without its comic overtones. In using the ‘generic designation of the book as comedy’ Whedbee finds caricature and parody in the depictions of Job’s friends, Elihu, God and Job himself. The most challenging part of the argument concerns the divine speeches, where Whedbee quotes D. Robertson’s Study of 1973: ‘God’s rhetoric ..... convinces us that he is a charlatan God, one who has the power and skill of a god but is a fake at the truly divine task of governing with justice and love.’ Terrien too, had commented on the element of parody in these poetic exaggerations of royal power. Thus in and through the comic perspective Job seems to gain a new view both of God and himself, and some of this knowledge and its utterance are tongue-in-cheek. No wonder modern authors catch on and present new plays on God’s Favourite in his highly ironical manner.

G.B. Shaw had paved the way in his tale ‘*The Adventure of the Black Girl in her search for God*’ written in 1932 after a motor accident in South Africa. Voltaire’s ‘Candide’ served as Shaw’s literary model, and the black girl, not finding God, judges that Job must have been very stupid not to have found out his God, the rattlesnake who can only sneer and not argue. Job’s God is an impostor who had never made anything. At the end the girl finds Pavlov’s Science instead of God, flanked by Voltaire and Shaw, whose self-indulgence could hardly go any further than in this absurd dialogue.

Fr. Dermot Cox in his *Triumph of Impotence* (1978) connects Job with the whole Tradition of the Absurd. This highly technical monograph, which adheres to a painstaking analysis

[p.13]

of the text, spans the wide arc which extends from the pre-Biblical Sumerian and Egyptian writings, the ‘ridiculous world’ of the Prometheus, down to our own day of Kafka, Beckett, Camus, Ionesco and others, such as Thomas Mann. Finding the meaning of Job in the totality of the book Cox discusses and dismisses the more conventional explanations, such as Fohrer’s—‘the proper conduct of man in adversity’—in order to show how the stage collapses under the weight of absurdity. Cox does not regard the sublime poetry as tongue-in-cheek mockery of a serious theme, but sees Job caught in the same trap as Watt, Murphy, Krapp,

and Estragon and Vladimir in ‘Waiting for Godot’. Man’s alienation must be accepted as a cosmic absurdity, and no ‘would God’ expostulation can change the scenario. Even revolt is illusory in a world without meaning as in Kafka’s *Castle*. Cox concludes that Job has argued himself into the same metaphysical corner as Beckett did with his Trilogy and Camus with his last novel *La Chute*. But the Theophany carries the drama of Job beyond anything the theatre of the absurd could reach. The true facts of the case belie common sense logic and the moral calculus: the universe may be absurd to us and our limited vision, but it is man who must change to accept the unacceptable. This is the Endgame when impotence wins over power.

Job and Comedy - what a contradiction! Yet the poetic imagination can cross thresholds, namely beyond one dimension to the ‘twofold vision’, as Yeats suggests in these lines from Lapiz Lazuli:

‘They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay  
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread....’

and conclude that the worst in being transfigured becomes comedy. But I should like to go further than that and consider where the centre of gravity lies which makes such a transfiguration possible. The negative factors which we have noted—absence of plot, of development, of interaction—open our attention to the easily neglected positive pivots on which Job hinges and operates. One is God’s long silence and the part played by the audience which must *judge* and therefore accept the role of the divine assembly. Even the boredom

[p.14]

of the last cycle, which Davidson rightly regarded as a deliberate device to bring out fatigue (as, for example, in Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida, a play so black that it can afford to die of boredom), does not break the tension. The jury may fall asleep, but it cannot quit. The interest remains awake as long as the members of the jury remember the initial dialogue, in which God ‘shows off’ his servant Job and the Satan replies with the probing eternal question: ‘Does Job fear God for nought?’. Just because the ordeal proceeds in a setting of general ignorance, in which Job and his friends share totally, the jury can look at the trial with eyes whose perspective cannot be the same as that of the participants. No chorus will speak to clarify matters. And as the speeches and counter-speeches lengthen the members of the jury will look more precisely into their own hearts, questioning themselves ‘Do I serve God for nought?’, and what lies behind this question. It was the young Goethe, awakened from his pietistic slumbers, who saw that here lies the key to a creative understanding of a tragic comedy or a comic tragedy.

Goethe’s fancy makes the gamble the central focus of the drama in heaven. Just as in Job, it is in the prologue of Faust that the fateful exchange of words occurs. Mephistopheles, the celestial spy, still complains about man, the despicable creature who wants comforts and gratification of his appetites. The Lord points to his servant, who, Mephistopheles must admit, is a special case, since he is not content when gratified. The Lord compares him to a sound tree despite the visible confusion; Faust will be fruitful. Then comes the astonishing question: ‘What do you bet’, and the terms of loss and gain are stated clearly. Mephistopheles may tempt the erring creature, and, like cat and mouse, play with him before he eats him up. For

the Lord the gamble is not primarily concerned with man's salvation, but the shaming of the all-denying force, the humorous defeat of the famous serpent, and the recognition that the good man is conscious of the right way even in spite of his dark urges.

[p.15]

Now clearly this contractual game cannot be applied in retrospect to the unstated terms of the tale in Job. Indeed, they make us more aware of the puzzling nature of the business before the divine assembly when the Satan, the hinderer (M. Buber), returns from his world mission and when the Lord takes the initiative in directing the hinderer's attention to the perfect servant. Job is *Tam Weyashar*, according to the Lord's estimate, and this invites the cheeky but justifiable reply: Does Job fear God in vain, for nought, 'umsonst', 'dorean', 'frustra'. None of our languages can do justice to the force of *chinnam*. This word and the Satan's following elaboration, namely, that Job is safely hedged about etc., alert us to the strangeness of the original contest, which is hardly a bet.

The idea that a man, however perfect, should serve God for nothing in return, throws up a disinterested love which is not only alien to human beings and their markets, but also to the covenant relationship and its varying interpretations in the Hebrew tradition. Giving and receiving stand in a contractual proportion, but true devotion and love can never easily be stated in terms of market value. The Satan's mocking *Chinnam* contains a charge which, if taken seriously, is an attack on the Lord rather than on Job. The latter could not be expected to come up to this expectation, but the former may take offence that he only receives service in return for favours bestowed. The narrator does not tell us what the outcome of the contest can look like. If the Satan is proved right he does not claim Job's soul for eternity but is presumably content to have shown up the hollowness of all the claims about true devotion. If he wins he has beaten the Lord One-Nil. But if he loses? Well, the book indicates that he returns to insignificance, for he does not reappear. Perhaps the author suggests that the accuser is annihilated by his own accusation, that he, and not Job, has failed to serve properly.

The gamble is none the less real enough. The audience who gambled and played dice are aware of it and want to know who wins. Even if not professional addicts they are familiar

[p.16]

with the casting of the lot, the *GORAL*, which Christians know best from the account of the soldiers' tossing for Jesus' coat (Jn. 19,23-4) and the strange procedure of electing Matthias in Judas' place—'they drew lots and the lot fell' *kleros*; (Acts 1.26). The gaming instinct is well attested in the Scriptures, it is part\*of the amusement and playfulness of the world.

The contractual aspect of the bet in Job remains vague, and this ambiguity is deliberate, for it opens up a far more daunting dimension, namely that of freedom and levels of contingency. This awareness that things may, or may not, happen is in accord with the Hebrew tradition. Despite God's determining sovereignty there remains in the human world the immense world of possibilities. The Biblical writers are not primarily interested in material contingencies, or, if so, only in their connection with moral responses. Someone ought to examine the force of the many phrases introduced by 'Ulai' in Hebrew. These 'perhaps' passages are fascinating:

‘perhaps’ Sarah may conceive (Gen. 16.2), ‘perhaps’ God may forgive Israel (Exod. 32.20), ‘perhaps’ the God Baal is asleep (I K. 18.27) The versions fail to bring out this playful element or irony of unpredictable happenings by rendering these clauses with *Hinah* and *Me* in Greek and *Ut* and *Ne* in Latin. The NT, however, retains this open room of possible action, of hope and doubt, in the use of *tacha*—as in Paul writing to Philemon about Onesimus’ absence: ‘perhaps this is why you lost him for a time, that you might have him back for good’ (v.15). In our context the concept is vital, for Job forestalls disaster, or rather would forestall it if he could, when he says right at the beginning: ‘Perhaps my sons have sinned’, and accordingly he hedges his bet by offering sacrifices on their behalf (1,5). He did not do this once but always, adds the narrator, in order to stress the unpredictable nature of the moral universe.

The ‘perhaps’ state of affairs goes beyond the confines of ordinary gambling and play-acting. It raises the uncertainty principle to become the key to the understanding of the universe.

[p.17]

Job will become a ‘wise’ man when he is no longer considered a perfect man, for he will have learnt to abandon his monolithic view of God and the world. Those who attend to his ordeal will equally lose faith in a simplistic, one-dimensional fanaticism and will grow to be human in a multi-dimensional and fluid world of private experience, public discourse, and cosmic reality. The supreme irony of the book allows us to judge that all the interlocutors are right in their arguments and wrong in their conclusions.

An Eliphaz postulates that vision and tradition are inseparable, and he is right; Bildad restates the nexus between cause and effect in moral intentions and actions, and he also is right; a Zophar decrees the inexorable laws which govern our conduct and argues empirically from appearances of guilt to alleged trespasses. Nor can Elihu be faulted for his prosy reconstruction of the nature of the human lot, its sufferings, and educational measures in the context of moral and intellectual progress. But what these men fail to express is the vast variety, the immensity, of human possibilities and their place in a universe which is never at rest but moves from the lowest to the highest, not in a graded hierarchy, but in cosmic unity which to us appears chaotic. The divine speeches ironically set their stamp on all, and in that sense provide a comic recognition to the tragic impasse.

We need accordingly not be surprised that Job is the Biblical book of our age and that no two exegetes of this age hew the same figure from this inexhaustible quarry. Both existentialist despair and cosmic confidence may legitimately be derived from this unique composition, for it reveals a Supreme Being who is unknowable, truly *absconditus*, and outside human experience, and at the same time so immediately present that no experience can be human without reference to It as the Lord, as a God with a face. The book authenticates Pascal’s enigmatic challenge to accept God as the necessary gamble in our existence since he gambles with our existence in that contingent Becoming which he has created and will create. He gambles with our freedom which we achieve, as Job, when we submit *chinnam*, freely, without a cause.

---

Ulrich E. Simon, *Gambling With Job*. The Ethel M Wood Trust Lecture delivered before the University of London on 5 June 1980. London: The University of London, 1980. Pbk. ISBN: 0718105637. pp.18.

---

© 1980 Ulrich E. Simon. All reasonable efforts have been made to contact the current copyright holder of this lecture without success. If you hold the copyright, please contact me.

Prepared for the Web in October 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---