THE BOOK OF JOB:
FROM AN IMMORAL TO AN AMORAL GOD

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In preparing to write my book, *Wrestling With God: Job Defends His Integrity* (available at amazon.com), I was both frustrated and encouraged by my studies. I was frustrated because, despite the evidence of the text, many religious commentators depict Job as the exemplar of patience and piety. Most insist that God tested the faith of the righteous Job, only to reward him in the end. But the text shows that Job does not remain patient during his harsh treatment by God. Indeed, he is angry at God's injustice and blasphemes throughout most of the text. At the same time, I was encouraged by the fact that I found a way of interpreting the Book of Job that is more true to the message of the Job poet. In this essay I share some of my conclusions. I view the Book of Job not as the word of God, but as a great work of literature. God and Job are treated as literary characters and the Job poet as a consummate artist.

A critical reading of the Book of Job must confront the issue of innocent suffering in a world allegedly created by a benevolent God. Traditionalists seek to defend God, dodging parts of the text that undermine their arguments. The Prologue to the Book of Job is troubling to many readers. They ignore its portrayal of God as tyrannical and unjust. God is manipulated by the Satan, or "the accuser," to afflict the righteous Job. The Job story is less about faith than the immorality of God. The Job poet portrays a righteous person who maintains his integrity while struggling against a God who afflicted him unjustly. Job's anguish represents the universal anguish of every human being who at some time or another in life utters the desperate question "Where is God in my suffering?"

Job remains unwavering in defense of his moral integrity to the end. While God might be satisfied that Job endured innocent suffering without cursing him to his face, as the Satan said he would, Job's courageous resistance is the hallmark of the book, an inspiration to all who protest against injustice. God could no longer assume that all humans will approach him as patient sycophants. Job rebels more forcefully than any other character in the Bible. He is willing to

risk his life by attempting to sue God in the heavenly court for assault and attempted murder. Unlike his divine adversary, Job is a person of conscience, justice and compassion. The God who speaks from the whirlwind at the end of the book is the God of the Prologue— insecure, unreflecting and brutal. He never honestly confronts his guilt in causing Job's innocent suffering; nor does he show compassion. With great irony, God declares in the Epilogue that his servant Job spoke rightly of him, confirming that Job's condemnation of divine injustice and cruelty, even his angry blasphemy, reflected the truth.

The silences in the Book of Job have their own eloquence. God hid his meaning in his silences, avoiding Job's probing questions about his justice. But Job's silences also bear implied meaning. Although he does not declare it explicitly, Job ultimately understands that retributive justice is not part of God's plan for the universe. The God that Job had heard about from tradition is different from the God he experiences. He is not a God of justice but of absolute power, arbitrary and unaccountable to humans. In fact, God is silent on the question of divine justice. But the question of God's justice is central to the Book of Job. If God wished Job to understand that his justice is beyond human comprehension, he never expresses it. If God wished humans to understand innocent suffering as a test of faith, why did he not say so? Would a benevolent God torment humans merely to test their faith?

If the poet intended to side with God, the book's conclusion would be the place for a stirring doxology from Job. Significantly, the poet refrains from having Job praise God as absolutely just or good. As Martin Buber, a devout Jew, lamented, "Dare we recommend to the survivors of Auschwitz, the Job of the gas chambers, to sing the praises of God's goodness and mercy."[1] Countless innocent sufferers over the centuries could declare the same. Asked in an interview whether Auschwitz proves the non-existence of God, Holocaust survivor Primo Levi replied: "There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God."[2]

For those who expect the Book of Job to resolve the problem of innocent suffering, the speeches of God constitute one of the biggest anti-climaxes of world literature. With verse upon verse depicting unmitigated suffering, with God silent and hidden until the end, one expects some reprieve from a text suffused with pessimism. Nevertheless, the words composed for God by the poet demonstrate the power of rhetoric to seduce. Indeed, the speeches from the whirlwind have seduced generations of pious readers into believing that God puts Job's turmoil to rest. Did God wish to teach Job that, viewed from the divine perspective, his innocent

suffering is not unjust, but bears a higher meaning? In the modern era, this view is reflected by Abraham Heschel, who refuses to apply human reason to the problem: "God writes straight in crooked lines, and man cannot evaluate them as he lives on one level and can see from only one perspective. We are not the final arbiters of meaning. What looks absurd within the limits of time may be luminous within the scope of eternity."[3] The view of Heschel is echoed by many pious commentators.

Many are honest in portraying Job's challenge to divine justice and goodness, but conclude by straining to salvage God's reputation by a leap of faith, unsupported by the text. Nevertheless, not all innocent sufferers of the world, many of them victims of horrendous evil, will surrender their critical faculty. They do not believe that the crooked line is really straight or that order and harmony reside in a higher moral realm, even if incomprehensible to humans. Like God in his speeches from the whirlwind, many religious exegetes wish to invalidate the theodicy question, holding that God is not subject to human reason. Law professor Alan Dershowitz offers a cogent defense of applying reason to God: "To accept the conclusion of the Book of Job that God's justice is not subject to human understanding, is to abdicate all human judgment of God's actions and to accept the injustices of our world….In the wake of the Holocaust, it is more difficult to shrug one's shoulders and sigh that God works in mysterious ways."[4]

Job might have been overwhelmed by God's speeches, bowing before the majesty of God's creation, but there is no evidence in the text that he is satisfied with the divine response. Theologians who ignore the danger in faith without reason claim that even though Job receives from God no logical answer to his suffering, he rests content. The mere experience of God, they argue, is sufficient. Once he "saw" God, Job's questions dissolved. This view received its classic expression in the work of Rudolf Otto. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto contends that the religious experience transcends human reason. According to Otto, God's response from the whirlwind is a "real theodicy," not only able to convince Job, "but utterly to still every inward doubt that assailed his soul." Such mystification is the last refuge of the religious apologist. Abdicating human reason, Otto holds that God's response provides a non-rational "theodicy of its own," leaving Job completely satisfied.[5]

The question of God's goodness and justice looms over the Book of Job from the beginning, when God betrays the righteous Job, to the end, when God refuses to take responsibility for his evil acts. It is easier for some to accept a God whose power is limited rather than a God who

permits evil and innocent suffering. Harold Kushner, in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, believes that God is good and just, but not omnipotent. Restricted by human free will and the unalterable laws of nature, God cannot prevent all evil and suffering in the world.[6] Along similar lines, the philosopher Hans Jonas also holds that God is not omnipotent. According to Jonas, "God was silent," failing to intervene in Auschwitz, "not because he chose not to, but because he *could* not."[7] This view that God is not omnipotent was also held by the philosophers John Stuart Mill and William James.

In contrast, the God of the Book of Job is omnipotent, but not good or just. This God is obeyed not out of reverence but for the terror he instills. How can such a God be loved? The only way to justify God's treatment of Job is to deny that his suffering is innocent. The Prologue demonstrates that God unjustly afflicted Job, whom he affirmed was righteous. Commentators who deflect the blame from God to the Satan, God's agent, distort the text. Job believes that God is omnipotent and able to prevent his calamity. If God is able to prevent suffering but chooses not to do so, no human can conclude that God is good.

To enable God to escape human scrutiny, many resort to the argument from divine transcendence. Humans allegedly cannot fathom the wisdom of God, who has his reason for permitting the innocent to suffer and the wicked to prosper. When speaking through his prophet, the second Isaiah, God declared that he is beyond human standards of good and evil: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."[8] Responding to those who maintain that God transcends human moral standards, John Stuart Mill declared: "I will call no being good who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow-creature; and if such a being will sentence me to hell for not calling him so to hell I will go."[9]

Humans have imposed upon God a moral responsibility he cannot bear. The Book of Job reveals that retributive justice is not part of God's plan for the universe. Humans have placed upon God the burden of absolute goodness and justice. Humans have assigned God the function of policing the world, justly distributing rewards and punishments. Perhaps God lacks the power to destroy all evil. If God were relieved of the responsibility of enforcing strict retribution, he might be spared attacks from righteous humans like Job. Humans could then take full responsibility for their lives. They are accountable for both the moral good and evil in the world.

The conception of God as the enforcer of absolute justice, intervening in the world, unfailingly rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked, is illusory. Everyone knows that innocent people often suffer and evil people often prosper. God undergoes a transformation within the Book of Job. The God of the Prologue is the God of retributive justice who behaves unjustly by afflicting Job. But God's speeches from the whirlwind at the end of the book reflect a paradigm shift. This God is not interested in justice or injustice. He sends rain upon the just and the unjust, the good and the evil alike. The God of retributive justice is dead.

But like the phoenix, God rises from the ashes, shorn of the moral categories that humans have imposed. The Book of Job implies a transition form an immoral God to an amoral God, beyond human conceptions of good and evil. The American writer Stephen Crane observed, "A man said to the universe: 'Sir I exist!' 'However,' replied the universe, 'The fact has not created in me a sense of obligation.'"[10] The American poet Robert Frost made an intriguing suggestion along these lines in *A Masque of Reason*. According to this poem, God and Job meet many years after their early experience together. Surprisingly, God credits Job with doing him a great service. God thanks the surprised Job "for the way you helped me establish once for all the principle there's no connection man can reason out between his just deserts and what he gets….My thanks are to you for releasing me from moral bondage to the human race. The only free will there at first was man's, who could do good or evil as he chose." God confesses that unless he wanted to "suffer loss of worship," he had to "prosper good and punish evil. You changed all that. You set me free to reign. You are the Emancipator of God."[11] Owing to Job, God is free to act according to his true nature.

Job laments repeatedly that God ignores his desperate prayers: "Behold, I cry out of wrong, but I am not heard. I cry for help, but there is not justice."[12] Job's plea has been echoed by countless sufferers over the centuries. But God, detached from humans and the world he created, cannot be expected to answer prayers. Believers think that they can communicate with a personal God by means of prayer. They believe that God can intervene in the world, hearing requests and rectifying injustices. When by chance prayers are answered, God is given credit. When prayers go unanswered or innocent suffering happens, many accept it as God's will. But the God of the Prologue is not the same God at the end of the book. He can be neither credited nor blamed for what happens in the world. He created and sustains the cosmos with all of its marvels. But he does not intervene to prevent innocent suffering. An amoral God, he is not concerned with

individual humans. Prayers of supplication assume that God will intervene to grant a petitioner's request. But he does not alter human affairs. If God does, why are the prayers of some innocent sufferers answered while the prayers of others, equally or more deserving, not answered? If God cannot be blamed, neither can God take credit for those who survive an earthquake or a tornado. Why should God allow some to survive and others to die? When evil persons exercise their moral freedom to murder others, God does not intervene. If he does, why are some saved while others perish? Prayers of thanksgiving assume that God bestows necessities or gifts upon humans. Why does God grant favors to some and deny the same favors to those equally or more deserving? Prayers glorifying God to curry favor for divine assistance are insincere. God should not require obsequious praise from suffering humans unless he demands servile worship. The fact is that the amoral God at the conclusion of the Book of Job is divorced from the fate of humans and the world.

Significantly, after the Book of Job, God recedes from the world. In the remaining nine books of the Hebrew Bible he does not again intervene in human affairs.[13] Henceforth, he is closer to the God of eighteenth century deism, espoused by America's founders, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine. The standard defense of God is that innocent suffering is inevitable in a world of human freedom and unwavering natural laws. Were God to prevent evil, theists argue, human freedom would be destroyed and the natural order destabilized. But the God of deism is an impersonal deity who created the world but does not interfere with human freedom or the laws of nature. This God is not concerned with human morality and the processes of nature. Nor can he be blamed for not intervening to prevent moral evil and natural disasters. Humans exercise their freedom to act either morally or immorally and natural laws operate relentlessly. The God of deism is not concerned with the thoughts of humans. He does not demand worship. Nor is he interested in consigning to hell those who do not believe in him.

What does the Book of Job teach about the relationship between God and humanity? The Book of Job signals a radical transformation in the traditional conception of the deity. The Job poet is an unacknowledged Hebrew prophet, issuing a clarion call for a major revision in beliefs about the nature of God and his relation to the world. Transcendent and impersonal, the amoral God is not concerned with the questions of innocent sufferers or with comforting them in their anguish. Indeed, at the conclusion of the Book of Job, God's depiction of the wonders of the world that he created contains a startling omission. Except for a brief reference to the proud and

the wicked,[14] human beings are absent from God's celebration of his works. The Book of Job undermines the anthropocentrism of Hebrew scripture. The God of the prophets is sometimes concerned with human justice. But this vaunted God of justice fades into the background, replaced at the conclusion to the Book of Job by an amoral deity, indifferent to the human condition. Like Atlas, who carried the world upon his shoulders, God was burdened by the moral responsibility imposed upon him by humanity. With the Book of Job, God shrugs this responsibility, allowing it to fall upon human beings.

One marvels that the Book of Job is included in the Hebrew canon. Read critically, the book undermines the faith of ancient Israel. It demolishes the central tenet of monotheism—a God of absolute justice. The Job poet was Israel's great dissenter. He raised questions about the nature of God that few, if any, of his contemporaries dared to ask. He had the courage to show that the God of the Hebrew Bible might be omnipotent, but he is not perfectly good or just. Throughout the rest of the Hebrew canon, especially the Torah and the historical books, we find numerous examples of God's cruelty and injustice, but no Biblical character challenges God with the tenacity and power of Job. The early fifth-century Christian theologian Theodore of Mopsuestia attempted unsuccessfully to remove the Book of Job from the canon because the blasphemous Job of the poetic dialogue contradicts the pious Job of the Prologue.

Nevertheless, over the centuries many must have had misgivings about the canonical status of the Book of Job. What kind of God is silent to innocent suffering? The Prologue is the Achilles heel of all religious defenses of God. But the God portrayed in the Prologue is consistent with ancient Hebrew theology: God causes suffering as well as prosperity, evil as well as good. Pious readers, holding every word of scripture to be the inspired word of God, ought to be shocked by the literal message of the Book of Job. Its canonical status induces them to evade or obfuscate issues that threaten their beliefs. Many might hold that the Prologue is only a story, not to be taken seriously. But if the Prologue is considered fiction, so must the rest of the book. The cruel test of Job says much more about God than the purity of Job's faith. The God of the Book of Job is the same God who wiped out the world with the Great Flood. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the God depicted is tyrannical, unjust and arbitrary.

Hurling his accusatory words against God, Job represents the triumph of the human spirit over tyranny and injustice. The Book of Job honors a noble hero of conscience, steadfast in his integrity, who dared to wrestle with God.

[1] Buber, "The Dialogue between Heaven and Earth," in *On Judaism by Martin Buber* (1967), 224.
[2] Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, translated by John Shepley, (Marlboro, Vermont: The Marlboro Press, 1989), 68.
[3] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (1995), 301.
[4] Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Genesis of Justice* (2000), 80.
[5] Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1950), 78.
[6] Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981), chapters 7 and 8.
[7] Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz," (1987), 10. Emphasis in original.
[8] *Isaiah*, 55:8-9.
[9] John Paterson, *The Book is Alive* (1954), 113.
[10] Stephen Crane, "War Is Kind and Other Lines," (1899), XXI.
[11] Robert Frost, "A Masque of Reason," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Latham, (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 475-476.
[12] *Job* 19:7.
[13] Jack Miles, *God: A Biography,* (1995), 11.
[14] *Job* 40:11-12.