Job's Colophon and Its Contradictions[1]

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There are many parts of the Bible that people find boring: the genealogies in the first eight chapters of 1 Chronicles, the description of the ark and tabernacle in Exodus 25-31 (repeated in chapters 35-40) or of the temple in 1 Kings or Ezekiel. These texts are often overlooked by readers because they are long, detailed, and repetitive. But these qualities are also what make them noticed. They must be acknowledged before they are skipped over or otherwise left unregarded. In contrast, the lowly biblical colophon has nothing similar by which it can assert itself to the reader. Colophons often go by unnoticed. They are the textual equivalents of the human appendix: structural relics of a bygone time that have outlived their usefulness. They are the Rodney Dangerfield of ancient text forms. At best they can yield form-critical data, as Michael Fishbane has argued on the basis of colophons in the legal collections of Leviticus and Numbers;[2] or be used as evidence of redactional activity, such as the colophon in Psalm 72:20 which denotes the end of a collection of Davidic psalms,[3] or be read to glean information about ancient Israelite scribal practices, as is the case with Karel Van Der Toorn's use of Hos 14:10.[4] The *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, the premiere multi-volume reference work of the past generation, contains no entry on the colophon. The work of Chaim Gevaryahu remains the most recent detailed study of the phenomenon,[5] but he studies colophons in order to explain the origin of biblical superscriptions. Colophons can't get no respect.

The most studied biblical colophon in the Hebrew Bible is doubtless the one that concludes Ecclesiastes (12:9-14), but this might be a case of the exception that proves the rule, given the distinctive questions this text raises: Does the colophon criticize the author of Ecclesiastes? Is it really multiple colophons from different scribes? I find it interesting that many scholars don't even use the word "colophon" to describe the one in Ecclesiastes, but rather refer to it as an "epilogue," as if the word "colophon" itself implies something that can-

not be expected to bear any significant interpretive weight.[6] In short, colophons are read for purposes that extend behind the text. To borrow an image from David Clines: they are windows in the text, used as a means to find out something else.[7]

This essay is not about all the colophons in the Hebrew Bible. It's about one, which occurs in the book of Job and marks the end of Job's final defense to the three friends. After Job's longest speech, which spans six chapters (26-31), an innocuous three-word phrase notes *tammū divrei iyyov*, which the NRSV translates as "The words of Job are ended." True to how colophons are viewed in the field, this particular one receives little attention in the commentaries, apart from what it might contribute to reconstructions of the book's growth. This is because it immediately precedes the entry of Elihu into the narrative, whose speeches have been viewed as an addition by many scholars. By way of example, in his very large commentary on Job, David Clines remarks on the colophon only to argue that it is not an editorial addition, but original to Job's final speech. This claim supports Clines's rearrangement of the book so that the Elihu speeches precede Job's final speech, which places the colophon immediately before Yahweh's first speech in chapter 38.[8] Among those who argue for the literary integrity of Job, the colophon is usually disregarded entirely. Norman Habel is a representative example here.[9]

But what if we looked at how the colophon functions *in* the text, instead of what it might tell us about the sources *behind* the text and how they may have been edited? How can we understand this colophon in Job as a paratext? Gérard Genette has coined the term, "paratext," to describe all of the elements of a printed book that constitute "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers."[10] Genette's discussion is limited to print books and, when it does refer to ancient works, his claims are often simplistic. He also does not discuss the colophon in ancient manuscripts. But Genette offers some theoretical clarity that I bring to bear on Job 31:40. First is the importance of position: where in the text does the paratext occur? Here Genette speaks of front matter, back matter, chapter ti-

tles, headings and the like which are standard parts of printed works. Despite where they occur in the overall structure of the work, he highlights their liminal character. The subtitle (itself a paratext) to the English translation of his book is *Thresholds of Interpretation*. The book's original French title is simply, *Seuils*—thresholds. Paratexts are thresholds because they mark a border or the "fringe" between the text and what is external to it.[11] Paratexts also have what Genette calls an "illocutionary force." How does it convey information? In whose voice does it speaks? Does it offer advice or injunction?[12] But the "essential" quality of the paratext is its function. What does it do? Or, in Genette's words, "What is it good for?"[13] Important here is the fact that because the paratext owes its existence to the text of which it is a part, it has a limited range of functions.

As a paratext, the colophon's functions can be summarily and quickly described. It marks the ending of a text. In the era before printing this was a necessity, so that later copyists would know that they had a complete text before them to reproduce. This is the case with many Egyptian and Akkadkian colophons. As such, a colophon is an assertion of authority. In marking the end of a text it pronounces that text to be in some way, "finished," whole or complete. It also protects the text from any supplementation by its very visual presence, because any additional text would be clearly marked as literally and figuratively outside the bounds of the normative text. This gives the colophon interpretive power to add to its practical dimension. By way of example are the Masoretic notations at the end of biblical books—colophons—which contain numerical data that seek to insure nothing is added to or taken away from the text. These notations are not benign observations; they implicitly assert that *this* iteration of a text is complete and no other. This gives the colophon the paratextual character of a boundary marker. But boundary markers also deconstruct themselves. A border shows itself and asks to be noticed, but the acknowledgement of a border not only can take the form of respecting it, but also of transgression. Biblical texts often overflow their boundaries. They are like the sea that Yahweh describes to Job: not everyone can simply say to

them, “Thus far you shall come, but no further” (Job 38:11). For example, in public readings of Ecclesiastes, 12:13 is repeated after the book’s final verse, so that the last word of the book is will not be “evil.” The *Yalkut Shimoni* for Jonah does not end on Yahweh’s question of Jon 4:11 but adds a response from Jonah that resolves his debate by having the prophet capitulate, falling on his face and quoting Dan 9:9a (“To the Lord our God are mercy and forgiveness”).[14]

Because the colophon in Job 31:40 is a paratext, I want to briefly look at the other paratexts in Job. The one-line introductions to each of the speeches in the dialogue are the most easily identifiable examples. These brief introductions actually do more than present the reader with a finished Job, because the names of Job and his friends never occur in their speeches. Without these paratexts, the speakers are otherwise unknown and there can exist no dialogue or debate. They do not simply present Job as a finished text, but, because they are necessary for there to be a coherent narrative which can be called “the book of Job,” they create that finished text. In this regard, they are more than paratexts. In the case of Job, none of its constituent parts—none of them—is a complete text in its own right, neither any of the anonymous poems of praise or lament; nor the narrative that frames those poems. Separately, none of these things cohere on their own and together they do so only partially. I’m reminded of the story in an early Buddhist text about another dialogue, between King Milisina and the Buddhist monk, Nagasena. When Nagasena tells the king the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, or no-self, the king asks how a person can exist if there is no self. Nagasena responds by pointing out to the king that the chariot he rode in that day doesn’t exist. “Chariot” is a term used to describe nothing but a combination of things—axle, driveshaft, yoke, wheels—that individually and collectively aren’t a chariot. This is also the case of Job. For example, Richard Simon argued over three centuries ago that the prose prologue and epilogue were added to pre-existing poems, and even though 19th century scholarship reversed that order,[15] claiming

instead that an author repurposed an old folktale to frame the dialogue, the result is the same: Job 1-2 and 42 are paratexts.

This is a signicant claim I wish to make: It is not possible to distinguish text from paratext in the book of Job. This ambiguity is present in the colophon of 31:40. I want to assert here, and then demonstrate, that its function in the interpretation of Job as a whole is much greater than that of an ordinary colophon.[16] This is due not only to the nature of paratexts in Job that I have been discussing, but also to the wording of the colophon itself.

With that in mind, a brief philological analysis of the verb in Job 31:40 is in order. The root of the verb *tammū* is *tmm* and it can mean several different things in biblical Hebrew:[17]

1. "To be completed, finished," as in Deut 31:24 (root's occurrence in bold type) "When Moses had completed writing the words of the Torah in a book until **finished**;" or Lam 4:22: "Your punishment is completed, daughter Zion."

2. "To be consumed, be destroyed, perish, die out," as in Jer 36:23: "As Yehudi read three or four columns he would cut them with a penknife and throw them into the fire on the brazier until the entire scroll **was consumed** in the fire on the brazier, or Ps 9:7: "The enemy **has vanished** in an everlasting waste; you have rooted out the cities and their memory has died."

3. "To be blameless, be perfect," used of persons as in Ps 1914:"And from the insolent hold back your servant; let them not rule over me. Then I will be **blameless.** I will be free of great transgression," an in Job 22:3 " "Does it give pleasure to Shaddai that you are righteous, or is it a gain if you are **blameless** in your ways?"[18]

How does this semantic range of *tmm* play a role in the interpretive power of the colophon in Job 31:40? If we read *tammū* to mean "complete" or "finished," then we might be inclined to do what commentators have done for years and gloss over the colophon as useless to the meaning of Job (although possibly helpful in reconstructing how the book came to-

gether). R.N. Whybray's reading is representative of this interpretation. He observes that the colophon does nothing more than assert that, "Job's case is complete; there is nothing more that he can say."[19] But Job's case isn't complete and there is more that he can and does say. Job speaks twice more, directly to Yahweh, in chapters 40 and 42. His second, brief, reply is itself a formidable interpretive enigma in a book that is full of them. It also in chapter 42 that God says to the friends that they, unlike Job, "not spoken rightly" about him (42:7). Does this refer to Job's words in the dialogue with the friends, before the colophon, or to his statements to Yahweh afterward? That God contrasts Job's words favorably with those of the friends implies that Job's correct speech about God occurs before the colophon. What are we to make of Job's two replies to God that come afterward, if the colophon indeed marks Job's words as "finished"? The colophon, read this way, causes us to re-evaluate our understandings of those two interactions of Job with Yahweh.

The meaning of "blameless" or "perfect" for *tammū* opens up other interpretive possibilities for the colophon. It functions now not just as a marker for the extent of Job's words, but of their content as well. This meaning of *tmm* is root of the word *tam* "blameless," which is used to describe Job in the prologue and is found the poems in the mouth of Bildad ("Look, God will not reject a **blameless** person," [Job 8:20]) and Job himself:

> Though I am innocent, my mouth will condemn me
> Though I am **blameless,** he will twist me.
> I am **blameless**; I do not know myself.
> I detest my life. And so I say it's all one!
> He destroys the blameless and the evil alike. (9:20-22)

The colophon could be interpreted to read "The words of Job are blameless," like Job himself. This appears to be the reason by the Targum's use of the Aramiac *šlm*. But then Job's claim that God treats the blameless and the evil alike, is undone in the epilogue. There, Yahweh distinguishes between the good words of Job, which have spoken rightly about God, and those of the friends which have not. In other words, while the colophon acknowledges that

Job has spoken blamelessly, it also tacitly rebukes his claim that God treats the blameless and the evil alike.

Not many interpreters have read the colophon this way, mainly because not many interpreters bother to read the colophon at all. An exception is C.L. Seow who notes the lexical connection between *tammū* in the colophon and the description of Job as *tam* in the prologue and wonders whether the poet is attempting to be ironic.[20] The 19th century Russian rabbi, Malbim (Meir Loeb ben Jehiel Michael) also reads *tmm* as perfect or blameless, noting that:

> "The words of Job are perfect" [Job 31:40]. They are perfect in his responses to his three friends so much that they refrained from answering.

Reading tmm as "perish" gives "The words of Job are destroyed," which tells the reader that Job's defense in the end does not carry the day. God's justice and freedom cannot be questioned by human beings. This of course is loudly and repeatedly asserted in Yahweh's speeches in chapters 38-41. It also poignantly denies Job's fervent wish in chapter 19 that his words

> Were written down, inscribed in a book,
> with an iron pen and lead,
> engraved in a rock forever (19:23-24)

The reading of the colophon supports an interpretation that sees Job as the eventual loser in his fight with God. His words of self-defense are destroyed in the power of Yahweh's words and divine manifestation as a whirlwind. The colophon also creates a wonderful irony in that Job's words are, of course, *not* destroyed, because we are reading them together here today, and also because the purpose of a colophon is to *preserve* the words that it marks.

In what I consider to be one of the most important books on Job of this century, Carol Newsom emphasizes the book's polyvalent character, engaging its cubist theology of suffering without resorting to textual or theological manipulations to make the picture look more familiar.[21] Taking seriously the book's paratexts only adds to the already multiple ways the

book continues to frustrate our attempts to force it into whatever literary or theological boxes we bring with us as readers.

[1]This is a revised paper given in the Biblical Paratexts section at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the SBL in San Antonio, TX.

[2]Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 27-28.

[3]David Wilgren, "Psalm 72:20: A Frozen Colophon?" *JBL* 135 (2016) 49-60.

[4]*Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) 257-58.

[5]Chaim Gevaryahu, "Biblical Colophons: A Source for the 'Biography' of Authors, Texts, and Books," *Congress Volume Edinburgh VTSup* (1974); "Colophons in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes," Samuel Loewenstamm FS, 1978).

[6]Note Hab 3:19.

[7]David J. A. Clines, "Methods in Old Testament Study," in *Beginning Old Testament Study* (ed. J. Rogerson, J. Barton, D. Clines, P. Joyce; St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1998) 25-48.

[8]Clines, *Job 21-37*, 975, 1036.

[9]So Marvin Pope mentions only that it is "presumable an editorial note" (*Job*, 239). Norman Habel, who argues for the integrity of the book, does not address the colophon at all.

[10]Gérard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext," trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History* 22 (1991) 261-72 (261). This is the introduction to Genette's, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) translation of *Seuils* (Paris: Editions du Seuils, 1987).

[11]Genette, "Introduction," 261, quoting Borges and Philippe Lejeune.

[12]Genette, "Introduction," 268.

[13]Genette, "Introduction," 263.

[14]"At that moment [Jonah] fell upon his face and said, 'Conduct your world according to the principle of your mercy, as it is written, 'To the Lord our god are mercy and forgiveness' [Dan 9:9]. Discussion in T. M. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 178.

[15]Richard Simon, *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* (1678; repr., Frankfurt: Minerva, 1967) I.1. 30. For the dominant model in the 19th century, see B. Duhm, *Das Buch Hiob* (Freiburg: Mohr-Siebeck, 1897); K. Budde, *Das Buch Hiob Übersetzt und Erklärt* (2d. ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1913). Discussion and overview in Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 3-31; K. N. Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the 'Happy' Ending in Job 42:7-17* (*BZAW* 354; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005) 71-75. See also G. Fohrer, "Zur Vorgeschichte und Komposition des Buches Hiob," *VT* 6 (1956) 249-67. I have touched on this in my "To Each His Own Job," in Ł. Niesiołowski-Spano', C. Peri and J. West (eds.), *Finding Myth and History in the Bible* (London: Equinox, 2016) 18-29.

[16]Some paratexts in modern printed works contain much interpretive authority, e.g., the preface or foreword. Smaller influential paratexts are titles. Genette notes that the one-word title of Joyce's *Ulysses* offers tremendous interpretive power because without it many readers might not notice the novel's debt to Homer's *Odyssey* ("Introduction," 262).

[17]Data from *Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*.

[18]The semantic range of the Hebrew tmm is reflected in the Targum which translates the term with šlm, a verb that can mean both "to be complete" and "to be perfect." The LXX uses the aorist middle of pauō ("to cease").

[19]R.N. Whybray, *Job*, Readings (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 137.

[20]C.L. Seow, *Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary*, Illuminations (Eerdmans, 2013) 69.

[21]Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).