



The Bible as Literature

Job and Tragedy

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Job 3 Job 42

It was Theodore of Mopsuestia in the 4th century CE who denounced the book of Job in the Old Testament as an imitation of a Greek tragedy and thought that its author was a friend of the Greeks, familiar with their literature. He was, said Theodore, 'prompted by an unholy ambition to make of the ancient true story of the Edomite Job a drama after the pattern of the Greek poets. He invented the speeches he put into the mouths of the characters – some of which are injurious and almost blasphemous – as well as the prologue in heaven with its scandalous wager between God and Satan, and the mythical monsters in chapters 40–41.' It is not surprising then to find that Theodore excluded the book of Job from his Bible on the grounds that it was fictional, an opinion condemned at the Council of Constantinople.

Many centuries later, after the rise of biblical criticism, H.M. Kallen in his book, *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy Restored* (1959) famously reconstructed the book of Job as a Greek tragedy with chorus. Kallen thought that the author of Job was directly inspired by witnessing a production of Euripides, possibly the *Bellerophon* and hence it was written as an imitation or echo of a Euripidean tragedy. This is unlikely as the book of Job predates the Hellenistic world by at least a century, but the comparison is instructive. The existence of a prologue and epilogue, Kallen argued, conform to Euripidean practice and the wisdom poem and speeches of the fourth friend, Elihu, can be regarded as choral interludes in similar manner to Euripides in which choral odes are detached from the dialogue. There is also the *deus ex machina* device, 'In Euripides this device is used to leave the play intentionally open-ended, to satisfy the spectator who wishes an orthodox or a happy ending, and simultaneously to nurture doubts in the minds of the less conventional.' (Hadas, *Hellenistic Culture, Fusion and Diffusion*, 1959, p. 136) There is a similarity here with the open-endedness of the book of Job, both in God's reply in that it does not give a straightforward set of reasons for Job's predicament and in Job's response which is emotive rather than rational. There is also a similar challenge by both to the 'orthodoxy' of the day: it is left to the spectator to accept or reject.

Kallen's suggestion might lead us to ponder on the possible motive the author of Job might have had in constructing his book as a tragedy. The Prologue and Epilogue narrative story may well have pre-existed the addition of the dialogue and God-speeches so that the main author of the dialogue and God-speeches (the Poet) may have seen in the folk tale the possibility for a tragic drama. He may have turned a trite tale into a great piece of work,

into a vehicle for opening up the character of Job. He saw the tragic possibilities of the story and opened it up to reveal the real experience of a man suffering terrible woe. Thus the Poet saw Job as throwing the ancient answer that a good man would bless God even in affliction into grievous question. So the real character of Job is the one who comes out with a curse in chapter 3, wishing away the day of his birth on the calendar so that he might not have been born, such are his trials! Job was a righteous man to whom suddenly and unaccountably suffering came. The tragic element is not that he suffered misfortune, but that there was no explanation for his suffering, nothing in his past to account for these repeated blows. God appeared to have suddenly turned hateful and malign and so all his beliefs about God and justice came into question. 'From the depth of an ancient skepticism and a sense of justice which dared to hold Deity itself to account, the Poet saw the story ... in the light of the tragic vision ... The resolution of the folk story, by which Job for his piety and suffering was rewarded by twice his former possessions and a new family, was unacceptable.' (R.B. Sewall, 'The Book of Job' in *The Vision of Tragedy*, 1992, p. 12)

Perhaps the closest similarity of Job to a specific Greek tragedy is with Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Similar turns of phrase and expression between Job and *Prometheus Bound* indicate close verbal links, (e.g., the pillars of heaven in Job 26: 11; cf. 'The pillar of heaven' in PB p. 69) and a striking similarity in sentiment (e.g., 'O that you would hide me in Sheol' in Job 14: 13 and 'Would that ... he had hurled me ... in Tartarus' (PB, p. 57)). In story and structure, the situations are similar in that both characters suffer pain. Job not only suffers the calamity of loss of his children, property and social status, but the worst affliction in many ways is his disease which consists of painful pus-filled sores. We encounter Job sitting on his dunghill scratching these sores. Prometheus is also suffering pain because a hungry eagle tears his body and eats his liver. Prometheus cannot move as he is tied by irons to a rock. In both situations the affliction comes from the godhead, but in both intermediaries are used – in Job the Satan figure actually carries out the afflictions and in *Prometheus Bound* it is Hephaestus who has been commanded by Zeus to cast him in irons and tie him down. At the end of the prologue and in the dialogue section of Job three friends come to visit him, at first in comforting silence but in the dialogue they turn into accusers. In *Prometheus Bound* there is just one friend, Oceanus who tells Prometheus that he shares in his affliction. However, like the friends in relation to Job, he sees Prometheus as having sinned in having spoken out in defiance against Zeus and thinks that Prometheus should repent to avoid further torment. The friends of Job also urge Job to repent of the misdeeds that they think caused his suffering. So Zophar says, 'If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away'. (11: 14a). Likewise Oceanus states, 'Dismiss those angry feelings and seek some way out of these troubles'. (PB 315–6) Both works end with reconciliation between the sufferer and the godhead. Whilst Job has a happy ending with the restoration of his fortunes and a new family, Prometheus does not. It appears to end in catastrophe with a rupturing of the earth so that the rock carrying Prometheus falls into the depths. One can argue that this is not Aeschylus' last word as he wrote *Prometheus Unbound* which intends an ultimate reconciliation with the godhead (as far as we can glean from extant fragments). One major difference however is that Job repents whereas Prometheus does not submit in any way. This is arguably a key factor of tragedy which Job fails to fulfil.

In relation to sentiments and ideas, both characters claim that they have done nothing to deserve punishment and that in fact they were full of good deeds. Job says, 'I delivered the poor who cried and the orphan who had no helper. The blessing of the wretched came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy ... I was eyes to the blind,

and feet to the lame'. (29: 12–13, 15) In similar vein Prometheus states, 'I saved mankind from being destroyed. Lend your ears to what I did for mortals, how before suffering and witless I on them bestowed mind and an understanding'. (PB 235–6) A major theological theme of the book of Job is the doctrine of just retribution which is open to severe question in the light of Job's suffering. This was a worldview espoused by the wisdom writers of the Old Testament and found especially in Proverbs. Whilst the Greeks had no official doctrine of this kind, it was clear to them that it was unjust for an innocent man such as Prometheus to be afflicted with great suffering. Thus it is legitimate in both cases for them to cry out against unjust treatment at the hands of the godhead. Both express the sentiment that God does not listen to the cries of the needy, e.g., Job 24: 12, 'From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer'. Similarly PB 231–2, 'Of wretched mortals he [Zeus] took no account at all'. Both become rebels against God but also both ask for pity, compare Job 19: 21, 'Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me!' with PB 274–5, 'Consent I beg you, consent; show sympathy with the one who is in trouble now'.

Comparison of the portrayal of God in the two works is also instructive. In Job, although God appears to have turned against Job at the beginning by inflicting the trials, it is clear from the wager that it was only a test. This does not completely exonerate God since to subject your faithful servant to a test is sporting with human beings and their lives, but it has the effect of taking the direct blame away from him. Having said that, throughout the dialogue Job is in no doubt that it is God who is the source of his punishment. God is essentially unchangeable in his nature in the book of Job, as the appeal to his work in creation and in ordering the world shows. God sets up the laws by which the world is governed which may be beyond human comprehension but which are also essentially unchangeable. Human beings need to change, not God. In *Prometheus Bound* there is a similar idea that the world power is beyond human comprehension and cannot be understood by standards set by the narrow bounds of human experience. In Prometheus however the godhead is not unchanging and in fact Zeus (rather than Prometheus) transforms from being despotic and tyrannical to becoming mild and humane and Zeus himself grows both intellectually and spiritually from the experience.

So what are we to make of these parallels between tragedy and Job? Of course, the very fact that we can make these comparisons at all shows the radical nature of Job's protests. The book is unlike anything else in the bible except perhaps the deeper moments of anguish of the prophet Jeremiah who is also not afraid to argue with God and bewail the day of his birth (in a striking parallel to Job 3 in Jeremiah 20: 1–7). So can we go further and ask whether we could classify Job as a tragedy in relation both to its construction by an author and its ideas? Is Job himself a tragic figure? In a famous radio broadcast in 1979, George Steiner ('Tragedy, Remorse and Justice', *The Listener* 102 (1979) 508–11), argued that it is the repentance of Job that spoils the tragedy. Until that point Job has much in common with great tragic figures such as Creon in the *Antigone*. However, he said, 'it is in the moment of remorse that Creon pulls down upon himself irremedial horror and catastrophe. Not so Job'. (p. 508) When Job is faced with 'the almost mocking, unanswerable speech of the Lord God out of the whirlwind of his ironic omnipotence' he repents and humbles himself recognizing his folly in questioning God's transcendent reasons for his actions. The happy ending epilogue that we heard in our lesson is also, says Steiner, essential to the Jewish conception of God in that reassurance in the face of anguish is the ultimate response. Steiner argued that tragedy is a rare genre to be confined

to the works of those such as Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles and he did not see any cross-fertilization of ideas on the grounds of the absolute contrast that he found between Greek and Hebraic views of the world. The Greek vision is, he said, of man as an alien or unwanted guest in the world and although tragic questions are raised in books such as Job, ultimately in Hebrew thought there are 'elements of reassurance' to be found. Arguably then the premise that God's justice will prevail prevents real tragedy here. Whilst Job raises questioning doubts about suffering to a greater extent than most other biblical texts and does not have accompanying answers, which brings the book close to tragedy, the appearance of God leads to a shrinkage of the grandeur of the tragic hero before 'the sublimity of the power he has questioned' (D.D. Raphael, 'Tragedy and Religion' in *The Paradox of Tragedy*, p. 48). Furthermore, when Job does contend with God he opposes only his understanding to God's justice: 'There is never any question of opposing his will, of refusing to *accept* the order of the world. He questions his justice but he submits to it willingly' (Raphael 49) 'Prometheus defies Zeus; Job lays his hand upon his mouth'. (Raphael, p. 51).

It is clear that many of the sentiments of the tragic genre are present in Job – there is the hostile deity and power of fate in the background, there is the nobility of the hero despite his desperate state, relentlessly pursuing his own arguments and holding to his own position whatever anyone else says, there is the bombastic and powerful God, possibly not really in control. And yet what spoils the tragedy is first God's appearance, which suggests that the universe is not a hostile and empty place after all, second Job's repentance even though his questions have not been answered, third his vindication by God who says to Job, 'you have spoken of me what is right' (42: 6) which seems to contradict all that has gone before, and fourth the nature of the Epilogue with its simple reward after punishment scheme. Thus essentially it is the way the book is constructed that makes it difficult ultimately to describe Job as tragedy. This, combined with the ultimate incompatibility between the Jewish religious outlook and the tragic worldview, suggests that the parallel can only be taken so far and no further. In a religious worldview God is accepted, for all his possible faults. Even though there are moments of questioning his consistency, which bring us close to the tragic spirit, God is given the benefit of the doubt and his justice is usually maintained. So Job repents despite not having received an answer from God.

Tragedy then is best seen as a window into appreciating the radical nature of Job. The application of the genre to Job draws out some interesting elements of the book and the noting of parallels, particularly with *Prometheus Bound*, is striking. But ultimately that the author conceived of his work as a tragedy is unlikely. Rather, at this meeting point of two different cultures we have found a real link of human sentiment that surpasses the individual culture itself. The most we can speak of is a spirit of scepticism and a presentation of Job's situation as tragic insofar as the Jewish religious framework of this biblical author would allow. Ultimately Job is restored – he leads a long and fulfilled life, seeing four generations of his offspring. At the end of the day, the tragic vision does not permit such ultimate blessing.