

**Readings
and
Random
Thoughts
from the
BOOK
of
JOB**

'There once was a man from the land of Uz, and his name was Job'. (1:1) It all sounds like the beginning of some wonderful fairy tale, full of noble and wealthy men from the mysterious Land of The East. In the Hebrew language the word for 'east' can also mean 'ancient', and conjures up the dream of a child's notion of wisdom and valor. 'Seven sons and three daughters': (1:2) Whether it is because of some perfection felt in them, or because they are odd and somehow unbalanced, I do not know, but the numbers seven and three have always had a magic ring to them.

The child-like nature of the first and last sections of the text both with regard to its diction and to the use of repetition, gives it a kind of never-never feeling, especially when contrasted with the stark reality felt in the rest of the text. Turning from one to the other is like turning from Dick and Jane to Shakespeare

The central part of the book begins: "May the day of my birth be lost in oblivion and with it that night in which it was said 'A hero has been conceived.' (3:3) The very being of a Hero lies in his being remembered, but for Job, this day and everything in it is to be forgotten. There is, then, a poignant contrast between the great joy felt by all on that day and the secret horrors it contained.

"Why," says Job, "Why does He give light to those whom toil has consumed, or life to the bitter of soul?" (3:20)

Man has a certain light, an innate sense of what is just and what is unjust. For Job, no man can ignore that light as long as he finds it within himself, and yet it is in constant opposition to the manifest will of God as seen in daily events. Would we not be better off without that light? The world makes too much sense to make no sense, and yet it makes no sense. If Job had no reason, the world would no longer look unreasonable, and he could sleep more soundly.

Eliphaz then began to speak:

"How can one speak and be more than wearisome? But who can refrain from words? It was you who always disciplined and strengthened so many frail hands, you who had the words to pick up those that were stumbling and bolster the knees that were about to bend." (4:2)

It is of utmost importance to note the genuine good will with which Eliphaz begins to speak. Only in that way can we catch a glimpse of what it was that made loving friends turn against Job so brutally. For Job's friends and for Job as well the only proper home for man is the home of man, the home of man as it has been defined by the wisdom of the fathers. The only proper concern for man is his fellow man. Not to be at home within that world is to be an outcast and a man of sin. Throughout all of what follows we must constantly remind ourselves that our daily lives depend upon such a world. Only in that way can we begin to understand why good men

might turn brutal when that world is suddenly found to be under attack. But for Job that world has already begun to crack. Job deeply believes in a just God and yet he has seen the just in meaningless pain. The wise men have assured him that all will work out for the best, but it does not.

Eliphaz has posed the central question of the book. "Shall a man be more just than his God?"(4:17) But does the question even make sense? Is there any standard for justice apart from the will of God in the light of which His actions can be inquired into? Even if there is, what is its relation to what we humans feel as being just and unjust? If they should prove not to be the same, what, then is the status of those human feelings? Job knows that all this is a question which must be faced one day, but how and in what terms? He is not yet ready for it.

Eliphaz answers

"Have no FEAR of the beasts of the earth, for you have a covenant with the rocks in the field, and the beasts of the fields will bring you peace." (5:22f)

Covenant, בְּרִית, the word used for Abraham's covenant with God; peace in this most fearful world is only achieved by a divine covenant with the rocks and the beasts. Threatening boulders are not held back in their places by any innate forces to be found

within the rock itself, but by a divine covenant freely established by that God who answers those who come unto him.

But all of Job's arguments presuppose the relevance of the way things appear to naked man. They imply taking seriously what we have called the surface of things; that fire goes up, that dogs bark, and that innocent men sometimes suffer. If arguments presuppose intelligibility then Job's arguments presuppose the relevance of the way things are in themselves. In other words they presuppose either something like natures in the ancient sense, or laws of nature in the modern sense.

It is hard to know to what extent or in whatever vague way Eliphaz could have been aware of such an alternative. However, it is clear that he knows that the notion that the rocks and beasts obey a covenant, cuts deeply into Job's words.

"Does not a mortal," says Job, "have a term of duty to serve here on earth and are not his days like the days of a hired servant?"

(7:1)

There is a strange and eerie almost Kafka-like feeling to the next set of verses. No God is ever mentioned in them and everything is stated in the indefinite third person plural or in the passive voice. Job presents man as feeling a horrible and meaningless but absolute and almost sacred duty to some nameless and totally unknown power. This sense of duty, this sense that there is

something to which, and to which alone a man must devote his entire life, Job feels these things too. Some may try to name it or endow it with intent and love and are at home with it, but for Job it has no name; it has no intent.

"Am I the sea or some monster," says Job, "that You set watch over me? When I said that my bed will show me compassion and my couch bear my complaint, You frightened me with dreams and terrified me with visions and I preferred strangulation and death to my own substance. I have contempt. I will not live forever; Let me be, for my days are but the mist of a breath." (7:11ff)

For Job the central idea which holds human society together, that man is ever under the care and watchful eye of his maker, is crippling and ultimately fatal to the human spirit. The feeling of being watched and therefore of being some kind of monster in need of being watched has so completely overwhelmed Job's inner world that even in his dreams he is tortured by an amorphous sense of guilt that arise out of the sense of being watched. Job's need to contact the outside world of his three friends is so great that its watching God has become the author of his dreams.

Job goes on.

"What is a mortal that thou shouldst magnify him? And that thou shouldst set thine heart upon him? Yes, and inspect him every

morning and test him every minute. When will you let me be? You'll not even let me alone to swallow my own spit. Supposing I have sinned, what have I done to you, Oh Thou Great Watcher Of Man?"
(7:17ff)

Again, as he has so many times before in the text, Job seems to have in mind a variety of psalm-like verses which must have been on everyone's lips, but for Job they take on the cast of ironic horror. To be constantly watched, and hence never to be one's self for one's self alone is, for Job, to be less than human. To be watched as a thing out of place is already to be out of place, or a thing that cannot know its own place but must be watched and kept in, like the sea. Being permeated by God both in mind and in body, he feels entrusted, and hence untrustworthy.

Then Bildad began to speak:

Only ask of the first generations. Seat yourself firmly upon what their fathers had searched out; for we are only of a yesterday and know nothing, our days are but a shadow passing over the land. Will they not teach you and speak to you as the words come tumbling out of their heart? Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh? or can a reed flourish without water? While yet in there tender days, they wither before any grass, still unpicked. (8:8ff)

Bildad's argument seems to be that wisdom is not available to the human mind outside the context of a human and hence a political tradition reaching back to the fathers. The span of a single lifetime is too short to gather the experience or the insight which would be needed even to begin an approach to a way of life dedicated to an autonomous inquiry into the surface of things, even such a life that someone like Socrates might one day lead.

The combined wisdom of the fathers who, over many ages, have slowly planted our roots by living through life, is to be trusted beyond the inquiries of a single man who must have held himself back from life in order to question it, no matter how thoughtful that attempt may have been.

Bildad even seems to have compassion and a kind of love for the tender reed who goes it alone, the man who does not seat himself firmly in the ways of fathers or nourish himself in the waters of tradition, but tries to search out wisdom for himself. But much as he may love such a reed, he sees it as a thing that cannot last. Other plants may be out there that can stand without the marsh, but not man, the tender reed. Those men have forgotten God, and are lost.

Then Job answered and said, "Yes, all that I know, but then what can make a mortal's justice apparent to God? (9:2)^"

Job now thinks that Bildad may be right, the distinction between the thoughtful and the thoughtless may not be visible from the highest point of view; the surface of things, the place where dogs bark, where fire goes up, and where good people suffer pain needlessly and die, from the highest point of view all that may completely disappear. On the one hand, this conclusion leaves him confused and perhaps a bit frightened. On the other hand, this confusion will one day lead Job to peer into a strange world well beyond his own, one which none of us has ever seen.

His words "Though I am just my own mouth would condemn me." (9:20) seem to be somewhere near the heart of things as they have been ever since the world began to fall out of focus. Job knows that he is guilty in the only world that he ever knew, and yet he knows that he is not guilty.

Job's sociality, his need for human companions and fellowship is so great that when they condemn and reject him, he takes the only course left open to him. He rejoins society by joining them in his own self condemnation.

When facing the world around him and the conditions it has placed upon his being, Job feels out of place, contorted, and perverse, and yet, since he knows of no crime or guilt, he knows of no way of expiation. He even begins to feel guilty of the sin of having seen his own innocence.

Divine wisdom and every-day justice; each seems to mock and jeer at the other till the whole turns meaningless.

He concludes by saying "My days have passed by. My ambitions have been snapped, all that my heart possess. They claim it is day when it is night and in the face of darkness they say that light is near. If I must take The Pit to be my home, and spread out my couch in darkness; call out to the muck 'Thou art my Father' and call out 'Mother' and 'Sister', to the maggots, where then is my hope? Oh my hopes, who will ever take note of them? They have all sunk down into The Pit and together they lie in the dust."(17:11)

We do not know yet exactly what Job's hopes for himself and perhaps for the whole of mankind were. We only know that they are incompatible with the notion that man is a maggot. The best one can do for now is to say that the notion of man as a maggot seems to be equivalent to the total denial of the ultimate relevance of the surface world as it appears to man.

Man is both a social and a rational animal. The two are not identical. Job, so far as he knew, was the first man to feel the full implication of that distinction, and being the first, he met it unprepared while it was yet naked and unmediated by prior human thought.

We are born as social animals, weak, feeble, and in need of others. The every-day life of action requires well defined horizons established either by The Fathers or divine revelation, or by those ghosts of former thoughts that once lived in the minds of others, and which we call our common heritage. Without them there would be insufficient grounds for communal action or communal life. But the need for clarity, and hence autonomous understanding does not believe in ghosts. It can only grasp them by bringing them back to life as a rethought thought and hence a reexamined thought. Sociality, on the other hand, knows only that it can only live by learning to live with the ghosts. Our lives depend upon it.

Well we remember Bildad's words:

8:8 Only ask of the first generation.

But is that "asking" the asking of piety and belief, or the asking of wonder and of doubt? For Bildad the answer clear, and to do otherwise is not only to try to answer the riddle of the Sphinx, it is to threaten Laius as well.

Reason and dedication to the surface, then, demand the one thing forbidden by divine law, tradition and sociality, that is, autonomous understanding.

But Job is both a rational animal and a social animal, and he is both in the deepest sense. He therefore lives under two shaggy horizons. For each the other is and is not there. As we have seen, sociality can only articulate itself to itself as the forbidding and hence, as the rewarder, or savior, and this is the form in which Job is aware of it. This act of self-forbidding of what the self wants most is that which is felt as guilt.

Chapter Twenty Five, the shortest by far in the whole book, which leads to abrupt cessation of all discussion between Job and his friends reads as follows:

Then Bildad the Shuhite answered and said: Dominion and fear are His. He makes peace in His high place. Is there any number to His troops? Upon whom does His light not fall? How can a mortal think himself just before God or what can cleans anyone born of woman? 5 Look high as the moon, nothing shines. Even the stars are not pure in His sight. 6 And now what of these mortals, the maggots or the son of man, the worm. (25:1-5)

Bildad ends with the words And now what of these mortals, the maggots or the son of man - the worm. We remember them well. Back in Chapter Seventeen, Job had said, If I must If I must call out Mother and Sister, to the maggots, where then is my hope?

Job had always known that the claim man is a maggot would end conversation because it denies the relevance of what for Job is the ultimate grounds of any human conversation. As Job looks at the

world, there is an equation between the notion that man is a maggot and the claim that the surface view of things as it reveals itself to human thought as such, is of no ultimate relevance, since the surface is the surface precisely because it is a surface for man. It has no other being than to be the beginning for man. In spite of the constant strife within Job's soul caused by the contradictory claims of both the surface world on the one hand, and the fear of the Lord on the other to be the beginning of wisdom, what is first for man as such must be the beginning of human conversation.

Conversation, then, must come to an end precisely because Job has no proof that he is not a maggot. If the surface world made perfect sense, he would know that he was not a maggot; but it does not make perfect sense. It is full of enigmas and contradictions, and yet for Job it makes too much sense to be forgotten.

And now, what of Bildad? He was always the most understanding, but now, he was the one to make the final brake. We ask ourselves why. Perhaps the first thing to notice is that while he has totally abandoned any attempt to come to terms with Job, Bildad has never condemned him personally.

He seems to have learned from Job that any attempt to find a compromise on the question of the status of the surface world would be meaningless.

Look high as the moon, nothing shines. Even the stars are not pure in His sight. Bildad has taken the other path. Nothing shines and man is a maggot! Bildad has seen that the only viable counter position to Job requires diminishing the status of both man and the visible universe.

To put it otherwise, Bildad began back in Chapter Eight with the position that no single man, by himself has a sufficiently large horizon to think as Job thinks. Only the wider horizon supplied by the wisdom of the ages will do as the foundation of human thought. He now sees the position as untenable. If a single man's horizon is necessarily too confined it can only mean that the human horizon as such, including that of the fathers is defective. Man is a worm and has only a worms-eye view.

None the less, he has not condemned Job. Why? Is it because he too knows that he cannot prove that he is right and hence that Job is wrong?

Job sees no place that can be called a place. He says: "I walked in gloom with no sun above. I stood up in the assembly and cried out; and so I became a brother of jackals." (30:28)

Like Job, The jackal live on the edge of the desolate city. Perhaps Job has no choice now other than to abandon both society and his own sociality and meld into the world that knows no human

eye or human tongue. For him it is a frightening thought, but the reader knows that it is into just such a world that the voice in The Tempest will soon beckon him.

Then came Elihu.

At the heart of Elihu's understanding of man is the notion that Job's request cannot be fulfilled. Man has not the stamina to face what lies beyond his own horizons, and he offers himself as one who, knowing of the terrors that lie beyond the human sphere, can listen to Job's case from within the human sphere. Job cannot go beyond, nor is there need any longer.

"If there only were a messenger", He says, "an interpreter - one in a thousand, to tell man what is right for him, he would have mercy on him and say: 'Redeem him from descending into The Muck, for I have found his ransom.' 'Let his flesh become brighter than youth, and let him return to his springtime days.'

Let him but supplicate unto God and he shall be accepted and see His face with shouts of joy, for He shall return to mortal man his sense of righteousness. Let him only stand squarely in front of mortals and say 'I have sinned; I have dealt perversely with what was right, and my accounts have not been settled.' Thus He shall redeem his soul from passing into The Muck; and his life shall see in the light."(32:23ff)

This 'interpreter' would conquer all the frightful things that live in the world beyond the world of man. The Terrible Face of God would now become the home of joyous man.

Job would stand where he could not stand before and laugh where there was only horror because the horror would have been banished. Job, for his part, has only to confess to a sin that by its nature he does not and cannot know that he has committed. Job's old hopes, that the human prospective has a legitimate place in any ultimate account of things, will still 'be all heaped together in The Muck,' but his soul would be redeemed and pass beyond it.

For Elihu the cosmos is wholly indifferent to the fate of man and to human concerns. The pull Job felt into a realm larger than the human realm is dangerously misdirected. In flirting with the land of the jackal, Job is allowing himself to become enmeshed in a world in which the word 'justice' is a mute sound which symbolizes nothing.

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Behold, Elihu says, God is exalted but we can not know. The number of His years cannot be unearthed. He draws up droplets of water, and the moisture refines itself into His mist that flows together into nebula and trickles back down upon mankind. Who can comprehend the expanse of the clouds, the roarings under His canopy?(36:26)

According to Elihu, the visible universe beyond man is directed by the hand of God solely towards the good of man and his concerns. However, if Job is tempted into that world, he will be faced only by the nebula and the constant roaring. To man, God's labyrinthine complex of delicately interwoven ends will seem no more than a roaring mass of anger, an incoherent nebula.

His last words are:

"The Almighty - none will find Him. He is ever multiplying in might and in right, abundant in judgment; giving neither wrack nor reason. Thus mortals hold in FEAR the one whom even the wise of heart have never seen." (37:23)

This is the last time that the word we have translated 'mortal' will appear in the text. Etymologically, it is, in fact rather close to the English word 'mortal.' The root means 'weak', or 'sick,' or, when used of a wound or a disease, it means 'incurable'.

And then THE LORD answered Job out of The Tempest and said: Who is this one that makes counsel dark by words that have no meaning? But come, gird up your loins like a man: (38:1)

In contradistinction to the word that Elihu had used, the word which The Tempest uses for man, comes from a root meaning 'to be

strong'. I was even tempted to translate it as 'Hero' as I had done back in Chapter Three.

The voice seems to be reminding Job of his own first words, urging him yet to fulfill the promise inherent in his birth:

Job 3:3 Job answered and said "May the day of my birth be
lost and with it that night in which it was said a MAN
has been conceived,

and now he is being asked to gird he loins and become that MAN.

What more can be said. If Elihu were not nearly right, there would be no need for Job to gird his loins; and yet, if Elihu were simply right, perhaps there would be no point in it either.

The Voice first asks:

"I will question you, and you must let me know. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Speak up, if you know! Who fixed its measurements, if you have any understanding? Who stretched a measuring line round it and into what were its pylons fixed? Who set the cornerstone as the morning stars sang together, and the sons of GOD all shouted for joy?" (38:3)

But then it says:

"Who closed up the sea behind the double door when first it burst out of the womb when I clothed it in a cloud and swaddled it in mist"(38:8)

This word, "to burst", is often used of the raging seas and the monsters in them and of a child as it bursts forth out of its mothers womb. Here the beginning of all thing is not presented as a "Let it be" or as a "creation" or as a "making". The passage, in mixing the waters of birth with the primordial waters of chaos presents God more as a midwife, controlling the birth and letting come forth in number and order. These verses, with words like 'burst', 'womb,' 'cloth,' and 'swaddle,' seem to mark a movement from the arts to those things which are older than the arts. This movement is in fact a movement from the masculine workman and his arts, which causes things to come to be by the application of measurement to a world outside of itself, and by the forceful fixing of pylons. Here, the artisan God has within himself the "to be" of the object. He shapes and molds according to His Plan, while the more feminine, swaddling, nurturing God we meet in The Book of Job allows for the emergence of the "to be" which is in the thing itself.

"Have you", the voice then asks, "yet commanded the morning, or taught the dawn to know its place, to grab hold of the corners of the earth and winnow out the wicked? All is as transformed as clay stamped by a seal, and fixed as dye in a garment."(38:12)

While the imagery of 'clay' often appears in the other books of the Bible, especially in 'Isaiah' and 'Jeremiah', in them, man is constantly likened to the clay itself, whereas in this speech he is like the object made of clay and bearing a seal or signet. The implication is that a man, like the pot, but unlike the clay, has his own shape, his own "to be".

In that sense, a seal marks a things character, and becomes a kind of guarantee that the object is what it is and will continue to be what it has become. "And fixed as dye in a garment." The argument seems to be that if a white garment has been dyed red, and the dye stands firm, or has been well fixed, then the garment has truly become a red garment. The red color is as much a part of the object in front of me as anything else. It would be wrong of me to think of the white garment as the truth lying behind the red garment. In the same way, the clay cannot be considered to be the truth behind the pot. The seal, or mark, or character, has transformed the clay into a pot, and a pot it now is.

The argument as a whole is intended as a reply to Elihu. The world beyond man, the realm of the jackal, as it is, considered in

itself and by the human eye, may not be reducible to the nebulae. The beings in it may each have there own being and hence there own strivings and ambitions apart from any human concern, yet man may be open to them.

In the next chapter Job will enter far into what we have come to call 'The Land of the Jackal.' There he will meet six sets of wild beasts. From each he will learn many things, but we shall only have time to meet one, the Hind.

"Do you know when it is time for the mountain goat to drop? and have you watched the hind writhing in the dance of birth? Can you number the months they fulfill? and do you know the season for them to deliver, when they couch and split open to give birth to their young, and thus to end their travail."(39:1)

The single Hebrew word לָוִן which I have generally translated 'writhe', and have here translated by the phrase 'writhing in the dance of birth' is a very complex word. Indeed, much of our understanding of The Book of Job will center around our attempt to regain the sense of unity that lies within the complexity of this word.

As far as one can tell, it originally meant 'to whirl.'

It can also mean 'to dance'. Sometimes it is used in a perfectly wonderful context which can be full of joy and exultation: But more often than not, things get out of hand, and often when first reading the word, the reader can feel a foreboding thought thickening the air. It then comes to mean 'to tremble', or 'to quake' and it often means 'anguish' and 'pain': But, as in our case, it can also mean 'to be in labor', and hence 'to give birth:' For this reason, the same word that meant 'pain' and 'anguish', can also mean 'to prosper':

We can now begin to understand the great admonition: 'Gird your loins like a MAN. There is wildness and pain present when the signet is put to the clay to make a thing of value and worth. Here there is no indication that the pain of birth was caused by a curse or the result of having taken a bite of the apple. Job, in visiting the day of birth, was revisiting the day of his own birth. To venture beyond the realm of man and to see each thing as having its own signet, means to come to terms with the unity of all these opposing feelings.

There is one more aspect of things we must look at:

JER 23:19 Behold, the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone
 forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head
 of the wicked.

Note the phrase A WHIRLING TEMPEST. If the words and ideas were intended by the author to come together as naturally as they do for the English speaking reader who knows the word 'whirlwind', we may also recognize in this passage some foundation for the shift we had already begin to feel in the role of the feminine. It is the whirling, dancing, pain ridden, birthing tempest that speaks to Job. She, for the word $\Pi\Lambda\Delta$ or tempest is a feminine noun, lets Job see that pain and joy and birth are so interrelated that they cannot be distinguished in even speech.

The great Leviathan counts iron as straw, and bronze as rotten wood. No son of the bow can put him to flight. Slingstones turn to stubble and clubs are rated as straw. He laughs to the sound of the javelin.

And so this grand beast, above and beneath all malice or ambition, oblivious to all, rules all by the mere weight of his being. In him we recognize our limitations and hence see our definition.

The world beyond man is not a world in which man can play, as God can play with the Leviathan like a bird or tie him on a string for the young ladies; it is only a world in which he can learn about play. The charm of the sentence teaches us about innocent jesting, but the beyond is not ours. We cannot divide it up and use it as we will. To see it is to see it as a thing for itself, not as a thing for us.

"Then Job answered THE LORD and said: I know that You can do all and that no design can be withheld from You. Who is this one that hides counsel without knowledge? I have spoken though I had not understood. There is a world beyond me, a world full of wonders that I had never known. Now listen and I will speak; I shall question you, and you will inform me. I had heard of You as ears can hear; but now my eyes have seen You. Wherefore I have both contempt and compassion for dust and ashes." (42:3)

Job the homeless is at home now. He is at home in a very large world in which no man counts for more than a hill of beans. He is also at home in a very small world in which each man is of infinite value. He can be at home in each world only because he is at home in the other. He also knows that that large and wooly world has in it a kind of love and a kind of laughter which only he and his fellows can establish in the world of the small.

Job's eyes have seen, but that seeing took place in a foreign land in which his hands could not act. Job of the wide world is again Job the servant of THE LORD, living in a nutshell. He who has seen the Leviathan will say a prayer for his friends as they bring their bulls and their rams to be sacrificed. The world of seeing turned out to be a world devoid of all meaningful human action, and Job has returned.

His last great act is recorded:

"In all the land there could not to be found any woman more beautiful than Job's daughters, and their father gave them an inheritance alongside their brothers." (42:15) Nothing is said about husbands or dowries. The inheritance is outright and absolute. So far as I can see, that means that Job has established the right of woman to own and hold property.

Could this be part a legacy that Job has brought back from a very large world to a very small world?

For Job, the beginning was a clashing of worlds. One said 'just' while the other cried 'unjust'. The need for human friendship, and a need of clarity, the two refused to mesh.

This need for clarity that came about when his world began to fall asunder ultimately lead Job to the need of autonomous understanding, and hence to questions concerning those old accounts of 'the first things.'

Out of the whirl of the tempest came the notion of the signets, the notion that things had their own seal upon them, and were what they were in themselves apart from human need. This recognition lead to a shift in Job's understanding of, and sensitivity to beauty. The needs of man may better be served by being open to the excellence of things as they grow of themselves than by seeing them as being directed towards those needs. This insight, in turn, lead,

as we have seen, to the emergence of the nurturing and swaddling God as distinguished from the making and constructing God. A small change in a last will and testament was the result.