



BIBLE

Suffering and Spirituality

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM WILLIAM BLAKE'S ENGRAVINGS OF THE BOOK OF JOB

“I Won’t Ask to Speak With God”

(Job 37:20) | BY SIGVE TONSTAD

Teach us what to say to God; our minds are blank; we have nothing to say. I won’t ask to speak with God; why should I give him a chance to destroy me?” the young Elihu says to Job toward the end of his tirade in one of the most startling books in all of literature (Job 37:19–20 GNB). The book of Job says four times that Elihu was angry (Job 32:2–3, 32:5), angry with Job “because he justified himself rather than God” (32:2), and angry with Job’s three friends “because they had found no answer though they had declared Job to be in the wrong” (32:3). Anger fuels Elihu’s determination to prevail where the others have failed. Mindful of his anger, one cannot rule out that there is a threatening tone in Elihu’s voice, as though he means to be the embodiment of the anger of an angry God. “I won’t ask to speak with God,” says Elihu, “and you, Job, should take my advice.” “Why,” he says, “should I give him [God] an opportunity to destroy me?”

Before Elihu has his turn, Job’s three friends have had theirs, through three cycles of amazing poetry where Job speaks and they respond. The text does not say outright that they are angry, but we sense growing annoyance on their part as they fail to make progress against him.

Communication, we know, is more than words. It is also body language, facial expression, tone of voice, hints, and gestures. All of this and more should be assumed with respect to the Bible, although often it is not. And yet, the more important aspect of Elihu’s speech is largely lost in translation, even if we make strides on points like facial expression or tone of voice. Robert

Alter says that the three main interlocutors in the poetic portion of Job—counting Elihu and Job’s friends as one—“exhibit three purposefully developed levels of poetry.”¹

That is to say, the conversation in Job and its impact on the original reader depend not only on what they say, but on how they say it. According to Alter, Elihu and Job’s three friends occupy the lowest of the three levels in this verbal tug-of-war. “In keeping with the conventional moral views which they complacently defend, the poetry they speak abounds in familiar formulations.... What this means is that much of their poetry verges on cliché,” says Alter.² In addition to anger, there is on their part formulaic speech and the inauthenticity of cliché.

At the second level, we find Job. Alter says that “the stubborn authenticity of Job’s perception of moral reality is firmly manifested in the power of the poetry he speaks, which clearly transcends the poetry of his reprovers.”³ Job’s speeches are not static. There is fluidity to his argument, development of perspective, and there is no formula.

And then, at the third level, God speaks. “The third—and, ultimately, decisive—level of poetry in the book is manifested when the Lord addresses Job out of the whirlwind,” says Alter.⁴

*If the poetry of Job—at least when its often problematic text is fully intelligible—looms above all other biblical poetry in virtuosity and sheer expressive power, the culminating poem that God speaks out of the storm soars beyond everything that has preceded it in the book, the poet having wrought a poetic idiom even richer and more awesome than the one he gave Job.*⁵

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**Job's
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standing.**

In God's poetic speech, there is "a sublimity of expression, a plasticity of description... and even an originality of metaphoric inventiveness, that surpasses all the poetry, great as it is, that Job has spoken."⁶ The contrast is even greater when it is held up to the speeches of Job's friends, "a revelation of the contrast between the jaded half-truths of cliché and the startling, difficult truths exposed when the stylistic and conceptual shell of cliché is broken open."⁷

What shall we call this? What shall we call it when Elihu and Job's three friends combine anger and cliché in their communicative arsenal? What shall we call the mixture of consternation of voice and predictability of argument?

While we ponder what to call it, let me try to make the task easier by giving three excerpts from the speeches of Job's friends.

Eliphaz: *Now a word came stealing to me, my ear received the whisper of it. Amid thoughts from visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals, dread came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake. A spirit glided past my face; the hair of my flesh bristled. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence, then I heard a voice. (4:12–16, emphasis added)*

Bildad: *For inquire now of bygone generations, and consider what their ancestors have found; for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing, for our days on earth are but a shadow. Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding? (8:8, emphasis added)*

Zophar: *So my thoughts give me a rejoinder, by dint of my inner sense. I have heard the reproof to my shame, and a spirit from my mind lets me answer."⁸ (or, as in the NRSV, "a spirit beyond my understanding answers me. [20:2, 3, emphasis added])*

These excerpts relate to the source and not to the content of the friends' argument. Each claims a different source for his conviction but, as we know already, the different sources all agree. Eliphaz claims revelation as the source of his conviction, Bildad invokes tradition, Zophar, rea-

son. What shall we call the essential posture of the friends, whether we see the encounter through the eyes of William Blake or in a makeshift representation of our own? When Job looks into the face of his friend Eliphaz, he does not see the familiar face, but the look of religious authority. When he looks into the face of Bildad, he sees the immutable stance of dogma. And Zophar, the beloved face of Zophar, has lost its humanity and manifests only the callous demeanor of a fundamental belief. The three friends and the young Elihu unite to make the force of authority bear down on Job and the recalcitrant particularity of human experience.

As a concluding observation on the importance of how things are said, scholars have been impressed by Job's final speech to his friends. A superficial reading of this part might lead to the impression that Job is beginning to agree with his critics. Such, however, is not the case. "Most perplexingly," says Carol Newsom, Job "uses the friends' arguments as though they were a refutation of what the friends had just said."⁹

One can imagine the friends whispering together in confusion: "That's what we said. But he can't mean what it sounds like he's saying. He can't mean what we meant. What does he mean by saying that?"¹⁰

Job delivers the verbal coup de grâce to his friends' line of thought by repeating their arguments in a tone of voice that accentuates the inauthenticity. "He does not mean the same thing the friends do, even if he speaks just like them," says Newsom.¹¹ How we say things, then, is as important as what we say. Job silences his friends by repeating their formulaic argument in a different tone of voice. This could be one reason why Elihu is angry when he sets out to undo the damage, and why there is no way he can succeed.

Suffering and the Quest for Understanding

Job's quest, playing out against the massive and strident opposition of his friends, is the quest for understanding. According to his friends and

Lo let that night be solitary
& let no joyful voice come therein



Let the Day perish wherein I was Born

And they sat down with him upon the ground seven days & seven
nights & none spake a word unto him for they saw that his grief
was very great

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to Elihu, Job should cease and desist from this quest. At first, they deem Job's pursuit unnecessary because his plight *has* an explanation, and they know what it is. Job suffers. The formula says that where there is suffering, there must be sin. "Think back now," says Eliphaz, "[n]ame a single case where a righteous man met with disaster" (4:7). "The wicked man's light will still be put out; its flame will never burn again," Bildad insists (18:4). "Surely you know that from ancient times, when man was first placed on earth, no wicked man has been happy for long," says Zophar (20:4). In this paradigm, the constituent parts are known, and the conclusion is certain.

But this is surely a vulnerable argument, easily refuted by stubborn facts to the contrary. Job shatters the moral and theological calculus of human sin and divine retribution by hitting a series of easy winners. The wicked do not die young, and they are not swiftly punished, as his friends parrot the line. "Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?" Job asks (21:7; see verses 6–13). "How often is the lamp of the wicked extinguished?...How often does God apportion pain to them in his anger?" (21:17 NET).

Human reality does not conform to the formula. "Have you not asked those who travel the roads, and do you not accept their testimony, that the wicked are spared in the day of calamity, and are rescued in the day of wrath?" Job prods, intimating rather unsubtly that they have not done their homework (21:29–30 NRS).

Do the friends have a counterargument? They do. While Job's friends are guilty of misrepresenting Job nastily, resorting to innuendo, smear, and character assassination in order to salvage their doctrine (22:5–11), what shall we say of their representation of God?

Eliphaz: *Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker? Even in his servants he puts no trust, and his angels he charges with error; how much more those who live in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed like a moth. (4:17–19)*

No reader of Job is likely to deny that Job's friends end up misrepresenting his character, but their representation of God may be a bigger problem. Is God really exacting and impossible to please along the lines argued by Eliphaz?

Eliphaz: *What are mortals, that they can be clean? Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous? God puts no trust even in his holy ones, and the heavens are not clean in his sight; how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, one who drinks iniquity like water! (15:14–16)*



Does God really view created reality with such ungenerous, faultfinding eyes? Is nothing good enough, heaven and angels not excepted?

Bildad: *How then can a mortal be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure? If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his sight, how much less a mortal, who is a maggot, and a human being, who is a worm! (Job 25:4–6)*

By the logic of the proportionality between imperfect nature and imperfect humanity, Bildad's misanthropy turns human beings into maggots and worms. All creation is flawed, human creation only to a greater degree than the rest. Given God's impossibly high demands, Job's claim to innocence is doomed.

Eliphaz: *Can a mortal be of use to God? Can even the wisest be of service to him? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous, or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless? (22:2–3)*

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This is Eliphaz speaking, but is it also God's view of things? Are humans irrelevant to God and human conduct inconsequential?

In the second line of attack, then, Job's friends set up an extreme ontological distinction between God and created reality, reinforcing it by an extremist moral view that places demands on humans (and angels) that no one can possibly meet. The fallout casts God as remote and detached, on the one hand, and on the other hand, as close and exacting.

Elihu does not retract any of this in his speech, but he sharpens the stress on divine transcendence and human finitude. In his closing missive, he attempts to cut off the merits of Job's complaint at the feet. In Elihu's version of what Newsom and others call the "masochistic theodicy," humans are incapable even when it comes to knowing what to say (37:19). Elihu rebukes Job for insisting on a meeting with God, denying legitimacy to a case that would be irreverent if not for the fact that he has already deemed it incoherent (37:20a; cf. 23:3–6). And he is convinced that Job is so out of bounds that his insolence invites real danger. "Why should I give [God] a chance to destroy me?" he warns, hinting that if God were to destroy Job it would be self-invited and well deserved (37:20b GNB). To Elihu, divine transcendence, inscrutability, and sovereignty are the verities against which Job is banging his head. "The Almighty—we cannot find him; he is great in power and justice, and abundant righteousness he will not violate," he counsels (37:23). "Those who are truly wise, according to Elihu, know their limitations, and do not expect to be able to argue with God," says David Clines in his summary of Elihu's argument.¹² Job ought to leave it at that.

Let me take a breathing pause here for the following assertion: what comes from the mouth of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, and even more crudely from the mouth of Elihu, flows like the Amazon River in the theological tradition from Augustine to Luther, and from Luther to Karl Barth (who modifies it somewhat): radical divine transcendence, retributive justice, divine incom-

prehensibility, and a conflation of human finitude and sin.

Augustine (354–430), leading the charge, echoes Elihu and not Job when he takes the most basic measure of the divine-human relationship. In a letter to his friend and fellow bishop Simplician in 397, Augustine asserts that God "decides who are to be offered mercy by a standard of equity which is most secret and far removed from human powers of understanding."¹³ "God owes explanations to no one," Paula Fredriksen notes, concerning Augustine's mature view on the subject.¹⁴

Martin Luther (1483–1546) ups the ante, arguing that God arbitrarily consigns humans to damnation and eternal suffering. Like Elihu and Augustine before him, Luther insists that no one should expect an explanation.

This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him [God] merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems, according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than of love. If, then, I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith.¹⁵

This clip from Luther's debate with Erasmus offers less explanation for a belief that needs it more. In order to keep questions at bay in the face of this belief, Luther deploys the twin argument of human incapacity and divine incomprehensibility in much the same way as Elihu. Faith, he says, is the antidote to human incomprehension, and submission the right attitude for anyone who might be tempted to take up a Job-like complaint against God.

In the twentieth century, Karl Barth (1886–1968) offers advice that sounds like a reincarnation of Elihu's words. Job, says Barth, should serve God "with no claim that His [God's] rule should conform to some picture which he [Job] has formed of it."¹⁶ Indeed, Job's need for an explanation "is itself a symp-

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tom of man's enslavement to moral and logical criteria and norms irrelevant to the conduct of the divinely unique One."¹⁷ God is accountable to no one.¹⁸ In Barth's words, God "does not ask for his [Job's] understanding, agreement or applause. On the contrary, he simply asks that he should be content not to know why and to what end he exists, and does so in this way and not another."¹⁹

"Be content not to know!" I have added italics and an exclamation mark to this statement because the admonition to "be content not to know" is an apt summary of the theological tradition that runs in a resilient stream from Augustine in the fifth century to Barth in the twentieth. We are well advised to understand that the advice not to know—and the impossibility of knowing—is the voice of Elihu, not the voice of Job and not the voice of God.

**"If It Isn't God, Who Is It, Then?"
(Job 9:24)**

This is a good time to address the most difficult issues in the interpretation of Job. I shall do so more by way of assertions than by arguing each point in the detail that it deserves. One such issue is the identity of Satan in the frame story. Is Satan God's loyal, if somewhat restive court bureaucrat, as many interpreters see him,²⁰ or is he God's cosmic enemy? What, too, is the connection between the frame story and the poetic section? Is the book a compositional quilt or whole cloth?

Addressing the last question first, I will answer that the book is a whole cloth in a big way. In the poetic section, Eliphaz asks whether human piety means anything to God.

Can a mortal be of use to God? Can even the wisest be of service to him? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous, or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless? (22:2–3)

Elihu blithely repeats the line.

If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him? And if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to him? If you are righteous, what do you give to him; or what does he receive from your hand? (35:6–7)

Here, if not before, we have hard evidence that Job's friends are not saying what is right, whether of Job or of God, but we have also a crucial link between the frame story and the poetic section. "Have you considered my servant Job?" God asks Satan in the frame story. "There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8). God speaks as though Job's commitment and conduct are consequential to God, completely negating the most disdainful argument of the friends, while also seriously weakening the view that the frame story and the poetic section are awkwardly stitched together.

Alter wisely spots "an element of jealousy...and cynical mean-spiritedness" on the part of the Adversary.²¹ Satan is not a benign figure, an interpretation, if true, that would rightly make the plot in the book frivolous and offensive.²² When God takes the initiative in the conversation, the topic suggests a discussion long in progress. It is as though God and Satan are picking up where they last left off, on a subject about which they disagree. "Have you considered my servant Job?" Yahweh says to Satan (1:8). If Satan were the vigilant prosecuting attorney that some take him to be—or a legal clerk in the employ of the heavenly council—he should be the one to bring charges against Job. Instead, he appears to be on the defensive. *When God brings Job to Satan's attention, therefore, it has the connotation of evidence that Satan would like to ignore. In the conflict that is in view, Satan is not the watchful fact-finder that undeservedly dignifies his résumé and reputation.*

God's reference to Job's integrity forces Satan to show his hand. He will do it by proposing a test that is meant to give him the edge in the argument with God.

Then Satan answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." (1:9–11)

But he knoweth the way that I take
when he hath tried me I shall come forth like gold
Have pity upon me Have pity upon me O ye my friends
for the hand of God hath touched me
Though he slay me yet will I trust in him



The Just Upright Man is laughed to scorn

Man that is born of a Woman is of few days & full of trouble
he cometh up like a flower & is cut down he fleeth also as a shadow
& continueth not And dost thou open thine eyes upon such a one
& bringest me into judgment with thee

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Here, the Adversary launches a frontal assault on the integrity of the divine-human relationship.²³ The attack on Job is equally devastating for the way it impugns God. “You,” Satan intimates, “have bought Job’s loyalty. His piety is the devotion of patronage and self-interest. For both of you, it is a mercenary relationship.” All this, we are called to imagine, Satan is saying in the hearing of the heavenly council. Is it true? Does it matter whether it is demonstrated not to be true?

Gustavo Gutiérrez notes that Satan does not deny that Job is a devout person.

*What he questions is rather the disinterestedness of Job’s service to God, his lack of concern for a reward. The satan objects not to Job’s works but to their motivation: Job’s behavior, he says, is not “for nothing” (in Hebrew: *hinn m*). In the satan’s view, a religious attitude can be explained only by expectation of a reward: we will shortly learn that this is also the view of Job’s friends. If, however, Job be regarded as a truly just man, then, even though there be no other like him in the land, the lie is given to this view of religion.*²⁴

Satan, we realize, claims that Job has selfish reasons for his conduct. Piety and devotion are wise investments in the interest of bringing a bountiful material return. The equation is simple and is, in fact, only another facet of the law of retribution. Piety is rewarded; sin is punished. This is one step closer to realizing how important the frame story is to the rest of the book, and how prose and poetry are mutually reinforcing with regard to the theology of Job. Again, in the words of Gutiérrez,

*The central question of Job is raised at the outset: the role that reward or disinterestedness plays in faith in God and in its consistent implementation. God believes that Job’s uprightness is disinterested, and he therefore accepts the challenge. The author is telling us in this way that a utilitarian religion lacks depth and authenticity; in addition, it has something satanic about it.*²⁵

Gutiérrez takes the frame story seriously, and yet something is lacking in these insightful comments. The sordid bargain to which Job is a partner is of God’s making. God, no less than Job, is motivated by self-interest. In Satan’s view, God does not

have many devotees for reasons that are intrinsic to the divine character. The one person he claims as a faithful follower—Job—will quickly turn away if God rescinds the lavish patronage (1:11).

The adversarial texture to this charge is blatant and explosive. Satan is in effect arguing that selflessness, whether in the divine or the human realm, does not exist. God and Job are in his view in a contractual relationship based on mutual self-interest. In return for gifts received, God earns Job’s devotion. Conversely, in return for devotion, God showers Job with rewards. Does it matter whether this charge is shown to be untrue?

The thought that Satan is present in the frame story, but conspicuously absent in the poetic section, is also flawed. In the frame story, Satan makes it seem like God is in a mercenary relationship with human beings (1:9–11), a relationship of retribution and reward. Satan is not mentioned explicitly in the poetic section, but the demonic theology is not absent. It is as



though Satan has gone undercover, now speaking in the guise of Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu. Eliphaz, as Samuel Terrien notes, deploys a doctrine of radical divine remoteness, “wholly otherness,” and impassibility, buttressed with the thought that finitude equals moral corruption.²⁶ Creatureliness and sinfulness are said to be two sides of the same coin (15:14–16). God and human beings do not have a common language with respect to right and wrong. While nothing

in these speeches is flattering to Job, their mantra is unremittingly unflattering to God.

*If God and man remain external to one another—if man is nothing more than a worm, and God a distant, unmoved and unmovable Being, an Absolute which is detached from the giving and the seeking of love—there is no hope, not even in repentance, or in good deeds of behavior or piety. Prayer is just as irrelevant as blasphemy.*²⁷

This comment by Samuel Terrien is to the point because Job is doomed if he does (it isn't good enough) and damned if he doesn't (it isn't important). If the friends are right, human life must henceforth unfold under the gaze of a God who is alternately demanding and detached, and this will be the truth even if Job shuts his mouth. Under the pressure of Job's outbursts, the friends have come forward with a view of God that purports to defend God and yet reeks of the theology Satan has espoused in the frame story.

When God at last makes an appearance, on first impression it seems as though God's response confirms the friends' ideas more than they support Job's. Divine transcendence towers forbiddingly over human finitude; omniscience runs circles around one who does not know much (38:1, 38:4, 38:21). Who, indeed, "is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (38:2). God rains question upon question on Job,²⁸ many more than we can reproduce here (e.g., 38:4, 38:17–18, 38:31, 38:41, 39:27).

God's speeches are stupendous disclosures of complexity and beauty, of order and design, of unfathomable grandeur and, in contrast to Job's death wish at the beginning (3:1–26), a resounding paean to life.²⁹ Human life is decentered by the introduction of other creatures that have their own rhythms, yearnings, and idiosyncrasies (39:1–30). In the first speech, God does not counter Job's claim of being innocent of wrong, but he never directly addresses it, preferring instead to shower him with a meteoric display of life and light.

And somehow, strangely, the voice from the whirlwind succeeds in stilling the storm of Job's

quest on its first try (40:2–5; cf. 42:1–6). And God is not done speaking. In the second speech, God goes beyond the bounds of necessity, ignoring that Job has declared himself content after the first speech. Having taken Job on a tour of the earth and the cosmos that included astronomy, meteorology, and zoology, God narrows the focus until it rests resolutely on the mysterious Leviathan.

"Can you," God asks Job, draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord? Will it make many supplications to you? Will it speak soft words to you? Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever? Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed; were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it? No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up. Who can stand before it? Who can confront it and be safe?—under the whole heaven, who? (excerpts from 41:1–34, emphasis added)

The poetic idiom is baffling. Here, in God's description of Leviathan, it pulls out all the stops.³⁰ What, or who, is Leviathan?

First, agreeing with Carol Newsom, we see that at the end of the divine speeches "three characters dominate the scene: Job, God, and Leviathan."³¹ This means that Leviathan is an important figure, the most important of all the creatures that are featured in God's speeches.

Second, I believe that Matitiah Tsevat is profoundly correct when he says that God's speeches have content and that the content, at least indirectly, resonates with the rest of the book. "Is it conceivable," Tsevat asks, "that the author invested this stupendous intellectual energy in the question only to seek, receive, and transmit the solution on a nonintellectual level?"³²

*Not only is the intellectual element characteristically present in their communion with God, the communion involves: usually the understanding of, often the approval of, sometimes an active sharing in His plan. Job's communion with God is not bought with an intellectual sacrifice, at the cost of renouncing his wish to understand the constitution of the world.*³³

If we take this view seriously, it means that God is

**And
somehow,
strangely,
the voice
from the
whirlwind
succeeds
in stilling
the storm
of Job's
quest on its
first try.**

**Who
can stand
up to an
adversary
whose chief
weapon
is its
mouth?**

not silencing Job with shock and awe. God is not practicing “education through overwhelming” for the reason that he “is in that inscrutable business, the government of the world.”³⁴ Others, including great readers like Robert Alter and Robert Gordis, incline to the view that God compensates Job for the injustice of his suffering with a vision of the world’s beauty. Tsevat rejects this view, asking how anyone can accept that “the demands of justice are met by the administering of an anesthesia to the victim of an unjust sentence?”³⁵ These criticisms seem valid and compelling.

But then, failing to give adequate billing to God’s description of Leviathan, Tsevat drops the ball. God gives an answer to Job, he says, and the answer is that divine justice “is not an element of reality.”³⁶ By “de-moralizing” the world, Job is prepared “for a pious and moral life uncluttered by false hopes and unfounded claims.”³⁷

This necessitates a response that goes directly to the identity of Leviathan. In God’s speech, and not only in the frame story, we have proof of a cosmos in turmoil. There are adversarial powers, and this reality is projected most forcefully in God’s second speech.³⁸ At the end of the book, the Adversary in the frame story reappears, now disguised as Leviathan. In his poetic incarnation, he cannot be cast as a benign figure doing God’s dirty work. The poetic idiom that veils him bewilders interpreters, but the bewilderment is unwarranted. Job eschews the axis of retribution and reward, but the book does not throw the idea of justice overboard. Justice, however, is not found in retribution. It consists in making right what is wrong, which is precisely what God is doing in the cosmic struggle with Leviathan.

Leviathan, in turn, is a figure that cannot be trusted because he does not speak “soft words” (41:3). Deceitful words and destructive action go hand in hand; “from its mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap out. Out of its nostrils comes smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes. Its breath kindles coals, and a flame comes out of its mouth” (41:19–21).

“Its heart is as hard as stone,” God tells Job (41:24), and it has the power to intimidate any-

thing and anyone that stand in its way (41:25, 41:33, 41:34). “Who,” therefore, “can confront it and be safe?” God asks Job in what is the most poignant of all God’s questions, adding, insistently, “*under the whole heaven, who?*” (41:11, emphasis added).

Who, indeed? And who can stand up to an adversary whose chief weapon is its *mouth*, as Samuel Balentine notes.

At the center of God’s portrait is a description of Leviathan’s mouth (vv. 18–21). If we read this section alongside the previous description of Leviathan’s mouth (41:3–4), then two contrasting images emerge: one that emphasizes what does not come forth from its mouth; the other, that which does. What does not come from this creature’s mouth are “soft words.” In the unlikely event anyone should ever successfully capture it and force it into service, even then it would not conform to any “covenantal” relationship that required it to do or say only what its master permitted. Instead, when it opens its mouth it instinctively speaks like a god. The rhetoric emphasizes fire and light, smoke and flames. . . Like a god, Leviathan announces its presence with an awesome fierceness that commands attention and defies coercion. (emphasis added)³⁹

As these excerpts show, Satan is no less present in the poetic section than he is in the frame story, although he is disguised in the theology of Job’s friends and veiled as Leviathan in God’s speech from the whirlwind. Job is not left ignorant of the reality of the cosmic conflict, even though he only seems to entertain it on the level of hypothesis until God speaks. Wedged in his second speech after Bildad and before Zophar, we hear him say, “The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges—if it is not he, who then is it?” (9:24).

I agree with all my heart with Robert Fyall that here, in this question, “the key to unlock the dark prison lies tantalizingly close to Job’s hand, indeed his fingers brush against it.”⁴⁰ Fyall, for this reason, argues that this is the most significant verse in Job. We, the modern readers, and especially a conservative reader like me, scramble for Job’s attention on this point. With knowledge of the frame story that Job does not have,

For God speaketh once yea twice
& Man perceiveth it not
In a Dream in a Vision of the Night
in deep Slumberings upon the bed
Then he openeth the ears of Men & sealeth their instruction

That he may withdraw Man from his purpose
& hide his Privie from Man
If there be with him an Interpreter One among a Thousand
& saith Deliver him from going down to the Pit
then he is gracious unto him
I have found a Ransom

For his eyes are upon
the ways of Man & he observeth
all his goings



I am Young & ye are very Old wherefore I was afraid
Lo all these things worketh God oftentimes with Man to bring
back his Soul from the pit to be enlightened
with the light of the living

Look upon the heavens & behold the clouds
which are higher
than thou

If thou sinnest what
doest thou against him or if thou be
righteous what givest thou unto him

W Blake inventit & sculpt

London Published as the Act directs March 8. 1825 by Will Blake N^o 3 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

Job...
is pressing
forward in his
existential
do-or-die
quest for
understanding.

I want to knock on the window of his suffering chamber from outside, trying to get his attention: it isn't God, Job!

Job and Currents in Adventist Spirituality

Is there anything in this book for us, as a prescription or as a vision for Seventh-day Adventist spirituality? I will suggest three areas for further thought.

1. Job confronts the power of authority, formulaic statements of faith, and dogma. Is that where Adventism will be going in our time? Rumors that scholars and leaders in the church wish to tighten the screws on Fundamental Belief Number Six could be proof that we intend to deploy the authority of creed in order to ensure conformity of belief. Before we commit to this approach, we should pause in the presence of Job to remember that how we say things may be as important as what we say. The rumored attempt to improve the wording of Fundamental Belief Number Six might see us commit not merely to inferior poetry, but to exceptionally mediocre prose. If we go ahead anyway, we should realize that we will be choosing the company and method of Job's friends, walking the path of inferior poetry.
2. Job faces impediments to his quest for understanding, laced with well-meaning misrepresentations of God as remote and unaffected on the one hand, and severe and exacting on the other. Is that the road we will take? Or rather, is that not the road we have taken for some time?

I will admit that it has been a source of wonder to discover the low esteem in which A. Graham Maxwell and his cosmic conflict theology have been held in theological and administrative circles in Adventism. There can be no doubt that this criticism has been energized by a theological tradition that emphasizes divine transcendence, human finitude, retributive justice, and divine inscrutability. These features of Protestant systematic theology seem to be as dear within Adventism as they are defining of



the Christian theological tradition from Augustine to Luther and, with modifications, all the way to Karl Barth. If this will be our road, it will be the road of Job's friends and the road of the angry Elihu: the road of inferior poetry.

3. And now, as a corrective to the latest, but probably not the last, burst of anxiety in Adventism, let us listen one last time to Job, first, and then to Elihu.

Job: Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! (23:3)

Elihu: I won't ask to speak with God; why should I give him a chance to destroy me? (37:20)

Job, we have seen, is pressing forward in his existential do-or-die quest for understanding, seeking illumination in the context of experience. He will not have one without the other, nor does it occur to him that illumination and experience live separate lives. Elihu, on the other hand, considers understanding beyond reach and experience off-limits. The bottom line in Elihu's theology centers on the peril of the direct encounter, even though we know that those who warn Job have themselves been victims of a spurious encounter with the supernatural (4:12–16).

Are we, too, afraid of the experience, whether in ecstasy or in despair, as was Elihu? Will we be strangers to Job's exclamation, born in the crucible of God's apparent absence: "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!" (23:3)? Will we settle for the voices of authority and demonic misrepre-

sentations of God that for centuries have held court in the halls of Christian theology, no other characterization sufficing? Will we be deterred by the somber faces warning us against the direct encounter, preferring the predictable routine to the voice from the whirlwind? If that will be our choice, it will be the way of Job's friends and of the angry Elihu, the loudest human voice in the book, but the poorest poet. ■

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Linda University. A native of Norway, he completed a BA in theology at Middle East College, Beirut, Lebanon, and Andrews University; his MD from Loma Linda University; an MA in biblical studies at Loma Linda University; and a PhD in New Testament studies at the University of St. Andrews. While in Oslo, Norway, Tonstad spent eight years as senior pastor of the Bethel Church, the largest Adventist church in Norway and one of the oldest Adventist congregations in Europe. *The Lost Meaning of The Seventh Day*, his book about the Sabbath, is in its second printing from Andrews University Press. The material in this article is part of his next book on Job. He is married to Serena Hasso (Tonstad), also a physician and professor at Loma Linda University.

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**Will we be
deterred by
the somber
faces warning
us against
the direct
encounter,
preferring
the pre-
dictable
routine to
the voice
from the
whirlwind?**