POETRY

FICTION

COVER: Demon mask from the Godwin-Ternbach Museum collection. Design by Antoinette Cohen. Photo by Otto E. Nelson.

Job's encounters with the adversary

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ALTHOUGH Job has been universally admired, his encounters with evil have met with diverse and often contradictory interpretations. In contrast to the tradition that exalts "patient Job," recent scholars have focused attention on the "impatient Job" who questions divine justice.[1] I will suggest that Job is essentially a book about questions and assertions, a book that leads us to consider the significance of theological questioning.

I

Job raises issues of good and evil, undeserved suffering, and God's justice. Phrased as questions: Is there a force of evil that is independent of God? Why do good people suffer? What can we know about divine justice? But these metaphysical doubts are displaced by a more pragmatic question: How must we act or speak in adversity? In more general terms: What is a right language of relationship to God?

The Book of Job also revolves around several key words: the name "Job," the divine names, and "the adversary" *(ha-satan)*. These names denote three different beings and characters in the

story, yet they also imply a wider range of meanings. Job's name is close to the Arabic word, *awab,* which connotes one who returns, or turns to God.[2] Yet despite his righteousness, Job finds that evil turns toward him. One Rabbinic interpretation, based on the conviction that everything in Scripture is significant, observes a verbal association: if the middle letters of his name are reversed, Job *(eyov)* becomes an enemy *(oyev)*. A chiasmus, here a crossing of good and evil, corresponds to a metathesis, a transposition in the letters of Job's name:

(Chiasmus)	Good	Job the Upright	*[Eyov]*	(Metathesis)
	Evil	Job as Enemy	*[Oyev]*	

The crossing of good and evil (or health and sickness, wealth and poverty, nearness to and distance from God) parallels a reversal in the letters of Job's name: Aleph-Yud-Vav-Beth, approximated in English by e-y-o-v, becomes Aleph-Vav-Yud-Beth, approximated in English by o-y-e-v. This reversal makes Job, who has always turned toward God, appear to be an enemy of God. After he is initially described as "perfect and upright" *(tam v'yashar),* then the narrative centers on what happens when God appears to treat Job as one would an enemy.[3] The transformation, both experiential and verbal, becomes explicit when Job asks God in chapter 13, verse 24: "Why do you hide your face,/And consider me your enemy?" Of course, Job never actually becomes God's enemy, but must feel that he has, for the purposes of the story. Satan, like language, plays tricks on us.

The name of God also undergoes diverse transformations in the Book of Job: the Prologue and Epilogue employ the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), while Job only once and his companions never refer to God in this way, instead speaking of *El, Eloah, Elohim,* and *Shaddai.* Some scholars conclude that this is the result of composite authorship, but Rabbinic tradition insists that the different divine names have theological significance. Job's false friends are caught up in misguided assertions about God. Job, in contrast, as he strives to address God, passes through several stages on the way to God's transcendence of language. Although the Tetragrammaton has been translated as "the Lord," these four (now unpronounceable) letters name the ineffable God. The language of Hebrew Scripture preserves a place for what is beyond images and words, the locus of divine mystery.

Ha-satan, the source of our modern Satan, derives from the root Sin-Tet-Nun, to act as an adversary, and thus may be translated, "the adversary."[4] The most recent translations printed by the Jewish Publication Society rightly avoid rendering ***ha-satan*** by the proper name, Satan. Without the definite article, ***satan*** may be simply "an adversary." The italicized ***satan*** indicates a Hebrew accent, emphasizing that we are dealing with a key word in a foreign system of beliefs. Unlike the modern Satan, this adversary is not represented as an independent evil being, but rather names a variety of opposing forces. We learn this from the earliest occurrences of the word in Numbers 22:22 and 22:32, when God places an angel in the way of Balaam as a ***satan*** against him. This ***satan*** is an adversary or a power of opposition sent by God, and is clearly not independent of Him. The evolution of ***satan*** and ***ha-satan*** is worth following through Samuel, Chronicles, and Zechariah, but would lead us too far afield.[5]

In addition to these central themes and key words, what are the essential rhetorical figures in the Book of Job? We may speak of chiasmus, the crossing that makes the upright Job appear to be an enemy of God. But we must especially attend to the tension between conflicting rhetorical modes: question and assertion. Job urges us to consider ways in which men approach God, sharply contrasting Job's form of authentic doubt with his friends' dogmatic statements. The technical term for questioning is "erotesis," from the Greek verb meaning "to question or inquire."[6] The trope or rhetorical device of questioning is, as we will see, even attributed to God in the Book of Job. Whereas assertions imply a situation of monologue in which the listener need not respond, certain questions initiate a dialogue. The Book of Job passes through various forms of questioning, and develops toward an I-Thou relation.[7]

Tropes engender tropes, and no figure of speech stands alone. The rhetoric of questioning is often linked to irony, broadly defined as saying one thing and meaning another. In the Book of Job, we also find quotations and misquotations, both from other works of Near Eastern Wisdom literature and within the book.[8] The situation may be outlined as follows. After the righteous Job loses his

children, his possessions, and his health, Job's companions respond to him by compounding the errors of dogmatic theology and misinterpretation. Job, on the other hand, is a probing questioner, so powerful in his questioning that he enters into relationship with God. The differences between Job and his false friends are evident in the language of their debate.

II

Now we can better understand Job's encounters with the adversary. We clearly cannot attempt a comprehensive discussion of Job, but only a close reading of a few central passages. The book opens at an indefinite time and place:

> There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, fearing God, and turned away from evil. Seven sons and three daughters were born to him. His possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred she-asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the children of the east.[9] (Job 1:1-3)

What is the literary genre of this Prologue in prose? "There was a man" sounds like the beginning of a folktale or legend. We know neither when Job lived, nor where Uz was located. Further, Job is described with utmost simplicity, as one who is "perfect and upright" and "the greatest of the sons of the east"; in an ethically reassuring correspondence between virture and reward, Job is blessed by extreme wealth. Thus Rabbinic tradition notes that Job is no historical person, but rather a typical figure.[10] From the start, we are encouraged to read beyond the literal level of the narrative.

A conflict arises when we learn of Job's children only that they hold feasts:

> His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each on his day, and they would send and call for their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When the feast days had run their course, Job sent and sanctified them, rose early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all, because Job said: It may be that my children have sinned and blessed [a euphemism for "cursed"] God in their hearts. Thus Job did continually. (Job 1:4-5)

The feasts are an incongruous detail for those related to the pious Job. How does he react to their threat to piety? Job keeps his distance from their parties and does not question what they do. Rather than confront them, he seems to turn his back on evil and privately express suspicions. This development gives a new sense to the phrase which describes Job as one who "turned away from evil." We need not say that Job's actions are blameworthy, but that he almost too readily resorts to a ritual act of purification, without entering into a dialogue with his children. The turn away from evil conceals problems that were not immediately apparent.

A parallel scene in heaven immediately follows:

> Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before God *[YHWH]*, and the adversary *[ha-satan]* also came among them.
>
> And God said to the adversary, Whence do you come?
>
> The adversary answered God and said, From deviating *[m'shut]* on the earth and from walking up and down on it.
>
> And God said to the adversary, Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a perfect and upright man, fearing God, and turned away from evil?
>
> Then the adversary answered God and said, Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not made a hedge about him, about his house, and about all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now put forth Your hand and touch all that he has, surely he will bless [curse] You to Your face.
>
> And God said to the adversary, Behold, all that he has is in your hands, only against him do not put forth your hand.
>
> And the adversary went out from the presence of God. (Job 1:6-12)

Whereas Job blesses his children and offers ritual sacrifices, God confronts the adversary. He immediately raises a question that begins a discussion. In response, the adversary also raises questions. But *ha-satan* uses what we loosely call "rhetorical" questions, to which he himself gives answers. Speaking as a prosecuting attorney, the adversary attempts to influence God's judgment of Job. Only God is absolutely justified in employing a mode of assertion, however, as when He describes Job as "fearing God, and turned away from evil." But these words repeat the opening

verse of the Prologue! Does this make Job an inspired text? An implicit narrative anthropomorphism—or is it a theomorphism?—identifies God's words with the initial description of Job.

Despite the events suggested by the title of this essay, there is no literal encounter between Job and the adversary, *ha-satan*. Such encounters are only implied, after the adversary "went out from the presence of God" to inflict catastrophes on Job. But after his physical setbacks, Job's encounters with the adversary are rigorously continued in debates with his false friends. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar speak many wise words, yet they err when they accuse Job of wrongdoing. At first, we may find nothing to reproach in the sober speech of Eliphaz:

> If one attempts a word *[davar]* with you, will you be weary?
> But who can refrain from speaking?
> Behold, you have instructed many,
> And you have strengthened weak hands.
> Your words have upheld the stumbler,
> And you have encouraged feeble knees.
> But now it comes upon you, and you are weary,
> It touches you, and you are frightened.
> Is not your fear of God your confidence *[kislatecha]*,
> And your hope the integrity of your ways?
> Remember, who that was innocent ever perished? (Job 4:2-7)

Once again we encounter a series of questions. What is Eliphaz's mode of questioning? The first question appears as a gentle request; Elihu asks whether he may respond to Job. Yet he is not interested in Job's answer, for he cannot resist speaking. Eliphaz accuses Job of hypocrisy: "Your words have upheld the stumbler . . . / But now it comes upon you, and you are weary." Eliphaz further employs leading questions that do not aim at conversation, but only accuse Job: "Who that was innocent ever perished?" By implication, if Job perishes, he is guilty. We begin to see that Job's companions are his accusers, his adversaries.

If this seems unlikely, consider a remarkable passage in tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud. To modern readers, this Talmudic narrative may appear to be a fanciful reconstruction. But such legends often achieve significant interpretations. In a deliberately anachronistic commentary on the binding of Isaac (Genesis

22), the Rabbinic sources draw from the Book of Job. On this model, they first explain God's command that Abraham sacrifice his son:

> "After these things, God tested Abraham."
> After the words of *satan*, as it is written, "And the child grew, and was weaned" [Gen. 21:8]. *Satan* spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the Universe! You graced this old man with the fruit of the womb at the age of a hundred, yet of all the banquet he prepared, he did not have one turtle-dove or pigeon to sacrifice before You.[11] (Sanhedrin 89b)

The Rabbis interpret the test of Abraham as a parallel to Job's trials. But *satan* appears here without the definite article: *satan* is either a proper name, perhaps influenced by Persian, dualistic ideas, or refers to some indefinite adversary.

According to tradition, there is no early and late, and hence no time in Scripture; God's language is beyond time. Once Job has been alluded to, then, the cross-references multiply. To explain why Abraham's journey to Moriah lasts three days, the Rabbis describe several obstacles, including an encounter with *satan:*

> *Satan* anticipated him on the way and said to him, "If one attempts a word *[davar]* with you, will you be weary? . . . Behold, you have instructed many, and you have strengthened weak hands. Your words have upheld the stumbler. . . . But now it has come upon you, and you are weary." [Job 4:2-5]
> He [Abraham] said to him, "I will walk in my integrity." [Ps. 26:1]
> He said to him, "Is not your fear of God your foolishness *[kislatecha]*?" [Job 4:6]
> He said to him, "Remember, who that was innocent ever perished?" [Job 4:7] (Sanhedrin 89b)

The absence of names produces a somewhat dizzying effect. We almost lose track of the speakers, as both the adversary and Abraham employ phrases from the Book of Job and the Psalms. In fact there are no speakers; there are only quotations from Scripture. At the same time, the retelling of Abraham's story sheds light on the story of Job. If *satan*—without the definite article—can speak like Eliphaz, then we have an insight into the character of Eliphaz as an adversary, a *satan*. Notice, in passing, that the

adversary resorts to a deceptive play on words. Eliphaz asks, "Is not your fear of God your confidence?" But *satan* plays on a further meaning of ***kislatecha,*** and turns this verse into the aggressive challenge: "Is not your fear of God your foolishness?" Or perhaps this insidious hint is already present when Eliphaz speaks these words.

But the Rabbinic revision of Abraham and Job presses further. If Eliphaz has been identified with the adversary, Abraham is identified with Eliphaz, for he defends himself with the question Eliphaz raises: "Who that was innocent ever perished?" Eliphaz accuses Job with this question, while Abraham uses it in self-defense. What the companions say is not necessarily wrong, but they wrongly address themselves to the righteous Job. Depending on context, Eliphaz's words are appropriate to either *satan* or to Abraham. Context also determines whether a friend speaks as an adversary, or whether perhaps Job speaks as his own enemy. May we interpret the disputes between Job and his friends as reflections of an internal struggle? Abraham's encounters with the adversary might be viewed as encounters between reason and irrationality, between waking consciousness and the unconscious.

Before hastily accepting or rejecting a psychological interpretation, we should read further. How does the discussion between Job and his companions proceed? We can hardly refer to it as a "dialogue," for the speakers seldom respond to each other. What is the difference between Job's language and that of his friends?

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar only strive to justify Job's suffering. They employ pseudo-questions, not in order to probe the mystery of God's justice, but to confront Job with conventional wisdom. A battle ensues between normative beliefs and personal experience. The friends attempt to force Job back to traditional ideas, but since Job denies that he is guilty, he wishes to question God directly:

> I will give free utterance to my complaint,
> I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
> I will say to God: Do not condemn me,
> Let me know why you contend with me.
> Is it good for you to oppress,
> To despise the work of your hands,
> And shine upon the counsel of the wicked? (Job 10:1-2)

The friends express platitudes, but Job seeks a more original and convincing form of language in debate with God. Casting aside their clichés, he says:

> What you know, I also know,
> I am not inferior to you.
> Yet, I shall speak to Shaddai,
> And I desire to reason with God. (Job 13:2-3)

The debates evolve, or fail to evolve, in three cycles: Job 4-14, 15-21, and 22-31. As we move from the first to the second round, however, a change occurs. The false friends become more hostile, and Job finds he must respond to their attacks. They briefly succeed in deflecting him from his intention to address God, as he tries to defend against their slanders and commonplaces. There can be no clear resolution in such a dispute between orthodox thought and an individual who seeks immediate knowledge of God. The problem for Job is not to attain wisdom, which he already possesses, but to reconcile his knowledge with his suffering.

After the third cycle of speeches, which appears to have been distorted by scribal errors or tampered with by editors, we come to Elihu's tirade. This new voice may have been added at a later date, and combines polemic with subtler arguments. In a sense, Elihu acts as the first literary critic of the book, when in chapter 32 he complains that the other speakers have not answered Job. He, on the contrary, employs relatively accurate quotations in chapters 33 and 34, and attempts direct rebuttals.[12] Further, Elihu introduces a new mode of questioning. The friends have raised *leading questions,* which imply that Job is guilty. Job asks ***probing questions,*** aimed toward truer dialogue and an individual grasp of God's ways. Now Elihu brings in a rhetorical style that involves borderline or *limit questions*. There are hints of this kind of questioning throughout the Wisdom literature, but it becomes decisive at the end of Elihu's speech:

> Stand still, and consider the wonders of God.
> Do you know how God commands them,
> And causes the lightning of His cloud?
> Do you know the balancings of the clouds,
> The wonders of one perfect in knowledge? . . .

Can you, with Him, spread out the sky,
Which is strong as a molten mirror? (Job 37:14-18)

These are questions that compel us to be silent, questions that can only be answered by God, if at all.[13]

Behind what are called "rhetorical questions," then, we discern unexpected nuances. Many questions work only as accusations, others probe for an answer, while a few provoke an inspired dialogue. The sequence of questions builds toward dialogue with God. In the circle of friends, Elihu comes closest to dialogue, when he quotes and tries to refute Job's words. God's response cannot come until Job and his companions have exhausted themselves in efforts to achieve either dialogue or a stable theological position.

Yet as God answers Job out of the whirlwind, He essentially radicalizes the form of the limit question:

Who is this that darkens counsel
By words without knowledge? . . .
Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Declare, if you have understanding.
Who determined the measurements, if you know?
Or who stretched the line upon it?
Where are its foundations fastened? (Job 38:4-6)

What is the quality of these questions? And how has the author of the text dared to represent God's speech? By raising this form of question, God asserts nothing, but only reveals the inadequacy of human assertions. A trope is a turn; when God answers Job, His questioning tropes on, or turns away from, all the assertions demanded of Him.

Only Job shows real understanding when he reiterates the question God has asked: "Who is it that darkens counsel/By words without knowledge?" Many interpreters conceive this as a leading question, addressed to Job, but it is more complex. After all, the companions are guiltier than Job of "darkening counsel." But only Job accepts the question as being addressed to him; only he appears capable of receiving God's words. Job combines an allusion to God's question with a genuine, self-abasing response:

Who is this that hides counsel, without knowledge?
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. (Job 42:3)

At this moment, Job attains the I-Thou relationship to God he has sought. Surely he cannot expect solutions to the vast questions he has raised. The only answer is a sequence of questions that leads to the human recognition: I am nothing, I know nothing. Only God truly is, so that Hebrew employs the present tense of the verb, "to be," only in reference to God.

III

I conclude with several questions and hesitant answers. Who or what is *ha-satan,* the adversary? Depending on context, and even within a single passage, this key word may be interpreted on several levels. First, "the adversary" can be read as a metaphysical force of evil or reversal, fate or accident, or as an evil being that accuses men and women before God. But this literal reading of *ha-satan* comes dangerously close to positing a dualistic distinction between God and evil. Second, "the adversary" can be viewed as being embodied in false friends. Third, moving further from the *pshat* or literal level, "the adversary" may be a part of oneself, an enemy within, perhaps the irrational impulses of the id—or the tyrannical commonplaces of the superego. Finally, through rhetorical analyses which extend the conclusions of previous methods, "the adversary" may be understood to represent a form of misguided language. False questions and assertions oppose those who strive for a dialogical relationship to God. As *satan* is an aspect of God, rather than His antithesis, so misguided language forms part of language in general. *Satan* becomes associated with deceptive rhetoric, especially when it asserts too much, or raises misleading questions. To decide that encounters with the adversary are only encounters with language, with oneself, or with other human beings, would be a humanistic reduction. Instead, we should leave all four levels of meaning open.

In what sense does God answer Job? Not by offering informa-

tion, but only by affirming the necessity of questions, rather than dogmatic assertions. What, then, is the final significance of the different forms of questioning employed by Job's companions, Job, and God? The false friends rely on theological dogmas and believe that they can explain the significance of Job's suffering. Job's inquisitive language, on the other hand, involves him in a project of "deconstructing theology," which shows itself as a more adequate, though also problematic, way to approach God.

Does this mean that the Prologue and Epilogue, by telling stories about God, contradict the negative wisdom suggested by the Book of Job? Job does indeed subvert the Wisdom literature of which he forms a part. One is tempted to say that the text undoes itself: by narrating a dialogue between God and "the sons of God," it contradicts the explicit argument against theological statements. Yet, just as *ha-satan* must not be read only literally, so the words of God must be read on several levels. Some readers are content to believe that God appears to Job and speaks with him. But the text does not tell us this; rather, God answers "out of the whirlwind." Most modern readers will be more comfortable with the notion that amid a sudden storm, Job senses God speaking to him, and raising questions about mysteries of creation.

Yet we should not be content to leave it at that. What is the essence of God's speech? Job learns, most profoundly, a way of approaching God through language and its annulment. Even if the friends have not recognized the errors of their words, Job learns a kind of linguistic asceticism that is one basic tendency in Jewish thought. He knows not to affirm what is beyond the limits of his understanding, and especially not to seek a clear perception of God. If the God that can be spoken of is not the eternal God, then how can theology presume to be a language of God? Jewish theology is at war within itself, constantly forced to reject its own positive statements. When God asks, "Who is it that darkens counsel/By words without knowledge?", Job turns the question toward himself and affirms silence:

> Behold, I am of small account;
> What shall I answer you?
> I place my hand upon my mouth. (Job 40:4)

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1. See, for example, H. L. Ginsberg's "Job the Patient and Job the Impatient," *Conservative Judaism*, 21 (1967), 12-24, and his discussion of "Job" in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), vol. 10, pp. 112-19.
2. See Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 67.
3. For a structuralist reading of the relationship between Job and God, see Robert M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp. 54-125. Polzin refers to figures such as metaphor, metonymy, and chiasmus (pp. 61, 124), but he does not discuss the rhetorical mode of questioning.
4. Compare N. H. Tur-Sinai, *The Book of Job: A New Commentary* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1957), pp. 38-45.
5. Full-length studies of Satan (with less attention to *ha-satan*) have been written by Rivkah Schärf Kluger, *Satan in the Old Testament*, trans. Hildegaard Nagel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), and Edward Langton, *Satan: A Portrait* (London: Skeffington, 1945).
6. See Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 46. Note that tropes need not be localized at the level of single words, and may name larger units of language.
7. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970).
8. As Gordis observes in *The Book of God and Man*, chapters 5 and 13.
9. Translations are based on the original, in consultation with *Job*, ed. Victor E. Reichert (London: Soncino, 1960), *The Writings* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982), and several other modern editions.
10. Baba Batra 15b.
11. References to the Talmud are modified slightly from *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nezikin*, vol. III, ed. I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935).
12. Compare E. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, trans. Harold Knight (Leiden: Nelson, 1967), pp. c-ciii.
13. This analysis is supported in Gerhard von Rad's *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972), chapter 6, "Limits of Wisdom."