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GOD'S ANSWER TO JOB

Let the day perish in which I was born... [Job 3: 3a][1]

...he crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause; he will not let me get my breath, but fills me with bitterness... though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse. [9: 17–18, 20b]

...therefore I say, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. [9: 22]

I call aloud, but there is no justice. [19: 7b]

Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me! [31: 35a]

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind. Who is this that darkens counsel without knowledge?... Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?... when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? [38: 1–2, 4a, 7]

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes. [42: 5–6]

In the long poem at the centre of the book of Job, we encounter a decidedly impatient Job – one who curses the day he was born, accuses God of treating him unfairly, and demands an accounting from his maker. At the dramatic climax of the book, God answers Job out of a 'whirlwind', displaying the wonders of creation and putting Job firmly back in his place. Apparently satisfied by God's answer, Job 'repents in dust and ashes'. [42: 6]

Here, in the answer from the whirlwind, and in Job's humbled response, the poet's own deepest thinking about the problem of unfair suffering finds expression. But it is notoriously difficult to see how the two whirlwind speeches provide an answer to Job's complaint, and interpretations vary wildly, depending on the propensities and emphases of the reader. In this paper, I am especially concerned with the following questions. What underlying problem is the poet wrestling with? How is God's answer to Job supposed to be relevant to this problem? And why is Job satisfied by it? I critically consider what seem to me to be two of the most important interpretations. Neither of them turns out to be completely satisfying. I then conclude by suggesting that the book of Job itself oscillates back and forth between two quite different conceptions of God's relation to the world.

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

I. THE PROBLEM OF JOB: FOUR INCOMPATIBLE PROPOSITIONS

The central problem posed by the book of Job emerges in the lengthy and repetitious debate between Job and the three friends who have come to comfort him. The friends are appalled by Job's attitude. They suggest, ever so tactfully at first, then more and more insistently, that Job should search his conscience to see what he has done to bring God's wrath down upon him. But Job will have none of it; he maintains his innocence, insisting that he does not deserve what has happened to him, and even accusing God of injustice.

It will help to clarify and focus our thinking if we formulate the issue in this debate with somewhat greater precision. As I see it, both sides of the debate share two presuppositions.

The first is that God is making Job suffer. God doesn't just permit Job's suffering. God is the ultimate cause of all Job's misfortunes. The precise mechanisms that God uses to get his way on earth are unimportant. The Chaldeans and the Sabeans, and even the great wind that comes roaring out of the desert to level the house where Job's children are dining all play their parts. But Job and his friends never doubt that the script was written in heaven. (They, of course, know nothing of God's conversation with the Accuser.[2])

The second presupposition is that in a just world people get what they deserve. The righteous are rewarded, and the wicked are appropriately punished – at least that's how God is supposed to be running the world.

Given these two assumptions, Job and his friends believe that they have to choose between blaming God and blaming Job – between giving up their belief that God is just, and concluding that Job is not 'blameless and upright'. It never occurs to them that a just God would destroy a righteous person.

Four mutually inconsistent propositions thus constitute the problem of Job.

(1) God is making Job suffer.
(2) A just God would not cause an innocent person suffer as Job has suffered.
(3) God is just.
(4) Job is innocent of any wrong-doing serious enough to justify the punishment he has received.

[2] *The satan.* In the Hebrew text, the word '*satan*' is not a proper name, and is always preceded by the definite article. It probably functions as a title – as the name of an office, perhaps something along the lines of 'Chief Spy and Prosecutor'. This means that when the *satan* accuses Job, he is only doing his job. In any case, the text makes it quite clear that when the *satan* brings misfortune on Job, he does so with his Master's express approval. (See 1: 12 and 2: 6.) It is also worth noting that by the time we reach the Epilogue, the *satan*'s role in the affair has been completely forgotten. (See 42: 11.)

Propositions 1 and 2 are not questioned in the course of the debate. The dispute is about the other two. The friends conclude that Proposition 4 is false. They believe that, contrary to appearances, Job is being punished for some sin.[3] Job, on the other hand, proclaims his innocence, and (at least some of the time) draws the daring and blasphemous conclusion that Proposition 3 is false. Since God has treated him unfairly, God is not just.

Job also knows that he is not the only innocent victim, and he issues a general indictment of the way God is running the world.

> It is all one; therefore I say,
> he destroys both the blameless and the wicked.
> When disaster brings sudden death,
> he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.
> The earth is given into the hands of the wicked;
> he covers the eyes of its judges –
> if it is not he, who then is it?
>
> [9:22–24]

In his final summation, Job returns to his own case, swears an oath of innocence, and demands that God explain himself. 'Here is my signature!' he cries, 'Let the Almighty answer me!'[4]

2. THE VOICE FROM THE WHIRLWIND

'Then the LORD answered Job from out of the whirlwind.' Job, silenced at last, hears the mysterious Voice of the Creator of the Universe.

Note first what the Voice doesn't say. It says nothing about any conversations with the Accuser. Nothing about 'testing' Job, or 'disciplining' him, or 'punishing' him. In fact, the Voice says nothing at all about what has happened to Job! It expresses no sympathy, and gives no explanation; it doesn't even hint at a reason for Job's suffering.

Actually, God speaks twice. The first of the speeches consists mostly in a series of gruff, ironic questions: What does Job know? What can he do? The content of each question is a vivid word picture, usually of some non-human aspect of nature. Taken together, God's questions display the vast panoply of creation in all its power and beauty: The earth, the sea, the stars. The dawn. Light and darkness. Lightning and clouds and rain. Various members of the animal kingdom are described: hungry lion cubs waiting to be fed, the

[3] It should be noted that the friends represent themselves as the inheritors of traditional wisdom. [8: 8–10, 15: 10]. Large parts of their speeches are virtually indistinguishable in both style and substance from some of the Psalms. (See esp. Psalms 1, 37, 49, and 73.) They are also reminiscent of passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. (See Isaiah 58: 6–14; Jeremiah 17: 5–8; Ezekiel 18.) Since the friends get the worst of the argument (God himself declares that they have not spoken the truth [42: 8]), I think it is fair to conclude that the poet means to reject the prevailing Hebrew view of the meaning of suffering.

[4] Many scholars believe that the Elihu speeches, which appear at this point in the text (chapters 32–37) are an interpolation by a later poet. However that may be, they certainly interrupt the dramatic flow of the poem, and add amazingly little to what Job's soon to be discredited friends have already said. I will not discuss them.

raven searching for prey, the goat crouching to give birth, the wild ox refusing to be harnessed or to work for humans, the ostrich leaving her eggs in the sand, the war horse exulting at the sound of battle, the hawk spreading its wings and soaring away, the eagle making its nest on a rocky crag.

Job is rendered almost speechless, but the Voice goes right on, as if he were still defiant. 'Will you even put me in the wrong?' it asks Job. 'Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?... Then I will acknowledge to you that your own right hand can give you the victory.' [40: 8–9, 14] (The reader may well wonder when Job had ever imagined that his power rivalled God's![5])

Most of the LORD's second speech is devoted to a description of the primeval monsters, Behemoth and Leviathan. Behemoth appears to be a sort of supernatural bull, or perhaps hippopotamus. Leviathan is a fire-breathing sea serpent; its strength and terrifying appearance are described in considerable detail. Once again, God's question seems to be: What can Job do?

> Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,
> or press down its tongue with a cord?
> Can you put a rope in its nose,
> or pierce its jaw with a hook?
>
> [41: 1–2]

At the conclusion of the description of Leviathan, the Voice falls silent. Job's brief response shows that the experience has brought about a complete change in his attitude. He drops all his former complaints, and repents.

3. THREE THEMES: POWER, KNOWLEDGE AND CREATION

I suggest that the Theophany makes three distinct points.

(1) First, it declares that God is supremely powerful and fully in control of everything.[6] That, I think is the main point of the descriptions of Behemoth and Leviathan, which dominate the second speech. These monsters seem to function as symbols of the chaos that the sky god of Near Eastern mythology was supposed to subdue at the end of time. In the present context, the point is that even these monsters are no threat to God. They are only his creatures, his playthings.

(2) In the second place, the Theophany repeatedly contrasts God's wisdom and knowledge with Job's ignorance. 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' God asks, and forcibly reminds Job of how little he knows about the way the world is put together. 'Where were you

[5] Job had always recognized that God is supremely powerful. That is precisely what sometimes makes his case seem so hopeless to him. See especially 9: 4–15.

[6] Some readers see this as the primary emphasis of the Theophany. According to them, the main point of God's Answer to Job is to assert that God is automatically in the right just because he is supremely powerful. For an entertaining example of this approach, see chapter thirty one of Hobbes's *Leviathan*.

when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.' [38: 2, 4] The point is that Job's doesn't know, doesn't have understanding.

(3) In the third place, the Theophany is a celebration of the Wisdom that created the world, and of the order it imposes on nature. It offers a breath-taking vision of the majesty and beauty of the Creator's design. When the foundations of the earth were laid,

> ... the morning stars sang together,
> and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy.
>
> [38:7]

As well they should. The sea (here, as elsewhere in the Bible, a symbol of chaos) is held within bounds. [38:8–11] Leviathan is kept on a leash. [41: 1–3] Everything – rain and lightning, hail and frost, lion and goat, eagle and ox – is in its proper place, playing its assigned part in the total scheme of things.

4. THE STANDARD INTERPRETATION: GOD HAS GOOD REASONS, BUT JOB SHOULDN'T EXPECT TO KNOW WHAT THEY ARE

To some readers, it will seem that God has merely changed the subject, asserting what Job has known all along – that he is the supremely wise and powerful author of a magnificent cosmos. How is this supposed to take care of Job's complaint?

The first answer I want to consider is the one most often assumed by the current generation of religiously committed writers.[7] I shall refer to it as the Standard Interpretation. Actually, it is a family of interpretations. According to all of them, the main point made by the Theophany is that Job doesn't know enough to call God to account. They take this to mean two things: (i) God has perfectly good reasons for the way he has treated Job, and (ii) Job shouldn't expect to know what they are.

A particularly clear and concise statement of the Standard Interpretation is given by Alvin Plantinga in a recent essay on the problem of evil:

> Job complains that God has no good reason for permitting the evil that befalls him. He believes that God doesn't have a good reason because he, Job, can't imagine what that reason might be. In reply, God does not tell him what the reason is; instead, he attacks Job's unthinking assumption that if he can't imagine what reason God might have, then probably God doesn't have a reason at all. And God attacks this assumption by pointing out that Job's knowledge is limited along these lines. No doubt he can't think what God's reason might be; but nothing of interest follows from this: in particular it doesn't follow that probably God doesn't have a reason. 'All right, Job, if you're so smart, if you know so much, tell me about it! Tell me how the universe was created; tell me about the sons of God who shouted with joy upon its creation! No doubt you were there!' And Job sees the point: '... I have spoken of great things which I have not understood, things too wonderful for me to know.' (Ch. 42 vs. 3).

[7] I am thinking especially of those Christian philosophers who write on the problem of evil.

... The point here is that the reason for Job's suffering is something entirely beyond his ken, so that the fact that he can't see what sort of reason God might have for permitting his suffering doesn't at all tend to show that God has no reason...[8]

Plantinga is right in interpreting God's Answer in the context of Job's complaint. Job's complaint, God's Answer, and Job's humbled response are parts of a single package. None of the items in it can be understood without reference to the others. Nevertheless, I think that Plantinga's defence of the Standard Interpretation involves a subtle misunderstanding of the case Job had made.[9]

Job never says, 'I can't imagine any reason for this; so there isn't one'. His complaint is based on what he takes to be a genuine piece of knowledge: if God is justified in treating him like this, it can only be because he somehow deserves it. That is why he thinks he has a right to demand that God either restore him to favor, or give a convincing explanation of what he has done wrong.

Of course, Job also doubts that any convincing explanation will be forthcoming. He thinks he has a pretty good grip on what his moral and religious obligations are, and he feels sure that he has fulfilled them. In his final summation, he runs through a long litany of sins that he has not committed. He says he is not guilty of lust, deceit, covetousness, idolatry or adultery. He has not failed to care for the poor, has not taken advantage of the weak. He has not trusted in his wealth or rejoiced in the ruin of his enemies. He never failed to extend hospitality to strangers. Has never concealed a sin, or misused his land. [31: 1ff]

Here, perhaps, we *can* see Job as moving from the premise that he 'can't imagine' how something could be so to the conclusion that it isn't so. 'I can't see what I have done wrong,' he cries, 'my conscience is clear' – and then concludes, 'I am innocent.' But this is no help to Plantinga, since this part of Job's complaint is not mistaken. There is not a hint in either of the divine speeches that Job deserves the things that have happened to him – and in any case, the rest of the book makes it abundantly clear that Job is innocent. Indeed, there would be no Problem of Job – no book of Job – if people always got what they deserved. So if there is a reason for Job's suffering – one that lies beyond his ken – it will not be a sin that he is unaware of.

This is not fatal to the Standard Interpretation, of course. For we can take God's Answer to be saying, not merely that Job and his friends were ignorant of God's reasons, but also that they were deeply mistaken in what they

[8] 'Epistemic Probability and Evil' (in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 75). I am using Plantinga's statement as a touchstone for my discussion of the Standard Interpretation partly because it offers such a succinct and clear defence of that way of reading the text, and partly because it is so typical of the use that Christian philosophers have made of Job in their treatments of the problem of evil.

[9] Job is not Plantinga's principal target in this essay. He is primarily concerned to defend theism against an 'evidential' argument from evil of the sort that is championed by William Rowe. However, Plantinga does (mistakenly, in my opinion) see Job has having argued in a way that is parallel to Rowe.

thought they *knew* about the requirements of justice – at least as they apply to God. Since Job is innocent, and since God nevertheless has a good reason for making him suffer, it follows that God sometimes has good reasons for making the innocent suffer.

On this reading, the second of our four incompatible propositions is the one that has to be abandoned. It is not true that:

(2) A just God would not cause an innocent person suffer as Job has suffered.

It is because of this misconception that Job is accused of 'darkening counsel by words without knowledge.' (38:2)

So far, so good. But if the reason for Job's suffering is not some hidden sin, what else could it be? Plantinga apparently thinks that the Prologue to Job does give the 'reason' for Job's suffering.

> As a matter of fact, according to the story, God does have a good reason, but the reason involves a transaction among beings some of whom Job has no awareness [of] at all.[10]

It is true that Job never learns about the conversations between God and the Accuser, and in this sense, they are 'beyond his ken'. But this had better not be the 'good reason' referred to in the Standard Interpretation. If God's only 'reason' for tormenting Job is to demonstrate his loyalty to a sceptical member of the heavenly court, then it is hardly surprising that he didn't tell Job about it – not because it would be too hard for Job to understand, but because he would understand only too well the utter inadequacy of God's reason. If no more than this is going on behind the scenes, then the great Answer from the Whirlwind is mere bluster on the part of a God who doesn't want Job to know the truth.[11,12]

Some proponents of the Standard Interpretation simply refuse to speculate about the nature of God's reasons, arguing that we are no better placed than Job to say what they might be. According to these interpreters, the message

[10] Plantinga, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

[11] In Robert Frost's satirical postscript to the book of Job, God says:

> I'm going to tell Job why I tortured him
> And trust it won't be adding to the torture.
> I was just showing off to the Devil, Job,
> As is set forth in chapters One and Two.
>
> And Job replies:
>
> 'Twas human of You. I expected more
> Than I could understand and what I get
> Is almost less than I can understand.

Masque of Reason (Henry Holt: New York, 1945), pp. 16–17.

[12] Many Job scholars are convinced that the divine speeches and the Prologue were written by different people. However that may be, the God who answers Job is a very different, and much more God-like, God than the one who holds court in the Prologue. It is a mistake to explain the meaning of the former in terms of the intentions of the latter.

of the Theophany is a perfectly general one about human cognitive limitations. It says that no mere human beings should expect to understand God's reasons for making the righteous suffer.[13]

Two different claims must be distinguished here, a positive claim and a negative one. The positive claim is that God does have good reasons; the negative claim is that human beings aren't smart enough (or something) to know what God's reasons are (if he has any). It's easy enough to see how the negative claim gets made in the divine speeches. God asks Job, over and over, 'What do you know about anything?' But how, exactly, does the positive claim get made? Where in either of the speeches does God say, 'I have a good reason for making you suffer'?

The speeches don't say anything of the kind directly. But as we noted earlier, they do celebrate the majesty and beauty of creation, and it has sometimes been suggested that this is an indirect way of saying that there is – also – a Moral Order at work in the world. This view of the matter is defended by Robert Gordis.

> ... God ... makes His point by implication, but nonetheless effectively on that account. The vivid and joyous description of nature is not an end in itself: it underscores the insight that nature is not merely a mystery, but is also a miracle, a cosmos, a thing of beauty. From this flows the basic conclusion at which the poet has arrived; *just as there is order and harmony in the natural world, though imperfectly grasped by man, so there is order and meaning in the moral sphere, though often incomprehensible to man.*[14]

I think there are two problems with Gordis's suggestion. In the first place, the analogy seems much too weak to support the argument. If we are worried about someone's moral character, it is no help to be shown a wonderful picture that he has painted, or an intricate machine that he has designed. By itself, that would only tell us that the person is talented, creative, and so on. The same thing holds true here. The celebration of the natural order shows us something about what God can do – it shows something of the beauty of what he has chosen to create – but it is hard to see how this provides a basis for a conclusion about his moral character or about the justice of his rule.

In the second place, it isn't at all clear what Gordis has in mind when he speaks of 'meaning in the moral sphere', or how this kind of order is supposed to be different from 'order and harmony in the natural world'. Gordis gives us little help, saying only that moral meaning is 'often incomprehensible to man'. One is left with the impression that divine justice is completely inscrutable – that there is nothing at all to be said about how a just God would treat a man like Job.

If this is all the Theophany says, then it is hard to see why Job is satisfied by it. Even if God's treatment of him is 'justified', Job has been given no

[13] This is consistent with most of what Plantinga says in the essay quoted above (though not with the unfortunate reference to the Prologue).

[14] *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 133. My emphasis.

reason to trust God. For all he knows. God has entirely sacrificed his welfare to some inscrutable good from which he will never benefit in any way. Not surprisingly, therefore, many readers try to find a more reassuring message in the Theophany. For example, Eleanore Stump writes:

> People are accustomed to say that Job got no answer to his anguished demand to know why God had afflicted him. But they forget that in the end Job says to God, 'now I see you'...
>
> In seeing the face of a loving God, Job has an answer to his question about why God has afflicted him... It lets Job see that God allows his suffering for his own spiritual or psychological good out of love for him; but it doesn't tell him precisely what the nature of that spiritual good is or how it is connected to Job's suffering.[15]

A few lines later, Stump says: 'If a truly good God rules the world, then the world has a good mother, and life is under the mothering guidance of God'.[16]

Is that what Job 'sees'? The answer must surely depend on what we think Job hears when God speaks. Is it the voice of a loving mother, assuring him that everything will work out for the best? Telling him that, in some way he cannot now understand, the evil that has befallen him is for his own good? We cannot hope to answer this question without taking a hard look at the content of the divine speeches – something that Stump does not do.[17]

Some Job scholars do make a case for the sort of interpretation of the Theophany that is suggested by Stump's remarks. They see at least the first of the divine speeches as a celebration of the sort of providential care that would make it plausible for Job to believe that he is safe in the hands of a loving God. These interpreters tend to emphasize God's descriptions of wild animals – the lion, the eagle, etc. – seeing in them a hint of the sort of care that Job can expect from God. For example, commenting on the first speech, John E. Hartley writes:

> Yahweh... portrays himself as Lord of the wild animals. He makes sure that all of them, from the mighty lion to the little raven, find food, both for their young and for themselves... The way that he cares for these creatures testifies to his wise goodness.[18]
>
> Although there is no mention of mankind in this speech, no doubt intentionally, Job can easily discern *Yahweh's implication that he cares for human beings even more wisely and compassionately than for the other creatures.*[19]
>
> Yahweh's message to Job is that he cares for him even more than for these wild animals.[20]

[15] Eleanore Stump, 'The Mirror of Evil'. In *God and the Philosophers* (ed. Thomas V. Morris). (New York: Oxford, 1994), pp. 242 and 246(fn. 10). See also: Eleanore Stump, 'Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job'. In *Reasoned Faith* (ed. Eleanore Stump). (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 1993), p. 353.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 242.

[17] In fairness to Stump, it should be said that Job is not the main focus of the essay from which the above quotations are taken. However, the more extended treatment she offers in 'Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job' suffers from the same deficiency.

[18] *The Book of Job* (*New International Commentary on the Old Testament*) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), p. 516. [19] *Ibid.*, pp. 489–490. My emphasis. [20] *Ibid.*, p. 516.

Let us test this interpretation by looking at a few of the passages that Hartley is referring to.

> Can you hunt the prey for the lion,
> or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
> when they crouch in their dens
> or lie in wait in their covert?
> Who provides the raven its prey?
> when its young ones cry to God,
> and wander about for lack of food?
>
> [38: 39–41]

> Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up
> and makes its nest on high.
> It lives on the rock and makes its home
> in the fastness of the rocky crag.
> From there it spies the prey;
> its eyes see it from far away.
> Its young ones suck up the blood;
> and where the slain are, there it is.
>
> [39: 27–30]

What do we learn from these passages about God's care for animals? Not that they never go hungry, or that their needs are always met. Not even that God sometimes steps in to provide food they couldn't find for themselves. The lioness and the raven and the eagle do their own hunting. At most it is implied that God has created them with natures that fit them for the task of finding food. But this is not a special providence whereby God looks after the interests of individual creatures. God's care – if care it is – is care for the various species of animals.

In the case of the foolish ostrich, God doesn't even seem to care much for the species.[21]

> ... it leaves its eggs to the earth,
> and lets them be warned on the ground,
> forgetting that a foot may crush them,
> and that a wild animal may trample them.
> It deals cruelly with its young, as if they were not its own;
> though its labor should be in vain, yet it has no fear;
> because God has made it forget wisdom,
> and given it no share in understanding.
>
> [39: 13–17]

Passages like this one led Rudolph Otto to find explicit 'dysteology' or 'negation of purpose' in God's answer to Job.[22] Be that as it may, we certainly

[21] Apparently the poet didn't know that the ostrich runs away in order to draw predators away from its young.

[22] And yet, Otto says, 'this very negation of purpose becomes a thing of baffling significance'. *The Idea of the Holy*, tr. John W. Harvey, second ed. (New York: Oxford, 1950), ch. VIII.

do not find in it the slightest intimation of the sort of providential care that would justify Job in expecting God to do anything for him.

One other thing must be borne in mind as we try to decide what inference, if any, to draw from these descriptions. Many of the animals described in the Theophany are predators. What is good for them is bad for their prey. In view of the terrible things that have happened to Job, it is at least as plausible to see him as a victim of the system – as one of the prey – rather than as one of predators. (Question: Was God showing his care for Job, or for bandits, when the Chaldeans and Sabeans took his livestock and killed his servants?)

As far as I can see, the animal passages give no support to the claim that the Theophany tells Job that everything that has happened to him is for his own 'spiritual or psychological good'. On the contrary, if we take the analogy with the animals seriously, we ought to conclude that there is no special reason why Job had to suffer. After all, there is no special reason why this particular antelope is eaten by this particular lion. Given the nature of these animals, that sort of thing will happen from time to time. That is all there is to say.

If this is what the Theophany is saying, then Job's deepest mistake lay in his unthinking assumption that God had singled him out for special treatment. This is not to deny that there is a sense in which God makes Job suffer – something that is assumed throughout the book of Job.[23] But it comes to no more than this. God is the Creator and Sustainer of a world order in which very bad things sometimes happen to human beings, and this time they happen to Job. The Chaldeans and Sabeans took Job's property, lightning destroyed his sheep, a great wind killed his children, disease took possession of his body. God may have good reasons for creating a world in which such things happen; but there is no further, special reason why they had to happen to Job.[24, 25]

I conclude, then, that when God answers Job, he should not be understood as saying, 'Trust me, Job, I have a good reason for afflicting you: if you just hold onto your faith, everything will come right for you in the end'. The God who answers Job out of the whirlwind does not offer that kind of reassurance. This God promises nothing – either in this world or the next.

It is true, of course, that Job is rewarded handsomely in the *Epilogue*, receiving double his original wealth, twice the normal life span, and an equal number of replacement children. But does not help us with the interpretation of God's answer and Job's response. Job was already fully satisfied by the

[23] See specially 42: 11, where Job's relatives and friends comfort him 'for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him'.

[24] This means that the first of our four incompatible propositions is not true in precisely the *way* that Job and his friends had thought. They believed that God had singled Job out for special treatment. But on the view suggested by the animal passages in the Theophany, that is not true.

[25] On this reading, the Theophany rejects the whole idea of special providence, and not merely a particular view about the way it operates. (Once again, it is important to distinguish between the point of view of the poem and that of the Prologue.)

Theophany, which contained not a hint of the coming restoration of his fortunes. (And in any case, Job's restoration looks more like compensation for pointless suffering than like a good that God wanted to achieve through Job's misfortune.)

It is also important to remember that Job had not asked only about his own case – he had spoken on behalf of all those who suffer unfairly, and as our poet must know, there is no 'happy epilogue' for most of them. If God is going to take care of them, it must therefore be in the next world.

Could this be the message of the Theophany? No. Apart from a couple of passing references to *Sheol*, the shadowy realm beneath the earth where the dead sleep, the divine speeches are silent on the subject of life after death, and there is not a hint of the possibility that Job (or anyone else) will ever be released from *Sheol*.

The only references to the possibility of resurrection are in the speeches of Job himself, and his view is decidedly pessimistic.

> As waters fail from a lake,
> and a river wastes away and dries up,
> so mortals lie down and do not rise again;
> until the heavens are no more, they will not awake
> or be roused out of their sleep.
>
> [14: 10–12]

Job briefly entertains the fantasy that God might 'hide' him in *Sheol* until his anger is spent, and then take him out again. But he knows this is nonsense.

> As the mountain falls and crumbles away,
> and the rock is removed from its place;
> the waters wear away the stones;
> the torrents wash away the soil of the earth;
> so you destroy the hope of mortals.
>
> [14: 18–19]

As far as I can see, this pessimistic view is not contradicted anywhere in the book of Job. The only possible exception is the much disputed verse in which Job says: 'after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God'. [19: 26] Unfortunately, the Hebrew text is so corrupt at this point that no one can be certain of its meaning. And in any case, the context makes two things clear: (i) it is *post mortem* vindication (against God!) that Job briefly looks forward to in this passage; and (ii) the means by which Job's 'Redeemer' (his 'Vindicator') is to be apprised of the facts of his case does not require Job's physical presence. 'O that my words were written down!' he cries.

> O that they were inscribed in a book!
> O that with an iron pen and with lead
> they were engraved on a rock forever!
>
> [19: 23–24]

There would be no need for the iron pen and the lead if Job were going to be resurrected from the dead!

I think it is fair to conclude that our poet shares the early Hebrew view that everyone – the righteous along with the wicked – are permanently confined to *Sheol*. But this is a side issue. Whatever Job may have had in mind in chapter nineteen, the fact remains that the God who speaks out of the whirlwind in chapter thirty-eight to forty-one does not promise to raise Job from the dead, and does not offer him any assurances about the future. Instead, God changes the subject, forcing Job to step outside himself, and to see the world from a perspective that wholly transcends the normal human way of looking at things. What Job sees when he listens to God is a world of elemental forces, inhabited by creatures who eat one another. It is a world of terrifying beauty. It is not, or at least not obviously, a Moral Order.

5. MITCHELL'S INTERPRETATION: REJECTING THE DEMAND FOR MORAL ORDER

We have seen that, while the Theophany does stress Job's ignorance, it does not say (or imply) that what Job is ignorant *of* is some 'good reason' for his misfortunes. The next type of interpretation I want to discuss goes even farther, suggesting that the Theophany should be read as a wholesale rejection of the demand for that kind of Moral Order.

As a representative of this view of the matter, I would like to take a look at the introduction to Stephen Mitchell's recent poetic translation of Job. 'Job's vision', Mitchell says, 'ought to give a healthy shock to those who believe in a moral God'.[26] As Mitchell understands it, Job's experience of God thrusts him outside the realm of human values, giving him 'a God's-eye view of creation' that is 'before man' and 'beyond good and evil'.[27]

> The Voice ... doesn't moralize. It has the clarity, the pitilessness, of nature and of all great art ... Projecting our civilized feelings onto the antelope torn apart by lions, we see mere horror: nature red in tooth and claw. But animals aren't victims, and don't feel sorry for themselves. The lioness springs without malice; the torn antelope suffers and lets go; each plays its role in the sacred game. When we watch from the periphery, as in a television film, we can sense the dignity this relationship confers on both hunter and hunted, even in the midst of great pain.[28]

But how, we may well ask, is this supposed to help Job? Doesn't it just mean that his worst fears have been realized? Unlike the antelope torn by lions, Job had hoped for better treatment. Even if he withdraws his criticism of God, how can he be comforted by the knowledge that the world is not and was never intended to be a Moral Order? Mitchell explains:

[26] Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (San Francisco North Point Press, 1987), p. xxiv. See also John T. Wilcox, *The Bitterness of Job* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989). Wilcox also offers an interpretation that places God 'beyond good and evil'.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. xx.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

What the Voice means is that paradise isn't situated in the past or future, and doesn't require a world tamed or edited by the moral sense. It is our world, when we perceive it clearly, without eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is an experience of the Sabbath vision: looking at reality, the world of starving children and nuclear menace, and recognizing that it is very good.[29]

This is Job's comfort. When he stops projecting his own values onto the world, and accepts reality as it is, he is able to see and to participate in the deep joy that lies at the heart of all things. He too experiences 'the Sabbath vision'. He looks at a reality that is not 'tamed or edited by the moral sense', and sees that it is 'very good'. Bitterness and resentment and rebellion are gone – replaced, not by cringing in the dust, or even by godly sorrow, but by a serene acceptance of God's will and God's world and of his own finitude. As Mitchell puts it, 'He has let go of everything, and surrendered into the light'.[30]

Does this make psychological sense? I think it does. We all know moments of release, in which we step back from our everyday commitments and view our lives in a wider context. If we step far enough back, if the context in which we see ourselves is wide enough, our worldly gains and losses can seem small and insignificant. If, at the same time, we make contact with something of supreme and unquestionable value, we may experience a kind of liberation, in which fear and anxiety and resentment and regret are replaced by inexpressible joy and peace. If this is what Job is experiencing, then we can understand why he drops his former complaint against God. It is only when he listens to God that Job is finally able to let go of all that he has lost. Compared to what he has seen, his former wealth and social position, and even his health and his children, sink into comparative insignificance. As Maimonides put it, Job now sees that they were never more than 'dust and ashes'.[31] That is his comfort.

There is no new information here. What is new is a paradigm-shattering experience of the world and of its Creator. The most important lines in the book may be, 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes have seen you'. Before the Theophany, Job had known God only by report ('by the hearing of the ear'). He had thought of God only in terms of the conventional ideas that, along with his friends, he had inherited from tradition. Now that he has 'seen' God with his 'own eyes'–now that he has encountered the God who is really God – all those conventional ideas drop away, and with them Job's complaint against God.

Other, more familiar, interpretations of Job's spiritual transformation make much less sense to me. There is, for example, nothing in the content of the speeches to motivate the sort of personal faith and trust that proponents of the Standard Interpretation so often find in Job's final words. Job is

[29] Ibid., p. xxi.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

[31] *Guide to the Perplexed*, Part III, chapter XXIII. Maimonides reads 42: 6 as saying that Job repents of 'dust and ashes'.

satisfied by what the Theophany has permitted him to *see*, and not by any newfound conviction that God will make it up to him in some heavenly Epilogue.

Nor, should it be added, is there anything in the Theophany to motivate the sense of sin and guilt that some Christian interpreters find in Job's final words. Job 'repents', all right – i.e., he undergoes a profound change of heart and mind and is reconciled to God and to God's world. But this can hardly be due to a newly discovered sense of sin. Job is mocked and rebuked in the divine speeches; but they do not accuse him of sin. (And in any case the Hebrew word translated here as 'repent' is often used in the Bible to refer to changes of mind on God's part.[32])

6. *CONTRA* MITCHELL

It seems, then, that Mitchell's interpretation has some clear advantages over the Standard Interpretation. It is able to make sense the actual content of the Theophany without taking it as an elaborate analogy for something else, and it makes psychological sense of Job's response to its message. Nevertheless, all is not 'smooth sailing' for Mitchell's interpretation. Trouble surfaces when we turn back to the Problem of Job, and ask which of our four incompatible propositions is supposed to come out false.

One would expect Mitchell to say something along the following lines. '*Proposition 3 is false – God is not just. To that extent, Job the rebel was right. But he was also wrong. He thought God had failed to satisfy moral requirements that really applied to him. What Job hadn't yet realized is that God is beyond good and evil.*'

I think Mitchell would not be altogether happy with this characterization of his position, however. He would rather read the Theophany as saying that God is just – but only in a larger sense that cannot be captured by any merely human conception. For example, commenting on a passage in which God asks Job whether he can trample on the wicked [40: 8–14], Mitchell takes him to be asking:

> Do you really want this moral sense of yours projected onto the universe?... Do you want a god who is only a larger version of a righteous judge, rewarding those who don't realize that virtue is its own reward and throwing the wicked into a physical hell? If that's the kind of justice you're looking for, you'll have to create it yourself. Because that's not my justice.[33]

Let us try to spell out the implications of this remarkable statement for the

[32] Two other small textual points are worth making in this connection. (i) The Hebrew verb, translated in the New Revised Standard Version as 'despise', is transitive but lacks an object. This must be supplied by the translator. Most authorities now agree that when Job says 'I despise...', what he despises is not himself, but his former words. (ii) 'Dust and ashes' is a symbol of finitude, of the gap between the Creator and a creature made out of 'dust'. It does not refer to place where Job is sitting, nor is it a sign of penitence. (Compare Genesis 18: 27 where Abraham, pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah, addresses Yahweh in similar terms – 'I who am but dust and ashes.')

[33] Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. xxiii. My emphasis.

problem of Job. I think Mitchell is saying that it is only when we fail to distinguish between divine justice and human justice that we are forced to conclude that God is not just. When we stop projecting our moral sense onto the universe, we see that God's rule is, in some deep sense, just.[34] It is difficult to interpret this, and Mitchell gives us little help, but perhaps the idea is that God is the impartial source and preserver of a certain order and balance among all the competing forces of nature, of which human life is only one.[35]

For just a moment, let us set aside the question whether this is what the book of Job says, in order to ask whether it is an adequate solution to the problem of Job, For me, the answer has to be No.

For one thing, I am not sure what is left of the concept of justice when we step outside the moral point of view. Mitchell seems to have preserved the word 'justice' while retaining little of its original meaning. But as Mill showed in his famous reply to Mansel, it is misleading or worse to use our moral vocabulary to describe a God who completely transcends our moral categories.[36]

In the second place, and at a more emotional level, I'm not at all sure that I don't want a larger version of the righteous judge to deal with the likes of Hitler. When I contemplate the sufferings of innocents at Auschwitz, I know that it won't do simply to say, 'virtue is its own reward'. My heart cries out for palpable, humanly understandable justice, and not something else with the same name.

As I see it, Mitchell's way of looking at things simply doesn't take evil seriously enough. It is true that if we become sufficiently detached, if we step far enough outside the moral point of view, human life can seem small and insignificant, and the suffering of a Job may no longer destroy our peace of mind. We may even be able to appreciate the beauty of a world that includes Hitler and Auschwitz, starving children and nuclear menace. But I see no reason to think that moral detachment offers a better or truer judgment of the world than moral involvement. The horror and outrage we experience in the face of unfair and pointless suffering cannot – or at least should not – be so easily set aside. If this is what the book of Job is doing, then, I say, so much the worse for the book of Job.

[34] With this distinction in mind, we can be a bit more precise about the implications of Mitchell's interpretation for the four incompatible propositions that make up the Problem of Job. If we are thinking in terms of human justice, God is not just, and Proposition 3 is false. If we are thinking in terms of divine justice, then it is not true that a just God always makes sure that people get what they deserve, and Proposition 2 is false.

[35] For a full development of this idea of justice, see Lenn Evan Goodman, *On Justice: An Essay in Jewish Philosophy* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1991). Goodman, whose interpretation of Job in some respects parallels Mitchell's, speaks of the 'claims' and 'deserts' of natural elements and forces (the 'whirlwind and the worm') as something that God rightly takes into consideration. See especially pp. 124–125 and pp. 150–151.

[36] 'I will call no being good', he wrote, 'who is not [at least] what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures.' See John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's philosophy*, ch. 7, 'The Philosophy of the Conditioned as Applied by Mr Mansel to the Limits of Religious Thought'. (London: Longmans, Green & Company, Ltd., 1865).

But is this what the book of Job is saying? Two considerations may give us pause. In the first place, an interpretation like Mitchell's would put the book of Job outside the mainstream of the religious tradition that placed it in the canon. The God of the great Hebrew prophets is not an amoral force – however awe-inspiring. He is a God who demands, and practices, equality and justice.

> As the heavens are higher than the earth,
> so are my ways higher than your ways
> and my thoughts than your thoughts.
>
> [Isaiah 55: 9]

When the second Isaiah wrote these famous lines, he didn't mean to say that the highest moral categories don't apply to God, or that God is just in some other, mysterious way. He meant that, unlike his unfaithful people, God always fulfills the deepest requirements of morality, keeps all his promises, and rules with absolute justice.[37] Could the author of the divine speeches be turning his back on this tradition? Could he be intentionally undermining one of the main tenets of ethical monotheism? To many, it will seem quite unlikely.

In the second place, the idea of a God beyond good and evil may seem to make little sense in the context of the kind of theism we find in the book of Job itself. Although God's message is very hard to understand, the fact remains that he speaks to Job. Job is dealing with a personal agent – and not merely with an impersonal Ground of Being. But a personal God, a God who acts in history and enters into dialogue with human beings, lays himself open to the possibility of criticism.[38] If he does not act in accordance with the highest moral standards, if he is less than what he requires us to be, then he is not above, but beneath, morality – an inhuman tyrant whom it is impossible to love or to worship.

7. CONCLUSION

This leaves the interpreter of Job with a dilemma. Either the Whirlwind Answer says that there are morally sufficient reasons for the sufferings of the innocent, or it doesn't say this. Neither alternative is particularly satisfactory. It seems contrived to say that the great celebration of the natural order is an indirect way of saying that there is – also – a Moral Order at work in the world. But from the standpoint of ethical monotheism, it seems impossible not to have it say this.

One can't quite escape the impression that the poet wanted to have it both ways – to have the God of the Whirlwind be the Answer to the question of

[37] I do not mean to suggest that the prophet thinks that God is 'subject' to some 'external' moral law – a notion that is quite alien to the Hebrew tradition, in which God is the supreme Law Giver. I do mean to suggest that, at least for this prophet, the deepest moral requirements are a reflection of God's nature.

[38] See Karen Armstrong, *The History of God* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1993), p. 169.

justice, to have the celebration of the natural order be a kind of insight into the nature of divine justice. But it is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to see how this could be so.

This may reflect a certain tension in the Hebrew idea of God. On the one hand, this God is wholly transcendent, wholly other, the ground and source of all being. On the other hand, he is said to be intensely interested in the doings of his creatures, and deeply concerned about their welfare. He enters into covenant with them, demanding certain things of them, and accepting certain obligations to them.

The book of Job moves back and forth between these two poles:[39] between the idea of a God who cares about the doings of particular men like Job, and the idea of a God who is almost too big, too mysterious, too wholly other, for anything like that to make sense. In the experience of the Whirlwind, Job is confronted with sheer transcendence; he is reminded of the chasm that lies between Creator and creature, and forced to take into account the infinite difference between God's point of view and ours. Job's experience is a breath-taking vision of the inexorable Source and End of all things. Without apparent reason, it gives, its takes away, it gives again. How, asks one writer, can we put such faith in such a One?[40]

But the book also says that God takes an interest in Job. Enough of an interest to subject his loyalty to an horrendous test, says the Prologue. Enough to restore his fortunes, says the Epilogue. Enough to speak with him, says the poet who put the Theophany into words. Can we really have it both ways?

The Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Bunam, said that 'A man should carry two stones in his pocket. On one should be inscribed, "I am but dust and ashes". On the other, "For my sake was the world created". And he should use each stone as he needs it.'[41] The experience of the Whirlwind has taught Job to use the first stone. But what we need, and what the book of Job tries, with only partial success, to teach us, is how to use them both together.

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[39] If, as many Job scholars believe, the hands of several generations of authors are at work in the book of Job, then it may be a mistake to look for a single coherent message. Instead, we should look for 'point and counterpoint' – for signs of one author trying to undo the work of another! For an excellent exposition and defence of this view of the matter, see Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent* (New York: Oxford, 1991).

[40] See Marvin Pope, *Job: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Doubleday: New York, 1973), p. lxxxii.

[41] Cited in Robert Gordis, *op. cit.*, p. 131.