

# *The Book of JOB*

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TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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HARPER  PERENNIAL

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## *Introduction*

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### I

One of the milder paradoxes that shape this greatest Jewish work of art is that its hero is a Gentile. Its author may have been as well. We know nothing about him, nothing about his world; he is even more anonymous than Homer. With Homer, at least, we can picture a society of competing principalities, each with its warriors and court and ceremonial feasts where the bard recites his ancient songs to the accompaniment of the lyre, like blind Demodocus in the *Odyssey*. But there is not the slightest bit of evidence about the author of *Job*: not when or where he wrote, or for what kind of audience. When we try to imagine him, we are left with a blank, or with one of those patriarchal figures dressed in bright monochrome robes who suddenly appear, devout and straight-nosed, between the pages of illustrated Bibles.

Yet however foreign the poet originally was, his theme is the great Jewish one, the theme of the victim. "Someone must have slandered J., because one morning he was arrested, even though he had done nothing wrong." That is what makes *Job* the central parable of our post-Holocaust age, and gives such urgency to its deep spiritual power.

## II

When the great Tao is forgotten,  
goodness and piety appear.

TAO TE CHING

To introduce his poem, the author retells a legend that was already ancient centuries before he was born. It concerns a righteous man who for no reason has been deprived of all the rewards of his righteousness; in the midst of great suffering he remains steadfast and perfectly pious, still blessing the Lord as before. "You have heard of the patience of Job," the Epistle of James says, and it is this legendary, patient Job—not the desperate and ferociously impatient Job of the poem—who, ironically enough, became proverbial in Western culture.

We can respect the legend on its own naive terms, and can appreciate the skill with which the author retells it: the chilling conversations in heaven; the climax where Job submits, as if he were a calmer, more insightful Adam who has just eaten the bitter fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and, eyes opened, sees that he is naked. But if we read the prologue more seriously, less objectively, we may be slightly repulsed by its hero's piety. There is something so servile about him that we may find ourselves siding with his impatient wife, wanting to shout, *Come on, Job; stand up like a man; curse this god, and die!* The character called "the Lord" can do anything to him—have his daughters raped and mutilated, send his sons to Auschwitz—and he will turn the other cheek. This is not a matter of spiritual acquiescence, but of mere capitulation to an unjust, superior force.

When we look at the world of the legendary Job with a probing, disinterestedly satanic eye, we notice that it is suffused with anxiety. Job is afraid of God, as well he might be. He avoids evil because he realizes the penalties. He is a perfect moral businessman: wealth, he knows, comes as a reward for playing by the rules, and goodness is like money in the bank. But, as he suspects, this world is thoroughly unstable. At any moment the currency can change, and the Lord, by handing Job over to the power of evil, can declare him bankrupt. No wonder his mind is so uneasy. He worries about making the slightest mistake; when he has his children come for their annual purification, it is not even because they may have *committed* any sins, but may have had blasphemous *thoughts*. The superego is riding high. And in fact, at the climax of his first speech in the poem, Job confesses that his "worst fears have happened; / [his] nightmares have come to life." This is not a casual statement, added as a poetic flourish. Anxieties have a habit of projecting themselves from psychological into physical reality. Job's premonition turned out to be accurate; somewhere he knew that he was precariously balanced on his goodness, like a triangle on its apex, just waiting to be toppled over. There is even a perverse sense of relief, as if that heavy, responsible patriarch-world had been groaning toward deliverance. For any transformation to occur, Job has to be willing to let his hidden anxieties become manifest. He must enter the whirlwind of his own psychic chaos before he can hear the Voice.

As Maimonides was the first to point out, Job is a good man, not a wise one. The ascription of "perfect integrity," which both the narrator and "the Lord" make,

seems valid only in a limited sense. The Hebrew says *tam v'-yashar*, which literally means "whole (blameless) and upright." Well, yes: Job has never committed even the most venial sin, in action or in thought. (For that very reason, his later agony and bewilderment are more terrible than Josef K.'s in *The Trial*.) In a broader sense, though, Job is not whole. He is as far from spiritual maturity as he is from rebellion. Rebelliousness—the passionate refusal to submit—is, in fact, one of the qualities we admire in the Job of the poem:

Be quiet now—let *me* speak;  
 whatever happens will happen.  
 I will take my flesh in my teeth,  
 hold my life in my hands.  
 He [God] may kill me, but I won't stop;  
 I will speak the truth, to his face.

If we compare the legendary figure with the later Job, especially in the great summation that concludes the central dialogue, we can recognize that even his virtue lacks a certain generosity and wholeheartedness. That is why the bet doesn't prove much. Job is too terrorized, from within his squalor, to do anything *but* bless the Lord: for all he knows, there might be an even more horrible consequence in store. The real test will come later, in the poem, when he feels free to speak with all of himself, to say *anything*.

There is a further irony about *tam v'-yashar*. When Job is handed over to the good graces of the Accuser, he is turned into the opposite of what the words mean in their most physical sense. He becomes *not-whole*: broken

in body and heart. He becomes *not-upright*: pulled down into the dust by the gravity of his anguish.

The author moves us to heaven after the prologue's first scene, and we may be tempted to admire his boldness. But heaven, it turns out, is only the court of some ancient King of Kings, complete with annual meetings of the royal council and a Satan (or Accusing Angel). As below, so above. Jung, in his *Answer to Job*, makes the point that, psychologically, the Accuser is the embodiment of "the Lord's" doubt. In a more naive version of the legend, the god in his divine myopia would himself doubt the disinterestedness of his obedient human and would decide to administer the test on his own. Here, though the Accuser ostensibly plays the role of the villain, it is "the Lord" who provokes him. "Did you notice my servant Job?" How can the Accuser not take up the challenge? After all, that's his job.

As Jung also points out, this god is morally much inferior to the prologue's hero. We would have to be insensitive or prejudiced not to be nauseated by the very awareness of "the Lord's" second statement to the Accuser: "He is holding on to his wholeness, even after you made me torment him for no reason," and by the calm cruelty of "All right: he is in your power. Just don't kill him."

Nevertheless, if we want to be serious about the poem, we mustn't take the legend too seriously. There is a profound shift when the verse dialogue begins; the change in language is a change in reality. Compared to Job's laments (not to mention the Voice from the Whirlwind), the world of the prologue is two-dimensional, and its divinities are very small potatoes. It is like a pup-

pet show. The author first brings out the patient Job, his untrusting god, and the chief spy/prosecutor, and has the figurines enact the ancient story in the puppet theater of his prose. Then, behind them, the larger curtain rises, and flesh-and-blood actors begin to voice their passions on a life-sized stage. Finally, the vast, unnamable God appears. How could the author have returned to the reality of the prologue for an answer to the hero of the poem? That would have meant "the Lord" descending from the sky to say, *Well, you see, Job, it all happened because I made this bet . . .*

No, the god of the prologue is left behind as utterly as the never-again-mentioned Accuser, swallowed in the depths of human suffering into which the poem plunges us next.

### III

If you bring forth what is inside  
you, what you bring forth will  
save you.

THE GOSPEL  
ACCORDING TO THOMAS

When Job discovers his voice after the long silence, he doesn't curse God explicitly, as the Accuser said he would. But he comes as close as possible. He curses his own life, and in doing so curses all of life—an ultimate blasphemy for those who believe that life is an ultimate good. (We may recall another great sufferer, Oedipus at Colonus, whose chorus offers something very similar to Job's death-wish as its wisdom: It is best never to have

been born; next best is to leave the womb and die immediately.) In his curse, Job allies himself with the primal forces of darkness and chaos, and with the archetypal symbol of evil, the Serpent Leviathan, whom we will meet again at the poem's conclusion. It is a ferocious hymn of de-creation. He must hurtle to the bottom of his despair before he can begin to stand up for himself.

At the end of the prologue, when they are introduced to us, the three friends who come to comfort Job are entirely correct in their behavior. How much delicacy and compassion we can feel in the author's brief account: "Then they sat with him for seven days and seven nights. And no one said a word, for they saw how great his suffering was." But they can't remain silent once Job becomes active in his anguish. Theirs is the harshest of comforting. They don't understand that Job's curses and blasphemies are really cries of pain. They *can't* understand, because they won't risk giving up their moral certainties. Their rigid orthodoxy surrounds an interior of mush, like the exoskeleton of an insect. Unconsciously they know that they have no experience of God. Hence their acute discomfort and rage.

The friends and Job all agree that God is wise and can see into the hearts of men. He is not the kind of character who would allow a good man to be tortured because of a bet; nor is he a well-intentioned bungler. Given this premise, they construct opposite syllogisms. The friends: *Suffering comes from God. God is just. Therefore Job is guilty.* Job: *Suffering comes from God. I am innocent. Therefore God is unjust.* A third possibility is not even thinkable: *Suffering comes from God. God is just. Job is innocent. (No therefore.)*

Even if the friends are right about God's justice, their timing is bad. In fact, they don't speak to Job at all, they speak to their own terror at the thought of Job's innocence. And though they defend God's justice, they can't afford to understand what it is. "If the wrong man says the right thing, it is wrong." So they are driven to their harsh God-the-Judge and their harsh judgments, like greater men after them who tried to justify the ways of God to men.

Any idea about God, when pursued to its extreme, becomes insanity. The idea of a just God absorbs all justice into it and leaves a depraved creation. Like proto-Calvinists, the friends extend their accusation of guilt to all mankind. Man becomes "that vermin, who laps up filth like water," and their god is revealed as a Stalin-esque tyrant so pure that he "mistrusts his angels / and heaven stinks in his nose."

Ultimately the dialogue is not about theological positions but human reactions. Afraid of any real contact with Job and his grief, the friends stay locked inside their own minds. The same arguments are recycled again and again, with more and more stridency, until they become merely boring. In the third round of the dialogue, in fact, the text itself becomes defective, as if it had broken down from the force of the friends' stuttering rage.

What makes their arguments bearable, and sometimes even thrilling, is the power of language that the poet has granted them. In this he has acted with the instinctive generosity of all great poets, endowing the friends with a life and passion almost as intense as Job's. His language is the most concrete of poetic idioms. Every idea or emotion has become an image, so vivid and

sinewy that verse after verse fills the reader with an almost physical delight. Thus Bildad, talking about the wicked man's precarious safety:

His peace of mind is gossamer;  
his faith is a spider's web.

Or Eliphaz, asking Job how he can be so sure he is right:

Are you the first man to be born,  
created before the mountains?  
Have you listened in at God's keyhole  
and crept away with his plans?

Or Zophar, in disgust:

But a stupid man will be wise  
when a cow gives birth to a zebra.

The friends, nevertheless, are supporting actors, and our attention is focused on Job. His speeches are a kaleidoscope of conflicting emotions, addressed to the friends, to himself, to God. His attitude shifts constantly, and can veer to its direct opposite in the space of a few verses, the stream of consciousness all at once a torrent. He wants to die; he wants to prove that he is innocent; he wants to shake his fist at God for leaving the world in such a wretched shambles. God is his enemy; God has made a terrible mistake; God has forgotten him; or doesn't care; God will surely defend him, against God. His question, the harrowing question of someone who has only heard of God, is "Why me?" There is no answer, because it is the wrong question. He will have to

struggle with it until he is exhausted, like a child crying itself to sleep.

In these speeches it is obvious that Job is a different character from the patient hero of the legend. He is no longer primarily a rich man bereft of his possessions and heartbroken over his dead children (they are mentioned only once in the poem). He has become Everyman, grieving for all of human misery. He suffers not only his own personal pain, but the pain of all the poor and despised. He is himself afflicted by what God has done to the least of these little ones.

In a wonderfully ironic sense, the Accuser's dirty work has resulted in an epidemic of accusations. Once that archetypal figure disappears, he is absorbed into the poem as if by some principle of the conservation of energy. The more the friends become Job's accusers, the more Job becomes the accuser of God. His outrage at the world's injustice is directed straight to the creator of that world. There are no detours or half-measures, no attempt to deflect ultimate responsibility by blaming a devil or an original sin.

He [God] does not care; so I say  
 he murders both the pure and the wicked.  
 When the plague brings sudden death,  
 he laughs at the anguish of the innocent.  
 He hands the earth to the wicked  
 and blindfolds its judges' eyes.  
 Who does it, if not he?

This may be blasphemy, but it is true. Job's straightforwardness is itself a kind of innocence, and is what the god of the epilogue refers to when he tells the friends,

"You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has."

All this bewilderment and outrage couldn't be so intense if Job didn't truly love God. He senses that in spite of appearances there is somewhere an ultimate justice, but he doesn't know where. He is like a nobler Othello who has been brought conclusive evidence that his wife has betrayed him: his honesty won't allow him to disbelieve it, but his love won't allow him to believe it. On the spikes of this dilemma he must remain impaled. That is what makes his cry so profoundly moving.

The Book of Job is the great poem of moral outrage. It gives voice to every accusation against God, and its blasphemy is cathartic. How liberating it feels *not* to be a good, patient little God-fearer, scuffling from one's hole in the wall to squeak out a dutiful hymn of praise. Job's own voice has freed him so that he can move from the curses of his first speech to the final self-affirmation as his own attorney for the defense. There, with oaths of the gravest dignity and horror, he becomes upright again in his wish to "stand before [God] like a prince." It is this passionate insistence that carries him into the eye of the whirlwind. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness," as another Jewish teacher said, "for they shall be filled."

Of course, the answer Job receives is anything but what he expected. Heart-stirring as the summation is, he remains lost in his own concepts, and there is no small irony to his final plea, "If only God would hear me." For if we needed a sensory metaphor to describe the experience of intimacy, hearing might be the last sense we would choose. No, far more than vindication

will occur: a plea will be granted that Job wouldn't have dared to make, a question answered that he wouldn't have known how to ask. God will not hear Job, but Job will see God.

#### IV

To men some things are good  
and some are bad. But to God, all  
things are good and beautiful and  
just.

HERACLITUS

If God's answer comes from an objective whirlwind, it answers nothing, and can only be the magnificent, harsh, and notoriously unsatisfactory harangue that most interpreters have found. As rational discourse, it reduces itself to this: *How dare you question the creator of the world? Shut up now, and submit.* After several pages of eloquent browbeating, Job can do nothing but squeak what amounts to, *Yes sir, Boss. Anything you say.* God apparently wants the unquestioning piety of the friends, and Job returns to the exact position he had at the end of the prologue, cringing in the dust. Compared with the endings of the *Iliad* or the *Commedia* or any of the major works of Shakespeare, this would be a wretched climax: so unecconomical, so anticlimactic indeed, that it seems more like a pratfall than a finale. We need to penetrate more deeply.

What does it mean to answer someone about human suffering? For there *are* answers beyond the one-size-fits-all propositions of the theologians. But these an-

swers can't be imposed from the outside. They will resonate only where the questioner lets them enter. Above all, they require a willingness to accept what can be excruciating to the ego. Often we find such reality unbearable. The light is so brilliant that it hurts, as in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and we retreat to the softer glow of a familiar, comfortable grief.

There is never an answer to the great question of life and death, unless it is my answer or yours. Because ultimately it isn't a question that is addressed, but a person. Our whole being has to be answered. At that point, both question and answer disappear, like hunger after a good meal.

"God is subtle, but not malicious," Einstein said in a different context. We have to listen to the Voice from the Whirlwind in a more oblique mode, as if its true meaning lay inside the logical framework of its words. First, we should notice how the answer consists mostly of questions (a good Jewish trait). In their volume and insistence, these questions acquire a peculiar quality. They sound in our ears as a ground bass to the melody of their content, and eventually function as a kind of benign subliminal message, asking a fundamental question that will dissolve everything Job thought he knew.

The closest we can get to that question is *What do you know?* During their dialogue, Job and the friends agree about the limits of human understanding, but none of them suspects how absolute those limits are. In order to approach God, Job has to let go of all ideas about God: he must put a cloud of unknowing (as a medieval Christian author expressed it) between himself and God, or have the Voice do this for him.



The content of the Voice's questions, aside from their rhetorical form, gives another kind of answer. Each verse presents Job with an image so intense that, as Job later acknowledges, he doesn't hear but *sees* the Voice. He is taken up into a state of vision, and enters a world of primal energy, independent of human beings, which includes what humans might experience as terrifying or evil: lightning, the primordial sea, hungry lions on the prowl, the ferocious war-horse, the vulture feeding his young with the rotting flesh of the slain. Violence, deprivation, or death form the context for many of these pictures, and the animals are to them as figure is to ground. The horse exults *because* of the battle; without the corpses, the vulture couldn't exist in his grisly solicitude. We are among the most elemental realities, at the center of which there is an indestructible power, an indestructible joy.

This worldview stands, of course, in direct opposition to the Genesis myth in which man is given dominion over all creatures. It is a God's-eye view of creation *before* man, beyond good and evil, marked by the innocence of a mind that has stepped outside the circle of human values. (When I was a very young Zen student, caught up in the problem of evil, I once asked my teacher, "Why does shit smell so bad?" He said, "If you were a fly, it would taste like candy.")

There is another text that can be contrasted: the peaceable kingdom of First Isaiah, where the wolf lies down with the lamb. Beside Job's vision, this seems a naive version of paradise, and as elusive as its direct descendent, the Marxist End-of-Days. Since Isaiah still equates the humane with the human, his desire turns

the wilderness into a zoo, stocked with nonviolent wolves and vegetarian lions. The Voice, however, doesn't moralize. It has the clarity, the pitilessness, of nature and of all great art. Is the world of flesh-eaters really a demonic parody of God's intent? And what about our compassion for the prey? 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.

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 the 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. In the fourteenth of his *Job* etchings, Blake drew small sketches of the first six days of creation in the margin (up to but not including the creation of man) and in the center, above God, he drew the angels who embody seventh-day consciousness, illustrating one of the most beautiful verses in all literature: *b'rôn-yâhad kôkhváy vôker / vayarî'u kôl-b'náy elohîm* ["while the morning stars burst out singing / and the angels shouted for joy!"]

If we pay attention to the images themselves, we perceive an attitude, not an argument. Each metaphor

describing creation in human terms has a large, ironic humor to it. As if God were really a gigantic carpenter, measuring the earth with a cord, cutting a path for the thunderstorm, etc. How else can he talk to Job about such cosmic energies, except in Job's language and with a cosmic amusement? Poignancy and humor are the essence of these images: the rain falling in the desert and for a brief time making the whole landscape spring into life and color, not for the sake of any human eye; the thunderclouds and lightning bolts hypothetically lining up like Disney cartoon figures to do Job's bidding; light and darkness as lost waifs who need to be escorted home; the wild ass that wanders in continual hunger and yet laughs at its enslaved cousins in the cities of men; the fierce exultation of the war-horse:

Do you give the horse his strength?  
 Do you clothe his neck with terror?  
 Do you make him leap like a locust,  
 snort like a blast of thunder?  
 He paws and champs at the bit;  
 he exults as he charges into battle.  
 He laughs at the sight of danger;  
 he does not wince from the sword  
 or the arrows nipping at his ears  
 or the flash of spear and javelin.  
 With his hooves he swallows the ground;  
 he quivers at the sound of the trumpet.  
 When the trumpet calls, he says "Ah!"  
 From far off he smells the battle,  
 the thunder of the captains and the shouting.

We have here a whole world of the most vivid, exuberant life, where every being is the center of an infinite cir-

cle. It is far from the human-centered world of final causes that we find in the rest of the Bible. The only parallel to it in Western literature is Whitman's "Song of Myself."

Job's first response is awe. He can barely speak. He puts his hand over his mouth, appalled at his ignorance.

But there is more to come. The Voice now, in a series of gruff, most ironical questions, begins to speak explicitly about good and evil. *Do you really want this moral sense of yours projected onto the universe?* it asks, in effect. *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 is not my justice.*

The answer concludes with a detailed presentation of two creatures, the Beast and the Serpent. These have certain similarities with the hippopotamus and the crocodile, especially the herbivorous, river-dwelling Beast, which is depicted in a distinctly Egyptian landscape. But the images are hardly naturalistic, and become less so as we move from the phallic Beast to the huge, fire-breathing, invulnerable Serpent. Both creatures are, in fact, central figures in ancient near-eastern eschatology, the embodiments of evil that the sky-god battles and conquers at the end of time, just as he conquered the sea and the forces of chaos in creating the world at the beginning of time. (In the cozier mythology of the early rabbis, the good Lord, after killing the two beasts, slices and serves them up to the righteous at the never-ending banquet that is heaven.)

This final section of the Voice from the Whirlwind is

a criticism of conventional, dualistic theology. *What is all this foolish chatter about good and evil, the Voice says, about battles between a hero-god and some cosmic opponent? Don't you understand that there is no one else in here?* These huge symbols of evil, so terrifying to humans who haven't seen, or won't acknowledge, the destructive Shiva-aspect of God, are presented to us as God's playthings. They are part of the continuum of nature, which runs seamlessly from angel to beast. "The roaring of lions," as Blake wrote, "the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of *eternity* too great for the eye of man." Job's vision ought to give a healthy shock to those who believe in a moral God. The only other source in the Bible that approaches it in kilowatts is a passage from the anonymous prophet known as Second Isaiah: "I form light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I the Unnamable do all these things."

These passages may remind us of the radiant, large-hearted verse in which Jesus of Nazareth gives his reason for loving our enemies: "That you may be children of your father who is in heaven: for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and on the unjust." Though in *Job* even the concept of God as a father (or mother) is gently mocked, not only in the metaphor of the primal sea being wrapped in swaddling clothes, but in the tender and very beautiful verses about the rain:

Does the rain have a father?  
 Who has begotten the dew?  
 Out of whose belly is the ice born?  
 Whose womb labors with the sleet?

*Does the rain have a father? The whole meaning is in the lack of an answer. If you say yes, you're wrong. If you say no, you're wrong. God's humor here is rich and subtle beyond words.*

## V

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,  
 The soul recovers radical innocence  
 And learns at last that it is self-delighting,  
 Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,  
 And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will.

YEATS

We come now to Job's final speech. To misunderstand it will be to miss his transformation and to destroy the harmonic structure that gives a book its meaning. If Job's response is unworthy, then God's answer is unworthy. One is a mirror-image of the other.

This is partly a matter of translation. The King James and most other versions present us with a Job who, in his last words, "abhor[s] [him]self / and repent[s] in dust and ashes." They do this on the shakiest of philological grounds; though understandably, because they are thinking with orthodox Christian ideas and *expecting* to find penitence and self-abasement as the appropriate response to the righteous, ill-tempered god they expect to find. Nor is this only a Christian mind-set. (For example, the joke about the rabbi who on Yom Kippur walks to the front of his congregation, pounds his chest, and

shouts, "I am worthless, Lord, I am worthless." Then the president of the synagogue walks to the front, pounds his chest, and shouts, "I am worthless, Lord, I am worthless." Next, to the surprise and scandal of everyone, the wimpy little beadle walks to the front, pounds his chest, and shouts, "I am worthless, Lord, I am worthless." The rabbi turns to the president and sneers, "Look who's saying he's worthless!")

But self-abasement is just inverted egoism. Anyone who acts with genuine humility will be as far from humiliation as from arrogance. *Wherefore I abhor myself* indeed! How could this poet, after a venture of unprecedented daring, end with a hero merely beaten into submission? Thereby proving that the friends' degraded opinion is correct after all, since Job, by acknowledging that he is a vermin among vermin, acknowledges the god who mistrusts his angels and in whose nose heaven stinks.

Job's response will not accommodate such whimpering. He has received his answer, and can only remain awe-stricken in the face of overwhelming beauty and dread. At Alamogordo on July 16, 1945, Robert Oppenheimer responded to another kind of vision by remembering a verse from the *Bhagavad Gita*: "I [God] am death, the shatterer of worlds." And indeed, the only scriptural analogy to God's answer (the other Biblical examples, except for the burning bush, are of a lesser god) is the vision granted to Arjuna in chapter 11 of the *Gita*, in which that prince experiences, down to the marrow of his bones, the glory and the terror of the universe, all creation and all destruction, embraced in the blissful play of the Supreme Lord. The manifestations there are more cosmic than in *Job*, and the realization of God as

"the Self seated in the heart of all creatures" is far clearer. But Job's vision is the more vivid, I think, because its imagination is so deeply rooted in the things of this world. Reading the two together, we are likely to feel even more powerfully the earthliness that moved the author of *Job* to write in such magnificent, loving detail of the lioness and the wild ass and the horse, those creatures as radiant in their pure being as the light that is "brighter than a thousand suns."

Job's final words issue from surrender; not from submission, which even at its purest, in the "Naked I came . . ." of the prologue, is a gesture in a power transaction, between slave and master or defeated and conqueror, and is always a mode of spiritual depression. Surrender, on the contrary, means the wholehearted giving-up of oneself. It is both the ultimate generosity and the ultimate poverty, because in it the giver becomes the gift. When Job says, "I had heard of you with my ears; / but now my eyes have seen you," he is no longer a servant, who fears god and avoids evil. He has faced evil, has looked straight into its face and through it, into a vast wonder and love.

Instead of bursting into fervid adoration as Arjuna does, Job remains a hairsbreadth away from silence. His words are a miracle of tact. We are not told the details of his realization; that isn't necessary; everything is present in the serenity of his tone. All we know is that his grief and accusations, his ideas about God and pity for man, arose from utter ignorance. But we can intuit more than that. A man who hungers and thirsts after justice is not satisfied with a menu. It is not enough for him to hope or believe or know that there is absolute justice in the universe: he must taste and see it. It is not enough

that there may be justice someday in the golden haze of the future: it must be now; must *always* have been now.

From this point of vision, the idea that there are accidents or victims is an optical illusion. This statement may seem cruel. Certainly it is a difficult statement. How could it not be? Paradise isn't handed out like a piece of cake at a Sunday school picnic. But the statement is not cruel. It is the opposite of cruel. Once the personal will is surrendered, future and past disappear, the morning stars burst out singing, and the deep will, contemplating the world it has created, says, "Behold, it is very good."

Job's comfort at the end is in his mortality. The physical body is acknowledged as dust, the personal drama as delusion. It is as if the world we perceive through our senses, that whole gorgeous and terrible pageant, were the breath-thin surface of a bubble, and everything else, inside and outside, is pure radiance. Both suffering and joy come then like a brief reflection, and death like a pin.

He feels he has woken up from a dream. That sense, of actually seeing the beloved reality he has only heard of before, is what makes his emotion at the end so convincing. He has let go of everything, and surrendered into the light.

## VI

And there, beyond words, the poem ends. But the author added a prose epilogue, since stories need to be finished, and fairy tales want to end happily ever after. This epilogue has upset and offended many modern readers. "How," they ask, "can Job bear to enter a new

life after all the agony he has been put through? And how can he accept brand-new children as a replacement for his murdered sons and daughters? What a mockery!"

We need to realize, though, that the author has changed language again, and thereby changed realities. We have descended to the smaller humanity of the old legend. Here the new children *are* the old children: even though Job's possessions are doubled, he is given seven sons and three daughters, as before, all of them instantaneously grown up; they have sprung back to life as gracefully as the bones of a murdered child in a Grimms' tale. On another level, all the possessions, and the children too, are outer and visible signs of Job's inner fulfillment, present beyond gain and loss. ("The Messiah will come," Kafka said, "only when he is no longer necessary.") Job's anxiety has vanished. Even his god, though he still cares about burnt offerings and ritual expiation, is not split into a Lord and an Accuser, and no longer needs to administer loyalty tests. Indeed, he rewards Job for having said that the righteous aren't rewarded, and mildly punishes the friends for maintaining that the wicked are punished.

Blake, who with all his gnostic eccentricities is still the only interpreter to understand that the theme of this book is spiritual transformation, makes a clear distinction between the worlds of the prologue and of the epilogue. In his first illustration to *Job*, he draws the patriarch and his wife seated at evening prayer, with Bibles open on their laps, their children kneeling around them; the sheep are drowsing, the dogs are drowsing, they themselves look up to heaven in drowsy piety, with all their musical instruments hanging silent on the central

tree. The last engraving, however, shows a world transfigured: it is sunrise, the whole family is standing up, bright-eyed, each exuberantly playing his or her favorite instrument.

The most curious detail in the epilogue is the mention of Job's daughters. In this new world they are not inferior to their brothers and do not have to go to *their* houses for the annual celebration. Indeed, they are dignified equally by being given a share of Job's wealth as their inheritance. Each is named, while the seven sons remain anonymous. The names themselves—Dove, Cinnamon, and Eye-shadow—symbolize peace, abundance, and a specifically female kind of grace. The story's center of gravity has shifted from righteousness to beauty, the effortless manifestation of inner peace. "And in all the world there were no women as beautiful as Job's daughters."

There is something enormously satisfying about this prominence of the feminine at the end of *Job*. The whole yin side of humanity, denigrated in the figure of Job's wife, and in Job's great oath looked upon as a seductive danger, has finally been acknowledged and honored here. It is as if, once Job has learned to surrender, his world too gives up the male compulsion to control. The daughters have almost the last word. They appear with the luminous power of figures in a dream: we can't quite figure out why they are so important, but we know that they are.

The very last word is a peaceful death in the midst of a loving family. What truer, happier ending could there be?

#### NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

p. vii, *its hero is a Gentile*: Job is one of the *b'nay qedem*, literally "sons of the east" (1:3), and a native of the land of Uz.

The sons of the east are mentioned in the Book of Judges along with other non-Israelite tribes in or bordering on the land of Canaan: "And it happened, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites attacked, and the Amalekites, and the sons of the east attacked also" (Jg. 6:3; also 6:33, 7:12, 8:10; cf. Gen. 25:6, 19:1, Is. 11:14, Ez. 25:4,10). A later reference in First Kings seems to be a more general usage of the phrase: "And Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 5:10). In either sense, the sons of the east are certainly Gentiles.

As for the land of Uz, there are two conflicting traditions. The first is based on Gen. 10:23 and places it in northern Mesopotamia or the Hauran. The second identifies it with Edom, to the southeast of Canaan. The relevant Biblical verses are: "Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, who livest in the land of Uz . . ." (Lam. 4:21); "And all the mingled people, and all the kings of the land of Uz, and all the kings of the land of the Philistines, and Ashkelon, and Azzah, and Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod" (Jer. 25:20). For an exhaustive survey of the evidence, see Dhorme, *The Book of Job*, pp. xxi ff.

p. vii, *its author may have been as well*: The language of *Job* is so idiosyncratic and contains so many "Arabisms" and "Aramaisms" that some scholars have postulated a lost original text, of which the Hebrew text is a translation. This was also the opinion of Abraham Ibn Ezra, the great medieval rabbinic commentator.

p. viii, *a legend that was already ancient*: Scholars have placed *Job* anywhere between 800 and 300 B.C.E. There are Sumerian versions of the legend dating from 2000 B.C.E.

p. viii, *something so servile*: "My servant Job" can also, in Hebrew, mean "my slave Job."

p. xiv, "If the wrong man . . .": From *The Recorded Dialogues of Ch'an Master Chao-chou Ts'ung-shen*.

p. xiv, *the text itself becomes defective*: In the Massoretic (traditional Hebrew) text, Bildad's last speech, for example, contains only five verses, and Zophar's is missing entirely.

p. xxiv, *Second Isaiah*: Is. 45:7.

p. xxv, *on the shakiest of philological grounds*: The first verb, 'em'as, means "to reject" or "to regard as of little value," never "to abhor or despise." Since the object has somehow dropped out of the Massoretic text, it must be supplied by the translator. "Myself" is based on a misunderstanding of the verb. A sounder interpretation, first proposed in the ancient Syriac version, would be: "Therefore I take back [everything I said]."

In the second half of the verse, the verb, as used in *Job*, always means "to comfort." The phrase *nihanti 'al* means "to be comforted about" or possibly "to repent of," but not "to repent in or upon." Nor does *'afar va-'efer* indicate the place where Job is sitting. This phrase, which occurs once before in *Job* and twice elsewhere in the Bible, always refers to the human body, which was created from dust and returns to dust. So the literal meaning is: "and I am comforted about [being] dust."

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## The Book of JOB