MAKING A DRAMA OUT OF A CRISIS?
A CONSIDERATION OF THE BOOK OF JOB AS A DRAMA*

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Has the author of the book of Job made a drama out of a crisis? If so, what type of drama is it, and from which dramatic/theatrical traditions? And what insights does such a reading offer? The book of Job certainly deals with conflict at the very deepest levels of being—and conflict lies at the heart of drama. Moreover, such a reading is supported by a consideration of the book’s overarching structure.

Dramatic Structure

Many scholars see at least two separate parts to the book of Job: a framework, originating as an independent narrative (1–2; 42.7-17), and an extended dialogue in poetic form (3.1–42.6). Habel, however, argues for the structural integrity of Job: taking a literary approach, he describes three ‘movements’, each of which is a ‘poetic dialogue framed by narration’, ‘each with its own appropriate introduction of key characters’.

While generally following Habel’s analysis, I would suggest that the structure of the book of Job is essentially dramatic, being divided into three ‘acts’:

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Act 1: God afflicts the hero—the hidden conflict (1.1–2.10).
Act 2: The hero challenges God—the conflict explored (2.11–31.40).
Act 3: God challenges the hero—the conflict resolved (32.1–42.17).

The narrator, who speaks in prose (a device also used by Shakespeare, among others, to define the speaker's character or role) introduces each act, identifying aspects of the role and character of the performers and giving, as it were, stage directions. 'The interplay between prose and poetry, between naïveté and rhetorical finesse, mirrors the interplay among the six characters: Job, the four friends, God—and the narrator.'

Eaton also inclines to the idea of Job as a drama, theorizing that, in an oral tradition, audience responses led to adaptations and additions to its content and overall structure—such as ch. 28, the 'Poem on Wisdom', or the 'Elihu Episode', prompted perhaps by adverse reaction from a new ruler: 'It is interesting that care was taken to incorporate this criticism of Job into the dramatic form, with the creation of a new role'.

The 'Prologue' and 'Epilogue' (often regarded as a less sophisticated narrative of 'theological naïveté') can be seen as a dramatic framework, with the speeches being a play-within-a-play. This device is often used in drama—most famously perhaps in Hamlet, where the inner play is shorter and cruder than its outer framework. In the book of Job, the framework play gives the mise-en-scène—the rules by which the drama will be played out—and offers rich possibilities of dramatic irony, for we, the audience, know a context of which the characters are unaware (the supernatural bet, in which God has already proclaimed Job's innocence—1.8; 2.3).

The overall structure of the book of Job, then, lends itself to a dramatic interpretation. But if it is a drama, what kind of drama might Job be? Wherein lie its cultural roots? I suggest three possibilities: Greek tragedy; comedy; Semitic drama.

*Job as Tragedy*

Clines avers that 'most scholars today would date the composition of the book of Job to some point between the seventh and the second

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centuries BCE’. In other words, in terms of dates and the cross-cultural links of the Mediterranean world in the centuries before Christ, the author of Job could well have been influenced by the Athenian tragedies of the fifth century BCE.

Aristotle’s Poetics describes the characteristics of tragedy, emphasizing particularly peripeteia (the sudden reversal of the protagonist’s fortunes) and anagnorisis (the protagonist’s realization of the truth, often effected by pathos, suffering). According to this understanding, Job fits the tragic pattern perfectly. Indeed, in 1918, Horace Kallen reconstructed Job in four acts, in a direct imitation of Euripidean theatre—an interpretation ‘whose deficiencies have been amply demonstrated’.

Job’s character, and the high literary quality of the text, also point to the tragic genre: ‘Suffering alone does not make a tragic hero—there has to be resistance to suffering. His fear... is changed to awe... At the core of any good tragedy is a profound disturbance of the human equilibrium.’

But the book of Job by no means fits the tragic model perfectly, on two main counts:

1. Aristotle insists that peripeteia must be preceded by hamartia—an error of judgment: this is plainly not true in Job’s case, he being ‘blameless and upright’ (2.3)—a description taken at face value by most analysts. (Brenner, however, believes that the pious Job of the Prologue and Epilogue is the antithesis of the Job of the poem. O’Connor takes this idea further, claiming that the Job of the poem is far from blameless, but shows ‘angry irreverence’, ‘arrogance and a sense of self-importance and disdain for others’, and ‘enormous pride’ which, following

Aristotle's description of the tragic hero, O'Connor labels 'hybris'.

2. There is a happy ending to Job—not merely the promise of recompense in heaven, but restoration on earth. Steiner claims that 'Tragedy is alien to the Judaic sense of the world... God has compensated Job for his agonies. Where there is compensation, there is justice not tragedy.'

So if Job is not in the tradition of Greek tragedy, could it be a Judaic or Semitic form of the genre? According to Whedbee, Terrien believes that Job is a 'festal tragedy':

Early in the Exile (c. 575 BCE), an Israelite poet experimented with cultic forms and forged out his masterpiece as 'a paracultic drama for the celebration of the New Year Festival'. The Joban poet used diverse genres—e.g. lament, hymn, judicial discussion, wisdom dispute, prophetic vision, onomasticon, theophany—to create a new genre, 'the festal tragedy'.

Whedbee goes on to point out the flaw in this otherwise exciting approach: it deals only with the poem of Job, not with the work as a whole.

**Job as Comedy**

If tragedy explores the perspective that 'in the midst of life we are in death', comedy takes the opposite view. Whedbee argues that the book of Job is a comedy—not in the sense that laughter is the appropriate response, but rather that Job embodies 'that vision of comedy which has two central ingredients: first, its perception of incongruity that moves in the realm of the ironic, the ludicrous, and the ridiculous; and second, a basic plot-line that leads ultimately to the happiness of the hero and his restoration to a serene and harmonious society'. Job's friends are, Whedbee argues, 'a brilliant caricature of... wise counsellors... Their pretentious pose vis-à-vis Job and God is exposed and ridiculed.'

Despite Whedbee's closely argued thesis, it fails to convince. Indeed, Whedbee himself has to admit that 'the line between tragedy and

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comedy is fluid, and a work as richly complex as Job can legitimately evoke both responses'.

For Job has nothing of the impiety of true comedy—'comedy is sacrilege as well as release'. And Job is much less of a comic than a tragic hero: 'The former is able to adjust, manoeuvre and overcome his plight by cunning, luck or intrigue; the latter is a man of integrity whose inflexibility and destiny lead to his inevitable downfall'.

Job as Semitic Drama

Very little is known about enactment (as contrasted to recital) of traditional Semitic stories. There is no archaeological evidence—buildings play little part in a pastoral society. What follows is a synthesis of what is known about certain texts, and what has been observed of enactment among Semitic pastoral peoples.

Eaton considers comparable literature, mainly from the standpoint of the content of Job, finding examples of suffering innocence in texts from Egypt to India. He also observes generic similarities between Job and other Semitic poetry:

A traditional item in Arabian poems was a description of animals of the wild. Creatures such as the wild ass, ostrich, eagle, hawk, camel and horse were depicted with expert knowledge. The audience relished also other scenes of nature, such as the desert storms, and precepts of proverbial wisdom.

Habel also, from the nature of Job's content, mentions ancient Near Eastern prototypes 'which clarify the genre of Job as a whole'. He refers to Sumerian and Babylonian texts with the same basic plot: 'The author of the book of Job, however, has adapted and expanded each component of this plot to highlight the existential complexities and theological paradoxes involved in exploring this plot'.

In terms of genre, however, Eaton seems to favour the notion of Semitic tradition:

In pre-Islamic Arabia, with a population that may have had much in common with Job’s ‘tribemen of the East’, appreciation of recited poetry was highly developed ... Chains of such tradition are known to extend over centuries ... We can likewise imagine that Job was also declaimed from memory with the relishing of every syllable, evoking fascination with the suspense and resolution of its drama.¹⁸

Hourani describes ‘great cycles of stories about heroes ... [whose] origins are lost in the mists of time’. Though dating is indeed uncertain, one of the most famous of these ‘sagas’ concerns Iskander—Alexander the Great—so may well have dated from that period. Hourani also describes the content of these tales:

Some evoke the universe of supernatural forces which surround human life... At the heart of them lies the idea of a hero ... pitted against the forces of evil—whether men or demons or their own passions—and overcoming them. These compositions were recited in a mixture of poetry, rhymed prose and ordinary prose.¹⁹

One such pre-Islamic story led to the development, according to Omani bedouin in the 1920s, of their dramatized ceremonial, as described by Bertram Thomas: ‘There was dancing, and ... chanting of heroic verse. The leader gabbled his lines and at the end of each couplet, the rest of the party shouted in chorus “Allahu Akbar” [“God is great!”].’²⁰ The implication is that primitive corporate drama was an element of ancient Arabian culture.

My own experience of drama in peninsular Arabia—whose customs remain little changed since pre-Islamic times—is of a natural and spontaneous occurrence. A leader, sometimes two, initiates the ‘action’ of the story, while others act as chorus, either repeating back, or developing variants on the same theme. This is not drama in the Greek sense: rather, it is a corporate dramatic expression of events, hopes, likes and dislikes, chanted, in verse-form, while participants dance round slowly, and in stately fashion, accompanied by the beating of a drum.

If the book of Job did originate as this type of Semitic drama cycle, it would explain one thing which has vexed critics, especially in recent

years: the barely existent role of Job's wife. Such gatherings would always have been single-sex: there simply would not have been a role for a female character.

A Conclusion?

As one might expect from one of the greatest works ever written, the book of Job defies easy categorisation into any of the contemporaneous genres. Nonetheless, I believe that to see Job as drama is not only plausible, but can offer insights as to its meanings. To explore some of these, I have chosen to consider Job—an untheatrical drama—in relation to Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*—a seminal twentieth-century drama which uses some of the same themes and devices, but in a self-consciously theatrical setting.

Job and Six Characters: An Intertextual Approach

'No text is an island.'\(^{21}\) 'Intertextuality [is] that perpetual and indeterminable process of deferral from text to text to text.'\(^{22}\) In the light of this I wish to consider briefly what Bentley lists as the five defining characteristics of drama—plot, character, dialogue, thought, enactment—in relation to Job and *Six Characters*, allowing each to illuminate the dramatic nature of the other.

Plot

Pirandello's play enacts different levels of illusion and reality. Six characters, rejected by their author, wander into a theatre in the course of a rehearsal, interrupt the actors, and claim priority for their own truer, more real and lived drama over the artificiality of the rehearsal. Their family tragedy, which they are compelled to live out, has been set in motion many years previously by the Father palming off the Mother (with whom he was bored) on his ex-secretary; his nemesis comes when he visits a young prostitute, only to discover she is his Stepdaughter, the family having fallen into poverty. Their drama unfolds

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with passionate intensity, weakly interpreted by the actors as grotesque melodrama; the plot builds up to a crescendo when the Child is discovered drowned in a fountain, because the rest of the family were too wrapped up in their own agonies to look after her, and a shot rings out as we presume the Boy to have taken his life in despair. Or are they only acting?

As with Job, the plot-line itself is not the most important element of the story: it is rather Pirandello’s ability to create compelling visual stage-art from metaphysical concepts; to depict people’s failures to communicate, the inadequacy of being weak but well-meaning, the desperation of human beings at odds with their society, the life-destroying power of lust, fear, jealousy and incomprehension.

Ostensibly, as set up in the first two chapters, the book of Job is an exploration of whether disinterested piety exists, through the protagonist’s seemingly endless torment, internal and external. Indeed, its plot is an examination of the character of God—monstrous tyrant, or just supervisor of the affairs of humankind? And the resolution of the issues reveals ‘a radically different model of God, creation, and human existence’.23 Likewise, in the plot of Six Characters, Pirandello probes the meaning of a terrifying existential situation: ‘All that man has at his disposal for such a task is words and thoughts … which go round and round in the brain [of Pirandellian man], only to produce another terror, another vertigo’.24

Interestingly, Job also experiences vertiginous feelings, attributed by Bechtel to his loss of control over life:

Job is portrayed as a very prosperous, upper-class male who has stockpiled excessively. Stockpiling wealth has also allowed him to stockpile status within his circumscribed community, once again creating the illusion of protection and control, thus placing Job under the tyranny of his own ego. With the loss of these things he loses his illusion of control over life and is devastated.25

Peter Brook argues that, among humankind’s needs which seek satisfaction in the theatre, ‘We seek The Theatre of the Invisible-made-

24. Bentley, Life of the Drama, p. 135
Visible... The notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts.\(^{26}\) Both Job and *Six Characters* have a *deus ex machina* (literally, in Job) breaking into the plot. The interventions are to a very different end: like God, the Characters bring a 'reality' which is more intense than that of the Actors and theatre; unlike God, they bring disturbance and conflict: the action switches to another plane, but one of chaos and compulsion.

God does not arrive to resolve Job's problem, nor to answer his questions: 'Job has no right to an explanation for his suffering, any more than he has the right to have the purpose of crocodiles explained to him... God neither affirms nor denies the doctrine of retribution, but marginalises it.'\(^{27}\) Ultimately God offers Job a reality beyond his pain, beyond his questioning, beyond his anger. It is the tragedy of Pirandellian drama that behind all the illusions—of theatre, characters, actors, masks—there is no ultimate reality. The Author never arrives, never completes the work—indeed, it is impossible in Pirandello's world for that to happen.

*Character*

*Six Characters* shares with the book of Job a structure involving two 'casts': Job and his friends are set within the play whose setting is 'the court of heaven'; the Characters play out their passion in the presence of the characterless Actors. Accused by the Manager of 'philosophising', the Father answers: 'Because I suffer, sir! I'm not philosophising: I'm crying aloud the reason of my sufferings.'\(^{28}\) Unlike Job, the Father is not blameless: he, and the whole family, are eternally trapped in a cycle of lust, abuse and death from which the Author will not free them by making them into a completed work. The frustration of the Characters, impelled by the inevitability of their drama, to make the Actors understand the situation recalls Job's inability to be understood by his friends, the essential isolation of the human person: 'We think we understand each other, but we never really do!' cries the Father.\(^{29}\) Job's friends provide the stimulus for Job's own re-evaluations of his


\(^{27}\) Clines, 'Wisdom Books', p. 287.


\(^{29}\) Pirandello, *Six Characters*, p. 224.
condition, emphasising his isolation not only from his peers but also from his society; for the Father, it is not words but actions—the endlessly repeated traumatic encounter with the Stepdaughter—which produce his isolation from all around.

_Six Characters_ offers us unnamed archetypes: Mother, Father, Stepdaughter, and so on—nameless, and defined wholly by relationship. Job and the Characters rail against the roles of victim in which they have been cast; all are helpless to do anything other than act them out, submit to them, however angrily.

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between the characters in the two works, though, is seen in the character of God. Prior to God’s appearance, Job has seen him as a larger-than-life human being, one whose concerns and preoccupations are the same as those of humanity, but on a greater scale:

> Job’s categories had been too narrow, his conception of God hopelessly anthropocentric... What God has done by ignoring Job’s way of posing the question [of suffering and oppression] is to illumine the inadequacy of Job’s starting point, his legal model of rights and faults and his image of God as the great patriarch.  

Nonetheless, God’s appearance as a character is a form of indispensable incarnation—something that the theatre itself denies to Pirandello’s Characters:

> The theatre, as represented by the Manager and his company, cannot cope with the demands of the reality the Characters bear with them on to the stage. The Characters offer theatre an opportunity to redeem itself; they lay before it an idea of total incarnation. But theatre simply cannot rise to the occasion.

(Dialogue)

Pirandello’s own definition of dramatic dialogue as spoken action is useful for thinking about Job and _Six Characters_. In the latter, the fractured dialogue represents the play’s clashes and conflicts. There are interruptions, irritated and strained relations between Characters and Actors—to the extent that the Characters’ full story is not revealed till the very last moments of the play, prevented previously by the interplay of conflicts major and minor.

The dialogue of Job is very different—touching poetic depths of true greatness. Job’s brokenness is magnificently verbalized—his pain never makes him lose his fluency—and we somehow accept this, as we accept the glorious poetry of Hamlet or Macbeth—as the convention of the genre.

As contemporary drama, Job would undoubtedly be considered too burdened with ‘thought’, not sufficiently concerned with ‘action’ or even ‘feeling’. Yet perhaps part of the very meaning of Job lies in the author’s choice of dialogue to express these thoughts, externalizing them, making them about communication between one person and another, and between a person and God:

Even the problem of human suffering is but a backdrop for the riddle of communication, or its lack, between the human and the divine. By definition, communication is a two-way process motivated... by active curiosity about one’s partner. Thus... the book of Job advances the view that probing is preferable to blind acceptance.\(^{32}\)

For Pirandello, however, ‘Man’s intellect, to which alone he can turn for an explanation of his own misery, fails him... It fails to find the reality beneath the appearance. We have only the appearances, and must hail them, mockingly, despairingly, as reality.’\(^{33}\)

\textit{Thought}

The book of Job is a drama of ideas:

Being nothing but an extended discussion of the theological issue [of retribution and the moral order], Job is the most consistently theological work in the Old Testament. It...portrays a debate in which conflicting points of view are put forward, none of them being unambiguously presented as preferable to the others.\(^{34}\)

Indeed, the complexity of Job means that it contains many ideas, and many commentaries on them. Just to give one, completely different example, Bechtel sees Job as a critique of deuteronomic, patriarchal systems: ‘In today’s world deuteronomic theology is embraced by many levels of society and particularly to undergird patriarchy. From a feminist perspective, then, the struggle reflected in the book of Job is as

\(^{32}\) Brenner, ‘Job the Pious?’, p. 310.
\(^{33}\) Bentley, \textit{Life of the Drama}, p. 135.
\(^{34}\) Clines, ‘Wisdom Books’, p. 281.
relevant for the modern world as it was for the ancient world'.

Pirandellian drama too has a reputation for being ‘cerebral’ in its concern with one notion (that appearance is reality—a conclusion ultimately refuted in Job). Yet Pirandello’s starting-point is emotional disturbance—characters and plot embody the philosophy—and indeed subvert the play itself, and the whole notion of theatrical illusion. The philosophical similarities and contrasts between Six Characters and the book of Job can be seen in Bentley’s comments:

> For Pirandello there is only one special kind of ethics to be had—an ethics of compassion in the face of impossibility. The neurosis of man is seen as bordering on psychosis, and occasionally falling headlong into it. Though man may achieve compassion, he is first and foremost not a moral being but a pathological one... Pathology plunges Pirandello into despair about existence itself—a metaphysical anguish. A schizophrenic is out of touch with us and we with him... Such unknowability and unreachability constitute for Pirandello the human condition generally. This is a philosophical proposition, but before it is that, it is the ‘impression’ life made on him, a shocking, agonising impression.

By contrast, the unknowability of God in Job is not a cause for despair, but for wonder, for trust. Job’s encounter with God gives him a new understanding of reality which is ‘given concrete expression as this previously isolated and alienated sufferer re-establishes relationships. Not only is he reconciled with God, he also prays to God for his friends, receives his brothers and sisters and becomes a father to ten more children (42.7-17)”.

**Enactment**

Is any play complete without performance? Literary scholars say ‘Yes’; theatrical ones say ‘No’. The Manager in Six Characters exclaims irritably: ‘You’ve got to understand that you can’t go on arguing at your own pleasure. Drama is action, sir, action and not confounded philosophy’.

As usual, he is oversimplifying: for the Characters, as for Job, ‘confounded philosophy’ is the mainspring of the action.

39. While we may see *Six Characters* performed, Job is not likely to appear on stage—though Clines (‘Wisdom Books’, pp. cviii-cix) lists ‘Literary Works Inspired
Job’s friends enact their unquestioning belief that suffering is caused by sin—a thesis also enacted in *Six Characters*, where the Characters are trapped on a treadmill activated by poverty and lust. The Characters’ emotions are raw: ‘Hatred, disgust, self-laceration, thwarted passion, a mutual lack of understanding—and where there is understanding, on the part of the Father, it is misguided, misinterpreted and, worst of all, rejected’. These people are eternally and necessarily alienated from each other, since, in terms of Pirandello’s vision, ‘self’ is impossible to know by oneself, and other people’s view of oneself is as false as the self one constructs to get oneself, somehow, through life.

Job too has railed, cursed, complained, shouted, lamented and called on God. But the profound difference is that he is not in the end alienated—the characters of Job and God are not on the treadmill. The action of the book of Job is redemptive, thanks to the relationship between Job and God:

(Job’s) religion and theology are suddenly able to cohere... [He] can bow in awe before a mysterious God he cannot grasp, perceiving only the outskirts of his ways. This is the Job of the prologue—but with a difference: the religious instinct is now supported by a theological realignment. Now he not only feels, but has also come to believe, that it makes sense that God should not be wholly amenable to human reason.

Rink comments: ‘If *Six Characters* is a tragedy... then surely the kernel of the tragedy lies in the mysterious and profoundly wounding nature of the Author’s total rejection of the Characters.’ This aspect fails to be enacted on any level, leaving the audience/reader as bereft and desolate as the Characters. In the book of Job, by contrast, the Author/God ‘is revealed as inexplicable, transcendent in wisdom and power, but certainly the good Creator, who cares for his works and for beauty, truth and order. It is a revelation of the Holy One which evokes wonder and self-renouncing adoration’.

Ultimately, then, the drama of Job enacts incarnational and redemptive truths; *Six Characters* enacts a primal scream of isolation and entrapment.

by Job’ (pp. cviii-cix), which includes a number of dramatisations, ‘Job in Music’, (p. cxi), as well as two short categories, ‘Job in Dance’ and ‘Job in Film’.

42. Rink, *Six Characters*, p. 23.
Concluding Thoughts

The complex genius and magnificence of Job cannot be addressed adequately in a brief article. Nonetheless, I believe that valuable insights can be gained in looking at its dramatic nature—insights which are needed in the contemporary theatre, as Peter Brook confirms:

We wish to capture in our arts the invisible currents that rule our lives, but our vision is now locked to the dark end of the spectrum. Today, the theatre of doubting, of unease, of trouble, of alarm, seems truer that the theatre with a noble aim. Even if the theatre had in its origins rituals that made the invisible incarnate, we must not forget that…these rituals have been lost or remain in seedy decay.

If the need for a true contact with sacred invisibility through the theatre still exists, then all possible vehicles must be re-examined.44

ABSTRACT

The article considers afresh whether the book of Job may have originated as a drama, as suggested by its three-act structure, and its use of the play-within-a-play device. It assesses its relationship to other early dramatic forms—tragedy, comedy and Semitic drama—and concludes that there is sufficient structural evidence to explore Job as a drama, thus opening the text up to new meanings and insights. The untheatrical drama of Job is then compared to the highly theatrical drama of Luigi Pirandello’s 1921 play Six Characters in Search of an Author, in terms of plot, character, dialogue, thought and enactment, allowing each text to illuminate the dramatic nature of the other. The concluding observation is that Six Characters enacts isolation, entrapment and a breakdown in communication; while the drama of the book of Job passes beyond this primal scream to reveal truths of incarnation and redemption.

44. Brook, The Empty Space, pp. 50, 54.