Job As Drama: Tragedy or Comedy?

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The literary form of the canonical book of Job is best viewed as unique. Nevertheless, affinities with the canons of drama have been noted by commentators over the centuries. Already in the fifth century of the Christian era, the Eastern church father Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) identified the book of Job as a drama fashioned in the manner of a Greek playwright. Theodore believed the author, prompted by literary ambition, had distorted an ancient true story of Job, having concocted the Prologue (with its blasphemous picture of God making a wager with the Satan), the fanciful descriptions of Behemoth and Leviathan, and the speeches of the Dialogue (many of which verge on blasphemy). Such a work of unedifying fiction Theodore wished to exclude from the Bible.

The idea that Job is a drama was revived by several commentators after the Reformation. Theodore Beza, the Geneva Calvinist, began a course of lectures on Job in 1587 by dividing the book into acts and scenes. Bishop Robert Lowth in his landmark study on Hebrew poetry, De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum (1753), noted that eighteenth-century scholars generally regarded Job as a drama and dealt with its structure and contents after the manner in which one might analyze an Attic tragedy. Lowth devoted an entire lecture to the question and argued that Job appeared to have all the marks of tragedy that Aristotle outlined in his Poetics except the essential mark, viz., the "actio," the dramatic action by which the soul of the drama is unfolded and the tragic event determined and brought about. One may call Job a dramatic poem, he concluded, but not a drama proper.

Greek Drama?

One of the most thoroughgoing attempts to interpret Job as a drama proper was that undertaken by Horace Kallen. His dramatic version of Job was performed in Milwaukee and Madison in 1913 by the Wisconsin Dramatic Society and in Boston by the Harvard Menorah Society in 1916. Kallen was encouraged in the endeavor by Professor George Foot Moore, who also wrote the introduction to the 1918 published version.¹ The aim was to restore Job to what Kallen believed was its original form, "a Greek tragedy in the manner of Euripides" (p. vii). Kallen included the Prologue, the Chorus (a priestly group with musical instruments), and the Epilogue among his dramatis personae, along with Job, the Three Friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar), Elihu (cast as leader of the Chorus), and the Voice of God. He set the drama in a village on the edge of the Arabian desert and, besides the actors themselves, placed only Job's shattered house and an altar on stage (the village was in the back-

Kallen included stage directions for the entrances and exits of the double Chorus and the Friends. They first come on stage just after the Prologue. Bildad and Zophar exit to the village after Chapter 21, then reenter the action after 23:10. Kallen also provided directions for gestures and mime; for the burning of incense on the altar; and for changes in lighting to make transitions between night and day, darkness and light. There were sound cues as well, especially for the winds, thunder, and lightning that were to accompany God’s Voice from the midst of the stormwind.

For the most part, Kallen simply followed the English text of the American Revised Version, arranging it to read like a script. The few liberties he took with the text, however, illuminate his understanding of the whole. For example, Elihu as leader of the Chorus is present on stage throughout the drama. Thus, he does not appear like the unexpected intruder who suddenly speaks up in Chapter 32 in the Bible. In fact, as leader of the Chorus, Elihu has already spoken with the Chorus on several occasions during the Dialogue. The first time was in response to Job’s opening oration (Chapter 3), where Kallen interpolated a choral chant: “Shema Yisrael, Yahweh Eloheinu, Yahweh Ehad! The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” The second occasion was at the recitation of the Poem on the Inaccessibility of Wisdom (Chapter 28), which Kallen placed after Chapter 14 (at the conclusion of the first cycle of Dialogue) and orchestrated for two Semi-choruses and individual voices. There, Elihu speaks the refrain (“Where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?”) as an antiphon, the Chorus repeats it after verse 6, Elihu after verse 11, the Chorus again after verse 19; then Elihu recites verses 22-27 before the full Chorus response of verse 28. The third occasion was the recitation of the Poem About the Wicked in Chapter 24. The biblical text connects this chapter to Job’s speech in Chapter 23. Kallen placed it as a response to Chapter 21 (where Job denies the orthodox doctrine about divine retribution) and divided it into segments for Elihu (verses 2-8) and voices of the Chorus (verses 1 and 25 are omitted). A fourth occasion has Elihu again intoning the Shema, while the Chorus repeats the chant of “The Lord giveth, etc.” This interpolation, which Kallen set at the time of evening prayer and placed after Chapter 29, forms a dramatic inclusion with the identical chant he interpolated after Chapter 3 and set at the hour of morning prayer. Kallen interpolated the same chant, this time heard faintly from the village, at the conclusion of the Dialogue and just before the Epilogue. In this way Kallen rearranged the text so that “each round of the great debate is followed by a choral ode” (G.F. Moore, “Introduction,” p. xxiii) in the Greek manner and accustomed the audience to the presence of Elihu through his role as leader of the Chorus. The Voice of God that finally is heard at the very conclusion of the Dialogues becomes a counterpart to the deus ex machina.

In short, Kallen believed Job was composed about 400 B.C.E. as a tragic drama in four acts in direct imitation of Euripidean theatre. Indeed, he felt that the Jewish author was influenced by Euripidean themes as well as form:

The injustice of divinity, the unhappiness of mankind, the desirability of death, the rebellion and the ultimate or primal mystical perception which consoles — these are the commonplaces of Euripides’ thinking (p. 37). In his chapter on “The Joban
Philosophy of Life” Kallen finds the tragic features of Job to lie in its conception of a God who is very much like Bergson’s elan vital: God’s “justice” is nothing else than power, force, the go and potency, generative and disintegrative, in things. It possesses nothing of the moral or the human; it is not foresight but performance, the originative and annihilative flowing of nature (p. 71).

Divine action is indifferent. In such an ultimate environment the glory of humanity is to cling to one’s own integrity and realize the excellence appropriate to one’s nature while maintaining one’s self by eternal vigilance in the fear of our Lord. Our proper excellence (arete) is to live courageously, take our chances, and keep our self-respect in a world that was not made for us. In this way we, like Job, can be “victorious in the warfare of living even when life is lost” (p. 78) as, inevitably, it must be! Thus, Job’s final words are to be understood not as an expression of repentance, of sorrow over sin and presumption, as the usual translations have it: “I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). Rather, they are to be translated: “I recant my challenge, and am comforted amid dust and ashes.” They express Job’s reconciliation to the indifference of providence.

Personal Encounter

The dramatic dimensions of Job have been explored again in a 1977 issue of *Semeia*, an experimental journal for biblical criticism recently launched by the Society of Biblical Literature. The volume to which I refer, *Semeia* 7, is entitled “Studies in the Book of Job.” It attracted the attention of John Dart, the well-known religion writer on the staff of *The Los Angeles Times*, who wrote a lengthy review article in his syndicated column on June 4, 1977. The major essays in the *Semeia* issue all deal with Job as drama.

The tone for the issue is set by Luis Alonso-Schoeckel’s essay, “Toward a Dramatic Reading of the Book of Job.” Alonso-Schoeckel asks us to “project

2 Other interpolations and rearrangements include: 1) the Friends’ spitting and retorting “Sinner! Liar! Enemy of God!” in response to Job’s angry words at 17:5; 2) the placing of 17:10, 8-9 as angry interruption by Job in the middle of Bildad’s second speech (after 18:4); 3) the assigning of 21:16, 19a, and 22 to the Friends as interpretations of Job’s complaint about the prosperity of the wicked and the interpolation of another stifled objection after v. 26; 4) the placing of 24:1 as conclusion to Job’s complaint in Chapter 23; 5) the connecting of 28:5-13 with Chapter 25 as Bildad’s last speech; 6) connecting 28:1-4 and 27:1-6 as Job’s response to Bildad; 7) assigning 27:7-23 and 24:25 to Zophar; 8) more spitting and insults by the Chorus against Job after their evening prayer; 9) assigning 40:15-24 (Behemoth) and 41:1-10a, 12-34 (Leviathan) to two Semi-choruses that speak in response to Job’s peroration in Chapters 29-31; 10) assigning 36:5-15 and 36:26-29 to “A man of the Chorus”; and 11) placing 42:2 (Job’s response) after God’s first speech (Chapters 38-39) and attaching 40:4-5 to 42:3b-6 after God’s second speech (40:1-14).

3 Kallen notes (81) that this is “the outstanding change” he had to make in the interest of accurate translation. Nihamti, derived from a Hebrew root meaning “comfort,” can only be translated “I am comforted” in the context of this drama. The Friends came to comfort Job and failed. God succeeded in answer to Job’s challenge. In his new translation of the Book of Job, *Into the Whirlwind* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), Stephen Mitchell argues for a similar interpretation: “Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust” (99-100). A radically different view is offered by John Briggs Curtis, who paraphrases: “Therefore I feel loathing, contempt and revulsion [toward you, O God]; and I am sorry for frail man.” This statement indicates that Job had reached the point where he “totally and unequivocally” rejected Yahweh. See Curtis’s article, “On Job’s Response to Yahweh,” *JBL* 98 (December, 1979) 497-511.
mental picture of the book as drama, in
order to be attentive to the dynamism of
its conflict and to enable ourselves to be
cought up in it” (0.2.). Appealing to
some of the staging of Archibald
MacLeish’s well-known play *J.B.*, a
modern adaptation of Job, he wants us
to imagine a stage with a second level on
one side. This level represents the upper
realm of heaven, where God is seated. It
may be lighted with greater or lesser in­
tensity as the dialogue unfolds. In any
event, the audience realizes what Job
does not: God is ever present and obser­
vant although neither seen nor heard by
either Job or his friends. Alonso-
Schoekel argues,

This triangular vision is the source
of irony that very much enriches
the drama. Only at the end of the
fourth act will the barrier be
removed so that Job can see and
hear God: pleased to see him, but
appalled to discover that God has
been listening all the time” (1.03).

A second, more important, irony
follows: the drama of the man Job calls
forth audience participation and em­
pathy. The viewer becomes caught up in
the testing of Job and finds *himself*
under the scrutiny of God (1.05). Thus,
“the character of God becomes a spec­
tator and a judge of the audience viewed
as characters” (1.06). Suddenly, we find
ourselves on stage, just like Elihu, a
faceless onlooker through 31 chapters,
who suddenly takes the spotlight in
Chapter 32 as an “impulsive volunteer”
who could no longer be contained and
had to jump up on stage and start speak­
ing “as if he were a member of the com­
pany” (1.07).

According to Alonso-Schoekel, Job
evokes such an “interested” response
precisely because it is less a book to be
read than an event to be encountered. It
is not so much a debate about divine
justice as an expression of the human
longing to actually engage in a lawsuit
with God (2.04). Job is willing to risk all
in order to be admitted into the presence
of God:

To be admitted to the presence of
God so that one may defend
himself and die is already salva­
tion, provided that his appearance
before God and his speech are
vehement, desperate and a risk of
his life (2.12).

Here is portrayed a fundamental
human experience in such compelling
terms that we are unable to remain spec­
tators. Job ushers *us* into the awesome
presence of God in such wise that we
find ourselves standing face to face with
impending doom. Yet, paradoxically,
precisely in our moment of mind’s con­
fusion and soul’s turmoil, precisely in
our moment of utter darkness and
ultimate risk, precisely when we must
speak out against God, precisely then we
become infused with an illumination
that saves us and returns us to our
creaturely selves with deepened
knowledge and wisdom (2.34; 2.38;
3.1). In the pain of encounter we are
vouchsafed a perception of reality.

As noted earlier, according to Horace
Kallen, the consoling perception is that
the world was not made for us and that
our proper excellence is to go down
fighting, as it were, and with head held
high. Actors in such a tragedy, we are
called upon to enact our roles in a
sublime and heroic manner. An article
complementary to Alonso-Schoekel’s in
*Semeia* 7, however, leads to a different
conclusion. Here I refer to J. William
Whedbee’s “The Comedy of Job.”
Whedbee is conversant not only with
Kallen’s reconstruction but with other
champions of the Job-as-tragedy school.
He rejects their views and argues that
“the most apt and compelling generic
designation of the book of Job is comedy" (0.3).

Whedbee develops his analysis of Job from the thesis that the comic vision contains two major ingredients: first, "a perception of incongruity that moves in the realm of the ironic, the ludicrous, and the ridiculous;" second, "a basic plot line that leads ultimately to the happiness of the hero and his restoration to a serene and harmonious society" (0.4). Whedbee argues that the plot of Job is typically comic: the hero undergoes an ordeal "from which he comes out on top only by the utmost effort and the demonstration of his prowess." This is the typical U-shaped plot, as literary critic Northrop Frye calls it, that finds the dramatic action sinking into troubled, near-tragic complications only to take a sudden reverse turn upward to a happy conclusion (1.0). Job, after the trauma of suffering and the exhaustion of seeking a lawsuit with God, suddenly finds inner peace and harmony with God and is blessed with double his previous wealth, a new set of children (his daughters are renowned for their extraordinary beauty and receive an inheritance just like men), and a life span of 140 years — exactly double the traditional three score and ten cited in Psalm 90!

As for the dramatic action itself, it fairly seethes with incongruities that keep us caught in "a subtle and powerful interplay between comedy and tragedy" (0.4). Whedbee points to the incongruity of the friends' arguments concerning Job's guilt and how God punishes the wicked in the light of what we know about Job's innocence (affirmed by none other than God!) from the prologue (1.2). He calls attention to the ambiguous personality of God: a just God who makes frivolous wagers with the Satan, a defender of the right who makes war on the righteous Job (1.2). But Job has two faces as well: pious and patient, he blesses God in the prologue; angry and impatient, he curses God in the song-cycle (2.0). Whedbee underlines the alternating attraction of life and death in Job's complaints (2.1), the interplay between God's rest of Job and Job's trial of God (4.1), the portrayal of the wise friends who end up making fools of themselves (3.1), and the personality of the angry young man Elihu, whose brash pretensions to wisdom give the lie to the saying "There's no fool like an old fool" (5.1)! We are confronted by unresolved opposites at every step of the way through Job's ordeal. None of this is really very funny; it is more like "the dark comedy of the grotesque" (4.2).

In the end, however, argues Whedbee, the dark gives way to light. Beyond irony and incongruity, beyond the ordeal, lies celebration. Whedbee detects a festive note in the speeches of God with their magnificent portrayal of the creation. The descriptions of the various animals celebrate their freedom, their strength and power, the grandeur of flight. Even the bizarre ostrich is extolled as a superb runner. And to top off this carnival of animals, we are given a rather sporting description of the great monsters Behemoth and Leviathan — sportive at least from the Creator's view (6.33). And this, after all, is the point: Job "sees God and through God's eyes he now sees the world" in all its marvelous, albeit mysterious and seemingly incongruous, interworkings. Like the recognition scene in the comic plot, Job's confession marks a dramatic turning:

His confession is authentic yet is paradoxical: his new wisdom is that he does not know all, his new perception is that he does not see

4 This citation, like those following for the Semeia articles, is to paragraph number.
all; but he knows enough and sees enough . . . Job as comic hero rediscovers his limits as a man and repents before the Creator God (6.7).

The dramatic action has come full circle as catastrophe gives way to restoration, penance to festivity, alienation from society to reintegration into society. Nor is the restoration for Job only, but for his three friends as well. For the crowning irony comes when God rebukes the friends and commends Job — and then orders the friends to offer sacrifices and ask Job to intercede for them that they may also be restored to divine favor (7.0). It’s a happy ending, and they all live happily ever after!

Whedbee concludes his article by quoting approvingly the assessment of the playwright Christopher Fry:

The bridge by which we cross from tragedy to comedy and back again is precarious and narrow. We find ourselves in one or the other by the turn of a thought . . . If the characters were not qualified for tragedy there would be no comedy, and to some extent I have to cross the one before I can light on the other . . . [But] a bridge has to be crossed, a thought has to be turned. Somehow the characters have to unmortify themselves: to affirm life and assimilate death . . . Their hearts must be as determined as the phoenix; what burns must also light and renew: not by a vulnerable optimism but by a hard-won maturity of delight, by the intuition of comedy . . . The Book of Job is the great reservoir of comedy (7.2) . . .

The comic vision does not necessarily eliminate evil and death; it is not incorrigibly and naively optimistic; it does not shut its eyes to the dark, jagged edges of life in this world . . . it is precisely because man has experienced suffering that he has sharpened awareness of cosmic incongruity (7.1).

Tragedy and Comedy

Seen from a larger perspective, the book of Job represents biblical religion in microcosm, with its movement from disaster to restoration, from humiliation to prosperity, from fall and exile to redemption and homecoming. In his chapter on “Christ the Harlequin,” Harvey Cox asserts that biblical religion is comedy, it is laughter and hope and affirmation in the midst of the hopelessness around us: “Deus ludens . . . winks at man, his all-too-serious creature, disclosing to him the comic dimension of it all.”

“There is no act in life,” writes Walter Kerr, “that is not, when it is seen whole, both tragic and comic at once.” When we approach Job as drama and ourselves enter into its seriocomic incongruities, we find ourselves running the gauntlet between the ridiculous and the sublime, the tragic and the comic, the sea of troubles and the ocean of tranquillity. Evidently, those who are able to survive the ordeal like Job did and who can penetrate to that inner sanctum where the opposites are reconciled may also experience the spiritual healing that will “bless their latter days more than their beginning” (Job 42:12).