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Why Is There a Book of Job, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?*

The programme of this chapter is the same as that of the previous chapter on the Song of Songs. Why is there a book of Job? means, What are the necessary conditions of its existence?, How did it come to be created as a text in the first place? What does it do to you if you read it? means, What effects does it have?, What difference does it make that this text exists?

The first question, Why is there a book of Job?, may sound like one of the old conventional questions, like What problem is the book addressing?, What is its intellectual matrix?, What were the influences upon it?, What theological needs did it serve? They are not my questions here, for what I have in mind, rather, are the *material* causes as distinct from the *mental* causes.

The second question, What does it do to you if you read it?, may sound like one of the newer conventional questions, like, What is the history of its interpretation? How have the differing social and historical contexts in which it has been read influenced the interpretation of the book? They too are not my ques-

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tions here, for what I have in mind, rather, is *critique* rather than *description* of the history of interpretation, *evaluation* rather than *mere understanding*.

1. *Why Is There a Book of Job?*

a. *The Implied Circumstances of the Text's Production*

Why is there a book of Job? The first set of questions concern the circumstances of the text's production, the social matrix, the material causes, the economic and political realities that the text itself might point to. These are not the questions that scholars writing on Job tend to ask about this text; if they ask about origins, they usually speak of mental causes, of ideas the author wanted to promote or to dispute. Here, though, I want to focus on material causes for the existence of the text.

1. *The Text.* We need to begin with the idea of Job as a *text*. The curious thing is that, in the scholarly literature, the textuality of Job is quite transparent, invisible. No one seems to take much account of the fact that it is a *text*, and to ask what brings a text of this kind into being or what it signifies that there was a text of this character in ancient Israel. For most scholars, the book of Job is a transcript of the author's mind, a window on the ancient Israelite thought-world, a discussion of a theological problem—anything other than a writing, a product, a *text*.

A text is a production, a product, made in order to be copied and to be circulated. All texts are, if they are not private texts. It is, moreover, a commodity, created to be sold in the market place, consumed by customers. That is what texts are, if they are not private texts like letters and contracts, but literary texts. Furthermore, the author of a text such as Job had the intention of a readership for the work, and had the conception of a public that would desire the work—desire it enough to put their hand in their pocket for it. And the author envisaged a public that would want ownership of the work, either in order to read it again whenever they wanted, or to possess in some way what they saw as the essence of the work even if they never opened or unrolled it. All these things are of the nature of literary works, ancient and modern. No doubt there are from time to time works that come into the public's hands by some freakish route,

as when private diaries come into the public domain after their authors' death and against their wishes; but there is no reason in

the case of the book of Job to suspect any unusual origins of the text.

2. *The Public.* If then a text implies a public, for the book of Job we need to ask, What public? Thereafter we can ask, And what kind of author, socially speaking, does such a public imply?

What public does the book of Job imply? Obviously, it implies a Hebrew-speaking (or rather, Hebrew-reading) public, which is to say, no doubt, an Israelite one, even though the central character of the book is not an Israelite. And it implies a male audience, since all its principal characters are male, and women and women's interests are ignored or repressed.

It implies a highly literate public, with a rich vocabulary, a taste for imagery and a stomach for elaborate and extended rhetoric. It implies a readership that is not literal-minded, one that delights in irony, exaggeration, misdirection and whimsy.

It implies an intellectual public, for the issues it ventilates are conceptual ones, the points of difference among the various characters in the book being sometimes quite fine—and the argument rarely being stated in concrete and direct language. It implies a public that is intellectually curious, that is open to being teased and is willing to be left unsatisfied by its conclusion. It does not imply a readership that wants clear, quick answers.

It implies a leisured public. Not only does it take several hours to read the book—if you are a very fluent reader, that is—but its public must be of a type that has a lot of time and patience to take an interest in theoretical and conceptual matters generally, as well as the time to process the arguments of this particular book by means of reflection, re-reading, and discussion with other readers.

Further, the book implies a public of individuals who are free to read the book or desist from it, consumers who have the choice to pick it up or lay it down. For it does not belong to any institutional structure as a necessary and constitutive text—in the way a lawbook or a collection of psalms might, for example. And the book does not imply the existence of a ready-made market, unlike the Song of Songs, for example, whose name implies the existence of other texts of the same type. The book of

Job had to win its readers one by one. It is hard to imagine a Job fan-club, eager consumers of every new book on the market about its loquacious hero, or a Job 'school', transmitting the Job tradition to generations of reverential pupils picking up their copies from the college bookstore year by year.

No, the book implies a very small readership, even among those who are literate in its society. It does not imply any ritual or socially occasioned use, but presents itself as an intellectual art-work for a leisured class.

Without that readership, however, the book could hardly exist, as a *book*. Perhaps the author could have written it purely for self-expression. But without a readership, without a circulation, it is unlikely that the book could have survived, or, if surviving, would have been included in a collection of Hebrew books. So the readership is constitutive of the book as a text, as a text that survives into the modern world.

3. *The Author*. If such is the public that the book implies, what kind of author, then, from the point of view of class and social structure, does the book imply? What is its matrix, socially speaking?

a. *The class matrix*. Let us suppose that in the society in which the book was produced there were two classes, rich and poor. No doubt societies are generally more complex than that, but most societies have at least those classes in them. We hardly need to *suppose* the existence of such classes as the matrix of the book of Job, of course, because the book itself testifies to the existence of rich and poor in the world of the story—and it is unlikely that the author would have envisaged such a social structure for his fiction if he had not been familiar with it in real life.

Very well, then. If there are rich and poor in the social world of the text's production, from which class does the book arise? Job is a rich man, in fact the 'greatest of the sons of the east' (1.3), so *prima facie* this is a rich man's story—not only a story *about* a rich man but also *by* a rich man.

Or is that conclusion too premature? Does not the story tell us that Job is not only rich but also becomes poor? Perhaps then it is a poor man's story. And, in any case, why should not the poor

also tell stories about the rich? I reply, in the first place, that the Job of the book is *not* a poor man—not even a poor man who once was rich—but a rich man, through and through, a rich man who loses his wealth, indeed, but who regains it and becomes richer than ever. And secondly, the experience the poor have of the rich is, overwhelmingly, of oppressors—of landlords, money lenders, despots. They do not know, on the whole, of *pious* rich men. If Job is rich *and* pious, the implication is that the story is a rich man's story, told from the perspective of the wealthy. Of course, we can allow, it is always within the bounds of possibility that in this case an exceptional storyteller from the poorer class told a story about a rich man with the piety and integrity of Job. That may indeed be true (I don't believe it myself), but, true or not, that is not the natural implication of the narrative.

Once we recognize that the narrative implies the perspective of the rich, other features of the book fall into place.

1. The first is the lack of realism in the book about poverty. Job has lost all his property, and his income: his 7000 sheep, his 3000 camels, his 500 yoke of oxen and his 500 she-asses. All that he owns is 'touched' or struck by disaster (1.11). Yet he is still able to support his wife, his four friends who have come to visit him for a week at least (2.13)—*and* the four servants who have survived the disasters (1.15, 16, 17, 19). He still has guests in his house (who ignore him), maidservants (who are treating him as a stranger), and his own personal valet (19.15-16). He is, in short, maintaining a considerable household—on nothing, on no income and no resources. And he is never hungry. He is distressed by his skin complaints, and he cannot sleep (7.4; 30.1), but he never complains that he has no food. So he is not really a very poor man. Or at least, the author does not know how to depict him as a poor man. The truly poor are not worried about their status, as Job is; they are worried about where their next meal is coming from.

2. When truly poor people are described in the book, they are either despised or glamourized. In ch. 30 Job depicts men who from 'hard hunger' (30.3 RSV) have to gnaw the dry ground, picking mallow and the leaves of bushes, living in gullies and caves, warming themselves by burning the roots of the broom (30.3-7). But there is no sympathy on Job's part or the author's

for these desperately poor people; rather, they are a senseless, disreputable brood who have been ‘whipped out of the land’ (30.8). True, they are said to ‘make sport of’ Job (30.1)—which is not very nice, but everyone else is rejecting Job too (or at least, that is how it seems to Job)—men in general who have gaped at him and struck him on the cheek (16.10), friends who scorn him (16.20), mockers who surround him (17.2), and all his family who ignore him (19.13). But it is his truly poor despisers who come in for the severest criticism, and are themselves despised for their poverty and not just for their attitude to Job. The implication must be that the book does not originate among them, or represent their interests. From the way they are portrayed we can infer that it is the interests of those at the opposite end of the social spectrum that are represented by this book.

Where the truly poor are depicted elsewhere in the book, however, in ch. 24, it may seem at first sight that their poverty is sympathetically portrayed. Here ‘the poor of the earth’, who have been dispossessed of their property by the wicked, have to go out into the wasteland like asses to scavenge food for their young (24.5). They are so poor they go about naked, they have no covering in the cold, and they are wet with the rain of the mountains (24.10, 7-8). They have no share in the food they are producing: ‘though hungry, they carry the sheaves...they tread the wine presses, but suffer thirst’ (24.10-11 NRSV). This is not an unsympathetic depiction, but it shows the hand of the rhetorician rather than of the fellow-sufferer. For the author can imagine poverty only as the deprivation of wealth: the poor people he describes in ch. 24 are widows and orphans whose flocks, donkey and ox have been seized by the wicked (24.2-3). In other words, they have suffered the fate of a Job, though on a smaller scale. Theirs is not the systemic poverty of the long-term poor, who never owned cattle and who were never rich enough to feel the absence of a donkey a loss. The poor of ch. 24 glean in other people’s fields and vineyards (24.6), and work as day-labourers, carrying sheaves in the field, pressing olives and treading grapes (24.10-11). They are not starving, and they are not—not literally—‘scavenging in the wasteland food for their young’ (24.5). The picture of the poor in ch. 24 is not a depiction of real poverty; it is a glamourization of poverty; it has an eye for the

photographic opportunities in it, but it does not know the world of the poor from the inside.

3. The third feature of the book that makes sense when its social context among the rich is recognized is the way in which wealth is regarded as unproblematic. In the world of the book, there is no question to be raised about one man having such wealth that he can own ‘very many’ slaves or servants (1.3), no question about a social and economic system, that is, in which the existence of many men functions to support the status and wealth of one man, a system that produces a narrative in which humans are listed as property of the rich man, like, and after, sheep and camels and oxen and she-asses.

Nor is it regarded as problematic by the book that Job’s ‘friends’ do not live in his own community. There is room, apparently, for only one Job in the land of Uz; he cannot have friends of his own standing in his country, for he is the greatest of the sons of the east, and the only friends he can afford to have (given his dignity) are sheikhs like himself, from foreign lands. Job’s intimates, indeed, are members of his household (19.19), but his equals, those who are alone are called his friends (or rather, his ‘neighbours’, *my[r]*) do not come from his community. This is a sad, and socially conditioned, state of affairs, but the author of the text sees nothing problematic about it, for he himself—so the inference may be drawn—has experienced, and has come to regard as natural and commonsensical, the fact that wealth creates a barrier and that distinct social classes are an inevitable feature of society.

b. *The gender matrix.* What of the gender matrix of the book? Not surprisingly, it must be characterized as patriarchal—but that is too general a term, and the nature of its patriarchy needs to be further analysed. ‘Patriarchy’ is often used today to designate a social system in which men have unproblematic power over women—and we can undoubtedly infer that the book represents the interests of patriarchy in that sense. For example, whatever Job’s wife means by her speech, to curse God and die (2.9), it is evident that she plays her role in the story only as a foil to Job, his patience being contrasted with her impatience, his piety with her blasphemy, his wisdom with her speech ‘like one

of the foolish women' (2.10). There are no wise women in the book of Job, we notice, only foolish ones. We cannot help wondering whether, when Job says his wife is speaking like one of 'the foolish women', he actually means 'women in general'—as if to say, dismissively, 'There you go, talking like a woman'. For who else, as a group, would the 'foolish women' be? In his language, they *are* a group, for she is speaking 'like one of' them. Yet in reality, in real societies, foolish women are not a group or class. How many foolish women has Job been listening to, anyway, to know how they talk? In fact, he knows very little about foolish women—a patriarch like him will hardly be mixing with such persons. He is simply presuming, from his position of patriarchal power, that women have nothing important to say. Perhaps there is a class aspect here as well, and 'foolish women' means, in particular, 'lowerclass women'; perhaps also it is the pious snob, who has pitched his tent on the moral high ground, who speaks here, equating 'lowerclass' with 'godless'. But more likely, as I was suggesting, it is simply the male speaking, the patriarch, who lumps all women together as foolish chatterers, expects better of a patriarch's wife, and is disappointed but not surprised when she shows herself typical of her sex.

Job's wife, in any case, suffers, as women do, at the hands of the patriarchy of the book. In the first place, the suffering she experiences is ignored, though her husband's is everywhere trumpeted. The fact is, she has lost as many children as Job has, and she, every bit as much as Job, has lost her status and standard of living. But she has, in addition, to endure a suffering that Job does not: she has to go on living with a spouse whom everyone in the society now regards as a heinous sinner. Secondly, her very existence is ultimately repressed by the narrative; for though we hear in the epilogue that Job again has seven sons and three daughters (42.3), not a word is said of her, the woman who by now has spent fifteen whole years of her life being pregnant with Job's children. The children that are born are Job's, not hers; she has been effaced.

Patriarchy, in the sense of male control of women, also expresses itself in the way Job's second set of three daughters is treated. At first it may seem that they are more highly esteemed than women generally are in their culture, for they alone of Job's

children are named and they, uniquely in the Hebrew Bible when there are surviving sons, share their father's inheritance (42.14-15). But the syntax of the narrative is very revealing. 'In all the land there were no women so fair as Job's daughters; and their father gave them inheritance among their brothers' (42.15), says the narrator. But we mistake him if we think that these are just two unrelated facts about Job's daughters: that they were beautiful, *and* that they gained an inheritance from him. No, that 'and' (the *waw* consecutive) functions just like the 'and' of 1.2: there, Job was blameless, *and*, *and so* there were born to him seven sons and three daughters and he had 7000 sheep... Here, Job's daughters are the fairest in the land, *and*, *and so* he gave them inheritance. But the male orientation is even more marked than that. Typically, in a male world, women exist to be looked at by men; 'fair' is the judgment of the male gaze, whether it is Job's, the narrator's, or the author's. No doubt the brothers are more or less as good-looking as their sisters, being the children of the same father and mother; but they are not called 'fair'. No, they inherit because they are sons; the daughters inherit because the man is charmed by them. And what names he gives them: names of cosmetics! Men must act but women have only to *be*.

Patriarchy, however, does not only concern the relations between men and women. It also comes to expression in the way older and more powerful men treat younger and less powerful men. Job's nostalgic speech in ch. 29, for example, is a classic text for a repressive and thoughtless patriarchy. In his 'autumn days' (29.4), as he recollects them, Job would prepare his seat in the square at the city gate, the young men would see him and withdraw, and even those esteemed in the society would refrain from speech and lay their hand on their mouth; the voice even of the nobles would be hushed and their tongue would cleave to the roof of their mouth (42.7-10). Job portrays himself here as the dominant male, and he behaves like any dominant male among primates: others must make gestures of submission to him. This dominance is what gives him identity and pleasure, and in the time of his loss of it he can only wish that it was restored: 'Oh, that I were as in the months of old' (42.2).

Consider a further expression of this patriarchal dominance:

Men listened to me, and waited,
and kept silence for my counsel.
After I spoke they did not speak again,
and my word dropped upon them (29.21-22).

That is to say, once Job arrives at the gate all conversation stops, and, once he has spoken, the matter is decided. He has total control over his interlocutors as his words ‘drop’ (*fn*) upon them (29.22); he prevents discussion, and insists on having his own way. Whether or not this is what actually happened in his salad days (what would ‘actually’ mean, I wonder), this is what he remembers, and this is what he desires.

Now this very unpleasant mode of dominance is not remarked on by male commentators (they are all male), no doubt because that is the role they secretly or subconsciously aspire to. Which man among you, my readers, I might ask, given the choice between giving your authoritative view on a matter and thereupon having the whole issue finalized, and submitting to hours of free-floating discussion by less experienced and lower-ranking members of a committee, would instinctively opt for the latter?

The conflict between groups that such patriarchal dominance arouses is well displayed in the intervention by the young Elihu. He has been compelled to hold his peace until the four patriarchs have finished all they want to say, and he is, not surprisingly, ‘angry’; the verb occurs four times (32.2, 2, 3, 5). Not surprisingly, too, the anger is intellectualized by the author as an anger that arises ‘because of’ the arguments of Job and the friends—but that ‘because of’ merely signals a displacement of the source of the anger. For one does not become *angry* because someone else holds a different view from oneself on esoteric points of theology; it is in cases where one’s own identity is in some way threatened by that view or its expression that intellectual disagreement connects with the emotions.

Because of the patriarchal rules of order and protocol (which are, of course, far from innocent and natural, and which exist in order to preserve the power structure), Elihu feels obliged to construct an elaborate and apologetic justification for his entry into the conversation. The conflict between old and young, between patriarchal dominance and the submission of the less

powerful male, is evident throughout. The text tries to repress the conflict that patriarchy engenders by having Elihu submit, ostentatiously, to the patriarchal norms and so 'resolve' the conflict; but the text is transparent to the social anger between the generations. It is an interesting possibility that the omission of Elihu from the narrative framework of the book is not an accident of literary history but a classic Freudian slip on the part of a patriarchal author, who identified with Job and the three friends, and with God—elderly gentlemen, all of them—, rather than with the young Elihu.

c. *The political matrix.* What of the *political* context? This text, the book of Job, which is so directly and overtly concerned with wealth and poverty, telling as it does the story of a rich man who becomes impoverished, is at the same time exercising a repression of the conflict between the social classes that are determined by wealth and its absence. In so doing, it deploys various strategies.

1. It portrays the concentration of wealth in the hands of one man as unproblematic.

2. It tells a story of movement from riches to poverty, and from poverty to riches; it tells of a man who in his lifetime is both rich and poor, and then is rich again—as if the boundaries between the classes can be casually crossed. But we know that such is not a possibility for the vast majority of humans.

3. It deflects attention from the political to the ideational, and elevates theology above economics. It transmutes the issues of wealth, power and class into issues of human innocence and the divine governance of the universe. Even if we think theology is more important than economics, we can hardly deny that it's a different subject—and changing the subject is a classic way of repressing conflict.

All texts, according to Fredric Jameson,¹ owe their existence to a desire to repress social conflict, to make life easier for both oppressors and the oppressed, to allow the oppressors to deny their responsibility and to enable the oppressed to forget their suffering. They carry out that programme by papering over

¹. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981).

cracks in the social fabric, minimizing the conflict, writing it out of existence. A book about a rich man, about the richest of men, indeed, who loses his wealth, must have something to do with class—which is to say, with class conflict. The book's existence, and its narrative, implies a situation of conflict, of tension and variant interests if not of open conflict, in which the rich feel the need to explain themselves and re-invent themselves, under the figure of Job. The fact that no one, even today, reads this book as a document of class struggle is evidence of how successfully it has repressed the conflict it presupposes.

Why is there a book of Job? Because there was a social, gender and political need for it. This is not the whole story, but it is a story that has to be told, especially when the prevailing story is that all it represents are the cultured theological sensitivities of its author. But there is another way of answering the 'Why is there...?' question. It is to enquire after the psychological profile of the author as it is implied by his text.

b. *The Implied Psychological Profile of the Author*

The text was called forth by a complex of social needs that it addressed. But it would not have come into existence if there had not been an author who was able and willing to produce the work. Its production must have satisfied some personal psychological need of his. Or rather, I should say, the implication of his text is that it did. That is the implication of texts in general, that they come into being at the free decision of their authors, who feel some internal compulsion to compose them, and derive some personal satisfaction, some lowering of interior tension, from completing them. That may not always be the actual case, of course. Some authors, no doubt, write at gunpoint, others are driven by financial necessity or greed to write works they have no personal involvement in, others are automata; but the implication we may reasonably draw from the existence of any text is that some author intended it, and met psychological needs of his or her own in writing it. What need on the author's part did the book of Job satisfy, then, or, rather, what need does it imply that it satisfied?

a. *The text as a dream.* My route in to this question is to regard the

text as a dream, its author's dream. The author, I argue, has conceived or imagined his story, consciously or subconsciously, from much the same stuff and in much the same way as he nightly created his dreams. The author was no doubt largely unaware of the psychological needs and drives that his work arose from, and would have spoken of his work—if he were asked—in terms of his conscious intentions and of the work's overt content. Most of us authors would do the same. So if we desire to penetrate to the unconscious layer of the writing, it will, no doubt, have to be without the author's knowledge or consent.

What kind of dream is the book of Job? Obviously, it is a death-wish, a dream in which the unconscious explores the possibility of ceasing to be—of ceasing to be altogether, or ceasing to be what one is at present. In fantasy too, that is, in a semi-conscious mode, we find ourselves imagining 'what if' scenarios in which our worst fears become reality. In entertainment too we have the phenomenon of the horror movie, or the video nasty—or the Greek tragedy—as an outworking of the death-wish on the author's part, and, complicitly, on the viewers' or audience's part as well.

If the author of Job is a well-to-do man, he is obliged to, and needs to, for his own psychic security, play out—in dream or fantasy or imaginative literature—his fear that his wealth may not last, and to imagine himself as something other than a member of the wealthy ruling class. He needs to affirm his identity, and his role within his class, by contrasting his present identity with other potential identities he could be obliged to adopt. He creates the character Job as an image of himself; or rather, he dreams himself as Job.

The book of Job exists, that is, because its author needed it to exist: that is the implication of a book that consists of such a narrative. He needed to externalize his fear, to see its shape, to try it on for size; and, at another level, he was driven willy-nilly to fantasize about the loss of what was precious to him. This is not a poor man's dream, incidentally, for poor people do not fear becoming poor. It is the dream, and so the text, of a man who has something to lose.

In this fantasy, however, the dreamer does not only give

shape to the death-wish; he also wills the overcoming of the death-wish, and writes of the restoration of what he has both feared and wished to lose. He wants, and yet he does not want, to lose his status and his wealth, and so his dream has a dream-like happy ending, which brings to the dreamer more than he had to begin with, which assuages the fear in the death-wish by the gratification of a dream of wish-fulfilment.

b. *The dream as a text.* There is a further aspect of dream interpretation that is relevant here, and it concerns the transformation of the dream material into text, the realization in textual form of the psychic realities that gave rise to the text. It is the principle that all the characters in a dream represent the dreamer, or aspects of the dreamer. As I have said, the author dreams himself as Job, and is the hero of his own dream. But he is also Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, Elihu, God—and the narrator too, no doubt.

This is to say more than that there is something of the author in all of these characters, more even than that the author recognizes himself in his characters—consciously or subconsciously. What is implied by the existence of this gallery of characters through whom the author dreams himself is that the author experiences a conflict over the issues he raises in the book. He has created a fiction of a dialogue about innocent suffering in which different speakers adopt different points of view because he himself, whatever his conscious mind thinks, feels uncertainty about the answer. The book is structurally, then, an expression of the author's psychic conflict—especially the conflict between a sense of fitness in the concept of retribution and the experience of suffering that he inscribes in the character of Job.

On the overt level, of course, the book allows this inner conflict to appear: for the book as a whole is a sustained debate, which is never fully resolved—it is never entirely clear what the 'message' of the book is, how the divine speaker answers Job and the friends—if at all—and what the final restoration of Job does to the case presented by the character Job throughout the book.

Not far below the surface, also, the book exhibits inner conflict; for it involves itself in a deconstruction, affirming throughout its course that piety does *not* lead to prosperity and then at

its end telling how Job the supremely pious becomes the supremely wealthy.² This deconstructability of the book is, I would say, a literary manifestation of the author's own psychic uncertainty.

Deeper still, there is a psychic conflict that the book witnesses to—a conflict we can legitimately *infer*. Consciously, the author may have believed he had resolved the problem, or resolved it as much as it can be resolved. But reading his text as a dream, we can infer that the plurality of its characters represents a certain psychic fragmentation on the author's part. Through the literary process, through naming, distinguishing, externalizing and distancing, he hopes to achieve psychic equilibrium—but only at the cost of alienating parts of himself. So it is not surprising that his project falters literarily, given that it is the manifestation of his psychic disorder.

Why then is there a book of Job? The material causes implied by the book's existence are these: a reading public, a social conflict and an author's psychic needs. For this book to come into being, there had to be a reading public that desired the work, and wanted to consume it as a commodity. The social tension between riches and poverty had to exist—that is, the distinction between rich and poor—for the narrative of a rich Job who loses his wealth to be invented. And there needed to be an author who attempted to relieve, to some extent, his own psychic anxieties by the composition of the work.

2. *What Does It Do to You If You Read It?*

As in the previous chapter, on the Song of Songs, I shall be trying to answer this question in two ways. One is to examine how the text has been received and interpreted by readers of the past. The other is to study the effects on readers of our own time.

² See my chapter, 'Deconstructing the Book of Job', in *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 106-23 (also published in *The Bible as Rhetoric: Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility* [ed. Martin Warner; Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature; London: Routledge, 1990], pp. 65-80).

a. *The Effects of the Text on Former Readers*

I think that we can identify four strands in the history of interpretation of the book of Job. In the first, Job has been seen as the ideal patient man, piously and fatalistically accepting his suffering as the will of God. This view prevailed in both Jewish and Christian interpretation up to the Renaissance. There then appeared the reading that saw Job as the champion of reason against dogma, of empirical observation against tradition. In the modern period, another image of Job has been developed, that sees him as the victim of a cruel and absurd world, and that finds even in the divine speeches a defence of a cosmic irrationality. The character Job, in other words, has been constructed according to the ideals of each age. The fourth strand in interpretation, which has persisted up until the present, is the conception of the book as 'wisdom'. In traditional interpretation that meant that the speeches as well as the narrative were didactic or moral literature, and moral truth could be supported equally by the speeches of the friends and by Job's (if anything, the friends' speeches were more serviceable for sound morality than the angry and intemperate speeches of Job). In modern critical interpretation, the categorization of the book as 'wisdom' continues by means of the construct of the 'wisdom movement' or 'wisdom school' in Israel. Questionable though the idea is that there was such a movement or group within ancient Israelite society, it is currently the prevailing paradigm for reading the book.

Now the effects of those styles for interpretation have been either a misreading of the book (I mean, a reading that I cannot accept or even sympathize with or tolerate), or an unnatural and dogmatically conditioned limitation on the interpretational possibilities for it.

In the case of the most ancient, and (to judge by its longevity) most persuasive, interpretation—of Job as the ideal patient sufferer—the reading is so palpably untrue to the book as a whole (as I and people who think like me would say) that I feel constrained to offer a reason for its existence. There is of course some colour for the picture of Job's patience in the narrative of the first two chapters—but then there is always *some* ground for misreadings. We could perhaps suggest that readers have rarely

got beyond the first two chapters and therefore have thought that the character of Job was adequately presented in these chapters. Or it could be that the portrait of Job in the first two chapters has determined how readers have read the later and quite different portrayal of Job in the rest of the book. But I think it more likely that the misreading of Job as a patient sufferer should be construed as due to readers' resistance to the portrait of Job's intemperate and near-blasphemous speech, to their refusal to accept that the hero of a biblical book could be so hostile to heaven. Whatever the reason, the portrait of Job that I find inscribed on every page of the book except the first is entirely effaced by this interpretational mode. In this case, what the book of Job has done to its readers is less than what the readers have done to the book of Job; or rather, the book has so provoked them to moral outrage that they have felt it necessary to suppress the evidence that has been staring them in the face.

The second strain in interpretation—which sees Job as representing reason and experience over against dogma—has much more grounding in the book of Job itself, but it nevertheless represents a projection of the interpreters' self-understanding upon the book, and is a distortion (as I think it) of the book itself. For, on the one hand, it minimizes Job's attachment to the conventional theology of his age; for the fact is that although he dissents from the friends' views of exact retribution, he nevertheless believes in retribution of some kind (for he believes that an innocent man like himself should *not* suffer), and in every other regard he stands for the religious dogma of his time rather than for unfettered rationality. And, on the other hand, such a reading turns the book of Job into nothing but a collection of Joban speeches, a vehicle for Job's ideas—and so must systematically write the prologue, the friends' speeches, the divine speeches and the epilogue out of the book. In this case, what the book has done to its readers is to so engage their sympathies with the character Job as to make them lose sight of the book as a whole.

The third strain in interpretation—which reads Job as representing humanity as the victim of an absurd universe—does indeed take the divine speeches into consideration, making them an affirmation of the irrationality (from the human perspective)

of the divine activity. But it too, like the second strain, essentially makes the book of Job a collection of speeches by Job and negates the book as a whole, with its prologue, its epilogue, and the speeches of the friends.

As for the fourth strain in interpretation, the categorization of the book of Job as 'wisdom' has functioned to protect the argument of the book and its assumptions from criticism. True, in scholarly language the term 'wisdom' means, properly speaking, 'Israel's wisdom tradition' and it does not imply the critic's assent to its validity. Yet in practice the stance taken by virtually all scholarly readers of the book is complicity with the text. The book of Job is said by all those who write commentaries on it to be a masterpiece of world literature and to express profound insights into the human condition. The result has been that Job himself or the book as a whole has become virtually immune from criticism—even though the book itself makes it crystal clear that Job's whole argument in defence of his innocence results from his ignorance of the reasons for his suffering, and even though the speeches of the friends, which form the bulk of the book, are said by the most authoritative voice in the book, God's, to be in the wrong. If Job is entirely under a misapprehension and the friends have not spoken what is right, where is the 'truth' in the book of Job? No one seems to have seen it this way, no one seems to have been troubled about regarding as 'wisdom' a book that—by its own admission—is mostly wrong. The history of the interpretation of the book, I conclude, shows that what the book does to you is suppress your critical instincts and persuade you to adopt the book's implicit ideologies.

b. *The Effects of the Text on its Modern Readers*

As with the chapter on the Song of Songs, I acknowledge that this part of the study would have been better if I had carried out in-depth interviews with many readers of our own time. Not inclined to the privations attendant on rigorous fieldwork, I decided rather to offer my own reactions to the book, inasmuch as I could reconstruct them from a time before I thought as I do now, as the sample from which I could extrapolate to other readers.

1. The book of Job persuades its readers that there is a causal relation between piety and prosperity, and that that relation is unproblematic.

I mean to say: the hero of the book is a pious and prosperous man, whose prosperity is the consequence of his piety. That is a given of the story, and it is never challenged. God has blessed Job and all that he has, and there is no mistake about that. What the book raises as an issue is not whether prosperity should indeed ever be regarded as a consequence of piety, but the question whether a poor and suffering man, as Job has ostensibly become, can be pious. In focusing upon the piety or otherwise of this most untypical poor man, Job, the book deflects attention from the deeper and prior question, why anyone should imagine there is any connection at all between wealth (or poverty) and godliness.

In short, while the problem *raised* by the book is whether a suffering man can be an innocent one, the problem of the book (i.e. the problem constituted by the book) is a different one. And it is inscribed, though silently, in its first *waw* consecutive: Job was a perfect man *and* he had seven thousand sheep (1.1-3). In the *faux-naïf* style of the narrative,³ that *and* means to say *and so*: his great riches are a consequence of his perfect piety. That is the point at which the real problematic of the book is embedded—but the narrative craftily persuades readers that in v. 2 of the first chapter we are still seeing the stage set, and that the real action, the real problematic, has yet to be developed and unfolded.

Consider how fundamental that *waw* consecutive is for the book as a whole, how that *waw* or ‘pin’ is the linchpin for the work. If there never was, or if no one had imagined there was, a causal connection between piety and prosperity, the Satan could never have asked his question, God could not have authorized the testing of Job, Job could not have suffered, and there could have been no book of Job. For the Satan’s question asks God to remove the prosperity to see whether piety collapses—and *that* question hangs upon the assumption that there is a relation of

³. On which see my paper, ‘False Naivety in the Prologue to Job’, *Hebrew Annual Review* 9 (1985), pp. 127-36.

cause and effect between piety and prosperity.

What is more, the book as a whole affirms the truth of the doctrine of reward for piety; for Job, the most perfect of humans, ends up the wealthiest. Even if he has been temporarily impoverished, his poverty is only temporary. Once again, however, readers have their attention deflected from this subliminal assertion of the book, for the narrative has convinced us that Job has been unjustly treated—Job himself has made out this case eloquently and persuasively—and the narrative has aroused in us a desire for Job’s vindication, which means, in Job’s terms, the restitution of his fortunes. When we read at the end of the book that Job becomes wealthy again, we are glad for Job, for we like happy endings and we crave closure; and there is not one in a hundred among us who draws an ideological consequence from the plot and exclaims, Aha! so piety *does* lead to prosperity in the end!

Furthermore, what we are persuaded not to notice, by the flow of the narrative and by the attractiveness of the character Job, is that in fact Job has *not* been treated unjustly—not unless the doctrine of retribution is true. Job’s protest against the injustice of his treatment is very *sympathique*, so much so that it is a rare reader who resists him. But unless his piety *should have* been rewarded with wealth and health, there is no injustice in what he suffers, and no deserving in his restoration.

2. The book of Job persuades its readers that wealth is unproblematic, ethically speaking. Who among its readers is unable to sympathize with Job because he is a rich man? Few who read these lines, I should think, for anyone who can afford to buy books or spend non-productive time in public libraries is already a wealthy person, by world standards, and is already, in a way, a member of the social class of Job and his friends.

I am too, and I never raised this question until once, when I was lecturing on Job, I had this response from one of my audience: ‘Man, I don’t like this dude Job. He is a rich man, and I am not. I have to get up at four in the morning to go to work before I come to school; I have to do three jobs to keep my family and pay for my education. Why should I be interested in the story of this rich man? He has nothing to do with me.’

Now I know that the book of Job takes wealth for granted as a good thing, even representing extreme wealth as going hand in hand with great virtue. It persuades its readers who are wealthy that it is perfectly all right to be wealthy, that they should not feel bad about it, in fact that they should not even stop to think about it. It is a rare reader, one who has not yet been inscribed in the scholarly literature (but I am putting him there at this very moment!), who resists such persuasion, reading from his own place.

3. It persuades readers that explanations of reality, and especially genetic and causal explanations, are worth having. In the story of the book of Job, Job is suffering, and thereupon the primary question on the agenda of the book becomes, *Why* is he suffering? What is the *cause* of the suffering? The book is so structured as to supply an ostensibly complete answer to that question; that is the function of the prologue.

Now it is a typically intellectual attitude, that explanations for states of affairs are worth having. I myself, being an intellectual, naturally think it is good that there are some people in the world who try to *understand* it and *account* for it. So I am by profession very partial to the book of Job. We intellectuals take delight in everything that confirms our own orientation. So we do not question the book in this regard; we do not even notice that it is subliminally supporting us. And, especially, we do not know that this orientation of ours is not natural, not obvious, not obligatory. For *understanding* reality is only one option among many when we are faced with an object or a state of affairs. There are people who think it more important to change the way things are than to understand it, and others prefer to use things or enjoy them than to do either. Faced with a bicycle, we can choose to study how it works, or to discover its pre-history—or to ride it. And there is no reason to think that understanding the origins of the bicycle will be of any use at all in learning how to ride it or in getting from A to B.

Faced with suffering, we have no reason to think that understanding its origin will have much value. Knowing how to handle it, how to behave ourselves while suffering, how to remain ourselves while suffering—these may be much more important.

But the book of Job persuades us, and especially because we do not notice it is doing it, that understanding, and understanding origins, is the one thing worth doing.

4. It persuades readers that it somehow answers the problem of suffering. Readers are in fact generally quite content with the conclusion of the book. They do not feel that it raises more questions than it solves, or that its whole approach is wrong-headed. Indeed, throughout the history of interpretation of the book it seems to have been the case that whatever the explanation of suffering that readers have found it to be proffering, the book of Job's explanation has been thought to be the best. Readers of the book of Job, in other words, have almost always agreed with it. It is hard to find a reader who says, I believe I understand what the book of Job is saying, and I don't agree with it.

So successful is the book at persuading readers of the rightness of its position that readers rarely notice the enormous paradox the book presents: the book is generally regarded as dealing with the problem of human suffering in general but the narrative is clearly about a quite exceptional occurrence. For the Job of this book is a very untypical human being, since he is the most perfect and the most wealthy man of all. How can the experience of such a man be characteristic of human experience generally? How, indeed, can his experience have any relevance at all to the rest of us?

And if that conclusion is resisted, and it is claimed that the book is not principally about the man Job but about humans generally, what then? If the testing of Job is meant to establish not just whether Job himself serves God 'for naught' but whether it is possible for human beings in general to do so, then Job's maintenance of his piety under the onslaughts of the Satan has resolved the question once and for all. He has proved the possibility of disinterested piety. If that is so, then the reason for Job's suffering cannot be (or is unlikely to be) the reason for anyone else's suffering, for the highly successful experiment with Job will surely not have to be repeated. The book, however, persuades readers that they are reading about a universal human problem, when in reality they are reading about Job's problem—a problem that is, by the logic of the narrative, no one

else's.

What the book of Job does to you if you read it, in short, is to inveigle you into a willing (or unconscious) suspension of disbelief. By its charm and its force, by its rhetoric and its passion, it persuades its readers of ideas that cannot be defended—or should not. It engages our sympathy for a character we know to be labouring under a vast illusion, we ourselves knowing from the prologue how misconceived his complaints against heaven are. It convinces us to pose the problems of suffering in the terms the book itself offers us, and to profess ourselves more or less content with the answers that it gives. That, at any rate, is the testimony of the ages to the book of Job. Unless criticism of it has been suppressed, or self-repressed, it has had its way with readers—which is, no doubt, what we mean when we call it a great and powerful work of literature.