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# TRESPASSING A MONUMENT: A LACANIAN VISIT TO UZ

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Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* opens with a trespass. The aged and blind patricide, Oedipus, stumbling upon a sacred grove, is warned by the chorus:

Stop —  
sufferer, stranger, you must not trespass!  
Move, come down among us now —  
closer, a good safe way from the grove,  
you hear, old traveler, man of grief?<sup>1</sup>

Learning the trespasser is the ill-fated Oedipus, the chorus hesitates between sympathy and curiosity:

It's a terrible thing, my friend,  
to wake an old grief, laid to rest so long . . .  
nevertheless I long to learn —<sup>2</sup>

The citizens of Colonus long to learn of Oedipus' "dreadful agony," and

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1 *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fágles (N.Y.: The Viking Press, 1982), 271.

2 *Ibid.*, 295.

though Oedipus at first refuses to speak of it, they insist:

But the rumor spreads throughout the world,  
it will not die — I want to hear it, friend,  
hear the truth from you.<sup>3</sup>

The story, as presented to us, is a complex telling within a telling. The old tale of suffering is told within Sophocles' own dramatic telling. That telling of a telling continues in history as Freud's retelling, focused upon *Oedipus the King*, and Jacques Lacan's telling of Freud's retelling, focusing upon *Oedipus at Colonus*. Through Freud and Lacan, that telling of a telling becomes the "key-narrative," "formative myth," or "specimen story of psychoanalysis" in its continuing development.<sup>4</sup>

It is a "terrible thing . . . to wake an old grief . . .," but we too have heard "rumors" and long to "hear the truth" of another sufferer whose story involves a telling within a telling, a story that maintains itself as an unsolved riddle within Jewish Scripture and nearly at the center of the Christian Bible. That location in the Christian Bible is apt, for early Christian artists in catacomb and on sarcophagus imagined Job the sufferer as forerunner and analog of Christ, God's good man given over to Satan and agony, and restored finally to God's right hand.<sup>5</sup> If some "Other" has spoken through the Oedipus tale, "specimen story of psychoanalysis," could it be that the inexhaustible puzzle presented by the Book of Job carries a similarly compelling voice marking that tale of suffering a likely candidate for "specimen story" of the Judeo-Christian tradition? Certainly it has attracted yet mystified scholars from the early rabbis to current literary critics, Jewish and Christian exegetes, psychologists, novelists, poets, and dramatists. Within the latter categories, it has attracted the likes of Karl Jung (*Answer to Job*), H.G. Wells

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3 Ibid.

4 S. Felman, "Beyond Oedipus: The Specimen Story of Psychoanalysis," *Lacan and Narration*, ed. by R. Davis (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983), 1022-1023.

5 See references to Job in early Christian art in Pierre du Bourguet, *Early Christian Art* (N.Y.: Wm. Morrow and Co., 1971), 56, and plates on 98 and 116.

(*The Undying Fire*), Robert Frost (*The Masque of Reason*), and Archibald MacLeish (*J.B.*). It was, in fact, MacLeish who found that sensitivities to Job run deep, leading him in the face of violent attacks to defend *J.B.* in a *New York Times* article of 1958, an article from which we borrowed for our essay's title, "About a Trespass on a Monument."<sup>6</sup>

But what leads us to our own "trespass" on this intractable puzzle that seems so far from solution after so many centuries of analysis? That "it is there" seems answer enough, or one might turn to the motive of the citizens of Colonus, who longed to learn of an "old grief," to hear a "truth" beyond the "rumor" of the story. But especially our own reading of Lacan, and of many readers' readings of Lacan, his search for "purloined" truth hidden in plain sight, for creative ways into a "key-narrative," have led us to try some Lacanian-style strategies on the Book of Job. It is in the company of Lacan, in a new awareness of his style of inquiry, that we undertake this trespass on a monument.

We could easily fill a sizable essay or small book simply cataloging the recent literature on Job. We would find, however, that the larger part of those efforts fit into the useful but limited scope of what Robert Alter has called "excavative scholarship," work "intended to uncover the original meanings of biblical words, the life situations in which specific texts were used, the sundry sources from which longer texts were assembled."<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, so much energy has gone into Ugaritic and Aramaic studies in relation to Job, and so much more into analyzing supposed successive editions and additions to some postulated original text, that little energy seems to have been left to struggle with the total work, the overwhelming puzzle that continues to confront the reader. In order to save our own energies and your patience for the central task, we will simply call attention

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6 *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 1958, Sec. 2 page 5.

7 R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (N.Y.: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), 13.

to SR Supplements, volume 16, *Studies in the Book of Job*, and especially to Ronald Williams' contribution, "Current Trends in the Study of the Book of Job."<sup>8</sup>

Describing how he had earlier in his career collected 1,500 bibliographical cards on Job, Williams goes on to cite over 100 further books and articles of some import on the book of Job since 1954.<sup>9</sup> He does note a current trend toward dealing with the whole of the Book of Job as it appears in the canon, especially through attention to irony, satire, and comedy, citing works by Roderick MacKenzie, William Power, Gerald Larue, Edwin Good, Matitiah Tsevat, James Williams, David Robertson, William Whedbee, Dermot Cox, and Robert Polzin.<sup>10</sup> Even these works, however, often treat less than the whole of the work. David Robertson, for example, felt compelled to omit chapter 28 and the Elihu speeches in his 1973 study,<sup>11</sup> and one might add the rather strange series of omissions in Stephen Mitchell's 1987 translation, *The Book of Job*, in spite of the "holistic" claims leaning on Indian and Zen insights in the work's "Introduction."<sup>12</sup>

The larger part of Ronald Williams' "Current Trends in the Study of the Book of Job" makes clear that in spite of some attempts to treat Job as a whole, far more time continues to be devoted to identifying "later additions" to a frame story, a dialogue, or to the Yahweh speeches, sometimes developing theories of four, six, or more stages in the growth of the text. To cite a few recent commentaries, Jean Steinmann's 1955 work, *Le Livre de Job*, judged chapters 24, 28, the six chapters of the Elihu speeches, and

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8 *Studies in the Book of Job*, ed. by W. Aufrecht (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1985), 1-27.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 18-22.

11 D.A. Robertson, "The Book of Job: A Literary Study," *Soundings* 56 (1973), 446-469.

12 S. Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987). Mitchell lists over 50 "deletions" and over 40 "omissions," including the Elihu speeches.

the section on the ostrich in chapter 39 as “secondary,” while the Yahweh Speeches (chapters 38-41) and the Epilogue (42:7-17) were identified as later additions by the original author.<sup>13</sup> Samuel Terrien considered the Elihu Speeches to be secondary in his 1963 commentary,<sup>14</sup> and George Fohrer’s *Das Buch Hiob* regarded the Elihu Speeches and chapter 24 as secondary, the third cycle of the Dialogue in disorder, and the Behemoth and Leviathan passages as later additions.<sup>15</sup> Marvin Pope’s *Job* volume in the *Anchor Bible* (1973) counted chapter 28 and the Elihu Speeches as later accretions,<sup>16</sup> as did Jean Leveque’s two-volume *Job et son Dieu* (1970).<sup>17</sup>

Ronald Williams sums up these tendencies in recent commentaries and scholarly articles on Job thus:

It might indeed be said that there is hardly any permutation or combination of arrangements of these materials or assessments of genuineness or spuriousness of passages or sections that has not been advanced by some commentator. This chaotic situation led Otto Eissfeldt to declare that the literary analysis of the Book of Job “is much more dependent upon the interpretation of the book, based upon intuitive understanding, than is the case with other books, and so to a much greater degree at the mercy of subjective feelings and personal taste.”<sup>18</sup>

With few exceptions, the Book of Job continues to be dealt with as a basket of fragments, as the balk at an archaeological dig, to be read and tagged layer by layer. In spite of a few experiments in reading the work’s message in terms of irony, satire, and comedy, most interpretations continue to avoid problem chapters, omit passages that seem disruptive, and settle for a repetition of the often voiced view that the Book of Job is a questioning of retributive justice and an appeal to final satisfaction through personal encounter with the divine.

Before beginning our own trespass, an appreciation of Robert Alter’s

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13 Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1955.  
 14 Neuchatel: Delachaux & Niestle, 1963.  
 15 Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1963.  
 16 Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1973.  
 17 Paris: J. Gabalda, 1970.  
 18 R. Williams, op. cit., 13.

work directing us toward a renewal of a serious literary approach to the Bible is in order. Alter's radicalizing of the field can be traced to his refusal of the popular designation "Bible as Literature." As he explained,

The notion of "the Bible as literature," . . . is needlessly concessive and condescending toward literature in any language. . . . Rather than viewing the literary character of the Bible as one of several "purposes" or "tendencies" . . . , I would prefer to insist on a complete interfusion of literary art with theological, moral, or historiosophical vision, the fullest perception of the latter dependent on the fullest grasp of the former.<sup>19</sup>

Further, Alter's identification of the Bible as "historicized prosefiction," of biblical narrative as "imaginative reenactment," carries the new spirit even further along a liberating route. His call for "close reading" and an alertness to the narrative art's "fine calibrations" provide a creative way into the text.

But Jacques Lacan provides a further radical and creative expansion beyond Alter. While Alter argues the applicability of the term "fiction" to biblical narratives, Lacan tests the more radical assertion that "truth always manifests itself in a structure of fiction." He writes:

Thus it is from somewhere other than the Reality that it concerns that Truth derives its guarantee: it is from Speech. Just as it is from Speech that Truth receives the mark that establishes it in a fictional structure.<sup>20</sup>

Further, while Alter calls us properly to a careful reading of the text before us, Lacan alerts us to the split between "manifest text" and "unconscious discourse," the "radical split of a subject irretrievably unwhole."<sup>21</sup> While Alter calls us to a careful focus on conscious artistry, Lacan describes a revolution that decenters the narrative itself as an effect of the unconscious.<sup>22</sup> Reminding us that the psychoanalyst's dream-analysis is itself the interpretation of narration, Lacan and his disciples call us to recognize that

19 Alter, *op. cit.*, 18-19.

20 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection Translated from the French* by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.), 306.

21 Robert con Davis, "Introduction: Lacan and Narration," *Lacan and Narration: the Psychoanalytic Difference in Narrative Theory*, ed. R. Davis (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983), 857.

22 Lacan, *op. cit.*, 295-296.

texts are already the result of a previous interpretation hidden in sliding significations, moving as displacements and condensations.<sup>23</sup> While Alter calls our attention to “type-scenes,” to modulated “repetitions” and “strategic variations,” Lacan points to the significance of the unconscious process speaking through gaps, slips, lapses, and disjunctions.<sup>24</sup>

The satisfying folk-scene pictures Job of Uz, fertile and prosperous, “blameless and upright,” punctiliously making offerings on the chance “It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts” (1:5). This scene of wholeness with but the hint of a possibility of hidden flaws is pierced by an unknown, certainly “unknown” to Job — a conversation between Yahweh and the Satan in that place where the sons of God present themselves before the Deity. The author of Job has placed within the seemingly “known” of Job’s life the disruptive “unknown” of Yahweh’s heavenly deliberations. Job’s life will now be determined by that which he desires and lacks, knowledge of heaven’s judgment. The author has established the absolute Truth of Job’s uprightness within God’s own assertion, but that certainty rests within an uncertainty. If Job and his friends, human beings, have no access to God’s conversations, how is the reader to interpret his own access? Already the question of interpretation has itself become a subject of the Book of Job. A further layer of unknowing, of uncertainty, immediately becomes apparent when we find that heaven is not of one mind, but of two, regarding the uprightness of Job’s motives. The Satan, whether servant, spy, or “left-hand” to God, disputes Yahweh’s own reading of Job. Within the “prologue” of the Book of Job we have the primal telling of the book’s disputed hermeneutic, the first argument over its meaning: Yahweh reads Job *ne way*, Satan quite another.

The downward motion of the plot’s trajectory from idyllic begin-

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23 Davis, *op cit.*, 849-853.

24 Lacan, *op ct.*, 299; Davis, *op. cit.*, 850-853.



nings and heavenly dialogue through perfect patience and intended comfort comes to earth in the dialogue and Job's cursing of the day of his birth. Here is revealed within the complex of uncertainties a new uncertainty. Job and his "friends" have as their subject "Job," and it is soon revealed that they are of two minds regarding the standing of the suffering patriarch. Is there not the hint that heaven's conversation fixed on Job and its two minds regarding him may have been but the mirror-image of earth's own situation as projected there by earthlings? The paradox of "religion" itself emerges in the disjunctive yet reflected patterns of the prologue and dialogue. Humans seek certainty beyond earthly doubt and dispute. Heaven, the very private world of God, would seem to satisfy the desire that drives us toward that which we lack, the uncontested Truth of our goodness. But our positing of certainty and Truth in that "Other" simply multiplies the uncertainty, for our own unwholeness, the split subject itself, cannot be satisfied by heaven at its word. Heaven communicates in "word," and word itself is fractured. In Kafkan style, the word, even if we could receive it, is of two minds, is split as radically as humanity's judgments. For just a moment there is a delay, we are led to consider the possibility that Job's patient acceptance of the two hands of God (2:10) might confirm God's reading against that of the Satan. That hope is dashed to earth on earth as Job opens his curse-laden speech (3:1-26). The engine of religion is desire whose language defines our lack, a tormenting absence of certainty. Our positing that certainty in the Absolute Other finds that any positing of certainty in the unknown remains unknown and so uncertain. Yet something seems to change, for desire now moves "beyond the pleasure principle" and uncovers a preference for death. "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? (3:11)" The only avenue of certainty is the certainty of limit, the certainty of death itself.

But Job does not decide upon death. The dialogue exhibits a

movement and direction. The increasing passion of theological dispute, the multiple possibilities, and even disruptions within the two minds regarding Job's position move from preference for death to insistence upon a legal hearing in a court of law. The courtroom metaphor recurs, binding together the required presence of the Deity and the appeal to law:

Behold, I have prepared my case;  
I know that I shall be vindicated (15:18)

...  
I would lay my case before him  
and fill my mouth with arguments.  
I would learn what he would answer me,  
and understand what he would say to me (23:4-5).

...  
But he is unchangeable and who can turn him? . . .  
I am terrified at his presence . . .  
I am hemmed in by darkness . . . (23:13-17).

What have we here if not a return to the theme at the beginning of our essay, the Oedipus tale as “specimen story of psychoanalysis?” Desire for the mother, for a return to our days of ease and comfort, are challenged by the limits set by the father. Hatred fantasizes the father's death, bringing guilt, fear, a displacement focusing on our own loss or sacrifice, and a repression which blinds us to the inevitability of this truth in our own history. Freud found the power of the Oedipus tale to reside in our own personal shock of recognition:

If *Oedipus Rex* moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one . . . there must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the Oedipus. . . . His destiny moves us because it might have been ours — because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father.<sup>25</sup>

Is this the very power of the Book of Job that has kept us at its puzzle over

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25 S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), Vol. IV, 261-263.

the ages? Does a hidden voice within us answer to the Book of Job because it resonates to our own story? Is the Book of Job the theological equivalent to Freud's reading of Oedipus Rex? Job posits for us the Edenic dream and the fall into judgment, fear and uncertainty:

I was at ease and he broke me asunder . . . (16:12)

...  
Oh that I were as in the months of old . . .  
when my steps were washed with milk  
and the rock poured out for me streams of oil! (29:2-6)

Dreams of perfect happiness are shattered by the Father-God imposing limitations, rousing hatred and fantasized murder displaced as hatred of the day of our own birth. Feelings of guilt are repressed, control gives way to uncertainties. We somehow know the problem has to do with the presence/absence of the Father, with the law that dares limit us.

But the Job story continues. The dialogue itself becomes confused and fragmented, punctured finally by the speeches of a young stranger, Elihu. These lengthy speeches slow the action, build suspense, and, in spite of a preponderance of views to the contrary, do not seem out of place. The trajectory of the text has moved from the tale of idyllic beginnings to heaven's uncertainties, from God-Satan's two-mindedness to earth's parallel dispute regarding Job's status. Symmetry and disjunction are joined in a kind of "palimpsest," each scene reflected in the next, yet "rubbed out" to allow a shifting emphasis with no single central viewing point, more like a Taoist screen painting than a Western singleperspective-point canvas. This decentering requires no further recounting of the Satan's fate, for he has been reflected onto the screen of the earthly dialogues, incarnate in the interminable conflict. Neither will Elihu be accounted for in the epilogue, for his diverting of attention from Job's plight to God's creativity and creation will be swallowed up and digested in the Yahweh Speeches.

The Yahweh Speeches of chapters 38 and 39, to our view, are

most creatively interpreted by Stephen Mitchell, who cites Oriental parallels to this appeal to nature's cosmic variety,<sup>26</sup> and by Robert Alter, whose "close reading" of the poetry of Job reveals God's reversal of the narrowness of Job's curse-speech (chap. 3) through a panoramic vision of creation (chap. 38).<sup>27</sup> Pointing out the anticipations of the perspective of the Voice from the Whirlwind in certain passages of the dialogue, and the bridge provided by Elihu's invoking of the wonders of creation, Alter compares Job's speech in chapter 3 with God's response in chapter 38:

In direct contrast to all this withdrawal inward and turning out of lights, God's poem is a demonstration of the energizing power of panoramic vision. Instead of the death wish, it affirms from line to line the splendor and vastness of life, beginning with a cluster of arresting images of the world's creation and going on to God's sustaining of the world in the forces of nature and the variety of the animal kingdom.<sup>28</sup>

Alter compares Job's reference to elements of the world viewed as mere "reflectors or rhetorical tokens of his suffering," to God's view in which "each existing thing (has) its own intrinsic and often strange beauty."<sup>29</sup> This includes, finally, even the culminating poetry of chapter 39 where hippopotamus and crocodile reveal God's immense and awesome world beyond human grasp.<sup>30</sup> Job's response to God's Speeches, according to Alter,

. . . announces that he has been vouchsafed a gift of sight — the glimpse of an ungraspable creation surging with the power of its Creator:  
"By what the ear hears I have heard You  
but now my eyes have seen You."<sup>31</sup>

Little can be added to Alter's reading. The initial sense of the irrelevance of God's response to Job's questions vanishes. The dynamic involved might call to mind the Zen koan, where specific questions from the limited point

26 Mitchell, *op. cit.*, xviii-xx.

27 R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1985). See the whole of chapter IV, "Truth and Poetry in the Book of Job."

28 *Ibid.*, 97.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*, 108-110.

31 *Ibid.*, 110.

of view of the disciple meet with such answers as “the mountains are green and the rivers blue,” “the murmuring of the stream,” “the oak tree in the garden,” or “a single blade of grass.”<sup>32</sup> Further, it should be noted that God’s response not only refuses the narrowness of Job’s frame of reference, it refuses to substitute for Job’s self-centrism some other centrism, even a theocentrism! The dynamic symmetry of the Book of Job thus moves from idyllic folktale and vision of heaven as humans might see it, a vision of God as having no other interest than the righteousness of his servant Job, through the uncertainties of heaven and earth’s divided mind, to the Voice from the Whirlwind which opens to a cosmic view of the extravagant variety of nature without reference either to humanity, or to any limited focus on the Deity. The current Kyoto School’s Zensunyata philosophy may be relevant here. As Keiji Nishitani explains:

. . . On the field of sunyata, the center is everywhere. Each thing in its own selfness shows the mode of being of the center of all things. Each and every thing becomes the center of all things, and, in that sense, becomes the absolute center. This is the absolute uniqueness of things, their reality.<sup>33</sup>

In such a de-centric view, the Deity might be viewed as sharing salvific significance with every detail of creation. Nishitani states:

Goethe says that things that will pass are metaphors of the Eternal . . . yet so long as there is nothing like an eternal thing to serve as its archetype, the metaphor as such is the primal reality or fact. It is metaphor even as primal fact, and primal fact even as metaphor. A Zen master extends his staff and says: “If you call this a staff you cling to it; if you do not call it a staff you depart from the facts. So what should you call it then?” . . . The fact that the staff is this staff is a fact in such a way as to involve at the same time a deliverance of the self. In this the fact appears as a primal factuality. The point at which this fact can be comprehended in a primal manner is the point of deliverance where one becomes a Son of God, a Son of Buddha.<sup>34</sup>

If the “specimen story” quality of the Book of Job extends to the Jesus story

32 See, for example, the discussion of “Koan Practice and Koan Collections” in chapter 2 of H. Domoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, Vol. I (N.Y.: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1988).

33 K. Nishitani, trans. Jan Van Bragt, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1982), xxx.

34 *Ibid.*, 157.

of Christianity, one might wonder whether “Christocentrism” adequately expresses this dynamic of God’s response as a refusal of “centrism” itself. Perhaps the “Body of Christ” image comes closest to a sense of the diffusion of the sacred throughout an organism, but the usual Christian anthropocentric application would have to be extended to all the variety of nature to match the cosmic proportions of God’s answer to Job.

We might be tempted to close here, but the Book of Job refuses such a closure at the high point of the cosmic vision of the Voice from the Whirlwind. There is the strange symmetry of a return to folktale, sacrifices, punishments and rewards, substitute belongings and even substitute children, closing in a happy death within a family within a culture, within a folk-myth.

Lacan, the later *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Lacanian interpreter, Shoshana Felman, may help us to make sense of this return of the folk-story. First, however, allow us what may seem an irrelevant diversion but is, in fact, a response to Lacan’s concern for the “unconscious discourse” detectable in the gaps, slips, or discontinuities of the “manifest text.”

There is a strange absence from the larger part of the Book of Job and a strange presence at the close for which we have been given no preparation. Though the prologue of the book notes Job’s “seven sons and three daughters” and their sudden death (1:2, 19), no emotion is shown or special mention made of this particularly cataclysmic loss throughout the book. Even Job’s speeches in the dialogue focus on his own personal discomfort and frustration, his loss of power and prestige, rather than upon the tragedy of the loss of his children. How could the author pass over such tragic loss so easily and so completely? Poignant scenes in Hebrew literature focused on the death of offspring come to mind. Jacob refuses to be comforted by all his sons and daughters as he laments the supposed death of Joseph: “I shall

go down to Sheol to my son, mourning” (Gen. 37:33-35). David grieves the death of the very son who sought to undermine his rule:

O my son Absolam, my son, my son Absolam!  
Would I had died instead of you, O Absolam,  
my son, my son! (2 Sam. 18:33)

It is the deep feeling of mother for child that makes possible “Solomon’s Judgment” (1 Kings 3:23-27), and the feeling of father for daughter fills with pathos the story of Jephthah’s vow, the tale of a daughter who will be mourned “four days in the year” by the “daughters of Israel” (Judges 11:1-40). But the Book of Job avoids reference to any specific grief by Job over the deaths of his seven children. Suddenly, however, in the final summing up of the book, Job’s three daughters become a focus of attention; and for the first and only time, names are given members of Job’s family, names signifying tenderness and beauty:

And he called the name of the first Jemimah; and the name of the second Keziah; and the name of the third Kerenhappuch. And in all the land there were no women so fair as Job’s daughters; and their father gave them inheritance among their brothers (42:14-15).

Has a gap opened in the manifest text and placed the focus of a hidden discourse in plain sight? Mitchell notices this surprising “feminine” element and describes it as the “yinside of humanity acknowledged and honored.”<sup>35</sup> But are we here given a clue to an unconscious discourse displaced by the author in creating the language of a suffering Job? Could it be that the author felt forced to distance himself from the true focus of his suffering until his translation of it into the story of Job brought sufficient healing to allow a single hint before the book was closed?

We tentatively suggest that the author, a person of great poetic power and sensitivity, has marshalled all resources to reveal and yet withhold the painful personal loss of a loved one, likely a daughter, to some

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35 Mitchell, *op. cit.*, xxx.

disfiguring disease. In more than a metaphorical sense, it was “skin for skin” (2:4), Job’s agony was a “touching” of his “bone and his flesh” that led him to curse conception and birth itself (3:3):

Yea, let that night be barren;  
let no joyful cry be heard in it (3:7).

Is it his wife’s womb rather than his mother’s, his daughter’s birth, and the attendant “joyful cry” that he remembers? The parent-author would suffer agonies far beyond personal discomfort, would be confused by feelings of guilt and adamant regarding the child’s innocence. So the foray into heaven serves as assurance that it was no lapse in parental care that brought the disease, and God himself must witness to the child’s innocence, a claim Job would never compromise.

Alter, in his interpreting of the poetry of the Voice from the Whirlwind, notes an emphasis which may now gain in poignancy. Regarding God’s Speech in chapter 38, Alter states:

There is a second set of images in the first movement of God’s speech that harks back to Job’s initial poem, namely, the imagery of physical generation and birth. Since this imagery . . . is imposed metaphorically by the poet as a way of shaping the material, it provides even clearer evidence of how the poem in Chapter 38 was purposely articulated as a grand reversal of the poem in Chapter 3.<sup>36</sup>

Later, Alter refers to this emphasis in imagery again:

That continuity is reinforced by the carryover of images of procreation from the cosmogonic and meteorological sections of the poem to the zoological section.<sup>37</sup>

The power and scope of that imagery is awesome. The sea itself is pictured as emerging from the womb and being wrapped in “its swaddling band” (38:8-9), and the rain and dew are “fathered” while the ice emerges from a womb (38:28-29). Parenting itself is celebrated, as both the lion and the raven hunt food for their hungry young (38:39-41). Birthing is described

<sup>36</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 99.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.



with care:

Do you know when the mountain goats bring forth?  
Do you observe the calving of the hinds?  
Can you number the months that they fulfill,  
And do you know the time when they bring forth,  
When they crouch and bring forth their offspring,  
And are delivered of their young? (Job 39:1-3)

The author, we suggest, after suffering the agony of the innocent daughter's wasting away, displaced the expression of pain through a distancing named Job, and felt moved to name a surprising comfort he had found for his loss through the contemplation of nature. All nature seemed to him to be revealed as birthing, a cosmic parenting diffused through rain and ice, mountain-goat and eagle, a parenting shared by the Deity with all creation. His own loss decentered and shared in all the cosmos, the author allowed one fantasy before closing the Book of Job, a naming of daughters, disfigurement reversed in perfect beauty: ". . . in all the land there were no women so fair as Job's daughters" (42:15). As a final act, in the place of haunting guilt, the author offers through Job an unusual gift to his daughter, "inheritance among (her) brothers." The Book of Job would stand as record of parental sufferings and the healing force of cosmic parenting in nature, a monument to his daughter he perhaps wished might one day be discovered.

But let us close with a wider view of the import of the book of Job's return to folk-story in the conclusion of the manifest text. Job receives God's approval, prays for his chastened friends, is restored, rejoins society, has a family, lives to see four generations of descendants, and dies.

Here Shoshana Felman's analysis of the meaning of Lacan's preference for *Oedipus at Colonus* and its return to the "telling of the story" may be suggestive. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, it is Oedipus' own telling of the tale that provides a way back into history:

*Oedipus at Colonus* is about the transformation of Oedipus' story into

history: it does not tell the drama, it is *about the telling* (and retelling) of the drama. It is, in other words, about the historization of Oedipus' destiny through the *symbolization* — the transmutation into speech — of all the Oedipal desire.<sup>38</sup>

We suggest that the return to folk-telling at the end of Job serves a similar purpose, putting “symbolization” and “interpretation” before us as our way toward healing and discovery. It is not that “myth” is put in the place of “real life,” but we are called to the quest for meaning, which is language and reinterpretation of old interpretations. Any one mode of telling, any one symbolization, is decentered, and the way is opened to a creative life-hermeneutic.

But we should also note a difference in Job from the Oedipal dynamic. Oedipus remains driven by a “death-instinct” repeated in the curse he lived and pronounces on his sons, marking a future haunted by the past, driven to “repetition-compulsion.”<sup>39</sup> But Job takes life up again, rubbing clean the past, leaving behind the burden of a heavenly contest and an unbearable suffering. The folk-tale concludes by accepting life and blessings as well as death. The hundreds of student papers on the Book of Job I’ve read, with few exceptions, conclude that the message is: “God teaches us through suffering.” I sometimes wonder whether that is much of an improvement over the faulted view that “suffering is punishment for guilt.” I would suggest that the return to folktale calls us to a creative telling that accepts the route of blessing, family, and society as readily as heavenly contest or suffering. Is it not that even the route of suffering is decentered in a history open to creative multiplicity and many modes of telling? Here, if the Job-Christ stories resonate as “specimen stories,” one might reexamine the directions Christian history and theology themselves have taken, witnessing to an insistence on the suffering mode, “taking up the cross daily,” to the

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38 Felan, *op. cit.*, 1030.

39 *Ibid.*, 1031.

impoverishment of creative discovery of ways of servanthood, family life, social involvement, and a multitude of possibilities. Perhaps the Voice from the Whirlwind has been lost, the shared center without limit, the point of deliverance with a multitude of forms. But both Oedipus and Job could take our discussion too far here for any easy return. As the messenger announces toward the close of *Oedipus at Colonus* (for which we might substitute the words “Job of Uz”):

My countrymen,  
the quickest way to tell you is this:  
Oedipus is gone.

But what took place — it’s not easy in the telling,  
Not easy in all that really happened there.<sup>40</sup>

Job’s return to a placid, folkloric Eden, to a long life whose richness is measured in sheep and camels, oxen and she-asses, sons and daughters, closes the revealing gaps, but is “not easy in the telling” when placed in juxtaposition to the heavenly dispute, Job’s agony and curses, and the panoramic vision of cosmic parenting. The awesome task of hermeneutics, never completed, always disrupted, is handed over to the reader as the persistent puzzle of any profound work of literature:

. . . it’s not easy in the telling,  
Not easy in all that really happened there.

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<sup>40</sup> Sophocles’ *Three Theban Plays*, op. cit., 361. We have replaced the word “short” in the passage by what we believe is the more accurate meaning of the Greek, “easy.”