

The Biblical Question

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The oldest fragment of tradition in the Hebrew Bible — quite literally, biblical Israel’s first utterance on the world stage — is a question. It occurs as the chorus of the famous “Song of the Sea,” in Exodus 15: “Who is like you among the mighty, ETERNAL ONE, who is like you, majestic in splendor, awesome in praises, working wonders?” The rhetorical form is interrogative, but the clear momentum of the verse advances, as well, both negation and exclamation: *None* is like you, O God! Who *could* there be? But then, could there be?

Think of a statement in which certainty and uncertainty commingle, in which the same words appear now one way, now another, a statement that conveys in one the resoundingly triumphant resolution of all doubt and the quiet wonderment over the incommensurable and the unknown — think of such a paradoxical knot of an utterance, and you have some sense of both the ambitiousness and the playful elusiveness of the biblical question. Perhaps the earthly counterpart of Israel’s question “Who is like you, ETERNAL ONE?” is the psalmist’s awestruck rumination: “When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars you have established, what is the human being that you remember it, the child of Adam that you provide for it?” (Ps. 8:4-5). Here again, we find negation, exclamation, and wonderment united in a single utterance.

A phrase such as this that plumbs the inventory of the possible, daring the listener to find the absent alternative, is richly abundant in both the poetic and prose traditions of ancient Israel. A quick profile of the situation can be shown by comparing the first three books of the Pentateuch. In the Book of Genesis, I count no fewer than 123 questions, quite apart from the implied interrogative of subordinate clauses like “to see what he would call them” (2:19) or “whether you are really my son or not” (27:21). In the Book of Exodus, where narrative is less predominant, there are some 51

questions. In the Book of Leviticus, by way of contrast, I have counted only two. Why it should be that, once we move from the fiery uncertainties of the human and human-divine interaction celebrated in biblical narrative and poetry to the cool serenity of cultic ritual, we should witness such a radical diminution of the question is yet one more question occasioned by this most enigmatic of literatures. Can it be that ritual inherently forecloses inquiry, or doubt, or exclamatory wonderment? Or are the motions of sacrifice and priestly oracle yet another disguise for inquiry? Is not the Bible itself — this purposeful montage of history and lore, this virtual labyrinth of rooms inside of rooms — a kind of question? It is not my aim to answer these questions here, but simply to share the habit of asking I continually find myself conditioned to adopt when looking at the Bible as I have done, professionally and personally, over many years.

I can suggest it best by displaying the biblical question in all its glorious variegation: as a vehicle of emphasis, of irony, of plaintiveness, of consternation, of wonderment, of challenge, of accusation; as a channel of passion, fear, and hope; as an emblem of humanness itself. We find question as both the high point of narrative development and the moment of departure for new movements in a story. If one were to remove everything in Genesis that is *not* a question, whole segments of stories would remain skeletally intact, at least for the

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reader familiar with the tradition. It is not hard, for example, to recover the context of the following:

“Why are you distressed, and why is your face fallen?”

“Where is your brother Abel?”

“Am I my brother’s keeper?”

“What have you done?” (GEN. 4:6-10)

Or especially the following:

“Will you sweep away the innocent with the wicked?...What if there be fifty righteous?...Will you then wipe out the place? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?...What if the fifty innocent should lack five?...What if forty should be found there?...What if thirty

should be found there?...What if twenty should be found there?

...What if ten should be found there?” (18:23-32)

Surely, we have here the currency of thought itself. And so, it behooves us to pore experimentally over the Bible’s different ways of asking, taking into account how context, ambiguity, and nuance work their magic.

To Ask with a Tongue Artfully Forked

The first full question encountered in Genesis is one posed, appropriately enough, by the serpent, and in language that elsewhere has another meaning: “Truly, has God said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the Garden?’” (*’Af ki ’amar ’elohim, lo’ to’khelu mi-kol ’etz ha-gan?*) (3:1) All other biblical uses of the expression *’af ki* are translatable as an exclamation: “All the more so that...!” But this option presupposes some dialogue missing from the story — not altogether impossible, by any means, but also not particularly explanatory. The ambiguity of the sentence is further underscored by the word *kol*, which in a negative clause can mean both “every” and “any.” Truly, has God said, You shall not eat from *every* tree of the garden? Has God truly said, You shall not eat from *any* tree of the garden? Meaning here is appropriately serpentine. It is apt that the vertigo of relative perspective that assails humanity’s ancestors at this point — their first truly human moment, and the event with which human history begins — be spoken with a tongue so artfully forked.

It is not until the Abraham cycle, in any case, that we find the potentialities of the question coming into full bloom. I have already noted the sequence of questions with which Abraham responds to the revelation of Sodom’s destruction, and I have suggested that much of the story can be surmised from the questions alone. But to isolate the questions thus, in the manner of a concordance, does not do justice to their dynamics. A safe rule of thumb in apprehending biblical questions is that question never functions in isolation from what is not question. In the bargaining over the fate of Sodom, the storyteller shows Abraham couching his questions in a deferential evasiveness:

Abraham approached and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous ones within the town — will you sweep [them all] away and not forgive the place even for the fifty righteous who are in its midst? How unthinkable it is that you should do a thing like that, to slay the righteous with the wicked, both of them together, how unthinkable! Will not the

Judge of all the earth do justice?” And THE ETERNAL said, “If I find fifty righteous in the city, I shall forgive the whole place for their sake.” And Abraham responded, saying: “Now please behold, I’ve undertaken to speak unto my Master, I who am but dust and ashes. Let’s suppose that five are lacking from the fifty righteous: Will you destroy the city in entirety because of five?” And THE ETERNAL said, “I would not destroy were I to find there forty-five.” And [Abraham] spoke further to [God], saying: “Let us suppose that forty can be found there...” And [God] said: “I would not do it, for the forty.” And he said, “Please do not be angry if I speak: Let us suppose that thirty can be found there...” And [God] said: “I would not do it if I found there thirty.” [Etc.] (18:23-32)

Like a trelliswork by its vines, questions are here plaited with flourishes of apology and flattery, even admonition, all highlighting the audacity of this creature of dust and ashes, the human questioner who dares to haggle out the costs of divine retribution as one might dicker, in the traditional Middle Eastern manner, over the price of a rug or a jar or a bauble.

This episode itself was precipitated by a question, one between God and himself (18:17-18): “Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am doing, when Abraham is surely to become a great and mighty nation, through whom all the nations of the earth are blessed...?” This moment of preface shows us the intimacy of the situation, an intimacy unthinkable for almost any other disputant.

Indeed, it is probably Abraham’s situation as one let in on the divine plan that shapes his interaction with God all the way back to Genesis 15. Prior to that point, his obedience to divine behest was wordless and instantaneous. When God told Abraham, “Get you forth from your land, your birthplace, your father’s house, to a land which I shall show you” (12.2), Abraham departed with no hesitation or questioning, accompanied by his extensive household and entourage. But some time after his entry to the Land of Canaan, after he has made its turmoil his own, after he has wandered its length, built altars, negotiated the division of his household, fought a war, and tithed its booty, he feels the pressure of time and the inconclusiveness of his situation. And these doubts finally crystallize as a question — a query not simply about the mysteries of divine intention but also about the shape and direction of the life he has been leading:

After these things, the word of THE ETERNAL came to Abram in a vision, saying: “Fear not, Abram! I am your shield. Your reward is very great.” And Abram said, “ETERNAL GOD, what do you give me, for I go childless, and the one in charge of my house is the Damascan, Eliezer?” (15:1-2)

It is our first glimpse of the inner life of Abraham. From the standpoint of tradition history, it very likely evolved as an explanation of the words of divine speech that precede it, which may have circulated independently as a refrain of song or poetry: “Fear not, Abram!...” What fear? What fear could this fearless man have manifested to have elicited such words of reassurance?

And so the scene unfolds, borrowing the rhythms of “prophetic doubt” familiar to us from other books and episodes that recount the call of a prophet. Moses, too, would ask, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? ...and

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when [the people] ask me ‘What is [God’s] name?’ what shall I say to them?...What if they do not believe me?” (EXOD. 3:11, 13). Isaiah, too, would voice his doubts, not directly as a question, but as an exclamation at his

insufficiency, which surely is an implied question: “Alas! I’m lost! For I’m a man of unclean lips, and among a people of unclean lips I dwell!” (ISA. 6:4). Jonah would phrase his prophetic doubt still more indirectly, as flight, only to be answered with a question, in the book’s final verse — the only biblical book to end with a question: “And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people, who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and also many cattle?” (JONAH 4:11).

Abraham, in any case, is answered more benevolently and unstintingly than his successors, though in several stages, and not without a play of silence, dread, and darkness. First, he is told, “Look toward the skies, and count the stars, if you can count them...so shall your offspring be.” (GEN. 15:5). Momentarily, it seems, Abraham is satisfied with the answer; the text records the silent assuredness of the faith by which Abraham would proverbially be known: “He believed in THE ETERNAL and [God] accounted it to him as righteousness.” (15:6) But then, Abram asks, “...how shall I know that I’ll possess [this land]?” — whereupon he is instructed to phrase his question as a ritual: “Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-

year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young bird." The offering is made, some birds of prey swoop down and must be scattered. Hours pass — after all, when God is asked the question, the answer can take a while. The sun goes down, and dread and slumber overtake the petitioner. When the answer comes, it is, from our perspective, richly informative, but to the petitioner, it is cryptic, murky, tinged with sadness and collective sorrow:

"Know, surely, that your offspring will be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall serve and be oppressed, four hundred years. And the nation they'll serve I am to judge, and afterward they'll come forth with great possessions. And as for you, you shall come to your ancestors in peace, and be buried at a ripe old age. And a fourth generation shall return here, [but not until then,] for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." (15:13-16)

It is the nearest we come in Genesis to the inner life of God. As the first word suggests, it is plucked, as it were, from the Tree of Knowledge, binding the family tree of procreation with the darkness of historical experience, and contrasting boldly with the effortlessly infinite promise, given earlier, of offspring who number as the stars. First, there must be an offspring. Only later could there be manyness, and only later, through the laborious task of cultural succession, could there be infinity of a sort: that of "the merest of all peoples" (DEUT. 7:7), who must extend themselves not in space but in time, embattled but rewarded, taking their place in the delicate balance of justice that governs the affairs of peoples and nations, in which one people must delay its advance while the iniquity of another "is not yet complete." This is close to being a biblical theory of history, and only against such a background can we understand the bargaining of Abraham and God over the Cities of the Plain, and the full force of the question: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (GEN. 18:25)

What Have You Done?

Because biblical literature evolved according to traditional poetic, narrative, and scribal patterns, we find the same types of questions surfacing again and again. In the Pentateuch, one of the most common is the plaintive accusation or admonition. "What have you done?" asks God of Cain after the disappearance of his brother Abel. "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the earth!" (4:10).

"What is this you have done to me?" asks Pharaoh of Abraham. "Why didn't you tell me she is your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' when I had taken her as my own for a wife?" (12:18-19).

"Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I truly bear a child?'" asks God of Abraham after the announcement that Sarah will bear a child (18:13).

"What have you done to us? What have I done to you? What, then, was your purpose?" asks Abimelech of Abraham after he represents his wife as a sister for a second time (20:9-10). "Why, then, did you say, 'She is my sister?'" asks Abimelech of Isaac when he is deceived a second time (26:9).

"What is this that you have done to me?...Why did you deceive me?" asks Jacob of his uncle Laban after he has switched Leah for Rachel on Jacob's wedding night (29:25).

"What did you mean by keeping me in the dark...Why did you flee in secrecy?" asks Laban of Jacob after Jacob has fled with his wives and his uncle's *teraphim*, his household gods (31:26-27).

"What is my crime? What is my guilt?...What have you found?" asks Jacob of Laban after a search fails to turn up the missing *teraphim* (31:36-37).

"Why did you serve me so ill as to tell the man you had another brother?" asks Jacob of his older sons after they have returned from Egypt (43:6).

"What is this that you have done? Don't you know that a man like me practices divination?" asks Joseph of his brothers when he accuses them falsely of stealing a goblet (44:15).

"Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" demands Pharaoh of the Egyptian midwives (EXOD. 1:18).

"Why did you strike your fellow?" asks Moses of a Hebrew slave, to which the slave retorts: "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (2:13-14).

"Why did you not complete the prescribed amount?" ask the taskmasters of the slave foremen (5:14). "Why do you deal thus with your servants?" they, in turn, ask Pharaoh (5:15), and when Pharaoh sends them off, they turn in anger upon Moses, who, for

his part, asks God: “O ETERNAL ONE, why did you bring harm upon this people? Why did you send me?” (5:22).

And so forth. The plaintive question grows especially prominent in the wilderness narratives, where it serves equally forcefully for Moses’s confrontation of Aaron over the Golden Calf: “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?” (ExOD. 32:21), as for Moses’s entreaties with God over the absence of a sign of divine favor: “For how shall it be known that your people have gained your favor? Is it not in your going about with us...?” (33:16). Eventually it also serves for Moses’s heartsore confessions over the burdens of leadership:

“Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,’ to the land that you have promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’” (NUM. 11:11-13).

Much the same form serves for the people’s complaints to Moses: “Why is YHWH taking us to that land to fall by the sword?” (14:3). “Why, then, do you raise yourself above THE ETERNAL’s congregation?” (16:3). To the

latter complaint, Moses retorts (16:8-10) with more questions: “Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you access to Him, etc.? Now that [God] has advanced

you..., do you seek the priesthood, too?” Korah, in turn, retorts: “Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness that you would also lord it over us?” (16:13)

We find a variant of the plaintive question serving also for God’s complaints to Moses about the people: “How long will this people spurn Me, etc.?” (14:11); “How much longer shall that wicked community keep murmuring against Me?” (14:27). In these examples, the mood of divine impatience is a force of lethal potential, against which Moses, the very same Moses whose patience is tried by the people, must intercede on their behalf.

The Book of Numbers is a virtual symphony of impatience

The Book of Numbers is a virtual symphony of impatience, rooted partly in the psalmodic traditions of lament. “How long, ETERNAL ONE?” cries the psalmist, a cry directed with equal force against the rebellious multitudes, the scheming nations, and the silence of the deity. Yet the deity asks, “How long?” as well, and what we could call the circle of complaint — the people dunning Moses, Moses crying to God, both for himself and for the people, and God, in turn, fuming against the people — expresses well the condition of deadlock that epitomizes the life of a whole generation who wandered in the wilderness. Moses is its most conspicuous victim. His destiny as one who will die short of the promised land is sealed when, in a moment of fury, Moses faces the multitude and cries out...a question. “Listen here, you miscreants, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” (20:10). Saying this, he hits the rock twice, and water pours forth.

It is a gesture of anger and despair, a failure of faith, as God later explains it (20:12: “Because you did not believe in Me...”), a gesture so human and so understandable in the light of all that has happened to Moses, and yet a historically dark moment, a stark contrast to the legendary faith of Abraham — perhaps the reason the tradition *needed* an Abraham. At that moment, humble and self-effacing Moses returns to being the man of violence and the outlaw he had been in Egypt, before his call. And in this moment, as noted, comes a question, a question with no answer, only the corollary of a physical blow. The violence of the moment seems ubiquitous — a blow against the people, against the deity, against himself. If we could unfold that impatient question in all its manifoldness, whom would it address? What would it ask? Is Moses asking the people what they, in the short run, want, what they think they want? Or is he asking, what do you really want? Do you really want it? What can I bring forth? How shall I bring it forth? Shall we bring it forth? Shall you and I? Shall I and Aaron? Shall we and THE ETERNAL? In this intensely compressed moment, Moses’s question becomes his burial ground, his She’ol. Is this why we call the land of the dead She’ol, which means, after all, “asking?”

The Divine ‘Raised Eyebrow’

To the plaintive question of prophetic doubt, we might juxtapose its occasional reply, something we might term the divine “raised eyebrow” — i.e., God’s assurance of divine sufficiency, phrased as a question: “Is anything too wondrous for THE ETERNAL?” asks the deity of Sarah (GEN. 18:14) when she

voices her laughing disbelief over the prospects of her conceiving a child in old age. “Who gives a person speech?” retorts God to Moses when the latter wonders if he has the makings of a prophet in him, “Who makes one dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind?” (EXOD. 4:11). “Is the hand of THE ETERNAL too stinting?” asks God when Moses wonders where all the meat will come from (NUM. 11:23).

Not far in spirit from these is what we can call the Deuteronomic boast: “For what great nation is there that has a God so close at hand...? Or what great nation has laws as perfect as this Torah?” (Deut. 4:7-8) “You have but to inquire about bygone ages...Has anything as grand as this ever happened? Or has its like ever been known?” (4:32) “Has any god ventured to take for himself one nation...?” (4:34). Such questions presuppose the hidden premise of Israelite society itself: all is coming to pass on a world stage, with the nations looking on. Israel’s miracles and triumphs are a matter of public record; it is part of the deity’s unfolding of a cause for wonderment, a signature to the historical hour, an assertion of the meaningfulness of history as such. Future generations are envisioned in the ready posture of questioners: “And when your children ask, ‘What do you mean by this rite?’ you shall say...” (EXOD. 12:26). A child asks; a parent explains. This nexus is the foundation of all human culture, all possibility of past influencing the present. Post-biblical Jewry derived from these proactive commands the form of the Passover Seder and the youngest child’s provocatively oblique Four Questions, which are the linchpin of the Haggadah, the Telling.

The question in most instances shown thus far seems meant not so much to elicit information — none, at least, commensurate with what is asked — as to provoke reflection and self-searching. Some, as we can see, are actually speeches couched as questions, but their message does not end with their utterance. And, notably, no protocol of cosmic or social status restricts their use. The question is something asked by God of persons, by persons of God, by royalty of commoners and vice-versa, by master of and by servant, and even by animals of humans: “What have I done to you,” asks the she-ass of Balaam, with a splendid dignity and courtliness, “that you have beaten me

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now three times?...Am I not your she-ass on whom you’ve ridden all your life till now? Have I ever been in the habit of doing thus to you?” (NUM. 22:28-30). Behind many of the plaintive questions in the biblical repertoire rests the assumption of a universe governed by rationality and legality, by a standard of decency, common sense, or civil responsiveness against which the present situation looms as a patent absurdity.

But the question need not always be well-founded or far-sighted. Jacob’s questions to Laban after the latter searches for his *teraphim* (“What is my crime? What is my guilt...etc.?”) are both relieved and triumphant, but that mood is compromised by the fact that Jacob and his wife Rachel are indeed guilty of the furtive absconion of which Laban accuses them, and of the theft of the *teraphim*. Moses’s question to the Israelite slave contending with his fellow is both a visionary pursuit of justice and an unexpected source of embarrassment when it turns up the fact that his own slaying of an Egyptian taskmaster is publicly known. Shortsightedness is echoed further in the very attitude of the slaves themselves, who prefer to persist in doing violence to one another, and spurn their rescuer. Pharaoh’s challenge to Moses and Aaron, or the taskmasters’ challenge to the slaves, are manifestations of despotism, of coerciveness, of callous disregard for life or human dignity. The people’s challenges to Moses in the wilderness are an expression of cynicism and despair, a late permutation of the same shortsightedness with which they had once turned on the Egyptian Moses when he sought to mediate between two among them. The bad faith signaled by the short-sighted question is a forensic device of narrative dialogue vital to all complex literature.

The 400 Questions of Job

There is no doubt the Book of Job is our most question-laden of biblical books (some 400 of them, by my rough count), and the one most given over to the unanswerables of human existence. Throughout more than thirty chapters of poetic discourse, Job and his friends deliberate in frantic and

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distraught tones over things beyond their ken to know, and finally are answered by a divine voice that tells them things they are, by nature, not meant to know, and tells them, remarkably, almost entirely in the form of questions. From the book's opening, in the folktale prologue, the mood set is that of inquiry: "Where have you come from?" God asks the Adversary. "From wandering the earth," comes the answer, "and from walking about in it." "Have you taken notice," asks God, "of my servant Job, the like of whom does not exist throughout the earth, a man perfect and upright, who fears God and shuns evil?" (JOB 1:7-8)

It may seem strange to us that the Supreme Being — a divinity, surely, with so many other things on its mind — would preen so conspicuously over one small creature, barely taller than a nostril of the great Leviathan, but watched over proudly like a hothouse plant, like a delicately-fashioned model ship inside a bottle. Israelite and Jewish tradition, we know, had otherwise no special reverence for the person of Job, who in fact was not even an Israelite. Why not hold a *people* up for the wonderment of the celestial court? And if not a people, why not, say, Moses, whose stewardship of a people was surely a more arduous and praiseworthy accomplishment in the historical arena than Job's?

It is as if the Supreme Being has somehow given up on the lot of humankind, with their pitiful, noisy squabbles and their clumsy, faltering enactment of their history, and retreated instead to the comforts of a hobby — to the cultivation of a human pet, pampered, scrubbed, and stuffed, whose well-trained leaps through the appropriate moral hoops are the delight of heavenkind. This kind of Job and this kind of deity have much in common. They have done everything by the book, have measured all by it, and are, to some degree, constituted by it. If doubt is to enter this picture — doubt of a person in the deity, doubt in the deity about the person, about persons as such — it must come, or at least *seem* to come, from without. And so, the voice of doubt appears to us as wholly extraneous, the voice of an alien presence who wanders, as it were, as an admissible stranger in both heaven and earth, posing challenges that are really questions, a voice bringing the seeds of doubt to both deity and person, nurturing it in both. This "Satan" (Hebrew for "Adversary") is empowered to smite and emplague, but is sanitarily cordoned off from heavenly will. He is an independent entrepreneur of chaos, a kind of legal poacher of souls. But what sort of legality is this? This, among other things, it will be the book's

task to plumb, this book that swallows itself, this book that plumbs the limits of living by the book.

And so, the questions come. At first, they come still couched in the language of faith: "Shall we accept only good from God, and not accept the bad?" (2:10). And then they come as a cry of pain: "Why did I not die at birth, expire as I came forth? Why were there knees to receive me, or breasts for me...?..Why was I not like a buried stillbirth, like babies who never saw the light?" (3:11-12, 16). And then, more philosophically: "Why does [God] give light to the sufferer,/ and life to the bitter of spirit,/ to those who wait for death but it does not come,/ who search for it more than treasure,/...who are glad to reach the grave?" (3:20-22). Questions come with an elaborate filigree of subordinate clauses, each one bearing metonymically the weight of a full question. And finally, questions come from those who question the questioner: "Isn't your integrity your [source of] confidence? What innocent person ever perished? Where have the upright been destroyed? Can mortals be acquitted by God?..." (4:6-7, 17).

One has the impression, reading the poetic parts of the Book of Job, that the work is, despite its often exotic vividness of language, an inventory of the old, familiar ways of talking about God — a rehearsal, as it were, of what the ancient rhetorician Quintilian called "storehouses of trains of thought." Such books were written in the ancient world, perhaps as part of the training of scribes, preachers, and counselors — marshalling all the phrases by which people have either challenged or defended divine providence. To this degree, however compelling they may sound, the characters of the Book of Job talk past one another, talk out of the stock of tradition and common wisdom, say what is expected of them to say. And yet, it is but a small step from there to another kind of work, one that uses the typical ways people talk in the service of a deeper inquiry into the truth of what they say. Out of the collage of monologues comes dialogue of a sort, however intransigent and inconclusive.

But *whose* dialogue is this? If it is between Job and his friends, what is at issue? Is it the justice of God's ways — that is, the traditional problem of theodicy as such? Or is it an inter-human issue — the problem of empathy for the sufferer, and the sufferer's problem of being heard by the non-sufferers? Nowhere does the book say this explicitly. And, indeed, God's cryptic comment in the book's epilogue that the friends "did not speak the truth about Me as has my servant Job" (42:7) seems to affirm that the central

issue is, indeed, one of theodicy. The problem with this conclusion is that nowhere is it stated *why* Job's speeches are truer than those of the friends, and the divine speeches that precede 42:7 (speeches we shall consider shortly in more detail) seem to convey precisely the opposite: that Job's remarks have been presumptuous and vain. Is there a way out of this dilemma?

It is at this point that the "non-Israelite" setting of the book becomes easier to understand, for the author needed a freer hand to plumb the depths of the traditional Israelite answers to the problem of suffering. Non-Israelites though they may be, Job's friends advance perfectly sound Deuteronomic theology. Nothing they ask or say would be out of place in the Book of Psalms, or the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, nor would it conflict with the silent scheme of karmic justice that underlies the narrative books from Genesis onward.

In a similar vein, virtually all that Job asks or says has its place within the context of the psalm of lamentation or the outcries of prophetic doubt.

And so, through the mouths of non-Israelites, all the cherished tenets of Israelite theology are put to the test, and all, to some unspecified extent, are found wanting. Only the era can explain why this is so — for Job was written precisely at the historical moment when Israel had lost its home, had, at the hands of Babylonia and other opportunistic neighbors,

undergone plunder, starvation, disease, and death. In such a setting, the old answers no longer were enough. But, if they are insufficient, are the old answers still, in some sense, necessary? It is here that the issue becomes focused, not on God but on the sufferer, and on the transformations that suffering effects.

Our first glimpse of Job, we remember, was not of a man whose concerns were centered on the sufferings of his fellow human beings. He is, so to speak, shown as a kind of atonement fetishist, repeatedly offering sin offerings for his children "in case [they] have sinned and blasphemed God in their thoughts." His concerns have to do solely with his own household, and precisely for children who are pampered and prosperous, and who, as adults,

Through the mouths of non-Israelites, all the cherished tenets of Israelite theology are put to the test, and all, to some unspecified extent, are found wanting

should have long since assumed responsibility for their own moral life. Whatever fallacies inhere in Job's expectation that he can atone ritually for the blasphemies of others, or that uprooting blasphemy from people's *thoughts* is even possible, he is not shown initially as a man who cares deeply for the wretched of the earth — whatever else may eventually turn out to have been true in this respect. What the book does not yet state is, for all practical purposes, not yet a fact. What is true at the level of the reader's experience is also true with respect to Job's alleged blamelessness: "For all this, Job did not sin *with his lips*" (2:10). For the remainder of the book to make sense, this statement must cover everything Job will say in the ensuing chapters. Whether Job sinned *in his heart* however, will remain very much an open question.

Now, by the time we get to chapter 24, a very different kind of Job seems to be speaking. Here is a sample:

Why aren't times [of judgment] set apart by the Almighty?

Those that know [God] cannot see those days.

People carry off the boundaries,

they steal the flocks and feed them [as their own],

they lead away the donkey of the orphans,

seize in pledge the widow's ox.

They chase the needy from the road...

[who] pass the night in nakedness...

There is no cover from the cold. (24:1-4, 7)

These lines would be at home in Jeremiah or Lamentations. They carry the refined vision of a prophet, at least of one keenly sensitive to the plight of the needy. Has suffering opened the eyes of Job to the suffering of others? Before we answer that, we must consider one further speech of Job's, his final one before God's answer, this one remarkably structured as an elaborate array of questions — at least by one theory of its translation.

Although Job grows progressively lonelier in the course of his dialogue with his companions (at one point, he notes that friends no longer approach him), he never wavers in his faith that he somehow has a companion in God, before whom alone he hopes to lay his case. His summation relentlessly repeats the word *'im*, a word which, in poetic texts, is often an interrogative particle. In the context of oaths, however (and some commentators see this chapter as an elaborate oath), the word can be translated as a negation: "[I swear] that I have not.../shall not...do such-and-such." Again, question and negation seem to ride

together in tandem. Here, then (with some minor alterations for gender neutrality), are some lines from that earth-shaking soliloquy, and here we may rely largely on the masterful current Jewish Publications Society (JPS) translation, which preserves the interrogative character of the oaths (to keep the pattern consistent, I modify only the “if/then” clause of the final four lines quoted):

Did I ever brush aside the case of my servants, man or maid,
 when they made a complaint against me?
 What then should I do when God arises;
 When [God] calls me to account, what should I answer...?
 Did not [the one] who made me in my mother’s belly make him?
 Did not One form us both in the womb?
 Did I deny the poor their needs,
 or let a widow pine away,
 by eating my food alone,
 the fatherless not eating of it also?...

[Have] I raised my hand against the fatherless,
 looking to my supporters in the gate?
 May my arm drop off my shoulder,
 my forearm break off at the elbow! (31:13-17, 21-22)

To get the full effect of this speech, one must read through the entire chapter, but the segment quoted introduces a new dimension of Job’s situation, and in the process teaches us how meanings compound between the prose and poetic parts of Job. It is as if Job has somehow recovered a part of himself inaccessible to both him and us within the framework of the folktale prologue. If, as the final editor of the book intended, we are to read the work as building toward a single, unified (if thus paradoxical) meaning, we must assume that suffering has opened Job’s eyes not only to the world but also to that part of himself that had been open to the world all along, but which, in the context of folk tradition in the prologue, was somehow forgotten.

This is only one of many examples in the Hebrew Bible where crucial revelations of character come belatedly, long after they seem to be of any use. And if what Job says is true, then his companions surely know it, as well, and if they have blindly persisted in insisting on his guilt, then they are guilty, not just of untruths about God, but also of woeful insensitivity to the sufferer — and as we see in the epilogue, only the sufferer is empowered to

intervene on their behalf. While never made an explicitly stated theme, the problem of empathy is crucial to the meaning of the book.

Let us, then, take this situation back to the portrayal — or, thus far, at least, non-portrayal — of God. Until chapter 38, the only representation of God that has been permitted is that of the enervated council-God of the prologue — a mask of God, really, hardly congruent to the impassioned divine speaker known through the mouths of the Israelite prophets, and, in some sense, barely the God of Israelite legality known from the Pentateuch. This is, to be sure, the divinity who presides over the annual Day of Judgment in heaven, an event familiar from the most ancient Near Eastern myths, the archetypal patterns of which are still commemorated in the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement. And to this degree, this divinity is an inquiring God, one who searches into the character of his favorite model citizen to test his faith and loyalty. Our nearest biblical parallel to this situation is the single phrase that introduces the famous tale of Abraham’s offering-up of Isaac: “And it happened, after these things, that God tested Abraham...” (GEN. 22:1). Such a God, viewed, as it were, from the large end of the telescope, appears very remote and very small.

But the human exchange below has somehow stirred the divine giant to assume its true proportions, and, beginning in chapter 38, comes the “answer” to Job’s questions. Appropriately, this comes as a new barrage of questions — the most sustained and extraordinary use of interrogative in the entire Hebrew Bible:

Who is this who darkens counsel,
 Speaking without knowledge?
 Gird your loins like a man;
 I will ask and you will inform Me.

Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?
 Speak if you have understanding.
 Do you know who fixed its dimensions
 Or who measured it with a line?
 Onto what were its bases sunk?
 Who set its cornerstone
 When the morning stars sang together
 And all the divine beings shouted for joy?

Who closed the sea behind doors
 When it gushed forth out of the womb,
 When I clothed it in clouds,
 Swaddled it in dense clouds,
 When I made breakers My limit for it,
 And set up its bar and doors,
 And said, "You may come so far and no farther;
 Here your surging waves will stop"? (JOB 38:1-11, JPS)

And so on. Nowhere in the Bible do divine and human subjectivity confront each other headlong as they do here, and nowhere is *human* wonderment over the grandeur of the cosmos better comprehended. The divine questions "Did you...? Do you...? Can you...?" are, to some degree, matched to Job's formulae of self-exculpation in his final speech ("Did I...? Have I...?" etc.), but they are otherwise commensurate with no problem or query set forth in the book thus far. They offer no consolation, no reason for human suffering. Indeed, human experience as such is totally excluded from their purview.

This is as near as we come in the Hebrew Bible to a deity "beyond good and evil," and the words, appropriately, come forth in the rhythms of ancient pagan epic.

And yet, the words are oddly comforting; Job, at least, seems to find them so, and there is something strangely touching about the ruler of the universe finally expressing what it is like to be God. In all other places where God speaks in the Hebrew Bible, it is with reference to human, and most often Israelite, history. The God who speaks through the prophets can weep for his faithless and fallen bride, the people Israel, can laugh at the folly of nations and empires, but nowhere else is the business of simply *being God* confronted directly — being the one responsible for everything, large and small, near and far, known and unknown. And in setting forth this impassioned confession-via-question, in tapping into the tradition of the awesome divine warrior of ancient Near Eastern creation myth, the deity has awakened to what had lain

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forgotten and inaccessible to the somber council-God of the prologue. The book's journey of anamnesis, of awakening and remembrance, is now complete — as is our limited tour of the biblical question.

Questions Sheathed in Silence

A few words of conclusion are in order. I hope I have shown what I promised initially to show: the simultaneous ambition and elusiveness of the biblical question. But three more specific lessons might be drawn:

First, we may safely say that in biblical narrative and poetry, question is a measure of volatility in human and human-divine exchange. The more explosive the situation, the more critical the stakes, the more glaring the injustice, or the more unexpected the revelation, the greater the likelihood that questions will fly, singly or in an effusive barrage. Questions typically interrupt the flow of the familiar, presenting a demand or challenge hitherto unforeseen. Yet the questions asked by human beings of God typically bear the earmarks of ancient custom and tradition — their demands are fewer and simpler: How long, ETERNAL ONE? How shall I know? What sign will you give me? Only Moses, in a moment of despair, only Job stewing with boils amid a divine eclipse, unleash their questions in more volatile, less predictable ways.

Secondly, the great majority of questions in the Hebrew Bible go unanswered, or are mostly answered only obliquely, cryptically, or opaquely. Often, they are shown as the preface to silent thought by the questioner's recipient, and so come sheathed, as it were, in silence. When, in Gen. 15, Abraham is given ritual commandments as the first step of an answer to his inquiry about the future, the biblical author accounts for the origins of cultic ritual as a form of inquiry, yet nowhere is such ritual ever explicitly identified as such, and rarely, if ever, is the answer as informative as God's to Abraham. In the Book of Job, the momentous questions raised by both Job and God come to us in a kind of post-cultic world, in which the old certainties have broken down.

Finally, where question is combined with exclamation or wonderment, the speaker puts forth a paradoxical kind of utterance, in which certainty and uncertainty seem united, and in which both affirmation and negation can be read into the same words. In the Hebrew language, the interrogative particles 'af, ki, 'im, ha-, halo', ha'af, and mah all have exclamatory functions, depending on context. And so, we cannot always be

fully sure that a question has even been asked. This malleability of the reality encompassed by a question adds to the puzzlement legitimately experienced by the conscientious reader of the Bible. Does not such ambiguity point us to the broadest structures of biblical literature and tradition as elaborate puzzles, whose unraveling is properly a lifelong task?



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