

# FALSE NAIVETY IN THE PROLOGUE TO JOB

by

D. J. A. CLINES

*University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, England*

By naivety we understand an artless ingenuousness, an unsubtle simplicity. In the prologue to Job, language, style, plot and structure alike convey such an impression—at first sight, at any rate.

The *language* is—by contrast with the rich metaphor-laden language of the dialogues—of a striking severity. Only in the Satan's speeches in 1:10 and 2:4 is there even the coloration of lively colloquial speech ("put a hedge about him"; "skin for skin"). The *style* is as plain as anything in the Hebrew Bible; beside the two post-positive adjectives in 1:1 and 2:3, "blameless" (*tām*) and "upright" (*yāšār*), there are only two attributive adjectives ("great" [*gādōl*] in 1:19; "grievous" [*raʿ*] in 2:7) in the whole piece, and repetition is the most conspicuous stylistic feature. The *plot* is naive as black and white is naive: Job must be the *greatest* of the sons of the East, *none like him* on earth, *blameless* and upright; he must lose *all* his possessions in *one* day, he must be afflicted *from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet*. His downfall must result from a *divine* conspiracy against him, of which he must have not the slightest suspicion. And to his fate he must respond with inscrutable oriental submissiveness. The *structure* of the prologue is its most noticeably naive feature: the division into five scenes, their alternating locale, the fourfold messenger scene, the two five-member dialogues—all evidence the utmost simplicity of construction.

False naivety exploits the appearance of artlessness to convey a subtle message.<sup>1</sup> Subtle and complex as the argument of the book as a whole is, its naive prologue is no less subtle: it is not some primitive tale that does no more than set the scene for the substantive argument of the dialogues, but a well wrought narrative that plunges directly into issues of substance that reach as deep as the fraught dialogues themselves. False naivety is not, let it be noted, an act of bad faith; it is a beguilement

1. McEvenue (1971) compared the style of Genesis 1 and of the Priestly work in general to that of children's stories on the ground of their formality and apparent artlessness. He might properly have said that their naivety was only "false".

of the reader, a strategy that, if it seduces naive readers into finding a reflection of their own shallowness in the text, equally entrances more perceptive readers into an exploratory journey into its depths. It produces an open text and a closed text at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I will consider some apparently naive elements in the prologue that will reveal themselves as—in reality—subtleties, only “falsely” naive.

### 1. *Scenic construction*

a. *The four messengers.* This device, used in the ancient theatre for reasons of practicality (scene shifts have to be minimized), functions here as a meaningful repetition.<sup>3</sup> We are not transported to the varying scenes of the four disasters; rather, the spotlight remains fixed upon Job, and the narrative advances only in the measure to which Job himself becomes aware of the disasters. The way in which each messenger arrives before his predecessor has finished his tale not only creates an atmosphere of accelerative doom; it heightens our expectation for Job’s reaction to the news by preventing him from responding emotionally or verbally to any one of the calamities that have befallen him until he responds to them all. Indeed, they are, in reality, one and the same calamity in design and in effect. The depth of the catastrophe that befalls Job is savored by the narrator by his expanding the catastrophe along a linear scale.<sup>4</sup>

Job’s reaction, when it comes, is remarkable on two counts: first, his immediate recognition that the news the messengers bring is not of two humanly caused disasters (Sabaeans, Chaldeans) and two naturally caused disasters (lightning, whirlwind)—but a divine deprivation, brought about directly and not indirectly by Yahweh (Job has never heard of the Satan). This narrative move goes straight to the heart of the intellectual issues of the book; it is not the depiction of an unshakable piety such as might be accounted for by the hyperbole of the folkloristic manner. Second, Job’s restraint is elaborated by his deliberate behavior, in which actions precede words, and for a moment seem to make a bid to preclude

2. A closed text is determinate, requiring no important interpretative decisions by the reader; an open text contains indeterminacy, demanding the reader’s involvement in creating meaning by making decisions. The language of closed and open texts is that of Iser (1978).

3. Among others, Alter (1981, ch. 5) has studied the function of repetition in Biblical narratives though his interest is primarily on the significance of variation within repetitions.

4. Alter (1981, p. 97) similarly talks (not in reference to our text) of a “developing aspect of the story [being] highlighted through repetition in the linear deployment of the narrative”.

speech altogether. His response, when it comes, is so restrained (he does not weep, he says so little), so disproportionate, that we must ask, Are we not being prepared here—by the unnatural restraint—for the unrestrained words of the dialogue? Is this not a (plot) *argumentum e silentio*? What is written is naive; what is not written—the space between the lines—is the subtlety.

b. *The five scenes.* The scenic shape of the prologue is formally composed, scenes 1, 3, and 5 being set on earth, scenes 2 and 4 in heaven. The scenes are clearly marked off from one another by the phrase, “and there came a day” (*wayehi hayyôm we-*), which begins scenes 2, 3, and 4 (scene 1 does not of course need a marker of beginning). The exception to the pattern draws attention to itself: at 2:7, the beginning of the fifth scene, not only is the introductory phrase absent, but also—for the first time in the prologue—one of the actors moves out of his proper sphere. Satan begins to be depicted (not simply reported) as operating upon the earthly as well as upon the heavenly plane: he “goes forth from the presence of Yahweh” in heaven and “afflicts Job” on earth. The breaking of the formal pattern signals the impingement of the divine world upon the human (we note that at the juncture between the second and third scene, the pattern is not broken, and the Satan neither appears in the earthly scene nor explicitly is said to bring about the disasters; the crucial impingement of the divine realm upon the earthly has not yet occurred). As the two scenes dissolve into one another, the tempo quickens for the finale of the piece. And at the same time the heavenly protagonists bifurcate, Yahweh shut off in heaven, Satan active on earth. The question of the responsibility for Job’s suffering is for an instant posed before us and we must make a sudden decision whether God is aloof from or complicit in the execution of the act of the “touching” of Job.

So, the apparently simple and formally repetitive scenic structure of the prologue is in reality a subtlety: it almost seems that the structure has been created in order to be fractured. Heaven and earth are distinct spheres only up to a point: the point of intersection is the point of departure.

We may pause for a moment to remark on the *absence* of a sixth scene.<sup>5</sup> What the dramatic logic demands of the narrative is that at the end of the fifth scene in 2:10 the focus should shift again to heaven, and a scene of resolution should be played out between the Satan and

5. There is, of course, a seventh scene, in the epilogue (42:11–17), set on earth, equally “naive”, and like scenes 1, 3 and 5 manifesting no awareness of what has transpired in heaven. Its presence is a further pointer to the absence of a sixth and heavenly scene.

Yahweh. It is their dialogue that has set in train the two-fold testing of Job; so what passes between them now that this testing is completed? The absence of any such scene is of course of the essence of the book. From this moment heaven is sealed off and silent: God himself will not speak again before there have been 34 chapters of human speech, whose inconclusive discursiveness makes the direct decisiveness of the heavenly conversations seem—in retrospect—quite brutal. Scratch the surface, and the simply structured folktale bristles with hidden agendas.

## 2. *Dialogue*

Dialogue is the essence of the two heavenly scenes. The two dialogues are simply constructed, which is to say that they have the appearance of naivety: there are five speeches, the first, third and fifth by Yahweh, the second and fourth by the Satan. It is naive that each dialogue follows the same pattern. It is naive that the first three speeches in each of the two dialogues are virtually identical. It is naive that the dialogues end with closely similar speeches from Yahweh. And as for their content, it is naive that Yahweh asks the Satan where he comes from; it is naive that Yahweh describes Job's character in detail, twice.

What is not naive about these dialogues? At the assembly of the sons of God, where they come presumably to report on their activities, it seems only natural that the sovereign should initiate the conversation. But it is also subtly meaningful that he should be the first to speak: it means not just that he begins the dialogue but that his question has a role-establishing function, showing that in the case of Job it is indeed God (and not the Satan) who takes the significant initiatives. It is God (and not the Satan) who is the chief architect of Job's downfall.<sup>6</sup> The Satan's reply, "From going to and fro on the earth", is not evasive, but shaped in such a way as to throw the initiative in the conversation back upon Yahweh. The Satan has nothing to report, nothing to advise, nothing to propound; he has simply been abroad on earth with his eyes open, amassing a fund of observations that his sovereign can use as he wills. Any move in the dialogue—or in the action—is up to Yahweh.

Yahweh's move, which the dialogue structure demands of him, is made by a question that is both guileless and pregnant with implication: "Have you considered my servant Job?" The question can certainly be heard as a straight, unloaded question arising from God's pleasure in Job. Nothing in the narrative to this point encourages us to hear the

6. In Jubilees 17:6 it is Satan (Mastema) who initiates the conversation concerning the trial of Abraham; so it is by no means inevitable that the heavenly scenes in Job should begin with a question from God.

question as a taunt to the Satan that he has not uncovered guilt in Job, for nothing in the narrative so far has encouraged us to see that as the Satan's function. Yet, at the same time, Job is being singled out by Yahweh's seemingly guileless question—which in reality is inviting the tender operations of the hermeneutic of suspicion. The dynamic of conversation cannot allow matters to rest with a statement of Job's uprightness. Nor can the dynamic of any promising kind of narrative allow the Satan to respond to "Have you considered . . . ?" with a prompt "Yessir!", throwing the initiative back to Yahweh. This question of Yahweh's calls out for significant response—which can only be, in some degree or other, a response contradictory to the assumptions of the divine question. Read in the light of what precedes, Yahweh's question "Have you considered . . . ?" is guileless—as guileless as the leisurely exchange that has just taken place between him and the Satan. But read in the light of what follows, Yahweh's question is provocative—it becomes clear from the reply of the Satan that Job's piety is not as simple a matter as it has sounded hitherto. Just because Yahweh's question has to read *both* with what precedes and with what follows, to hear it simply as a challenge to the Satan would be too sophisticated;<sup>7</sup> to take it purely at its face value would be to fall prey to the artful naivety of the narrative.

As for the response of the Satan, we note first that he implicitly assents to the assessment of Job made both by the narrator (v. 1) and by Yahweh (v. 8). He cannot call into question Job's incomparable piety ("none like him"). We are not to infer therefore that, because he cannot fault Job on the primary matter of his piety, his destructive impulse must be directed towards the comparatively trivial matter of Job's motives.<sup>8</sup> It is rather that precisely because there can be no questioning of Job's piety that in his case the essential question can be raised: is piety, that is, genuine piety, spontaneous, gratuitous (*hinnâm*)? So deep does the intention of the narrator reach: beyond the case of the man Job to the structure of the moral universe. And—a further twist—we may not perceive the Satan's speech as a reproach of Yahweh or a taunt that he cannot be assured of gratuitous godfearingness. The question, once it has been uttered, can be recognized as a question that was all the time implicit in the earth-bound narrative that has preceded, implicit too in God's singling out of Job for special consideration.

7. As Pope (1965, p. 4) observed, "There is something of taunt and provocation in Yahweh's query."

8. As Rowley (1980, p. 31) thought: "Satan is unable to point to any flaw in Job, but ascribes his integrity to mere selfishness by pointing to the prosperity with which he is rewarded."

A naive reading of the story sees the Satan's language as abrupt, peremptory: "put forth your hand [imperative], and I'll be damned if [<sup>im</sup>] he doesn't curse you to your face." A more alert reading may find here that colloquial form of speech which puts the hypothesis (protasis) in the imperative and shapes the consequence as a strongly affirmed affirmative. Read the speech thus: "If you but put forth your hand, then he will curse you;" and the notion of any challenge to God by the Satan, let alone a wager, evaporates.

If the Satan can predict that Job will curse God, does the Satan know something God does not know? That must inevitably be so on the naive reading. But how can that be? It needs just a little subtlety to see that a prediction is not a simple and infallible foretelling of the future, but more a shrewd suspicion, a hunch. It is not that the Satan knows how Job will react, but that in order for a question to be a serious one that is worth checking out, the Satan's answer to the question has to be stated in a dogmatic, knowing form. Set the brash dogmatism of the Satan down to the author's false naivety.

### 3. *Concepts*

a. *The act-consequence nexus.* Almost without our noticing it, the narrative plays off two notions of causality against one another.<sup>9</sup> At the very beginning of the prologue, the limpid narrative assumes—and presents—the conventional causal nexus between piety and prosperity: "that man was blameless and upright . . . *and* [*waw* consecutive] there were born to him seven sons and three daughters, *and* his substance became: 7000 sheep . . ." In the heavenly realm, however, where it is the business of all to *know* and not to be taken in by the conventional assumptions of the naive (or the wise—for the author of Job they are the same people), the causal nexus is challenged. Is its direction from piety to prosperity or not rather from prosperity to piety: Does Job fear God gratuitously (v. 9)? Is not his prosperity the cause of his piety?

The narrator has adopted a new *blik* at the moment he shifts the scene to heaven; the heavenly scene deconstructs the earthly, challenging its assumptions. On earth the conventions hold sway: seven sons form a perfect progeny; three daughters to seven sons is the appropriate ratio of females to males; ten children signify rounded perfection. Greatness is measured in wealth, wealth is measured in livestock; the patriarch is responsible for the sanctity of his children, grown though they are and

9. No particular theory of *how* the act is related to the consequence need be discussed here; it is enough *that* the nexus exists. For the broader discussion of the *how*, see von Rad (1972, pp. 124–133); Koch (1972).

each in his own house—and, to crown it all, piety is the cause of prosperity. In heaven, on the other hand, while such assumptions can be played along with, Yahweh himself echoing in v. 8 the naivety of the narrator's depiction in v. 1, they cannot be entertained forever—the question of the Satan that challenges the assumption is no “satanic” question but a heavenly one,<sup>10</sup> raised by one of the sons of God, an open question indeed to God himself, who does not know the answer, but must experiment to find the truth of it.

The stylized simplicity of the opening scene and the unpretentious dialogue in the rustic heavenly court make it possible for the hasty reader to see here only the narrative scaffolding for the dialogues, or the dramatic machinery by which Job is set on the ashheap. In reality, however, the primary ethical problematic of the book is being raised in these two scenes: namely, the act-consequence nexus. In the dialogues that problematic will appear as the question whether suffering is brought about by sin; in the prologue as the question whether prosperity is brought about by piety. The two are but two sides of one coin. And the value of the coin is being assayed from the *waw* consecutive of 1:2 onward.

At one point, indeed, the two questions are explicitly shown to merge: at 2:3 Yahweh allows that Job has been smitten “for nothing” (*hinnām*). The question of gratuitous piety, it transpires, has been probed by an episode of gratuitous suffering (the narrative plot told us as much, but not explicitly). Yahweh himself has broken the causal nexus, the law of retribution; and if Yahweh, why not Job? The immutability of the law is the issue, and that has been undermined from heaven. This is not the moment for a development of the problematic of the sin-suffering nexus: that will be treated amply in the dialogues. Here the nexus under the microscope is that of piety and prosperity, but the narrator is preparing the transition from the world of the prologue to the world of the dialogue.

In sum, the intellectual issues here being explored have formed the unprobed bedrock both of popular belief and professional teaching in Israel. Issues for which Qoheleth would devise his own philosophical mode of argumentation are handled here with the ingenuousness of the folktale. The naivety conceals a brave intellectual experiment.

b. *The significance of Job's suffering.* The prologue of the book appears to leave little room for doubt over the significance of Job's suffering. He suffers to prove to heaven that gratuitous piety does in fact

10. Weiss (1983, p. 39) goes so far as to say that “Satan is indeed a hypostasis . . . of one of the contradictory, ambivalent traits of God Himself,” Satan representing God's doubt of Job's integrity. Cf. Kluger (1967, pp. 118ff.); Schärf (1948, pp. 151–319).

exist on earth, that a pious man, robbed of all the prosperity that piety can bring, can remain pious, charging the God who steals that prosperity with no wrong (1:22). Even though there is no sixth scene in the prologue to signify beyond equivocation that heaven has accepted Job's decisive answer to its moral conundrum, it seems hard to deny that the issue has been resolved by Job's response to his suffering.

Read naively, the prologue must mean that no question about the meaning of Job's suffering remains. Even if it takes Job himself a long time to realize that such is the meaning of his suffering, or even if he never realizes it, that is nevertheless its meaning. The meaning of Job's suffering is that particular meaning it has in the prologue.

But, read with an ounce of subtlety, the book of Job as a whole does not present itself as simply the story of an ancient hero Job, but rather as an enquiry into human suffering in general. Indeed, if it cannot be read thus, its readers must always be asking themselves what they mean by going on reading a story that has nothing whatever to do with them, but only with the man Job. And, in fact, the character Job conspires with the readers to convince them that the book is about humankind or Everyman as much as it is about the singular individual Job. For throughout his speeches his most consistent rhetorical move is to project his own unhappy lot on to the generality of mankind: "Why is life given to him [whoever he may happen to be, not just me, Job] who is in misery?" (3:20); "Has not man [humankind] a hard service upon earth?" (7:1); "Man that is born of woman [without exception] is of few days, and full of trouble" (14:1).

But if Job's suffering is Everyman's, what the prologue seems to tell us—read naively—is that Job's suffering is irrelevant to human suffering in general, for there is a distinct and known reason for it. The question whether there is such a thing as disinterested piety on earth needs to be answered only once, and Job has answered it definitively; so the reason for Job's suffering can never be the reason for any other suffering.

What then does the prologue offer for the problem of human suffering? Naively read, what it is doing is to proffer the reason for Job's suffering; more subtly read, what it is doing is to offer no reason for any suffering at all—except Job's. What it extends to the reader with one hand it takes away with the other. For a moment it encourages us to believe that there is no mystery at all about suffering; but in the next moment we recognize that what was plain and unmysterious about Job's suffering was trivial, and only its inexplicability is serious.

Does the prologue then communicate nothing at all about the problem of human suffering? If we take it simply as a narrative about the man Job it does not, for his case is unique. But if we take it as a prologue to

the dialogue it does. For what it affirms is that even when the sufferer does not know the reason for his suffering, and even when there is in fact “no earthly reason”, there is indeed a reason, a divine reason. Not Job’s reason, of course; Job’s reason is but an exemplar of the reasons God has.

More than that, the prologue presents another dimension to the significance of suffering. In Job’s case, says the prologue, his suffering is entirely for God’s benefit.<sup>11</sup> From Job’s perspective it is gratuitous (*hinnām*), as God himself acknowledges (2:3), but from God’s perspective it is necessary. Why else should God authorize the persecution of Job if not because it is only Job who can solve the question that has been raised in heaven? In a word, Job suffers for God’s sake. May not the prologue, read as the framework for the dialogue, be saying the same thing about innocent suffering in general? The precise benefit that Job does for God in maintaining his piety even while he suffers cannot be the benefit any other sufferer does God. But may not Job’s suffering be paradigmatic in this respect also? If innocent suffering is for God’s sake, to grant him some undivulged benefit, to win him some unguessed at boon, then does not undeserved suffering acquire a fresh and startlingly positive valuation—for the sufferer in his particularity and for humankind at large?

We have been watching the naivety of the prologue deconstructing itself. Especially in its juxtaposition with the subtlety of the dialogues, but also in and of itself, it demands to be read as “falsely” naive. Its very naivety, the excess of its naivety, is what invites more thoughtful readings, and entices the reader into a participatory scrutiny of its hidden depths.

11. In this crucial respect the prologue is in complete harmony with the divine speeches (chs. 38–41). As I read them, their concern is to affirm that the created order exists for God’s purposes and benefit, not humankind’s, and that therefore, implicitly and by analogy, so does the moral order. Suffering is a hippopotamus: it makes no sense to humans, but it does to God.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alter, R. 1981. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. London.  
 Iser, W. 1978. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*.  
 Baltimore and London.  
 Kluger, R. S. 1967. *Satan in the Old Testament*. Chicago.

- Koch, K. 1972. *Um das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des Alten Testaments*. Wege der Forschung 125. Darmstadt.
- McEvenue, S. 1971. *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer*. Rome.
- Pope, M. 1965. *Job*. Anchor Bible. Garden City.
- Rowley, H. H. 1980. *The Book of Job*. New Century Bible. Grand Rapids.
- Schärf, R. R. 1948. "Die Gestalt des Satans im Alten Testament," in C. G. Jung (ed.), *Symbolik des Geistes: Studien über psychische Phänomenologie*. Psychologische Abhandlungen 6. Zürich.
- von Rad, G. 1972. *Wisdom in Israel*. London.
- Weiss, M. 1983. *The Story of Job's Beginning. Job 1-2: A Literary Analysis*. Jerusalem.