

The Dybbukast

Season 2, Episode 2: "The Book of Job"

Transcription

An actor reads from the Book of Job:

Do not human beings have a hard service on earth, and are not their days like the days of a laborer? Like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like laborers who look for their wages, so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me.

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Host Aaron Henne: Welcome to *The Dybbukast*, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays, and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what do they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? I'm Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk. In this episode, presented in collaboration with the Philosophical Research Society, we will be investigating the Book of Job. Dr. Greg Salyer, President of The Philosophical Research Society, takes us through the text, discussing its structure and content, as well as the ways in which it has been interpreted, and how those interpretations may have obscured or misrepresented its meaning. He will also illuminate the book's relationship to fundamental human questions about existence.

And now, *The Dybbukast*, Season Two, Episode Two: "The Book of Job."

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Dr. Greg Salyer: The book obviously focuses on our central character, Job, who does everything right and has everything go wrong — brutally, terribly, fatally wrong. Put another way, the Book of Job is the world's first poetry slam, and all the poetry is about suffering.

Actor 1 (as JOB): *Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, "A man-child is conceived." Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds settle upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it.*

Greg: Job articulates everything we feel when we suffer: What did I do? Wait, no, I didn't do anything! I didn't do anything wrong! Who's not been through a broken relationship that hasn't processed that event the way Job processes his? That's what we get — a poetic text that surveys the inner architecture of suffering.

JOB: *For my sighing comes before my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes.*

Greg: While the heart of the book is the poetry, and also the bulk of the book, there is a plot that is found largely in the prologue and epilogue. What Job does not know, but the reader does because of the prologue, is that Job's suffering is all a set-up based on a bet between God and a figure called Satan. And we should think here: prosecuting attorney rather than a chief demon, because the word simply means "accuser." It's a juvenile back-and-forth, where God baits Satan by pointing to how awesome his servant Job is, with all his sacrificing and piety and such. Satan takes the bet, and the bait, by suggesting that Job is pious because God has blessed him with wealth and children. Listen to this chilling and ridiculous prologue that sets the whole story in motion:

Actor 2 (as GOD): *Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.*

Actor 3 (as SATAN): *Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.*

GOD: *Very well. All that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him.*

Greg: It's only a short paragraph later when Job's children, servants and livestock are all gone; victims of the Chaldeans, the Sabaeans, lightning and wind. Job is broken, but remains faithful. Then Job stood up, he tore his robe, he shaved his head, he lay down with his face in the dust.

JOB: *Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*

Greg: God then attempts to call the bet, but Satan raises him.

SATAN: *Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.*

Greg: God then strikes Job with boils from head to toe, and Job's wife looks at him and says —

Actor 4 (as JOB'S WIFE): *Curse God, and die.*

Greg: And I'd like to note that the late Harold Bloom, literary critic out of Yale, called Job's wife the hero of the story because she's the only one who makes sense of his situation. And all that's just the prologue. The real beauty and power of the book is found in the many chapters between the prologue and the epilogue, and consists of a four-way poetic intercourse between Job and his three friends who have quote, "left their own countries," unquote, to support their comrade. Upon seeing him from afar, they do not recognize their friend. Upon sitting with Job upon the plain as he scrapes his boil-encrusted skin with pottery shards, they sit in complete silence for seven days. This silence is really their best moment because when they begin to speak, it is both stunningly beautiful and completely wrong. And that's not hyperbole.

Actor 5 (as FRIEND #1): *Is not your fear of God your confidence? And the integrity of your way is your hope? Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause.*

Actor 6 (as FRIEND #2): *Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh? Can reeds flourish where there is no water? While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish.*

Actor 7 (as FRIEND #3): *If God comes and confines you in prison and convenes a court, who can oppose him? Surely he recognizes deceivers; and when he sees evil, does he not take note? But the witless can no more become wise than a wild donkey's colt can be born human.*

Greg: At the same time, the friends are utterly human, defaulting to pointing fingers at Job, connecting his suffering to sin, and blaming him for an unacknowledged transgression that, in their minds, he simply refuses to admit.

FRIEND #1: *As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.*

FRIEND #2: *Surely the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of their fire does not shine. The light is dark in their tent, and the lamp above them is put out. Their strong steps are shortened, and their own schemes throw them down. For they are thrust into a net by their own feet, and they walk into a pitfall.*

FRIEND #3: *For you say, "My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God's sight." But O that God would speak, and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For wisdom is many-sided. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.*

Greg: There are actually four friends. And the fourth friend, Elihu, is not a friend to anyone really. He excoriates the other three friends. He's a youth. And he says —

Actor 4 (as ELIHU): *It is not the old that are wise, nor the aged that understand what is right. Therefore, I say, listen to me. Let me also declare my opinion. See, I waited for your words. I listened for your wise sayings while you searched out what to say. I gave you my attention, but not one of you proved Job wrong.*

Greg: And he excoriates Job, all in defense of God.

ELIHU: *Why do you contend against God, saying He will answer none of my words? For God speaks in one way, and in two, though people do not perceive it.*

Greg: The text would lead you to believe that Elihu was sitting there the whole time. But we have no indication of this. He's not mentioned in the first parts of the book. He just appears on the scene and then he disappears. No further mention. Now, I'm convinced that biblical critics, many of them are frustrated screenwriters. And so some of them say, well, this is the author of the book. And that's a nice little kind of twist, but it doesn't make any sense to me. In fact, none of the explanations for Elihu make sense to me other than this: What comes after Elihu is the whirlwind. I think this is a softening for the reader because what the whirlwind says is not easy. And it also kind of serves as a bridge.

ELIHU: *Surely God is powerful and despises no one; powerful in his strength of understanding. He does not preserve the lives of the wicked, but he gives justice to the poor. He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous.*

Greg: After the most poignant poetry in the history of sacred literature, the climax of the story is extremely unsatisfying, both theologically and narratively. A very different God from the one in the prologue — a voice from the whirlwind — confronts Job as a poet Himself and asks Job essentially if he knows what creators know.

GOD: *Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the skirts of the Earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the bear with its children? Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth?*

Greg: Of course, Job does not know this and admits as much.

JOB: *Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand; things too wonderful to me which I did not know.*

Greg: And the concluding line is —

JOB: *Therefore, I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.*

Greg: Now, in the epilogue, the poetic and nuanced voices of Job, his friends and the whirlwind, give way to a flattened and formulaic voice of the narrator from the prologue. And we learn that Job had more sons and daughters — the exact same number, in fact — and regained all his wealth. Everything's fine now, right?

Actor 1 (as NARRATOR): *After this, Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.*

Greg: I utterly reject this ending and believe with translator and commentator Stephen Mitchell, that the oldest and most profound ending is Job was comforted that he was dust. As you can already tell in my overview, this book is a patchwork of many texts and seems to find its provenance in Sumerian versions of the essential tale around 2000 BCE and a written version, conventionally titled "The Babylonian Theodicy". Now, this kind of borrowing is the rule rather than the exception for the oldest texts of the Hebrew Bible, including especially the creation and flood stories. As with most ancient stories however, this one was told rather than written, making it more adaptable than a

written one. Given that the story is stripped of most of its cultural context, it is therefore easy to apply to any culture and extremely difficult to situate it in one. Samuel Beckett does something similar when he sets his famous play, *Waiting For Godot*, on a nameless plain with a single tree to make it applicable to any place or time.

Actor 8: *Act one. A country road. A tree. Evening. Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again.*

Greg: Add to these qualities the fact that Job is a poetic meditation on the most heartbreaking aspects of being human, and you have the recipe for an epic myth that can speak across cultures and time to anyone who suffers and cries out at the injustice of it all.

JOB: *Why do you hide your face, and count me as your enemy? Will you frighten a windblown leaf and pursue dry chaff?*

Greg: As with most ancient texts that emerged from orality into writing, the book contains a fragmentary archaeology of the life of the written text, and ghosts of the oral tale. The language reflects the story's journey through periods and cultures, and also reflects the hand of less enlightened editors, who have more parochial or uniquely theological concerns, which happens sometimes in sacred texts. We see this phenomenon in the Book of Job in the atypical Hebrew and Aramaic phrases scattered throughout. Pope points out that the problem of the language has many aspects.

Actor 9: *The problems of Job, however, are not simply lexical, but also morphological and syntactic. The language is ostensibly Hebrew, but with so many peculiarities that some scholars have wondered whether it might not have been influenced by some other Semitic dialect.*

Greg: There's even a theory of an Arabic original, and there's good evidence that the author or editor was in fact a Gentile. After all, Job is one of the sons of the East and lives in the land of Uz, which is either northern Mesopotamia, or Edom, south of

Canaan. Given its deeply human subject of making sense of suffering, it should not be surprising to find the text well-traveled in the ancient world, and elusive to scholarly attempts to categorize it. I'll be candid and say that I'm pleased that there are not many scholarly handles with which to grab on to this text. Textual history, morphology, syntax, authorship — these are interesting, but ultimately distracting for such a profound story as Job. The Book of Job belongs in the company of the Chinese Tao Te Ching.

Actor 10: *There was something undefined and complete coming into existence before Heaven and Earth.*

Greg: The medieval *Cloud of Unknowing*.

Actor 5: *For the first time you lift your heart to God with stirrings of love, you will find only a darkness, as if it were a cloud of unknowing.*

Greg: And the American *Leaves of Grass*.

Actor 8: *This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless / Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done / Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best. / Night, sleep, and the stars.*

Greg: Like a great painting or a profound film or play, Job must be experienced more than written about. And each experience of Job takes one deeper into the human mystery, and produces gratitude for the role of great art, which is what this book is. In the most cited and least read book in history, the Bible, Job is arguably the most misunderstood. I speak from both the history of hermeneutics and from my own personal history. My first job was in a little church-related college in the South, one that required all first-year students to take Hebrew Bible their first semester and New Testament their second. It was, in so many ways, a terrible idea, not least because students were unprepared to treat the Bible as a text with a context. Instead, they came into the class thinking it was advanced Sunday school. For the Hebrew Bible class, I would lecture on the Torah and leave the other books for students to research

and present themselves. The Job groups would invariably misread the text by using the lenses of Christian and some Jewish theology. And so, they would pronounce at the end of their presentation, the Book of Job teaches us that if we follow God's laws and praise Him even in suffering, we will be rewarded la dee da dee da. I grew so tired of this misreading that I once exclaimed, "Have you not read this book? The only way to see God in this text is as a monster who treats human life as poker chips." I really couldn't blame the students though, since the editors of the epilogue themselves overturned the poetry of the text to add a cartoonish, platitudinous, vacuous interpretation that suggests that God will mess with you by taking away all that you care about, but He will return it in the end. New children to replace the dead ones. The epilogue is a narrative explanation that says, don't heed what you just read. Okay, well that's an interesting move too. It's a kind of postmodern move even, in some ways. Why would someone do that? Because it's too hard of a teaching. Hard teachings don't typically work well in communal settings. They work well in private, in solitude. We find this all the time in sacred texts from the Dhammapada of the Buddha, to the Qur'an and others. There's a line in the Tao Te Ching, which is actually from about this time period probably. This is, the world is sacred. It doesn't need changing.

Actor 10: *The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.*

Greg: Wow. Okay. I've been thinking about that for 30 years, you know. It's a hard saying, and I don't really say it to people because it's too hard. It's something you've got to sit with and not just contemplate but eventually live. I think I know what it means. I think, given the context of Taoism, it means, don't try to influence the Tao. Let the Tao be the Tao. Which is bigger, stronger, faster, deeper running than you are.

Actor 10: *A violent wind does not last for a whole morning. A sudden rain does not last for the whole day. To whom is it that these two things are owing? To Heaven and Earth. If Heaven and Earth cannot make such spasmodic actings last long, how much less can man?*

Greg: Well, guess what? Now we're right back at the Book of Job. The interpretive history of the Book of Job is one where well-meaning readers and editors dull the sharp edges of the text to make it less dangerous, placing future readers into the exact position Job finds himself in the prologue: pious but unwise. As Stephen Mitchell notes in his translation, —

Actor 9: *Job, because of its strange idiom and the extreme compression of its verse, must have seemed difficult even to the poet's contemporaries. Difficult and scandalous. In several places, it is obvious that some scribe has deliberately altered a word out of a pious desire to suppress Job's blasphemy. And there are numerous other errors that must be due to inadvertence or misunderstanding.*

Greg: From such misinterpretation is born the adage, "The patience of Job," found in everything from the Talmud to the New Testament to contemporary sermons.

Actor 3: *"The Bible records the story of Job that illustrates someone who suffered greatly, yet never turned his back on God. The phrase, 'The patience of Job,' demonstrates the experience of Job's triumphant attitude during his excruciating suffering that intruded his life." - from the writings of Reverend Billy Graham.*

Greg: Really? Have you met this man? He's anything but patient, nor should he be. I think this is a deeply poetic, literary, psychological text, and none of those things belong in sacred scripture, at least given a certain understanding of sacred scripture. We want history, we want theology. We want something from which we can build doctrine. Well, you know what? The whirlwind says your doctrine is nothing —

GOD: *Can you lift up your voice to the clouds so that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings so that they may go and say to you, "Here we are"? Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?*

Greg: So, let's take another tack here and look at the psychological structure of the book, okay? Forces beyond Job's comprehension, one of which takes the form of a

god he worships, conspire to deal him the most profound suffering a human can experience: the loss of children, wealth, and eventually health, all in one stroke. It's the story of profound loss. And as literary critic J. Hillis Miller once wrote —

Actor 8: *Storytelling is always after the fact. And it is always constructed over a loss.*

Greg: So, loss sets in motion a story. But in Job's case, the story he knew is gone. And his new story has yet to emerge. He put all his chips on his own bet with God — that goodness prevents suffering — and he lost all but his life on that bet. Now he sits alone, scraping his rotting skin, crying out to God for justice he never gets. What he does get is a wife who tells him to curse God and die, and a set of friends who find the most elaborate and sophisticated ways to blame him for his suffering. Carl Jung, in his answer to Job, brilliantly sees the story at its deepest level, and recognizes the voices of the friends as Job's own voices of self-recrimination. This phenomenon is existentially true because, in addition to storytelling, loss produces recrimination, and voices in our head speak accusingly of what we have done to deserve our fate.

FRIEND #1: *Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities.*

FRIEND #2: *How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind?*

FRIEND #3: *Should your babble put others to silence, and when you mock, shall no one shame you?*

Greg: You know, Job just keeps saying, in every one of his slam poems, “where is God? I need a referee. I need someone to come down.” And at the end, the whirlwind comes down and Job goes: Oh. Basically, oh shit.

GOD: *Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.*

JOB: *See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?*

Greg: The genius of the book is that its solution to suffering is no solution at all, really. The voice of the whirlwind points out that Job simply does not know much, at least as much as the Creator knows.

GOD: *Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or, who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

Greg: We are too small and too ignorant to solve the problem of suffering. What we can do is be comforted that we are dust. How is that a comfort? Just ask the Job of the beginning of the book with his obsessive piety and belief that he knows God and therefore, how the world works. It's a comfort to know that we are dust, and we'll return to it, because it means that we're not in charge of our fate. We do not know enough to make demands of the universe that center on our small concerns. Someone does, but he's inscrutable and too powerful for our puny minds to grasp. At the same time, the whirlwind did answer Job. It took the time to interrogate him, as he demanded, and offered him his best poetry; the language of mysticism, not of philosophy or law. And let's not forget that Job's prayer was answered. He was comforted, just not in any way he could have imagined at the beginning of the story. It would not be incorrect to say that Job and his friends met his suffering with logic wrapped in poetry, while the whirlwind offered Job a sense of his place in the world, wrapped in power and beauty. H.G. Wells, Archibald MacLeish, Robert Frost, and others recognized the power of the story and made it their own. Tennyson called it —

Actor 3: *The greatest poem of ancient and modern times.*

Greg: So, while Job has always been relevant, it has never been more so in this time of pandemics, and the fraying of old stories. When our stories are threatened by events they cannot account for, we not only cling to that story, we also examine it, test it, make sure it's not broken. We call in our friends and ask them to confirm our righteousness: It's not me, it's him, right? For some 36 chapters, Job and his friends do precisely that. And it is understandable that they would do so in poetry. After suffering comes silence,

and after silence comes words. Words, however, must adapt themselves to this new thing in the world, this new world. And the best kind of language for such a process is poetry. Why is that the case?

It's because prose is the language of the old story, a story well told and well-lived. And language reflects life. So, when life shatters, so does our language. Of course, that's not to say that prose cannot be helpful or not employ paradox, but it is in poetry that paradox finds a special home.

GOD: *Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of Heaven? The waters become hard like stone, and the face of the deep is frozen.*

Greg: And when new stories emerge, it is paradox that is at work. Paradox, irony and similar devices are language turning in on itself, just as life has turned in on itself in suffering.

JOB: *You put my feet in the stocks, and watch all my paths; you set a bound to the soles of my feet. One wastes away like a rotten thing, like a garment that is moth-eaten.*

Greg: Poetry is also the language of the sacred because the sacred is beyond language. We need language to take us there, but we cannot allow language to substitute for the sacred. As the literary critic Cleanth Brooks put it in his essay, "The Language of Paradox," —

Actor 8: *The poet must work by analogies, but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes; necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions. Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes far more often than we think, if we are sufficiently alive to what he is doing.*

Greg: Even before Brooks, the great Christian existentialist philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, noted this —

Actor 3: *The paradox is not a concession, but a category; an ontological definition which expresses the relation between an existing cognitive spirit and eternal truth.*

Greg: Job, his friends, and even God, agree with Kierkegaard. Put more simply, a new story appears as paradoxical because it's overturning a previous orthodoxy. Remember that Job actually spoke his new story before he enacted it —

JOB: *Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there.*

Greg: He has it. There it is. But he does not have it because the story has not yet been enacted. He's pantomiming his new story, saying what he thinks he should say, not what rises from within him to say. Put another way, it is a story he had heard but not yet lived. And that is okay. Because that is how new stories, new worlds, emerge. They're already here. We just cannot see them yet and have not lived them yet. As such, they are esoteric or hidden, waiting to be revealed and lived as soon as we let go of the old ones. We can see that this is the case because new stories are not dramatically different from the old ones, which is its own kind of comfort, I guess. Like musical notes, there are only so many stories in the world. It's how we relate to them and recombine them that make them new. To hear and enact a radically different story would be psychologically and culturally devastating, maybe even impossible. After all, this world is fragile. And so are we. So, we seek survival first, and meaning second, until they are eventually the same thing. And a new story begins to emerge, a new world begins to emerge, one in which we are comforted that we are dust.

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Aaron: Thank you for listening to this episode of *The Dybbukast*, "The Book of Job" - Readings from the Book of Job, as taken from multiple translations — with the primary source being the New Revised Standard Version — as well as readings from other featured texts, and quotations from scholars, were performed by Joshua Wolf

Coleman, Perry Daniel, Joe Jordan, Julie Lockhart, Rebecca Rasmussen, Clay Steakley, Diana Tanaka, Jonathan CK Williams, and Mark McClain Wilson. Thank you to Dr. Greg Salyer for sharing his insights. Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff, and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing is led by Clay Steakley, with support from Julie Lockhart and from me, Aaron Henne. The series is edited by Mark McClain Wilson.

Please visit us at theatredybbuk.org, where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website on the contact page.

This season of *The Dybbukast* is generously supported by a grant from Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah. New episodes are available every second Friday of the month. This episode was presented in collaboration with the Philosophical Research Society. More information about that organization and its work can be found at prs.org. *The Dybbukast* is produced by theatre dybbuk.

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Actor 1: Then Job answered the Lord: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust."