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Caught in a web of irony: Job and his embarrassed God

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DEALING WITH DISCREPANCIES

In an ironical but at the same time esthetically pleasing way, the position of the reader with regard to the Book of Job is analogous to the position of Job vis à vis God's behavior: for neither of them, it is an easy matter to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation. But if both God and the text are difficult to make sense of, it should come as no surprise that the Book of Job has been subject to postmodern analyses. Postmodern criticism is very much concerned with two related characteristics of texts that feature prominently in the Book of Job: on the one hand, the absence of a definitive interpretation (what is, ultimately, the significance of human suffering?), and on the other, the presence of incongruities and discrepancies (why, for instance, does God answer Job by basically repeating a number of the things that Job himself has already said?) In Job scholarship, these two characteristics seem to lie at the basis of two different strategies of interpretation, one somewhat less extreme than the other. Whereas a more moderate approach shows how the tensions in the text contribute to meaning rather than subverting it, the more radical form of postmodern interpretation takes its starting-point in the absence of a definitive interpretation, and dialectically turns this absence into the very message of the text: the impossibility of arriving at an ultimate meaning *is* the meaning of the text.

A postmodern approach, however, is merely one way of making sense of the alleged inconsistency and inconclusiveness of the text. More traditional is the earnest philological habit of attributing difficulties to textual corruptions and interpolations, and there have of course been many suggestions as to the philologically heterogeneous character of the Book of Job. I am not in a position to judge the philological value of such arguments, but I will assume

that it is good hermeneutic practice to apply an interpretative Occam's razor: if we can find a coherent meaning, that option is to be preferred over postulating different textual sources. The same methodological guideline applies, to be sure, to radical postmodernism: renouncing a coherent textual interpretation in favor of a meta-textual reading is something to be done only as a last recourse, when all other possibilities have been rejected. So have they?

What I propose to do in this paper, then, is to steer clear of both the Scylla of postmodern extremism and the Charybdis of philological facility. Incoherence, a lack of harmony, clashes between different aspects of the text may in fact be interpreted in yet a third way: as symptoms of humor. As a literary genre, humor is the form par excellence to harbor incongruities. So would a humorous reading be an adequate way of dealing with the interpretative difficulties of the Book of Job? To what extent can it be read as an ironic text?

The question is not new, and what I will be able to add to the debate is merely a specific reading of God's speech in chapters 38-41. I will develop my argument in three steps. First, I will review some of the evidence for the presence of irony in the Book of Job. Second, I will chart the ironists' positions with regard to the theophany of chapters 38-41: for those writers who have taken the ironical aspects of the Book of Job seriously, the nature of God's speech is as much a matter of debate as it is for those writers who have simply taken the Book of Job seriously. And third, I will have a closer look at chapters 38-41, arguing that they can indeed be interpreted ironically. The outcome is a reappraisal of the dramatic figure of God: I will argue that the God-character is best interpreted as an embarrassed God.

METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

The methodology that I will use in the following pages is not specifically linguistic in any technical sense. (It is not even specifically lexical, in spite of my personal specialization in lexical semantics and lexicology.) There is, however, a consistent inspiration from Cognitive Linguistics, which it may be useful to make explicit at this point. (For an introduction into Cognitive Linguistics, see Taylor 1995, Ungerer & Schmid 1993. Foundational works are Langacker 1987, 1991 and Lakoff & Johnson 1981, Lakoff 1987.)

As a first step, let us note that my analysis involves three specific thematic discussions: an investigation into the concept of wisdom as it appears in the Book of Job, a pragmatically oriented analysis of Job's speech, and an attempt to answer the question whether God's reply to Job can be considered ironical. These topics are situated at different levels of linguistic structure: the analysis of the notion of wisdom looks at a single category, whereas the other two involve utterances as a whole.

As I will try to make clear presently, the three topical questions illustrate a

number of views on meaning that are cherished by Cognitive Linguistics. This does not mean, to be sure, that a similar analysis could not be arrived at by other means, i.e. starting from a different framework. I have since long claimed, for instance, that cognitive semantics links up in fundamental respects with a traditional philological approach, and (notwithstanding the recognition that Cognitive Linguistics has developed a battery of analytical notions and techniques that go far beyond anything to be found in the philological tradition), I could very well conceive of the following analysis as coming out of a more traditionally oriented philological approach.

The relevant views on meaning, then, are the following. Each of them relates specifically to one of the three topical discussions.

1 *Meaning involves categorization.* Linguistic meaning is not a straightforward reflection of the world, but it is a way of shaping reality, of making sense of the world. In the case of a concept like "wisdom", what is to be understood by that term is not a priori given. It is, as we shall see, a category that derives its experiential content from its relationship with other concepts. In the Book of Job, wisdom is not just "the quality of being wise" or some such lexicographical definition, but it is closely connected with age and experience: I will argue that it is crucial for an understanding of the Book of Job that wisdom comes with age. If we merely think of lexical concepts in the way in which they tend to be economically defined in dictionaries, such aspects of a concept might easily be considered of secondary importance. If one thinks of meanings as categories of experience, however, the entire canvas of associations that the concept entertains becomes part of the meaning.

2 *Meanings may invoke culturally specific background knowledge and assumptions.* As categories making sense of the world, specific categories are situated against a wider context of lived experience, which may be either physiological/biological or cultural. In the pragmatic analysis of Job's speech, I will suggest that Job seems to be flaunting a culturally specific pragmatic politeness hierarchy that has its roots in a patriarchal context.

3 *Meanings are contextually flexible.* The meanings that are realized in actual speech contexts need not be completely identical with the meanings that are more or less permanently stored in our linguistic memory. The interplay between specific circumstances and the linguistic message may create new or different readings. On the level of individual categories, this flexibility is well-known in the form of prototype effects (Geeraerts 1997). In the Book of Job, the importance of context becomes specifically clear if, at the level of utterances rather than individual categories, we look at the way in which irony comes about. Irony is typically a case in which an expression receives a different interpretation in one context rather than another - even extremely so:

one reading is the opposite of the other, and moreover, the contrast between the two readings is part of the effect that the speaker wants to achieve. When, for instance, Job replies to Sofar and the other friends: "wisdom will die with you "(12:2), the utterance receives an ironic interpretation because we know that Job is far from happy with the comfort that his friends purport to give. In the context, Job's reply acquires a sarcastic reading. The impact of context in the constitution of irony is complicated by the fact that the knowledge that triggers the ironic reading is not necessarily shared by all participants (and the reader, to be sure, is one of those participants).

HUMOR IN THE BOOK OF JOB

Before focusing on the possible irony of God's speeches in chapters 38-41, let us first establish that a reading of the Book of Job as a humorous text is not an altogether implausible option. Humor is far from absent in the Old Testament (Good 1965, Knox 1969, Friedman 2000), and a number of authors (Whedbee 1977, Robertson 1973, 1977, Hoffmann 1983-1984) have specifically analyzed the Book of Job with regard to its humorous content. The most radical position in this respect is that of Robertson and Whedbee, who argue that the text as a whole belongs to the genre of comedy. I will discuss the views of Whedbee, Robertson, and Hoffmann more thoroughly in the next section. At this point, I will merely enumerate some of the humorous aspects of the text. Many of the points enumerated here may be found in the works of the authors just mentioned, but I have tried to bring some order into the matter by grouping the observations in four categories: the conversational style of the book, the characters, the plot as a whole, and specific details of the plot.

First, throughout the conversations and speeches that constitute the main body of the text, there are sarcastic remarks and ironical interchanges among the main characters. For one thing, Job regularly scorns his friends for their failure to provide an adequate answer to his misery. (Quotes are from the Revised Standard Version of 1947.)

12:2 No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you.

13:5 Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom!

26:2 How you have helped him who has no power! How you have saved the arm that has no strength!

3 How you have counseled him who has no wisdom, and plentifully declared sound knowledge!

4 With whose help have you uttered words, and whose spirit has come forth from you?

For an other, God mocks Job's claim to wisdom (the claim, that is, that he could explain something to God that he does not know yet):

38:4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

5 Who determined its measurements--surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?

and Job's challenging attitude:

40:10 Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor.

11 Pour forth the overflowings of your anger, and look on every one that is proud, and abase him.

12 Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked where they stand.

13 Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below.

14 Then will I also acknowledge to you, that your own right hand can give you victory.

Second, the characters have caricatural features. To begin with, Job's friends are a caricature of the wise counselor: they are supposed to comfort Job and provide him with good counsel, but blatantly fail in their task. Next, Elihu is even more ridiculous: there is a comical contrast between the tension and the expectation that is created when Job so to speak calls God's bluff, and the unexpected appearance of Elihu, who is portrayed as a bombastic, long-winded and self-important young upstart. In contrast with the awesome God whose appearance is expected, Elihu is a joker who relieves and at the same time prolongs the tension. Finally, even Job himself, working himself stubbornly from a state of utter desolation into a frenzy of rebellion in which he challenges God to a showdown, displays an obsessive single-mindedness that would suit any of Molière's comical archetypes.

Third, the overall narrative structure of the text corresponds with that of a comedy (not in the sense of an amusing story with funny characters and farcical incidents, but in the sense of a literary work with a happy ending). The overarching structure moves from a blissful, fairytale-like beginning to a situation in which the main character lapses into wretchedness and misery. When the main character has gone through the test (and has changed his ways accordingly), a happy end follows.

And fourth, at a more detailed level of the plot, the progress of events is characterized by comical repetitions and comical reversals. The dominant example of repetition is obviously the conversation between Job and his friends. Time and again, the attempts to comfort and convince Job fail, but time and again, the pattern of futile argument and emotional reply is repeated. A specifically ironical touch is the way in which the pattern of repetitions gradually comes to a halt, with ever shorter interventions of the friends, and finally the complete absence of the expected third speech by Sofar. The ineffectiveness of the interventions, in other words, is reflected by the gradual fading away of the friends' speeches: they literally have no arguments left. An ironic reversal occurs in Job's attitude with regard to God: after God has

only once raised his voice, Job's rebellious challenge abruptly changes into subservience. Similarly, there is an ironical reversal in Job's relationship with his friends: while they were supposed to act as intercessors for Job but failed to do so properly, Job, after his restoration, functions as an intercessor for them.

THE IRONY OF GOD'S SPEECH I

Both microstructurally and macrostructurally, then, humor and irony seem to play an important role in the construction of the Book of Job. But all interpretations of the book stumble over God's speech - the final chapters of the poetical part of the text that are so hard to interpret that some critics have even suggested that they do not belong to the original text. Writers like Hoffmann, Whedbee, and Robertson, who have devoted specific attention to the humorous and ironic aspects of the book, are likewise divided as to the meaning to be attributed to the intervention of God. In this paragraph, I will try to show that the positions they take correspond to a specific pattern. At the same time, it will appear that there is a hole in the pattern, and the next paragraph will suggest how the hole can be filled.

The position of Robertson and Hoffmann may be contrasted with that of Whedbee: whereas the former argue that God's speech is ironic and evasive, and therefore does not constitute a proper answer to Job's question, the latter underlines the non-ironic, relevant aspects of God's answer. Let us take a closer look at the various positions.

Robertson (1973) interprets God's speech against the larger context of the book, and specifically in the light of chapter 9, where Job predicts what God would do in a face-to-face encounter: God would overawe Job with his intellectual superiority and his overwhelming powers. And when God does indeed appear, he acts precisely as predicted by Job: Job simply does not stand a chance, and he acknowledges as much. God then appears as an inconsiderate tyrant rather than a just and merciful ruler: "So God's rhetoric, because Job has armed us against it, convinces us that he is a charlatan God, one who has the power and skill of a god but is a fake at the truly divine task of governing with justice and love" (1973:464). Job's repentance, in turn, can only be a non-authentic stance, faking rather than feeling submissiveness. The overall meaning of the Book of Job, then, is that of curing man's fear of fate, his destiny, the unknown by "ridicule of the object feared" (1973:468): "So we know of him what we know of all tyrants, that while they may torture us and finally kill us, they cannot destroy our personal integrity" (1973:469).

Whedbee (1977), as we have seen, accepts Robertson's overall premise that the Book of Job belongs to the genre of comedy, but challenges Robertson's reading of God's speech. Robertson, he claims, underplays the significance of God's intervention by merely concentrating on the ironic interplay between Job's prior speeches and God's speeches. God does in fact go further than just

echoing Job's predictions: he redirects them towards a positive vision of the universe. Yes, God is all-powerful (as Job predicted), but whereas Job paints a bleak picture of God's overwhelming strength, God himself brings, as Whedbee states it, a "playful, festive note in the portrayal of creation", stressing the magnificence and the order of the universe rather than the chaos and oppression that Job highlighted. Job's confession, then, is a genuine recognition that he saw creation in the wrong light, and the restoration of Job, rather than being ludicrous in all in its implausibility (as Robertson would have it) is a true happy ending.

Robertson (1977), incidentally, has answered Whedbee, but in a very half-hearted way, admitting that "though neither theory is free from defects, both are about as coherent and comprehensive interpretations of the Book of Job as we are likely to get".

Hoffmann's position (1983, 1996), to round off the overview, is an interesting variant of Robertson's. Hoffmann too recognizes God's speech as ironical, but it is not irony of God with regard to Job, but rather irony of the author with regard to himself. It is worthwhile to quote Hoffmann (1983:19) in full:

The author has ironically presented himself as someone who knows the answer to the questions he has raised. However, in the manner of irony, that which is written (i.e.: here is the well-ordered answer to the questions raised heretofore) implies the exact opposite. What is really being said is: I cannot answer the difficult questions I have presented, and they are still as problematic as before. What we have here is *self-irony*, in that throughout the book the author creates the impression that he knows the answer and will tell us at the end. (...) Hence we arrive at the self-irony of man: All I, as a human being, can do is to delude myself that there is a solution to the problem of divine recompense and mask my delusions one way or another. The ironic truth is that I must accept my fate, come what may.

The inaptness of God's words with regard to Job's question turns the text as a whole into an ironic statement. All along, the text seems to work its laborious way towards an answer, but when the answer finally comes, it is way off the mark.

The pattern that emerges from the positions of these three authors is a simple one: either God's speech is an appropriate albeit indirect response to Job (Whedbee), or it is ironic and evasive (Robertson and Hoffmann). But are these alternatives mutually exclusive? At least in one way they are not: the view that God's speech is a corruption of the original text in the form of a later insertion can be equated with the defeatist view that it is neither appropriate nor ironic, that it is, in other words, uninterpretable. The true hole in the pattern, then, involves the possibility that God's speech is both appropriate and ironic. What would happen if we pursued this line of thought? Can such an interpretation be maintained?

I will explore the possibilities in the next paragraph, but I first have to

indicate how the approach that I will propose differs from the positions discussed so far.

On the one hand, I agree with Whedbee that Robertson underestimates the impact of God's speeches: they do not just mimic Job's earlier speeches, but they add something to them. I disagree with Whedbee, however, as to what it is that is being added. Even though there is an element of playfulness in God's speech, the speech as a whole is not really a straightforward hymn to creation. If it convinces Job, it has to be on other grounds than just the festive nature of creation. A closer scrutiny of God's speech is in order, then.

On the other hand, I entirely agree with Hoffmann that we have to take into account different levels of irony in the text. Whereas Robertson only envisages the irony of God with regard to Job, we have to allow for forms of irony that are perceived only by the author and the audience, and not by the characters. However, I think we can be more precise about the conspiracy between the author and the audience than Hoffmann is, by taking a closer look at the narrative framework of the text. If the audience knows more than the characters, it is through the narrative setting introduced in the prologue. So how does God's speech relate to the prologue?

THE APPROPRIATENESS OF GOD'S SPEECH I

There are two points of a pragmatic nature that need to be elucidated first. To begin with, God's speech is definitely an indirect speech act, and indirect speech acts can constitute extremely appropriate answers. If you ask me: "Will you attend Ron Langacker's lecture?", and I reply: "Have men walked on the moon?", then my rhetorical question is not a direct answer, but it does constitute an appropriate response of the "obviously"-type.

Further, appropriate responses to speech acts may take the form of questioning the felicity conditions of those speech acts. Felicity conditions are criteria that have to be fulfilled if a speech act is to be properly made. They may involve the sincerity of the speaker, the authority invested in the speaker, the ability of the speaker to live up to the consequences of his commitments, and so on. In all cases, satisfaction of the felicity conditions is a necessary prerequisite for a certain speech act to be pragmatically valid. This implies that certain acts may be appropriately countered by pointing out that the felicity conditions of the act do not hold. Imagine a 15-year old at the box office of a theater showing only X-rated movies, asking whether the film is shown with or without a break. If he gets the answer: "Sorry, but you are under age", then it is clearly not a direct answer to his question, but it is an appropriate answer, because it makes clear that he was not in a position to ask the initial question to begin with. The presuppositions that are necessary for the question to be a relevant one, are not met, and pointing that out is a conversationally adequate answer.

My suggestion now is that God's speeches may be read as *indirect speech*

acts questioning the felicity conditions of Job's question. I will argue for this position in two steps. First, I will analyze the concept of wisdom in the Book of Job, because Job's speech act is fundamentally framed as an investigation into knowledge and truth. If Job is asking for insight but is asking for it in the wrong way, then we will first have to be clear about the conception of knowledge and insight that permeates the Book of Job (and that is insufficiently heeded by Job). Second, I will have to deal with the twopartite structure of God's speech, because each of those parts addresses a different aspect of Job's pragmatically inappropriate behavior.

The concept of wisdom (and insight, as both terms are often mentioned together: see 11:6, 15:8-9, 26:3, 28:12, 32:7-8, 34:34-35, 38:36, 39:17) is basically presented with three features (apart from the fact, of course, that wisdom is difficult attain).

First, wisdom is a condition for appropriate speech. See e.g. 11:47, 20:3, 26:3-4, 32:7-8, 34:35, 36:4 and other passages, of which God's comment in 38:2-4 is perhaps the most poignant one. In itself, this association between wisdom and the pragmatic validity of a given discourse is not surprising. In the dramatic setting of Job's attempt to justify himself, speaking the truth, expressing wisdom, formulating the right insight is probably the motor concept par excellence of the whole text. We will see presently, however, that this unsurprising link between possessing wisdom and speaking appropriately is the basis for a specific pragmatic logic.

Second, wisdom correlates with age. Take the second speech by Elifaz, lines 15:7-10. Elifaz questions Job's insight by pointing out that Job is not of infinite age.

7 Are you the first man that was born? Or were you brought forth before the hills?

8 Have you listened in the council of God? And do you limit wisdom to yourself?

9 What do you know that we do not know? What do you understand that is not clear to us?

10 Both the gray-haired and the aged are among us, older than your father.

Superior knowledge, in other words, presupposes superior age. Similar lines are to be found in Sofar's speech in 20:4, in Elihu's speech in 32:7-9, perhaps also in Job's words in 28:13, and most certainly in God's remark in 38:4. Job cannot have infinite wisdom because he does not have infinite age. If we accept that the experience needed for ultimate wisdom exceeds the bounds of human life, then, of course, wisdom cannot be found in the land of the living. The patriarchal association of wisdom with experience and age is, in other words, extrapolated towards God. In the ordinary context of the patriarchal society, the elders know best. God however is a superhuman hyper-patriarch who has to know even better, if only because of his superior age.

Third, it follows from the combination of the first and the second feature that age is a prerequisite for appropriate speech, or at least, that there is likely

to exist a pragmatic hierarchy of speaking rights based on age and assumed wisdom: the young do not speak before the old. As a form of a politeness hierarchy, such a hierarchical restriction on the structure of conversation would be a conventional part of a patriarchal society, but in the context of the Book of Job, it acquires a specific depth through the way in which the text focuses on the concept of wisdom.

This is particularly apparent in the speech of Elihu. On the one hand, Elihu presupposes the patriarchal model, expressing his disappointment in the older people who have spoken before him, but who have not exhibited the wisdom that might be expected of them: see 32:7-9. On the other hand, Elihu breaks the hierarchy. According to the patriarchal politeness hierarchy, Elihu speaks before his time. He is a young person challenging and the elders, and moreover challenging them on their own domain: that of wisdom. That is why Elihu can be depicted as a fool, making a lot of wind, inflating himself, making himself more important, and continually re-affirming his own importance.

Elihu, in short, challenges the patriarchs without being in a position to do so. But ironically, this is precisely what Job does with regard to God. The position of Elihu with regard to Job and his patriarch friends is structurally analogous to the position of Job with regard to the divine super-patriarch. The epistemological hierarchy of wisdom and age, coupled with the pragmatic hierarchy of politeness and conversational turn-taking, leads to a linear ordering where Elihu is lower on the ladder than Job and where Job is lower on the ladder than God.

But then, Job calling God to account is not observing the linear ordering just as much as Elihu is in reprimanding the elders. In challenging God, Job is making a non-felicitous speech act, because he is not observing the hierarchy of politeness and conversational rights, and in claiming that he can teach God something about his innocence, he is ignoring the hierarchy of wisdom that is itself (as we have seen) intimately connected with the pragmatic hierarchy.

God, to be sure, makes all this apparent, putting his mighty finger on Job's breach of felicity conditions. God makes clear (in a roundabout way, by pointing out rather than by stating explicitly) that Job is going beyond the pale. Note that we have just identified two relevant conditions that Job is not observing: one having to do with a hierarchy of politeness of conversational rights, and the other having to do with a hierarchy of wisdom and knowledge. That is why we have two speeches of God: in each of the speeches, God addresses one of Job's pragmatic trespasses. The first speech addresses the hierarchy of wisdom (i.e. Job's flaunting of the presupposition that superior wisdom correlates with superior age, and that ultimate wisdom relies on infinite age). The second speech addresses the hierarchy of power (i.e. Job's flaunting of principles of conversational politeness).

THE APPROPRIATENESS OF GOD'S SPEECH II

But the binary nature of God's speech is one of those aspects of the text that have troubled the interpreters. It has been claimed that the double speech of God is a flaw in the text, an interpolation perhaps, and in any case a superfluous repetition. Why are there two speeches of God? Why is there a second speech if Job has already submitted after the first one? Is God just sadistically rubbing it in, delivering a final blow to an already subdued enemy? I would argue that there are subtle differences between the two speeches that indicate that they have a different focus. There are three basic observations that I would like to advance in support of this idea.

First, God's opening lines, setting the topic of the speeches, unmistakably mark a difference. The opening of the first speech takes Job at issue for wanting to teach God something, as if God were saying: "So you want to instruct me? Well okay, be a man, and let's see if you can teach me anything". The second speech puts it no less explicitly in terms of power relations: "You what to challenge me? Well okay, let's see how far you can get." Whereas 38:2 invokes knowledge (and "words without knowledge") as the theme of the speech, 40:8 invokes condemnation and justification, i.e. the notion of authority. Needless to say, the two aspects that we have identified above involve precisely the way in which Job counteracts or at least ignores the prevailing models of knowledge and authority.

Second, Job's reaction is fitting with regard to the topic of the speeches. After the first speech, he basically admits that he has no knowledge to speak of, and then he shuts up - which is an entirely appropriate reaction in a cognitive context, i.e. in a context focusing on knowledge and wisdom. After the second speech, by contrast, Job does something rather than say something: he submits and repents. The reaction is not a cognitive one, but a symbolic one; it involves making symbolical amends. Whereas Job's first reaction is a cognitive recognition of ignorance, his second reaction is a symbolical recognition of impudence, followed by a ritual act of making amends.

And third, the text of the speeches, the argument that each of them contains, is clearly different. In the second speech, we find images of power - the two monsters - and of power over power. God conjures up the terrible image of Leviathan and Behemoth, and further shows (in a positively hilarious way) that he controls the monsters: "Look, I can draw a straw through the crocodile's nose and lift it up. Can you?" In the first speech, on the other hand, we get images of the birth of the cosmos and the principles that organize it. Given the model of wisdom that we have been able to identify, this is entirely appropriate: God displays his superior knowledge which is grounded in his superior age, i.e. the fact that he (and not Job; compare 15:7) witnessed and engineered the creation of the world. Once again, God is overwhelming Job: "Look, I know all of all this. Do you? And

if you do not, how can you question me?"

In short, then, God seems to be saying something like this: "Well, Job, you are asking me for a chance to defend yourself, but actually, you are not in a position to ask. You challenge me to explain what is going on, but come to think of it, you do not have enough wisdom to understand what is going on, and moreover, you are not powerful enough to challenge me."

There is, however, another step to take. What is the function of the second part of the first speech? Chapter 39 does not contain cosmic images but rather describes a number of animals (though not powerful monsters as in chapters 40 and 41). One way of reading 39 is just as an addition to 38, as further proof of God's powers of creation (and hence his unsurpassed knowledge). I would argue, however, that God is adding a nuance to the first part of his first speech. To be sure, we cannot really say that God is noticeably subtle in his speeches. He uses extremely powerful images of cosmic and animal forces, and Job is duly overpowered; predominantly, God is just putting Job down. But in 39, a touch of subtlety does creep in.

Overall, the chapter presents multiple images of carefree and proud animals. What is the function of this? I would suggest that the key lies right in the center of the chapter, where God describes the ostrich.

13 The wings of the ostrich wave proudly; but are they the pinions and plumage of love?

14 For she leaves her eggs to the earth, and lets them be warmed on the ground,
15 forgetting that a foot may crush them, and that the wild beast may trample them.

16 She deals cruelly with her young, as if they were not hers; though her labor be in vain, yet she has no fear;

17 because God has made her forget wisdom, and given her no share in understanding.

18 When she rouses herself to flee, she laughs at the horse and his rider.

The passage (and particularly 39:17, which seems to mirror 28:20) adds a crucial nuance to the conclusion that Job arrives at in 28:28. The ostrich is presented as carefree (39:13) but at the same time as careless: it does not mind leaving its children in the desert (39:14-15) nor treating them harshly (39:16). Moreover (39:17), it does not mind if its efforts are useless, and it thinks highly of its own strength, lightly attacking humans, i.e. beings that are higher on the scale of creation (39:18).

The ostrich, then, is the ironical counter-image of Job himself: Job does worry, conspicuously so, about his children coming to harm and about the fruit of his life's work being destroyed. And even if Job stands up against a higher, divine power, he does not do so laughingly. This ironical context gives specific depth to line 39:17, which reads an explanation of the ostrich's behavior against the background of the hierarchy of knowledge: the ostrich is carefree precisely because it has no insight. This could be called the "tree of knowledge" argument: because man has eaten from the tree of knowledge, he

is no longer happy and carefree like the animals. By implication, the very fact that Job does worry establishes that he is not entirely devoid of insight.

God, in other words, refers to the hierarchy of wisdom to point out to Job that he got his presuppositions wrong (chapter 38), but at the same time, he subtly suggests (chapter 39) that the hierarchy of wisdom has to be extended in another sense as well: starting from Job, the Great Chain of Being has to be extended upwards from man to God, but it also has to be extended in a downward direction from man to animal. So, we have to modify our summary of God's first speech slightly: "Job, you are challenging me on the point of wisdom. Well, you're in no position to do so, because my knowledge is infinite and yours is limited. But if it can be of any comfort to you, remember that your limited knowledge is precisely what distinguishes you from the animals." Job is asking questions that he cannot *answer*, but the very fact that he can *ask* them demonstrates that he is closer to God than he may be inclined to think.

THE IRONY OF GOD'S SPEECH II

In an indirect, roundabout speech, replete with images and innuendo's, God suggests that the felicity conditions for Job's challenging attitude are not met, with regard to the question of wisdom just as well as with regard to the question of power and authority. This is a relevant answer, given the hierarchical model of knowledge and authority that permeates the text. And because Job clearly agrees, both in thought and in behavior, God's reply can only be considered an effective one.

But even if God's discourse is an appropriate and effective one, yielding an answer that Job can genuinely (though perhaps uncomfortably) live with, God is still being evasive and dismissive. He is sending Job off none the wiser, or at least, just a tiny bit wiser. Shouldn't we expect a different answer from God? It is important to make a distinction at this point between the expectations we may have as a reader and the expectations we may have as a believer. As believers, identifying with Job, we may either find God's answer unsatisfactory, or we may accept the idea that God's logic escapes us. As readers, however, we need not even ask the question, because we know what the answer is. This is a recognition that is remarkably absent from most discussions. If Job's question is: "Why do you torment me so while I am innocent?", we as readers *know* the answer, and we have known it from the very start of the book: God is tormenting Job merely because God has been persuaded by the satan to test Job. God has been bragging about Job, and being challenged by the satan to prove himself right, God lets the satan have his way with Job.

As readers, then, we know very well that God's answer to Job, though pragmatically relevant and conversationally effective, is not the true answer. So why doesn't God give the true answer? At least one plausible solution, it

would seem to me, is to recognize that God may well be *embarrassed*. Even if the Satan in the story were not the devil of later Judaism and Christianity but rather a member of God's courtly council (see Pagels 1995), God is not exactly well-behaved by common human standards. He has been playing a bad joke on Job, and he is not really in a position to confess to it. Job's insistence creates a painful moment for God: he could not really admit that he has been agonizing Job because he is his most faithful servant, could he?

The suggestion of an embarrassed God, outlandish though it may seem, does not only follow from the narrative context. There are two other features of the very final chapter of the book that fit in well with such an interpretation.

First, how can God declare that Job has spoken right of him when Job himself admitted that he had no understanding and that he had been talking nonsense? God's declaration in 42:7 can hardly apply to Job's earlier statements, which were dismissed in 38:2 as lacking understanding. At the same time, it can hardly apply to Job's newly acquired submissive attitude (and silence), because it is not different enough from the deferential attitudes advocated earlier by Job's friends, who are now being punished. Logically speaking, then, God's statement that Job has spoken right of him would seem to be paradoxical on any account. However, if we take it as a gesture of atonement, as a comforting signal that everything is alright now, as a way of saying that in spite of everything, Job is still God's best friend, then of course it matches the assumption that God somehow feels indebted to Job.

Second, the restoration of Job carries a hint of overcompensation. The reversal is so abrupt and the reparation so exaggerated that it can only be a sign of God's bad conscience. God is trying to make amends, and his feeling of unease induces him to do so lavishly.

On the whole, then, coming back to our earlier discussion of the views of Whedbee, Robertson, and Hoffmann, we can conclude that the opposition between Whedbee on the one hand and Robertson and Hoffmann on the other is not an exclusive one. God's speech is appropriate, but at the same time, his behavior appears to be profoundly ironic, in a sense that may be perceived by the audience and God himself, but hardly by Job. There is an ironic discrepancy between God's show of power with regard to Job, and his actual state of embarrassment. God's authority, his wisdom, and his strength overpower Job, but the reader can recognize them as a disguise of God's vulnerability. Likewise, there is an ironic discrepancy between the message of God's indirect speech act ("you're in no position to ask") and the message that we assume God is trying to avoid ("I am in no position to answer").

THE THEOLOGY OF GOD'S EMBARRASSMENT

Within the dramatic structure of the text, then, God's behavior exhibits an ironical embarrassment. But what does this mean for our interpretation of the

text as a whole, if we think of it as a religious text? How should we interpret God's embarrassment? I would like to suggest that we have two basic alternatives.

If we contrast the common expectation of an omnipotent God with the image drawn in the Book of Job - the image, that is, of an all too human, fumbling, embarrassed God - then the text has an overall ironic meaning. We could even conjecture that we are dealing here with a form of what we would now identify as Jewish humor, with the author mocking his own initial, pre-existing image of God, and his own subordination to a God that he does not entirely fathom. But as we know next to nothing about the way in which the original audience may have understood the text (how old, in fact, is Jewish humor?), it may be cautious to contrast the radically ironic interpretation with a more charitable one: what if the Book of Job is trying to make a specifically subtle point about the relationship between God and man?

At this point, I am again drawn to the ostrich passage as a key for an alternative interpretation. On the ladder of Creation, human intelligence has a specific place. It alone can recognize the wonders of creation and the power of God, but it can only do so at a tremendous price - the loss of innocence and carefreeness. God's embarrassment at the enormity of the price, in return, would seem to ask for much more drastic measures than the mere restoration of Job. Perhaps the Job episode, this practical joke that almost got out of hand, convinced God that he needed to set things straight with mankind on a much grander scale. And so Job would be vindicated, as a prefiguration...

It should be clear that the context that could disambiguate between these alternatives can hardly be found within the text itself. I have so far tried to formulate an interpretation that is as consistent as possible with what we know about the internal features of the text and the external context (such as the patriarchal social structure) in which it originated. But there are natural limits to this approach, and the choice between the alternative interpretations suggested here far exceeds the contextualized methodology that I have tried to follow. But that, I would say, is merely one more irony of this profoundly ironical text.

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