

What did Job Say?

by [Samuel Hux](#) (January 2019)



Job, Jacob Jordaens, 1620

Job's last words (*King James*):

I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear;
but now mine eye seeth thee.

Wherefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust
and ashes.

“So what’s on your mind, Miss Adeola?” I asked my student, an African who practiced no Abrahamic faith, with no religious axe to grind. As a Chemistry major, she was an exception in this history-of-ideas course; but she seemed to be minoring in whatever I was teaching and I had learned to read her facial expressions. “It just doesn’t sound like Job to me, his giving in this way.” So I was pleased to say to her (and a bit perplexed as well) that I knew just what she meant, have never been really convinced of Job’s surrender myself.

To get things straight, I remind myself (I do not presume to instruct the reader, who I am sure needs no instruction) what has happened before Job’s last words—excluding the interruption by the excited Elihu, possibly the addition of another hand. Satan has the Lord’s permission to test Job, who is a blameless and upright man (we have the Lord’s endorsement!): will Job curse the Lord if, first, all his possessions and his offspring are destroyed, and, second, if his body is wracked in pain? Satan loses, the Lord wins the “wager in Heaven,” as Job instructs his wife (a stand-in for most readers, I think) that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, so blessed be the name of the Lord. Which giveth scant solace to Job, however, who quite understandably curses the day he was born. (“God damn the day I was born” in Stephen Mitchell’s translation.) His three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar—presume to improve Job’s theological understanding: Job *must* have done something to deserve his *just punishment*, for

the Lord would not allow this otherwise. They instruct him thus in three cycles of debate in which their lectures do not change in content but only become more intense and exasperated (as is usually the case when we try to “get through” to someone who “will not listen” to our confident wisdom.)

Job insists throughout that he has done nothing wrong—and in spite of how such protestations of innocence always strike us in normal life we, the readers, know in this case that we are privileged to have the Lord’s own judgment that Job is blameless. Knowing he is so, Job, while never cursing his maker, quite naturally wants to know from the Lord “Why?” Ahistorically and alinguistically, I often imagine Job to speak German, because “*Warum?!*” is the loudest *why* I know of. *VahROOM!* When the Lord finally answers Job’s question, the “answer” is a paradoxical-poetic-mystifying-frustrating non-answer: Who are you to ask? Have you a power like Mine? Can your voice thunder as Mine does? Could you have created what I have created? So, Job girds up his loins like a man and asks nothing else—and repents in dust and ashes for even asking for explanations. Once Job has apparently surrendered, the Lord rages at the three friends for not speaking what is right of Him, as His servant Job has! Job, after all, has not presumed to explain the Lord’s actions—an arrogant assumption of intellect Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have arrogated to themselves—but has only cried out *Why?* (The Lord in effect is saying to the three, “You may think you are *defending me*, but you are really trying to *explain me!* Who the hell do you think you are?”) The Lord then gives Job twice what he had before (life-span included) and either replaces (?) or resurrects (?) his offspring. I will not say “rewards” Job, because I do not wish to tempt the Lord’s wrath which was perhaps not exhausted upon the three unfortunate intellectually-overconfident friends.

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So why am I, along with Miss Adeola and others (I will suggest), suspicious of Job's acquiescence—or, rather, the *manner* of his acquiescence? I will accept the terms set up by the text itself and not presume to *judge* the Lord's actions (the Eliphaz crew's defense of the Lord was after all a "judgment")—for even if those actions *strike* me as not quite what I would wish, *being struck* is by its nature something that happens to one and not quite what, like a judgment, one *does*. In other words, I do not intend to imitate Carl Jung (see his *Answer to Job*) and put the Lord on the couch. The Lord is offended, as it were, that this mere human Job is truer to the Genesis-delivered standards of moral behavior than He Himself is, so judges Jung. No, I accept (at least for the sake of argument) the Job-poet's intention: we cannot know why the Lord does what the Lord does.

I know when I am reading *The Book of Job* that I am in those fearful precincts of the Old Testament where the Lord-Jahweh-Elohim does not necessarily (who are we to define necessity?) behave the way we expect Him to behave. (I am trying to avoid saying "the way we think He ought to behave.") This is the broad biblical area, I tell my students, that Socrates—had he been Christian or Jew—would have bowdlerized out of the Guardians' assigned readings as just too shocking, if the



second book of Plato's *The Republic* is anything today. For instance, the Lord's wrath erupting as Noah's Flood, after which He seems to scratch his head at His own impatience and reflect that He doesn't think He should ever do that again.

Or the terrifying test (?) or temptation (?) of Abraham, His most faithful servant, to sacrifice Isaac, during which episode, it seems to me, if Abraham does not suffer the worst existential agony imaginable he is not worth the reader's respect. Or the odd and perplexing moment in Exodus when the Lord, having sent Moses on a mission to Egypt, decides to kill him for no apparent reason until (?) Zipporah slices off Mo's foreskin. And, of course, the story of Job. All moments as perplexing as all get-out.

So, in other words, these reflections of mine *are not on the actions of the Lord*, but, rather, *on the mental action taken by Job in his last words!*

Throughout the narrative, Job not only never curses the Lord, he never judges Him; for while asking *Why* something is happening can indeed be an accusation (as in "Why do you deny me my promotion, you son of a bitch?"), Job's *Why* could not be more respectful: he always assumes there must be a perfectly understandable explanation and he only wants to understand. And besides—once again—we have the Lord's testimony: the three friends "have not spoken of me the thing that is correct, as *my servant Job has*" (*italics added*). So what exactly (or even approximately, for God's sake!) does Job have to "repent" of?

The *King James* once more:

I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear:
but now my eye seeth thee.
Wherefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust
and ashes.

(What is the italicization of “myself” all about?)

The Revised Standard Version changes nothing essential, only minor adjustments into more modern English. Nor do the translations approved by the Jewish Publication Society. Nor does Robert Alter’s version in his recent *The Wisdom Books*.

By the ear’s rumor I heard of You,
and now my eye has seen You.
Therefore do I recant,
and I repent in dust and ashes.

“Recant” (obviously referring to Job-the-questioner’s words) seems to me an improvement upon “abhor *myself*” (the one who said the words). And Alter’s explanatory note is worth repeating, especially since we know Job can’t literally see God. “The seeing of the eye is a testimony to the persuasive power of the poetry that God has spoken to Job out of the whirlwind. Through that long chain of vividly arresting images, from the swaddling bands of mist drifting over the primordial sea at creation to the fearsomely armored Leviathan, whose eyes are like the eyelids of dawn, Job has

been led to see the multifarious character of God's vast creation, its unfathomable fusion of beauty and cruelty. And through this he has come to understand the incommensurability between his human notions of right and wrong and the structure of reality. But he may not see God Himself because God addresses him from a storm-cloud." All of which I heartily agree with. But I do not like Alter's translation of the last words of Job, any more than I like the *King James's*, the *RSV's*, the *JPS's*, or any other . . . *save two*.

And with that last sentence I desert the modest tone I have been trying to cultivate, and assume a tone (but not the content) as arrogant as that of Eliphaz and pals—for let me confess right away that I know no Hebrew at all, so who am I to talk about translations-from? I'll answer that question: I'm a pretty damned sensitive reader of a story.

"Save two" translations, I have noted. The first is Stephen Mitchell's (1979).

I had heard of you with my ears,
but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I will be quiet,
comforted that I am dust.

Well might Job "be quiet." For what is there to say? And he has been told quite emphatically by the Lord to *shut up*, even though what he's been saying God has approved: in Mitchell's translation the Lord says to the three, "For you have not

spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.” But “comforted” that he is dust? That’s a far cry from repenting in dust and ashes. And what it suggests to me is something like this: Given what Job has heard from that thunderous voice of God and “seen” through the images of creation, there is, in lieu of understanding what it’s all about, a certain comfort in knowing that in being but dust one is at least or best a totally other being from the *totaliter aliter* who thunders those sounds and speaks those images, and thus is not responsible for all that dreadful confusion . . . or something on that order.

I don’t suggest that this is exactly what Mitchell intends. In fact, the “comfort” he finds Job to experience is intended to be without the irony I read into it. Mitchell’s introduction: “He has faced evil, has looked straight into its face and through it, into a vast wonder and love.” About which I am not sure at all. It may be that my reading of Mitchell is colored by the next translation I wish to talk about.

In 1995, Jack Miles published *God: A Biography*—great title!—a study of how the major character of the biblical narrative—God, that is—“evolves” literarily and theologically in the course of the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures. The book was written a quarter-century ago and, although it won a Pulitzer and although reviews promised it would change our perspectives on biblical this and biblical that, as far as the Judaeo-Christian theological consensus is concerned, and as far as I can tell, Miles’s radical reading of *The Book of Job* has been met with a most stunning silence. I cannot hope and will not attempt to capture the subtlety and range of Miles’s argument: I am not an ex-Jesuit theologically educated at both Rome’s Pontifical Gregorian University and Jerusalem’s Hebrew University with a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages from

Harvard. I can only invite a reading or re-reading of his Chapter 10 plus his note running in excess of four pages of small print. The gist:

In Job's last words there are two problematic verbs related to one noun-phrase. The noun-phrase "dust and ashes" is in Hebrew *àpar wa'eper*. No problem here, although Miles prefers—I sense for poetic reasons—"mortal clay." But "abhor [or despise] *myself*" is an enormous problem. For one thing, that *myself*, traditionally and suspiciously italicized, simply does not exist in the Hebrew, was added aeons ago because the verb *èm'as* is transitive, that is, it requires a direct object. (Incidentally, Alter—whom Miles does not discuss since Alter's translation is much later—alters "abhor" to "recant" with an implicit direct object of "my words.") But how can *èm'as* be translated as "abhor" or "despise" (or even "recant")? For Miles says the verb implies a mental act of physical revulsion: he will finally translate it, therefore, as "shudder at." But, transitive, it still requires a direct object, to which I return in a moment.

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The second problematic verb, usually rendered "repent," is *nihamity*. When *nihamity* is followed by the preposition *àl*, it may mean, says Miles, either "I am sorry" (about or for something *I* have done), or "I am sorry" (about or for something that's been done by some other). Which is the case depends upon the noun that follows the preposition *àl*: if the noun refers to a human being—and *àpar wa'eper*, whether

translated “dust and ashes” or “mortal clay,” clearly signifies the human—then the verb phrase *nihamity àl* has to mean sorrow for something that’s happened, not about something I’ve done.

Now back to the transitive: what is the direct object of *èm’as*? What does Job “shudder at”? Rather than the fictional “myself” or the invention of the implied “my words”—recognize that just as in English two verbs can have the same direct object (my example: “I adore and revere my beloved”) so can two verbs in Hebrew. So accept what is already there in the text and doesn’t have to be invented: *àpar wa’per*, “dust and ashes” or “mortal clay.” So Job *shudders at* and *is sorry for* the same thing.

I have stripped Miles’s reasoning to its essentials, but I cannot here convey the extraordinary richness of his learning. Nonetheless, putting it all together—the shuddering-at and the being-sorry-for—Miles’s version of Job’s last words is nothing less than stunning:

Word of you had reached my ears,
but now that my eyes have seen you,
I shudder with sorrow for mortal clay.

There is no repentance, no acquiescence, no surrender. At best, an amazed and hesitantly respectful resignation.

I have three questions to ask: (1) Is Miles right? (2) If he

is—or even if he is merely “provocative”—why has he had no impact upon the “canonical” versions of *The Book of Job*? (3) Is the stunning “I shudder with sorrow for mortal clay” *coherent*, that is, consistent with the Job story as a whole?

First question: I am as I have confessed ill-equipped to answer, since the only Hebrew I know is what Miles has taught me. Nonetheless, having read his reasoning several times now, Miles’s translation of the last words sounds so very right and his learning seems so overwhelming, that I honestly have to say that it would require an extraordinary effort to force myself even to the level of the mildest skepticism. However, I am forced by the intention with which I conceived this essay in the first place to ask the Hebraically-literate to instruct me.

Second question: In his explanatory note, Miles writes that the self-aborrence and repentance of Job represent “an exegetical tradition”—dating back at least to the Septuagint—“unbroken to our own day.” That was 1995. It remains essentially unbroken still, almost as if Miles had never existed. So, why the silence? Is it because Hebrew scholars *know* what I *don’t* know, that Miles is just wrong? Well . . . even *if* he *were*, he would be wrong in such an interesting way that . . . (Do I need to finish that sentence?) Is the silence a result of an ignorance of Jack Miles’s *God: A Biography*? Well . . . I don’t dare to be judge of any possible dereliction of duty in one scholarly community. As good a possibility is a kind of gentle-scholars’ agreement—not necessarily reaching the level of conspiracy—to allow to slip from mind or active attention a view of Job that is profoundly upsetting of the canonical view of Job with which the Judaeo-Christian intellectual world has become familiar and comfortable for just too many centuries by this

time. After all, a translation which can be read in effect as "If you are the divine master, I am sorry for the human race" can arouse suspicions of blasphemy. Which leads to the third question.

The reader will have noticed that I have all along insisted that Job has nothing to repent of because the Lord upbraids His arrogant defenders, the three friends, for their not saying of Him the thing that is right as His servant Job has. My logic in its great simplicity has been that Job has said the right thing by not saying the wrong thing; that is, that his demanding to know *Why* may be annoying to the Lord—it surely is!—but does not amount to an arrogant and presumptuous attempt to *explain* Him.

However, it could be argued—conventionally has been argued—that when the Lord approves Job's saying-what-is-right He means Job's conventional repentance. Fine, I can understand that, but I doubt it sincerely. But for my well-mannered gesture I want reciprocal understanding. That is, understanding of the possibility that Job's saying-what-is-right is precisely his "*I shudder with sorrow for mortal clay,*" dear Lord, *now that I have experienced you so directly.*

Is such a reading blasphemous? I honestly cannot see it as such. I think that blasphemy has more often occurred in well-meant biblical commentary which tries to "clean up" ambiguous (often morally ambiguous) passages, such as the casual Christian's assuredness that when Jesus says in *Mark 4* that he speaks to "them that are without" in such a way that "seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest that at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them," then

surely Jesus must mean—surely—the opposite, since no one is to be excluded from the chance of salvation. But wily old Robert Frost had it right when he wrote (“Directive”) about “the Grail / Under a spell so the wrong ones can’t find it, / So can’t get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn’t.” This casual Christian (intellectually casual, that is) would *improve* the Bible. That, I resolutely refuse to do, preferring to read *what is there*, not what one thinks ought to be.

In any case, the Lord of *The Book of Job* is a difficult case, as hard for the reader to understand as he is for Job—and not easy on his most devoted worshippers. He is, as I once put it, “godly, not some pale Transcendentalist deity, some divine, universal president of an ethical culture league.” And that is true no matter how Job’s last words are to be translated. But it does make a difference if He approves of Job’s view of Him as an impossibly hard master to serve, if the Lord rather likes it that while neither Job nor anyone fully understands Him, Job, his most faithful servant, knows nonetheless at some level Who he is dealing with. That is, it makes a considerable difference—dramatically speaking at least—if Jack Miles is right. I await instruction from those learned in Hebrew.

And if I cannot be so instructed, I would wish to know why (my own *warum*?) the Miles thesis, so to speak, has been answered with such silence from the appropriately learned community. “Word of you had reached my ears, / but now that my eyes have seen you, / I shudder with sorrow for mortal clay” is just too bloody interesting to be ignored. I forget where but I am sure it was Kierkegaard who confessed that one of his chosen tasks was to make Christianity a difficult task.

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