

2014

Jewish Liberation Theology: A Post-Holocaust Exegesis of Humankind's Last Words to God

Jacob Bessen
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/studentawards>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bessen, Jacob, "Jewish Liberation Theology: A Post-Holocaust Exegesis of Humankind's Last Words to God" (2014). *Gateway Prize for Excellent Writing*. Paper 6.
<http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/studentawards/6>

This Gateway Prize for Excellent Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Academic Programs and Advising at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gateway Prize for Excellent Writing by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Jewish Liberation Theology:
A Post-Holocaust Exegesis of Humankind's Last Words to God
By Jacob Bessen

In Post-Holocaust Judaism, believers struggle to reconcile the atrocities of the Nazi ethnic cleansing with the existence of a just and caring God. Modern Jewish theologians often try to understand the Holocaust through the Book of Job, because the suffering of Job parallels the suffering of innocent Jews. In Job 42:5-6, the protagonist declares how he found solace from his struggle to rectify his unwarranted affliction with his understanding of Yahweh. From a modern perspective, this pericope can present a way in which the nature of God can be reconciled with the Holocaust. This God is not omnipotent but is in eternal struggle with the force of Chaos. The post-Holocaust Jew struggling to resolve the theological problems the genocide presents can interpret Job 42:5-6 as defining a relational existence with the omnipresent God. Job 42:5-6 should inspire modern Jews to commit just and compassionate acts to bring oneself closer to God and to prevent Chaos.

Most Post-Holocaust interpretations of Job are based in Ellie Weisel's idea that, "The Holocaust survivor is Job. The Holocaust survivor's story is Job's story. Job's story is traumatic testimony."¹ This understanding is a direct and immediate response to the Holocaust. However, it is not sustainable. The purpose for this interpretation was to help people who survived or were close to survivors to understand the Holocaust. As the modern Jewish population's memory of the Holocaust shifts from their reality to history, these understandings become less useful. The way Modern Jewish theology will reflect and understand this tragedy is dependent on how the Holocaust is remembered. Many search to retain vivid personal stories. Remembering the Holocaust as a collection of individual stories is unsustainable and impractical, because the story's potency is

¹ Mathewson, Dan. "Between Testimony And Interpretation: The Book Of Job In Post-Holocaust, Jewish Theological Reflection." *Studies In The Literary Imagination* 41.2 (2008): 17-39. EBSCO MegaFILE. Web. 24

dependent on its freshness. As memory of the genocide inevitably changes with the progression of time, the way Jews comprehend it must change as well. The Holocaust will eventually be thought of as the most recent period of affliction in Jewish history. This new historical memory of the Holocaust will reshape Jewish belief and thereby reshape and reaffirm Jewish identity.

Much of Jewish identity is shaped by the Tanakh, which looks to the moments of Jewish oppression and suffering as the source of identity. The best example of this is the way Hebrew scripture takes the affliction of Exodus and echoes it, using it to define the religion's relationship with God and the lifestyle God prescribes and to understand the existence of unjust persecution and tragedy. Though Biblical interpretation must change over time, Job still works as the lens through which to understand the Holocaust. At its core, the theological conflict in both the Book of Job and Jewish understanding of the Holocaust is how to reconcile Faith and Experience. While the approach to reconciling the two has changed vastly since the authorship of Job, addressing this conflict between faith and tragic experience seems to be the original intent of the author.

The Book of Job can be one of the most confusing pieces of the Tanakh for readers and historians alike. Scholars have debated the date, nationality, native language, and authorship of Job. While the answers it provides are limited, historical critical analysis provides enough context to understand some of the author's original agenda in writing Job. Marc Brettler states that the Book of Job is from a single author, perhaps with later additions.² However, it is probably an adaptation of a common tale in the Ancient Near East.³ Source criticism maintains that while the book's structure, which

² Brettler, Marc. *How to Read the Jewish Bible*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005. Print. 245

³ Brettler, Marc. *How to Read the Jewish Bible*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005. Print. 245

moves from a prose prologue to a poetic story and back to a prose epilogue, suggests it may have been written by different sources, these different sections cannot exist alone. The prologue, poem, and epilogue are codependent pieces of a one plot and story. Therefore, all three are considered the product of a single source. While the single authorship of Job is generally accepted, the identity of the author is less clear.

Modern interpretations suggest that the author of Job was a Hebrew intellectual dating from the earliest parts of Second Temple Judaism.⁴ There has been discussion that the peculiar Hebrew used in the Book of Job was written in another tongue and then translated. Gordis argues that the Tanakh's version of the Job story clearly bears the characteristics of Hebrew Wisdom literature, and therefore, the written copy was originally penned in Hebrew.⁵ The unconventional Hebrew used in Job is evidence of the author's identity as an intellectual. The use of animals and mythological characters not native to Israel is a result of the author's firsthand knowledge of nearby countries. This knowledge requires both the money for travel and the time for study, supporting the author's identity as a member of the wealthy intellectual class. The author's personality is prevalent in the conflict within the book. As a pious Hebrew, the author seeks to reconcile in an intellectual manner his faith that God is just with his firsthand witnessing of the suffering of the innocent and rewarding of the wicked. The reconciliation of faith with suffering is a problem that transcends time and identity. The universality of the conflict of Job, the mystical language, and the uncertainty of how and if Job finds solace, allow Job to be one of the most liberally interpreted pieces of canonized Jewish scripture.

⁴ Gordis, Robert. *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Print. 211-217

⁵ Gordis, Robert. *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Print. 212

The Book of Job dates from roughly 500 to 300 BCE or the Early Second Temple period based on certain theological distinctions.⁶ Brettler dates Job to this period using linguistic analysis of the word “ha-satan” or “adversary.” This terminology denotes that Job was written during the Persian period.⁷ The text seems to be written after the contributions of deutero-Isaiah. While deutero-Isaiah argues for devout faith in one God over the popular polytheism of the time in Babylonia, the author of Job is able to take monotheism for granted, presenting no argument at all. Lastly, the author is familiar with the idea of the afterlife but chooses not to accept it, like Kohelth and other Wisdom authors. By the end of the second temple period, the nature of afterlife was a very prominent and controversial topic in Hebrew theology. The author of Job disregards its existence without making an argument for his position. The liberty the author takes by not making an argument dates the authorship to the earliest parts of the Second Temple theology, when Hebrew commentary on the afterlife was less pervasive.⁸

The parallels between the contexts of the author and contemporary Jews promote a non-individualistic and historical interpretation of the text. In the way in which modern Jews remember the recent trauma of the Holocaust, the author has the memory of the destruction of the First Temple and Babylonian exile. However, he probably did not live through the destruction and exile himself. Unlike Hebrews before the exile, he identifies as an ethnic minority who survived recent oppression within a larger nation. These similarities link the generation of Hebrews in the time of the writing of Job to the Jews of today. This connection and modern Jews’ memory of recent affliction privilege post-Holocaust Jewish hermeneutics of Job.

⁶ Gordis, Robert. *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Print. 216

⁷ Brettler, Marc. *How to Read the Jewish Bible*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005. Print. 247

⁸ Gordis, Robert. *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Print. 217

Interpreting Job 42:5-6 as inspiring acts of compassion and justice derives from reconciling the central question the book as whole asks: why do bad things happen to good people? In Stephen Mitchell's introduction to his translation of the Book of Job, he offers three logical understandings for God's treatment of Job. The first is the perspective of Job's friends. They insist that God is just, and therefore, Job must be guilty. The next is Job's belief that he is innocent, and so, therefore, God cannot be just. The third is the perspective of the reader who wants to believe that God is just but also that Job is innocent. Mitchell says the last option is "not even thinkable."⁹ However, it is the understanding a Post-Holocaust reader must choose. Modern Judaism diverged from the deuteronomist perception that ancient Israelites' suffering was a result of their guilt before God. Instead, the popular belief of contemporary Jews maintains their innocence, claiming that they did not deserve the affliction of the Holocaust. However, they also maintain that Yahweh is a just and caring God. Consequently, Modern Jewish interpretation of the Book of Job must choose the "unthinkable" third option. To make sense of this interpretation, the Post-Holocaust theologian must acknowledge that it is not logically possible to do so without accepting that there are other factors at play beyond that of a just God and an innocent Job. If God was omnipotent and just, God could ensure that an innocent Job was treated appropriately. The post-Holocaust interpretation requires acceptance that God is either non-omnibenevolent or non-omnipotent and that there is a third factor at work in the Job story that causes the suffering of the innocent.

The third factor in the Job story cannot be human and cannot be under the control of God. The third factor can best be characterized by the Hebrew idea of "Thou Wa-

⁹ Stephan, Mitchell. *The Book Of Job*. New York, New York: HarperCollins, 1979. xiii. Print.

bohu,” best translated for this purpose as “Chaos.” Chaos is the primordial force that existed with God from the beginning. The earth as we know it begins when God dominates Chaos, ordering it to make the world and its inhabitants.¹⁰ The existence of Tohu Wa-bohu outside of the control of God explains Job and how a just God can allow suffering. In Jeremiah 3.11-6.30, God asks Israel and Judah to return to their homelands. The God presented in this pericope is not an omnipotent one. He is not giving the command of the almighty, but he is asking them to do as he asks. He bribes them with his blessing, saying, “If you return...Nations shall bless themselves by you.” (Jer. 4:1-2) In the beginning of this pericope, God states that the Hebrews are, “ignoring the Lord their God.” (Jer. 3:21) To describe the result of straying from the ways of the Lord, the language of Genesis is referenced. Yahweh foretells, “I look at the earth, it is Tohu Wa-Bohu.” (Jer. 4:23) These words of God can be interpreted literally to mean that the destruction and suffering taking place on earth are manifestations of Chaos. In Jeremiah 4:23, Yahweh and Tohu Wa-Bohu are contrasted as opposing forces. The cost of the Hebrews ignoring the commands of God is a return to the primordial reign of Chaos (Jer. 4:23). The rule of Tohu Wa-Bohu without the counteracting forces of Yahweh is an environment in which humankind cannot exist. It benefits humankind to do all it can to aid God against Chaos to maintain the balance and prevent Chaos from gaining the upper hand and manifesting itself in human suffering like the Holocaust and the Book of Job.

Chaos is clearly manifest in both stories. In Job, the afflictions Job suffers are not caused by reason but by unexplainable acts of nature and the human will for violence. His children did not sin, but they were still swept up by the great wind. The boys and camels were slaughtered by neighboring tribes as an act of malice and destruction, rather than

¹⁰ Genesis 1:1

being taken captive for profit of the attackers. These random, horrific acts are manifestations of Chaos. Similarly, the Holocaust must be viewed as a manifestation of Chaos and perhaps even as a time when Chaos held the balance of power over God. The survivors of the Holocaust did not survive because they were stronger or more devout than those who died but for cruel reasons of chance that are characteristic of Chaos. By accepting the existence of Chaos, Jews can reconcile suffering with God's presence and benevolence, yet must also face the question of where and how to find stability and protection from evil when such a malicious and random force exists. In Job 42:5-6 Job finds solace and protection from the presence of Chaos.

In Job 42:5, Job tells God that he "had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth Thee." Like other cases in the Tanakh where the face of God is seen, the direct experience of God exists only when one is at the greatest extremes of human suffering, and that experience drives one to faith and solace in faith. When Moses dies it is said that God knew Moses, "face to face." (Duet 34:10) Until his death, there is no evidence that Moses had seen God in God's full form, but only heard God's voice through divine objects (Exod. 3:1, Exod. 25:1). Placing the exact moment that Moses and Job "see" God is impossible, because in both instances the text makes no mention of them "seeing the face of God" but only notes in past tense that they "had seen the face of God." In the case of Job, it is clear that Job decides of his own accord that he has seen God. In neither account does God reveal itself to Moses or Job, yet they have each still seen Yahweh by undergoing changes themselves. God does not change to make himself visible. The viewer must change to have the ability to view God. God is omnipresent in the lives of the two men. However, they cannot see his presence. It is only once they

reach a level of extreme desperation and suffering that their vision is clarified, and they can see God. Moses' suffering is less blatantly stated than Job's, but his existential desperation has been the subject of much rabbinic commentary. Medieval Rabbis¹¹ point out that Moses did not die of his own accord but that of the Lord's word.¹² Like all humans, Moses feared his inevitable death. Moses' existential anxiety was not his only source of anguish. In accordance with Deuteronomist prerogatives, Moses also recognized and feared that the Israelites' would stray from the law of the Torah and monotheistic worship of Yahweh after his death. His death means relinquishing control over the Hebrews, though he clearly recognizes their need for a leader. He also dies being able to see the Promised Land he has worked for all of his life, but God prevents him from entering it. These causes of desperation leave Moses with nothing left to lose and no reason to maintain his faith. Yet, it is in this condition that Moses is able to see God and die in peace.

Like Moses, Job visually experiences God in the midst of exceptional suffering. When Job says, "I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth Thee," (Job 42:5), he is juxtaposing two ways of empirically understanding God. The first way is through his friends who know of God from earthly experience. They see God embodied in natural patterns and rules and assume that if God is omnipotent, all nature must follow his just order. Bildad says, "Can the reed- grass grow without water? Whilst it is yet in its greenness, and not cut down, it withereth before any other herb. So are the paths of all that forget God; and the hope of the godless man shall perish." (Job 8:11-13) However convincing Bildad's observations may be, Job cannot accept them as truth,

¹¹ See Deuteronomy Rabba in the Midrash

¹² Duet 34:5

because he knows that there is undeserved suffering and rewarded wickedness. Bildad's incomplete argument fails to reconcile the intellectual and believer voices of the author. Job only finds solace when he sees God firsthand, amid great suffering, when he has nothing left to lose. Ha-satan has taken his property, his loved ones, and his body. Once his friends and his social status abandon him, Job is left with nothing but his suffering, and it is then that the ever-present face of God becomes apparent. In some ineffable way, this experience pacifies Job and leads him to the revelation that he is "dust and ashes" (Job 42:6)

Job 42:6 are the last words in the dialogue between humankind and God in the canonized Tanakh. The line has been published with incredible variation in translation. The many translations fall into two basic categories, reflecting different understandings of how Job is able to comprehend his affliction. The first grouping of translations confers the more traditional meaning of the verse: that Job surrenders in his argument with God and submits fully, recognizing that he is only dust and ashes compared to the might of Yahweh. This was probably the way in which the Book of Job was first interpreted, or this text would not have had such a smooth introduction into canonization when compared to Ecclesiastes.¹³ The second is a more modern, existentialist interpretation that claims Job recognizes that he is only dust and ashes amongst an infinite amount of dust and ashes, and therefore, he and his suffering are meaningless.¹⁴ Neither of these options works for a Post-Holocaust perspective. The first option, complete surrender because of the incomparable power and awesomeness of God, works as an interpretation of Job because he is a single person, and therefore Job serves as an archetype for an oppressed

¹³ Gordis, Robert. *The Book of Job and Man: A Study of Job*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Print. 222

¹⁴ For an example, see Stephen Mitchell's translation.

individual. In the context of the Holocaust, however, this interpretation does not work, because the Holocaust forces Job to serve as an archetype for a race of people. More specifically, Job must represent a group that considers itself the Chosen People, who believe they receive favoritism from God. The second interpretation similarly fails to work when the suffering extends beyond an individual to include an entire race.

Job 42:6, the last words in the dialogue between humankind and God, relates back to the second account of the creation of Adam, in which God builds Man out of dust but also breathes into him the “breath of life.” (Gen 2:7) When Job, “repent[s] in dust and ashes”(Job 42:6), he is commenting on the relationship between humankind and God. Without God, Job is a meager pile of dust and ashes. Therefore, Job needs God. Job is not afraid of God’s mighty acts the whirlwind lists, but is instead inspired, understanding that by being full of the breath of God, he is a part of those acts. The relationship between God and Job is codependent. God wants Job to be faithful and obedient. If, instead of following his wife’s recommendation to “renounce God, and die” (Job 2:10), he does act the way God requests and perseveres through the suffering, the breath of God inside Job will flourish. In turn, this Post-Holocaust interpretation of Jewish scripture allows a different theological understanding of the Holocaust itself.

By accepting a non-omnipotent God, the Holocaust can be viewed as a time in which Chaos became the dominant power over the justice and order of the rule of Yahweh. As a product of this period of return to Tohu Wa-bohu, in an eerie realization of Job 42:6, Jews became “dust and ashes.” (Job 42:6) In response to the Holocaust, Jews must do all they can to nurture the “breath of life” (Gen 2:6) that exists throughout all of humankind, so that they (and all peoples) will be more than dust and ashes and enforce

God's order on earth, so that Chaos cannot gain the upper hand and upset the balance between order and chaos. As a realized form of this theology, the Book of Job calls for Hebrews to commit acts of compassion and social justice. These acts will nourish the breath of God in the enactors and will also move human existence away from periods of injustice like the Holocaust.

While surrounded by darkness, Job sees the light in the face of God. Similarly, post-Holocaust theology provides modern Jews a method to be surrounded by the inhumanity of genocide, and find light through ancient scripture. Pursuing justice on earth and compassion amongst mankind as a response to the Holocaust may seem naïve or over-sentimental, but it is also through this response that can Modern Jews find the light that Job found.

Bibliography:

Alford, C F. *After the Holocaust: The Book of Job, Primo Levi, and the Path to Affliction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print.

Berlin, Adele, Marc Z. Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane. *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.

Brettler, Marc. *How to Read the Jewish Bible*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005. Print.

David, Tollerton. "Emancipation from the Whirlwind: Piety and Rebellion among Jewish-American Post-Holocaust and Christian Liberation Readings of Job." *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*. 2.2 (2007): 70-91. Print.
<<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol2/iss2/>>.

Gordis, Robert. *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Print.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. 2nd Printing. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987.

Jonker, Louis C. *Texts, Contexts and Readings in Postexilic Literature: Explorations into Historiography and Identity Negotiation in Hebrew Bible and Related Texts*. , 2011. Print.

Katz, Steven T. *Post-holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought*. New York: New York University Press, 1983. Print.

Mathewson, Dan. "Between Testimony and Interpretation: The Book Of Job In Post-Holocaust, Jewish Theological Reflection." *Studies In The Literary Imagination*. 41.2 (2008): 17-39. EBSCO *MegaFILE*. Web. 24 Nov. 2013.

Mitchell, Stephen. *The Book of Job*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992. Print.