

## The Poetry of Power: A Literary Reflection On the Book of Job

Jack Hernandez

“Astounding poetry,” is Robert Alter’s description of The Book of Job.<sup>1</sup> Yes, it certainly is that, and more; it is a marvelous, major work of world literature, raising as it does timeless issues of human existence in a stunning and memorable way, one that grabs us, shakes us, and makes us think deeply, indeed dispute with one another as do Job and his friends. Alter’s new translation, *The Wisdom Books*, captures the extraordinary poetry of this important and memorable work.

The Book of Job begins and ends with an ancient folk tale, but its heart is the fifth century BCE verse drama, one that begins with Job’s extraordinary, moving monologue of futility, progresses and intensifies through a dialogue of increasing anger, and culminates in God’s final monologue of overwhelming power. Too often The Book of Job is approached as either an uplifting description of pious character, a stereotype, e.g. “the patience of Job,” who is anything but patient in his aggressive demand for justice, or as a simplistic morality tale, i.e. the faithful always flourish. What is, unfortunately, obscured by these approaches, is the wonderful poetry, which transcends easy intellectual categories and raises fundamental existential themes. It is to one of these themes, that we turn—the triumph of power.

This triumph is the climax of the drama, when God essentially tells Job what He, God, is like. The effectiveness of this climax, though, depends on Job’s initial monologue and the subsequent escalation of anger and verbal violence, a war of words, between Job and his friends, from Job to God, and God to Job. The poet thus sets up the appearance of God as the giant of anger and power.

The verse drama begins with Job sitting in ashes, scraping his sores with a potsherd. He sits in great physical pain but in even greater emotional pain and anguish, having lost his great abundance of sheep, camels, cattle, slaves; the respect of his wife; and, more, his seven grown sons and three grown daughters, wantonly killed. And why? Why? To Job, who is described as blameless and upright and fearing God and shunning evil, that question must have burned deeply in his soul.

Annul the day that I was born  
and the night that said, “A man is conceived.” (3:3)

In his opening monologue, Job’s first words request that his life be “annulled,” along with the day of his birth and all of his days, which, were, until his incredible misfortune and suffering, full. His is more than a straight forward prose death wish; it is a poetic call for the annihilation of life and all associated with life, especially light; thus, it is a primal denial of

existence. In the first lines of the poem (3:3-9), he asks, “That day, let it be darkness,” that “brightness” not “shine upon it,” that “darkness, death’s shadow, foul it,” that “day-gloom dismay it,” that “its twilight stars go dark”; and, finally, the poignant image of birth, “...let it not see the eyelids of dawn” (3: 4,5,9). Several times he calls his birth day a “night,” as in “the night that said...” and “That night, let murk overtake it,” and “Oh, let that night be barren,” where he alludes to a mother who cannot bear a child (3: 3,6,7).

But the images are not the only source of the poetry’s effectiveness. The Hebrew poetic technique of parallelism, in which the first line or verset is repeated (or contradicted or complemented) using different words and images, results in an intensification of the poetry:

Let darkness, death’s shadow, foul it,  
                                   let a cloud-mass rest upon it,  
                                   let day-gloom dismay it. (3:5)

Not only should his birth day be made unclean by death’s shadow, it should be suffocated by a cloud-mass, and defeated by day-gloom: three staccato lines and images, walking down steps, expressing regret, despair, and rejection. Furthermore:

Let its twilight stars go dark.  
                                   Let it hope for day in vain,  
                                   and let it not see the eyelids of dawn. (3:9)

On that night of his birth day there should be no light; there should be no hope for the next day’s light; and the dawn’s light should vanish, its eyelids shut as should his be.

The next section of the poem elaborates on “barren” by negating the process of birth: “...shut the belly’s doors,” “...die from the womb, from the belly come out, breathe my last...”(3:10,11). And,

Why did knees welcome me,  
                                   and why breasts, that I should suck? (3:12)

The image is one of vulnerability; at birth both mother and child are weak, open to death. And, as with light, a mother’s life milk is wished gone.

The final section of the monologue describes death, not life, as a wished for place, an absence, absence of both accomplishment and suffering for all: “kings and the counselors of earth,” “princes, possessors of gold,” “the wicked,” “the slave” (3:14,15,19). Death is anti-life, and anti-power, a place of darkness and “repose” (3:17). A place to be desired, especially for Job, who after a litany of the “small and great” (3:19), refers to himself and the cause of his troubles and renunciation of life, God:

—To a man whose ways is hidden,  
and God has hedged him about. (3:23)

Here, as he says earlier, he would “lie and be still” (3:13).

If, though, we are talking about the poetry of power, why does the poet begin with a monologue that describes its opposite: darkness, vulnerability, death, nothingness? The key is in the two lines referring to God, namely that God’s final monologue, the last poem of the verse drama, expresses the opposite of this beginning; through its images and lines, it praises light not darkness, strength and power not weakness and vulnerability. Life is power, power is life.

But how do we get from Job’s opening cry of anguish and despair to God’s paean to power, from Job’s impotence and defeat to God’s invincibility and might? From the poetry of renunciation to the poetry of power? This poetic path through the verse drama leads through the escalation of anger, through images of God’s power, and, ironically, through Job’s vision of a court of justice where he will be vindicated. The first two lead directly to God’s appearance and the final poem about Behemoth and Leviathan, the third is an irrelevant hope to be shattered. All occur in the exchanges between Job and his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

The escalation of anger begins, oddly enough, when Eliphaz first addresses Job on a tentative, reassuring note:

If speech were tried against you, could you stand it?

And:

Is not your reverence your safety,  
your hope—your blameless ways? (4:2, 6)

Job’s first response to Eliphaz reflects despair, not anger:

Could my anguish be but weighed,  
and my disaster on the scales be borne,  
they would be heavier now than the sand of the sea. (6:2,3)

But Eliphaz’ second speech opens on a harsh and angry note:

So you thwart reverence,  
take away prayer to God.  
For your crime guides your mouth,  
and you choose the tongue of the cunning. (15:4, 5)

And his third speech, even more:

Why, your evil is great,  
and there is no end to your crimes. (22:5)

Bildad also accuses Job of jabbering— “the words of your mouth, one huge wind.” (8:2). And Zophar says, “Shall a swarm of words go unanswered, and should a smooth talker be in the right?” (11:2). But why the accusatory anger toward Job? The answer lies in the conventional notion of wisdom of the time; namely, the truly righteous do not suffer; Job is suffering, therefore must be guilty of some wrong doing, which he needs to acknowledge and accept God’s reproof. As Proverbs, the anthology of conventional Hebrew wisdom, asserts:

The treasures of wickedness will not avail,  
But righteousness saves from death.  
The righteous man never stumbles,  
But the wicked shall not dwell on earth. (10:2, 30)

At this time there is no concept of the afterlife, so justice will happen in this life, not the afterlife. As Eliphaz notes: “Recall, pray, what innocent man has died, and where were the upright demolished?” (4:7). But in the face of conventional wisdom, Job maintains his righteousness and innocence, and audaciously and fearlessly questions God’s justice, which to his friends is great wickedness and blasphemy.

I shall say to God: do not convict me.  
Inform me why You accuse me.  
Is it good for You to oppress,  
to spurn Your own palm’s labor,  
and on the council of the wicked to shine? (10:2, 3)  
Though in the right, my mouth will convict me,  
I am blameless, yet He makes me crooked.  
It’s all the same, and so I thought:  
the blameless and the wicked he destroys. (9:20, 22)

Although Job’s first response to Eliphaz is not of anger, as his friends each accuse him of foolishness, ignorance, stubbornness, irreverence, and wickedness, his responses escalate with theirs in recrimination and anger. His response is, first, sarcasm to Zophar:

Oh, yes, you are the people,  
and with you wisdom will die! (12:2)

Then, anger to Eliphaz:

I have heard much of this sort,  
wretched consolers are you all. (16:1)

Finally, a bitter, accusatory response to Bildad:

How long will you cause me grief  
and crush me with words? (19:2)

This escalation of anger has prepared us for God's appearance in the whirlwind, an image of unanswerable power, and for his opening and angry condemning words to Job:

Who is this who darkens counsel  
in words without knowledge? (38:2)

God does not begin by saying, "Job, come let us reason together," or "yes, you are righteous, but, unfortunately, had to suffer for a good cause." Nor does God appear from, say, a fluffy cloud, in a still, small voice. No, this is an irritated, ticked off God, who will crush Job with his words.

While the anger ratchets up through Job's interaction with his friends and with what he considers God's unjust, and, perhaps, cruel treatment of him, leading to the appearance of an angry God, power, although associated with anger's force, is also associated with actual might. Accordingly, poetic images of God's power over the natural world and the people in it are a motif in the speeches of Job and his friends that foreshadow and prepare the way for the images of God's power over nature in his response to Job. Thus, in his speeches, Job sees God's power extending over nature and nations, which are almost playthings before Him:

He makes earth shake in its setting,  
and its pillars shudder. (9:6)  
raises nations high and destroys them,  
flattens nations and leads them away, (12:23)

Eliphaz notes that before God:

The king of beasts dies with no prey,  
the whelps of the lion are scattered. (4:11)

And for Bildad:

The heavens' pillars quaver,  
are dumbfounded by His roar. (25:11)

According to Zophar, this fate awaits the wicked:

A torrent will take down his house,  
pouring out on the day of His wrath. (20:28)

God's overwhelming power is emphasized by the images of "shake," "shudder," "flattens," "scattered," "quaver," "dumbfounded," and "take down." These images are reinforced by the poetic, escalating drumbeat of the lines repeating in different words and images the sense of the first lines, and by the alliteration knitting together the images, "shake" and "shudder,"



slips by me and I cannot grasp Him.  
Look, He seizes—who can resist Him?  
Who can tell him, “What do You do?”  
God will not relent His fury.  
Beneath Him Rahab’s minions stoop. (9:1-13)

Though Job is very aware of God’s power, as evidenced by this litany, and that his plea for justice is no match for this power, his response is still the wish to answer God in court, and because he is weak and powerless, through his own judge. Tellingly, in light of God’s later appearance, Job does not believe God will listen to him, consider his case:

And yet, as for me, I would answer Him,  
would choose my words with him.  
Though in the right, I can’t make my plea.  
I would have to entreat my own judge.  
Should I call out and He answer me,  
I would not trust Him to heed my voice. (9:14-16)

To his friends, he refers to one who will witness for him, as he maintains his innocence:

Hear, O hear my word  
and my utterance in your ears.  
Look, I have laid out my case,  
I know that I am in the right.  
Who would make a plea against me?  
I would be silent then, breathe my last. (13:17,18,19)  
Even now in the heavens my witness stands,  
one who vouches for me above. (16:19)

At times, though, he reflects upon God with optimism:

Would that I knew how to find Him,  
that I might come to where he dwells.  
I would lay out my case before Him  
and would fill my mouth with contentions.  
I would know the words that He answered me,  
and would grasp what He said to me.  
With great power would He debate me?  
No! He alone would pay heed to me. (23:3-6)

Finally, he defiantly sums up his position:

Would that I had someone to hear me out.  
 Here's my mark—let Shaddai answer me,  
 and let my accuser indict his writ.  
 I would bear it upon my shoulder,  
 bind it as a crown upon me.  
 The number of my steps I would tell Him,  
 like a prince I would approach Him. (31:35-37)

As we shall see, the terrible irony of Job's hope for reasoned dialogue, for justice not power, is that God's response will be of the logic of power, of the word as power. As noted above, God addresses Job angrily from the whirlwind. He then proceeds to hammer him with a long series of rhetorical questions and vivid imagery about His power over nature, all reinforced by the parallelism:

Were you there when I founded earth?  
 Who fixed its measures, do you know,  
 or who stretched a line upon it?  
 Who hedged the sea with double doors,  
 when it gushed from the womb.  
 Have you ever commanded the morning,  
 appointed dawn to its place...?  
 Have you come into the springs of the sea,  
 in the bottommost deep walked about?  
 Can you tie the bands of the Pleiades,  
 or loose Orion's reins?  
 Do you know the laws of the heavens,  
 can you fix their rule on earth?  
 Can you hunt prey for the lion,  
 fill the king of beast's appetite?  
 Does the hawk soar by your wisdom,  
 spread his wings to fly away south?  
 (38: 4,5,8,12,16,31,33,39; 39:26)

Included in this relentless questioning is an extended description of the horse, and of its might, that foreshadows the later poems about Behemoth and Leviathan:

Do you give might to the horse,  
 do you clothe its neck with a mane? (39:19)

The description continues with images of the horse's roar, its snort of terror, its churning up the valley, its scoffing at fear, its clamor and clatter as it swallows up the ground, and its "Aha" at the scent of battle (39:19-25), the latter a martial image that will return with the description of

Leviathan. The effect of this poetic questioning is to overwhelm Job, not with a discussion of justice but with the rhetoric of power, which trumps justice, which is beyond justice.

As Alter notes, the poetry of God surpasses that of Job, and in doing so refers to Job's monologue as "a rejoinder to the spate of images of darkness blotting out the light..."<sup>2</sup>

In his first words to Job, God's allusion to darkness is negative, not to be sought:

Who is this who darkens counsel  
in words without knowledge? (38:2)

Instead of the twilight stars going dark, as Job wishes, God says of the earth's creation:

In what were its sockets sunk,  
or who laid its cornerstone,  
when the morning stars sang together...? (38:6,7)

Instead of denying dawn, as Job wishes, God asks him:

Have you ever commanded the morning,  
appointed the dawn to its place...? (38:12)

In addition, the belly and birth images are also turned around. Whereas for Job, these images refer to weakness and his wish for death, God upends these images to their opposites, life and power:

Where is the way that light dwells,  
and darkness, where is its place,  
that you might take it to its home  
and understand the paths to its house?  
From whose belly did the ice come forth,  
to the frost of the heavens who gave birth? (38: 19,20,29)

Who hedged the sea with double doors,  
when it gushed forth from the womb. (38:8)  
Do you know the mountain goats' birth time,  
do you mark the calving of the gazelles? (39:1)

Yet, for this poet, God is not done; Job admits that he cannot argue with God:

Once I have spoken and I will not answer,  
twice, and will not go on, (40:5)

But God goes on, even when Job has been silenced, by emphasizing again that the issue is not justice, but power:

If you have an arm like God's,  
and with a voice like his you can thunder, (40:9)

The question is why? In dramatic terms, the drama could end. Job has been silenced, his case made irrelevant. The answer may surprise: the poet has decided to have God describe Himself metaphorically, using the images of Behemoth and Leviathan, so that Job can have an unmistakable, vivid, and unforgettable picture and understanding of who and what God is. What remains, then, is to examine the poetry of this portrait. What are, however, the reasons for this interpretation? First, as just noted the drama is complete, as a drama, without these final images: the poetry of power over nature has triumphed. Second are God's words about Behemoth:

He is the first in the ways of God. (40:19)

And about Leviathan:

He has no match on earth,  
made as he is without fear.  
All that is lofty he can see.  
He is king over all proud beasts. (41:25,26)

If Behemoth and Leviathan crown God's creation, then it is not unreasonable to conclude that they are made in God's image, that they are as God wishes Job and all humans to see Him. After all, the poet does not have God choose the image of a nurturing mother, such as a bird that shelters her young under her wings, as in several Psalms. No, as the poet has Him, God identifies with creatures most powerful. As God says about Leviathan:

Would he urgently entreat you,  
would he speak to you gentle words? (40:27)

The answer is no, of course not.

As we examine the poetic presentation of Behemoth and Leviathan, several motifs are clear: a response to Job's opening monologue, virility, impregnable strength, fierceness, and intimidation, all characteristics of power, male power. As in God's earlier speech, the descriptions of Behemoth and Leviathan contain rebukes to Job's opening, despairing speech. While Job wishes light to be extinguished, Leviathan's sneezes "shoot out light" (41:10). While Job refers to the vulnerable belly of a mother at birth, Behemoth has "power in his loins...virile strength in his belly's muscles" (40:16). While God has hedged Job about, bringing suffering upon him, for Behemoth, "The lotus hedges him, shades him," (40:22). And, most strikingly, while Job wishes his birth day to "not see the eyelids of dawn," (3:9), Leviathan's eyes "are like the eyelids of dawn" (41:10), open and flashing light.

For this poet, strength and power are clearly male, as Behemoth described above has “power in his loins” and “virile strength in his belly’s muscles,” and more:

He makes his tail stand like a cedar,  
his balls’ sinews twine together. (40:17)

Very potent male sexuality. As for women, Leviathan is pictured as too strong to be leashed “for your young women” (40:29). More, Behemoth and Leviathan are impregnable, fierce, and intimidating, all features of strength and power. Of Behemoth:

His bones are bars of bronze,  
his limbs like iron rods. (40:18)

Of Leviathan:

Who can uncover his outer garb,  
come into his double mail?  
Who can pry open the doors of his face?  
All around his teeth is terror.  
His back is a row of shields,  
closed with the tightest seal. (41:5-7)

The imagery is pointedly martial, of a warrior.

Thus, Leviathan, the poet’s greatest picture of power, is fierce and intimidating:

From his nostrils smoke comes out,  
like a boiling vat on brushwood.  
His breath kindles coals,  
and flame comes out of his mouth. (41:12,13)

As a consequence:

...before him power dances. (41:14)

And:

When he rears up, the gods are frightened,  
when he crashes down, they cringe. (41:17)

At the beginning of his last response to Job, God challenges him:

If you have an arm like God’s,  
and with a voice like his you can thunder,  
put on pride and preeminence,  
and grandeur and glory don.

Let loose your utmost wrath,  
                                   see every proud man, bring him low.  
 See every proud man, make him kneel,  
                                   tramp on the wicked where they are.  
 Bury them in the dust together,  
                                   shut them up in the grave.

And I on my part shall acclaim you,  
                                   for your right hand triumphs for you. (40:9-14)

Immediately, then, in contrast to Job, God points to Behemoth:

Look, pray, Behemoth, whom I made with you, (40:15)

And from that point to Job's final submission, "By the ear's rumor I heard of You, and now my eye has seen You. Therefore do I recant, and repent in dust and ashes," it is the might of Behemoth and Leviathan that are on show. But what has Job seen? Not a just God, nor a nurturing mother. God depicted is male power, overwhelming, triumphant power. It is, thus, clear that the issues are not Job's righteousness nor justice, but power, in its awe, in its glory and in its terrible, even terrifying, might.

Power. Some would say, "Yes, but in the ancient epilogue, Job got his life back, new sheep, and camels, and oxen, and she asses, and another ten children, seven sons and three daughters, the latter so beautiful that there were no women in the land so beautiful as Job's daughters. And he lived a hundred and forty years and he saw his grandchildren and great grandchildren. "And Job died, aged and sated in years." (42:12-17). Yes, but he saw his first family slain under God, his first seven sons and three daughters slaughtered for no just reason. Yes, and he accepted this injustice and unjust suffering at the crushing arm and crushing words of God. And, yes, God's wrath flared against Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar for not understanding and not speaking rightly of God, which, He said, Job did. But what did Job understand and speak rightly of? That he realized God was too great, too transcendent for his understanding? While that may be the case for God's creative power over nature, justice is a concept that can be understood by human reason; if not, it doesn't exist in any sense that can guide human lives. Indeed, by repudiating the ancient wisdom of justice expressed by Job's friends, God repudiates his moral self, and repudiates the wisdom of justice, replacing it with the wisdom of power:

Does the hawk soar by your wisdom,  
                                   spread his wings to fly away south? (39:26)

So what is the poet's message, so beautifully and powerfully crafted and conveyed?

Power. Not compassion, but power. Not love, but power. Not reason, but power. Not justice, but Power. Power is what it means to be God and God like. Behemoth and Leviathan are

not creatures of reason and justice. Their magnificence, which God holds up as the pride of His craftsmanship, is the terrible, the overwhelming beauty of power. Power as the ultimate value in creation. As Job succinctly puts it in a moment of despair, well before his capitulation to God's power:

If it's strength—he is staunch,  
and if it's justice—who can arraign Him? (Job 9:19)

This is the poet's vision in this marvelous verse drama, *The Book of Job*, a vision that genius has so vividly conveyed through the poetry of power.

#### End Notes

1. Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books* (New York, NY: WW Norton and Company, Inc., 2010), 3
2. Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 158