

The "problem of evil" figures prominently in current philosophical and theological thought, which is extraordinarily sensitive to the tragic components of existence. In keeping with this trend, there has developed an unprecedented upsurge of interest in the classic treatment of the problem of suffering — the Book of Job. In this essay, Rabbi David S. Shapiro, spiritual leader of Congregation Anshei Sefard in Milwaukee, Wisc., and lecturer in Bible and the History of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Ill., discusses one of the most puzzling aspects of the Biblical account of the perennial problem. The author received his Bachelor of Science degree from the Lewis Institute of Chicago and was ordained at the Hebrew Theological College where he also obtained a doctorate in Hebrew Literature. Apart from numerous contributions to scholarly journals in America and Israel, Rabbi Shapiro, a contributing editor of *Judaism* and *Hadoar*, authored three major books.

## THE BOOK OF JOB AND THE TRIAL OF ABRAHAM

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. This man was whole-hearted and upright; he feared God and spurned evil. He was blessed by God with a large family and great wealth. God took pride in Job's righteousness and integrity, but Satan attributed his piety solely to his well-being and material success. Were he to suffer domestic or economic affliction he would no longer revere God. The Lord permits Satan to destroy Job's children and his wealth, but Job remains devoted to God, saying, "The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away; may the name of the Lord be blessed." Satan persists. There is nothing more important to a man than his own life. If Job were afflicted with some dread disease, he would

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not remain saintly for long. And so Satan again is given control over Job's fate, and Job suffers unbearable anguish and pain. Despite his agony and despite his wife's prodding, he refuses to blaspheme his Maker. He accepts evil from God in the same way that he had accepted His blessings.

It is against this background that the drama of the book of Job takes place. Job's friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, hear of Job's misfortunes. They come from their distant homes to console him. When they see him they are so distressed that they are unable to talk. They all suffer in silence for seven days and seven nights. After that Job opens his mouth and curses the day of his birth. The great dialogue of the Book of Job has begun.

Modern students of the Bible tend to discount the importance of both the prologue and the epilogue of the Book of Job. It is generally assumed that they merely serve as a framework for the dialogue. The writer, it is claimed, took an old folk-tale, and around it constructed his majestic work. It is also maintained that there is a basic discrepancy between the prologue and the body of the book. The "all's well that ends well" character of the epilogue is also apparently out of joint with the tenor of the drama as a whole. Nevertheless, before all possibilities have been exhausted, we need not, on the basis of apparent difficulties or even disharmonies, reject the organic unity of the Book of Job. The prologue, after all, leads right into the dialogue, and the epilogue presumes it.

The author, obviously a man of vast learning and profound insight, would certainly not have allowed the discrepancies to remain if he had been taking liberties with the original tale. The framework of the drama as we now have it must surely have been organically interwoven into the texture of the work. If we attempt to fathom the inner meaning of the prologue we may be in a better position to understand the work as a whole.

A major problem is that the prologue provides us with an answer — "Job was being tested" — before we read the question of the book — "Why was Job suffering?" The answer appears nowhere in the dialogue itself. But even more important

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than this question is the problem of why this test was necessary. Was it not enough that God knew that Job was a truly righteous man? Why should he want to convince Satan?

Elsewhere in the Bible we read of men being tested. God asks (not a command)<sup>1</sup> Abraham to bring Isaac as a sacrifice. What was the purpose of this test? Did God need reassurance of Abraham's wholehearted devotion to Him?

What strikes us above everything else is the harshness of the test in both cases. How can the seeming callousness of God be justified? And how is it that Abraham, who had argued against the wholesale destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, remained silent in the face of an irrational request that was a repudiation of what he knew was the way of God?

### I

The Talmud and Midrash may provide us with an insight into these questions and the problems of the Book of Job. In *Genesis Rabbah* we read:

When the Holy One Blessed Be He set out to create the first man, the ministering angels divided themselves into conflicting groups and companies, some approving the creation of man, others disapproving. Lovingkindness said: 'Man should be created, for he will perform deeds of lovingkindness.' Truth said: 'Let man not be created, for he is full of lies.' Righteousness said: 'Let him be created for he will perform righteous deeds.' Peace, however, said: 'Let him not be created for he is full of dissension.' While the ministering angels were disputing among themselves, God created man. God then said to the angels: 'What are you arguing about? Man is already here!'<sup>2</sup>

Another Midrashic passage expresses the conflict surrounding man's creation somewhat differently:

When God decided to create the first man, he consulted with the ministering angels. He said to them: Let us make a man in our image. They said to God: This man, what is his character? God answered them: He will be a progenitor of righteous men. God told them that righteous men will descend from him, but He did not tell them about the wicked men who would come out of him. Had the angels learned about the wicked men, the quality of judgment would not have per-

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mitted the creation of man.<sup>3</sup>

Many centuries after the Book of Job was written, the schools of Hillel and Shammai were debating this very question, *ex post facto*. After three and a half years of disputation they concluded that it would have been better had man, the sinner and sufferer, not been created.<sup>4</sup>

The question of the worthwhileness of man reverberates throughout the Bible. The Psalmist ponders: "When I behold Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and stars which Thou hast established, what is man that Thou art mindful of him and the son of man that Thou thinkest of him?"<sup>5</sup>

In the Midrash this passage is cited as reflecting the objection of the angels to the creation of man. They prefer that the glory of the Lord be rehearsed above the heavens.<sup>6</sup>

In another Psalm this feeling is echoed:

Lord, what is man that Thou takest knowledge of him? . . .  
Man is like unto a breath; his days are as a shadow that passeth away . . .  
Send out Thy arrows and discomfit them . . .  
Whose mouth speaketh falsehood, and their right hand is a right hand of lying.<sup>7</sup>

The Psalmist invokes God's wrath against the mendacity of man, just as the angels (in the Midrash) vetoed the creation of man because of his falsehood.

In the 89th Psalm<sup>8</sup> the vanity of the creation of man is be-moaned, and the Book of Ecclesiastes is, of course, full of such ruminations, such as the day of death being better than the day of birth.<sup>9</sup> But from the standpoint of the moral failure of man, no passage equals in poignancy that found in book of Genesis:

And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was very great in the earth and that every imagination of the thought of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth, *and it grieved Him at His heart.*<sup>10</sup>

God Who Himself had proclaimed after the six days of creation that everything that He had made was very good (including

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man<sup>11</sup>), now looks at the crown of creation and is filled with unspeakable sadness. But a ray of light pierces the gloom: "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord."<sup>12</sup> The saintly man, the man dedicated to righteousness, justifies the creation of man. Because of him, man is vindicated. Through him it becomes clear that God's efforts have not been in vain.

## II

The opening scene of the Book of Job takes place in heaven at a session of the Heavenly Court. The unexpressed question broods over the entire prologue: Can God justify the creation of man? Actually, it is not man who is on trial but, as it were, God Himself. Why has He created man? The opening verse of Job provides the answer to this question:

There was a man in the land of Uz. And that man was wholehearted and upright; he feared God and turned away from evil.<sup>13</sup>

The only other person in the Bible described similarly is Noah:

Noah was in his generations a righteous and wholehearted man; Noah walked with God.<sup>14</sup>

Noah justified the creation of man in the generation of the flood. Job justified the creation of man in his day.

And that day came and the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.<sup>15</sup>

It is very likely that the definitive *he* in *ha-yom* (*that day*) refers to a day that had a special significance. Jewish tradition identifies this day as Rosh ha-Shanah, the Day of Judgment.<sup>16</sup> On this day the fate of every man is decided. We can surmise that the poet imagined a very heated discussion going on in the heavenly circles about the creation of man. God is once again put on the defensive with regard to this creature whom He has made, a creature who is so frail, so unstable, so sinful, and

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oftentimes, so stupid. The appearance of the Lord in the midst of the heavenly host is, in the Bible, an occasion for judgment. There are, for example, the judgment of Ahab,<sup>17</sup> and passages in Psalms,<sup>18</sup> Isaiah,<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel,<sup>20</sup> and Zechariah.<sup>21</sup> Jacob's dream is also interpreted as a judgment wherein the patriarch was vindicated.<sup>22</sup>

In the monotheistic world of the Bible, it seems strange that the Lord should be pictured as presiding over a Heavenly Court, with the celestial hosts to His right and His left. The deeper purpose of this presentation, however, is the stress on the absolute significance of justice. God does not deal arbitrarily with His creatures, nor is He an autocrat who judges alone and tyrannically.<sup>23</sup> Every man stands in judgment before God and is given a chance to speak and defend himself. Not for nought is God called the Judge of the whole earth Who does no injustice.<sup>24</sup>

If there be for him an angel,  
An intercessor, one among a thousand,  
To vouch for man's uprightness;  
Then He is gracious unto him and saith:  
Deliver him from going down to the pit,  
I have found a ransom.<sup>25</sup>

Before the sentence is passed upon Sodom and Gomorrah, God reveals His intentions to Abraham, for Abraham will become a great nation and teach his children to walk in the ways of the Lord, to do justice and righteousness.<sup>26</sup>

God's profound concern for righteousness is expressed by His consultation with the heavenly council, or His disclosure to His servants of His plans.

For the Lord God will not do a thing unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.<sup>27</sup>

Among those who participate in the sessions of the heavenly tribunal there is also *the Satan* (not *Satan*, nor *a Satan*). The Satan appears in the Bible twice: in the Book of Job, and the Book of Zechariah.<sup>28</sup> In both instances he appears in the court

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on high as a prosecutor, as a critic, even as a cynic. He is man's adversary, not because of blind hatred, but because of his stern, cynical judgment. The Satan, mythopoetically conceived, has probably been *the* adversary of man from the very beginning, opposing his very creation. Now that man is created, he refuses to be reconciled to this vile, foolish creature, who at best worships God for material gain. Who would not worship God if he were certain that he would get something out of it? Satan does not believe that the righteous man is rewarded. It is rather the rewarded man who is righteous. Satan is aware that there are men who are powerful and prosperous, yet impious and depraved. But to him all men do that which will redound, above all, to their own advantage. If piety will bring this about, they will be pious. If through impiety they will attain the same ends, they will be impious. The Satan is supposedly searching\* for a *truly* righteous man, but he claims that his search has been in vain.

The dialogue in the Heavenly Court to which we are introduced appears to be a continuation of a discussion that took place before the curtain was raised. We have to reconstruct what transpired before God asks, "From where are you coming?" The question was meant only to involve Satan in the discussion.

On the day of judgment, as suggested above, the question arises in all its acerbity: Does man deserve to be perpetuated? God has promised to preserve the species on the ground that man is weak but not hopeless.<sup>20</sup> He still insists that the righteous man outweighs all the evil in the world. To God, Job is unparalleled. The implication is not that Job is the only righteous man in the world, but that he is the most nearly perfect example of righteousness, and through him the existence of man is vindicated. But Satan has no use for any man, not even Job. Satan may even suspect God's righteousness, or perhaps, like Jonah in his time, he feels that God is not righteous but overly gracious.

\*The Hebrew term *shut* is used; Jeremiah employs the same term when he speaks of the search for the righteous man (Jer. 5:1). Similarly, Zechariah (4:10) uses it to describe the eyes of God that are searching.

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He is good when he should be just, and in terms of justice no man can prevail. Does not the Psalmist himself say:

If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities,  
O Lord, who could stand?<sup>30</sup>

\* \* \*

In Thine eyes no living being can be just.<sup>31</sup>

If the existence of the human species cannot be justified before the Heavenly Court, the world will have to be restored to chaos. God had regretted creating man upon the earth. Then he found Noah. But God is constantly on trial. In every generation He must find a Noah. Now it was Job who was the vindication of God's handiwork. Satan, however, claimed that Job was no better than any other mortal. Once God's special Providence was removed from Job, Satan was sure that he would react by blaspheming God. God consents to try Job, and the Satan afflicts him with calamity upon calamity: his wealth is destroyed, his servants and children killed. When Job continued to bless God, Satan smote him with excruciating boils. In his agony, Job cursed the day he was born but continued in the way of righteousness and integrity, saying:

Till I die I will not put away mine integrity from me.  
My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go;  
My heart shall not reproach me as long as I live.<sup>32</sup>

Job has justified not only man but God Himself.

### III

The trial of Abraham is similar to that of Job. Why did God expose Abraham to such a severe trial after he had already, according to tradition, been put through nine previous ones?<sup>33</sup> The background of the test is not revealed in the Bible, but the aggadic sources link it with that of Job. The ancient sages adopted the Satan-concept from the Book of Job and employed it to explain the test of Abraham. Satan appeared before God with a complaint which apparently was justified. The Lord

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had blessed Abraham with a child in his old age. Had Abraham shown any gratitude? Did he offer a pigeon or a turtle-dove as a thanksgiving unto the Lord? Immediately Abraham was put to a test to prove to Satan that not only was he ready to offer a sacrifice to his Maker, but that, if necessary, he would even sacrifice his only son. If Abraham had not offered a sacrifice previously, it was because he had profounder ways of expressing his gratitude to God. Abraham was *asked* ("Take, I pray thee") to bring his son as a burnt-offering. And Abraham complied.<sup>34</sup>

Why did not Abraham protest the injustice of taking his son's life, as he had the injustice of visiting the sins of the wicked upon the innocent at Sodom? It was because he realized that he was in the presence of a test which meant much more than the vindication of his own piety and loyalty. When God revealed to him the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, he refused to accept with equanimity the doom of his sinful neighbors and he thereby proved the greatness of his soul which could brook no injustice even on the part of God. Now he was requested to give up the gift that was more precious to him than life itself, the *raison d'être* of his life's work, his only son, his beloved son. But Abraham, who knew that all of life is a test, understood that the present test was unique. He was certain that it was not a repetition of previous tests. It was terrifying, it was unintelligible, it was a contradiction of everything that he had taught. But Abraham carried out the request of God, not because he expected to receive a reward (he was going to lose that which to him was most precious and irreplaceable), not to fulfill the order of a person whom he could not resist (there was no priest to instruct him to carry out the gruesome ritual), not for the admiration of others (the event took place in isolation),<sup>35</sup> but only because he knew that he was being put to a test of cosmic significance. It was not for him to question or resist, but to fulfill God's request with the whole of his bleeding heart and soul.

Against the background of Abraham's test, the petulance of Satan becomes more intelligible. Abraham had proved that the man of true piety will do anything for his God, even giving

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up his only child.\*\* But, in the case of Job, Satan insisted that to a human being his own life is more valuable than the life of his only son. Hence, it becomes necessary to prove that man will hold on to righteousness unto his last breath, even if it means losing his own soul.

\*\*In the Book of Judges we read with revulsion how Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in fulfillment of a vow he had rashly taken. Conceivably Jephthah pictured himself as a second Abraham being put to a test by God. However, in his case the execution of this vow was inexcusable for two reasons: first, God had already revealed to Abraham, in prohibiting the sacrifice of Isaac, that He never suspends the ethical; second, there was no clear-cut revelation of a prophetic character to justify the carrying out of the vow (see *Sanhedrin* 89b). On the contrary, Jephthah's test was whether he would humble himself and seek to absolve himself from his vow (*Taanith* 4a and various Midrashim).

### NOTES

1. Gen. 22:1; *Sanhedrin* 89b.
2. *Gen. Rabbah* 8:5.
3. *Ibid.*, 8:4.
4. *Erubin* 13b.
5. Psalms 8:4-5.
6. *Gen. Rabbah* 8:6; in *Shabbath* 88b this passage is used to express the objection of the angels to the giving of the Torah to the children of men.
7. Ps. 144:3-11.
8. *Ibid.*, 89 verse 48.
9. Eccl. 6:3; 7:1.
10. Gen. 6:6.
11. Gen. 1:31; *Gen. Rabbah* 9:14.
12. Gen. 6:8.
13. Job 1:1.
14. Gen. 6:9.
15. Job 1:6.
16. Targum; Rashi.
17. I Kings 22:19-20.
18. Ps. 82:1.
19. Isaiah, 6:1 ff.
20. Ezekiel, ch. 1 and 2.
21. Zechariah 14:5.

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22. *Gen. Rabbah* 68:12.
23. *Ib.*, 8:8; *Abodah Zarah* 3a; see Rashi to Gen. 1:26.
24. Gen. 18:25.
25. Job 33:23-24.
26. Gen. 18:17-19.
27. Amos 3:7.
28. Zech. 3:1.
29. Gen. 8:21.
30. Ps. 130:3.
31. *Ib.*, 143:2.
32. Job 27:5-6.
33. *Avot* 5:3.
34. *Sanhedrin* 89b.
35. Cf. Philo, *De Abrahamo*, 177 ff.