

TEXTS FOR RANDOMNESS AND MORAL AGENCY

Rabbi Gordon Tucker

I. DOING WELL = DOING GOOD

Deuteronomy 11:13-14, 16-17

If, then you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil.....

Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them, for the Lord's anger will flare up against you, and God will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you.

II. OR DOES IT?

Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, 1998, pp. 112-3, 115-6

It was by dint of hearing a great many such sneers at faith that Brother Juniper became convinced that the world's time had come for proof, tabulated proof, of the conviction that was so bright and exciting within him. When the pestilence visited his dear village of Puerto and carried off a large number of peasants, he secretly drew up a diagram of the characteristics of fifteen victims and fifteen survivors.....Each soul was rated upon a basis of ten as regards its goodness, its diligence in religious observance, and its importance to its family group. Here is a fragment of this ambitious chart:

	GOODNESS	PIETY	USEFULNESS
Alfonso G.	4	4	10
Nina	2	5	10
Manuel B.	10	10	0
Alfonso V.	-8	-10	10
Vera N.	0	10	10

The thing was more difficult than he had foreseen.....From all this saddening data Brother Juniper contrived an index for each peasant. He added up the total for

victims and compared it with the total for survivors, to discover that *the dead were five times more worth saving*. It almost looked as though the pestilence had been directed against the really valuable people in the village of Puerto. And on that afternoon Brother Juniper took a walk along the edge of the Pacific. He tore up his findings and cast them into the waves; he gazed off an hour upon the great clouds of pearl that hang forever upon the horizon of that sea, and extracted from their beauty a resignation that he did not permit his reason to examine. The discrepancy between faith and the facts is greater than is generally assumed.

Edward Greenstein, Introduction to Job, *The Jewish Study Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2004, p. 1494

There is no resolution to the problem of evil in Job because that is not the theme of the book. Although the problem of innocent suffering, the search for an explanation for a case like that of Job, is the topic of discussion among the participants in the dialogues, it is not the theme of Job [the book]. Instead,...[a] prevalent theme in Job is that of honesty in talking about God.....Job takes pride in his absolute commitment to speaking only truth (see 27:3-4). The radical turning point in the book comes at its conclusion: God turns to Job's companions and reproves them for not speaking "truthfully" about Him as Job "My servant" had done (42:7-8). Job may not have arrived at the truth, but he had reason to believe in what he was saying, as it came to him honestly, unlike the words of the companions, who merely repeated uncritically the wisdom they had received. Seen this way, the book of Job promotes honesty in theological discourse and rejects a blind reliance on tradition.

III. CAN THERE BE RANDOMNESS IN A WORLD CREATED BY GOD?

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 7a

Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosi: Moses requested three things from the Blessed Holy One, and all were granted to him. He requested that the Divine Presence rest upon Israel, and God granted it to him.....Moses requested that the Divine Presence not rest upon the nations of the world, and God granted it to him.....Lastly, Moses requested that the ways in which God conducts the world be revealed to him, and God granted it to him.

Moses said before God: Master of the Universe. Why is it that some righteous prosper, some righteous suffer, some wicked prosper, and some wicked suffer? God said to him:.....The righteous person who prospers is a completely righteous person, the righteous person who suffers is one who is not a completely righteous person. The wicked person who prospers is one who is not a completely wicked person. And the wicked person who suffers is a completely wicked person. But all of this is in contradistinction to Rabbi Meir's opinion. For Rabbi Meir said: Two of Moses' requests were granted to him, and one was not granted to him. God granted him that the Divine Presence would rest upon Israel, and that the Divine Presence would not rest upon the nations of the world, but God did not reveal to Moses the ways in which God conducts the world. As it is said: "And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" (Exodus 33:19) — i.e. even though he is not worthy. "And I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy," — i.e. even though he is not worthy.

Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 4b-5a

When Rav Yosef reached this verse, he cried: "But there are those swept away without justice" (Proverbs 13:23). He said: Is there one who goes before his time and dies for no reason? The Gemara answers: Yes, like this incident of Rav Beivai bar Abaye, who was frequently in the company of the Angel of Death. The Angel of Death said to his agent: Go and bring me Miriam the raiser [braider] of women's hair. He went, but instead brought him Miriam, the raiser of babies. The Angel of Death said to him: I told you to bring Miriam, the raiser of women's hair! His agent said to him: If so, let me return her to life. He said to him: Since you have already brought her, let her be counted toward the number of deceased people. But how were you able to kill her? The agent responded that he had the opportunity, as she was holding a shovel in her hand and with it she was lighting and sweeping the oven. She took the fire and set it on her foot; she was scalded and her luck suffered, which gave me the opportunity, and I brought her.

Rav Beivai bar Abaye then said to the Angel of Death: Have you permission to act in this manner? The Angel of Death said to him: And is it not written: "But there are those swept away without justice" (Proverbs 13:23)?

IV. TRUTH AS PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Job 42:2-6 (Revised Standard Version [RSV] Translation, 1952)

2 I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted.

3 “Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?” Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

4 “Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.”

5 I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee;

6 Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Job 42:2-6 (Edward Greenstein Translation, Yale, 2019)

2 I have known you are able to do all; that you cannot be blocked from any scheme

3 “Who is this hiding counsel without knowledge?” Truly I’ve spoken without comprehending — wonders beyond me that I do not know.

4 “Hear now and I will speak; I will ask you, and you help me know.”

5 As a hearing by the ear I have heard you, and now my eye has seen you.

6 That is why I am fed up; I take pity on dust and ashes.

Jack Miles, *God: A Biography*, 1995, pp. 319, 323-5

We come now to.....the cryptic closing verse of Job’s speech,.....in the RSV translation:

Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

This is the filament from which hangs the thread from which hangs the entire traditional reading of Job’s last words as a recantation. If the first four verses in the speech have usually been translated to read as a recantation, it is because they have all been interpreted in the light of this closing verse. In the Hebrew, however, this verse is ambiguous, and in the RSV’s resolution of the ambiguity no word has less support from the original than the word *myself*..... Against the traditional interpretations, it is likely that though Job is in the grip of profoundly changed and negative feelings about *something* at this point, that something is not himself.

Jack Miles, op. cit., p. 329

A view common to nearly all commentators on the Book of Job is that, one way or another, the Lord has reduced Job to virtual silence. Unnoticed is the fact that from the end of the Book of Job to the end of the Tanakh, God never speaks again.

V. COMPASSION AS PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Job 42:7-8 (Edward Greenstein translation)

It happened, after YHWH spoke these words to Job, that YHWH said to Eliphaz the Teimanite: "I am angry at you and your two companions, for you did not speak about me in honesty as did my servant Job. Now then, take yourselves seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job, and offer up a burnt-offering on your own behalf; and my servant Job will pray for you; for I will lift up his face without doing anything unseemly to you — for you did not speak about me in honesty as did my servant Job." So they went, Eliphaz the Teimanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Na'amathite, and they did as YHWH had spoken to them; and YHWH lifted up Job's face. For YHWH had restored Job's restoration when he had prayed for his companions. YHWH added double to what Job had had.

Sari Kivistö and Sami Pihlström, "Kantian Anti-Theodicy and Job's Sincerity", *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 40, 2016, pp. 356-8

The falsity of the friends' views also stems from their intellectual efforts to construct tenable narratives in order to explain Job's turmoil, and thus their mistake has a moral basis. Especially after the Second World War, critics have emphasized that narrative means can be ethically problematic in trying to make sense of individual suffering.....Instead of building explanations and appealing to fictive causation they should aim to relieve misery by helping the victims.