

## JOB AND SUFFERING IN TALMUDIC AND KABBALISTIC JUDAISM

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Deine Augen sind tief in deinen Schädel gesunken  
wie Höhlentauben in der Nacht  
die der Jäger blind herausholt.  
Deine Stimme ist stumm geworden,  
denn sie hat zuviel *Warum* gefragt.

(Nelly Sachs, *Hiob*)

Of all the books in the Bible, the text which has often been regarded as the most enigmatic is the Book of Job. An enormous amount of attention has been applied to this text, both within and without the Jewish tradition, and most commentators have found the prospect of reorganising its verses almost irresistible. Some have gone further and have literally rewritten it, in such a way as to bring out, in their view, its real structure and meaning. I am going to resist this temptation, and my aim here is merely to point to some of the main features of the text and how they have been understood within Jewish theological and philosophical thought. But before doing this, given the problematic nature of the text in the view of many commentators, it is incumbent on me to say something about the nature of the text itself, since otherwise it will be unclear on what I am commenting. I take the Masoretic text to be accurate and the arrangement of the verses accurate also. I regard the content of the Book to be no more or less problematic than anything else in the Tanakh, and it is from that standpoint, which will be regarded as terribly ingenuous by many commentators, that I am proceeding.

I think there are two main reasons for fascination with Job. One is that he touches on concerns which strike every human being, namely, why the innocent suffer. Even those operating outside of a religious framework will find this an important and difficult issue. The other aspect of the Book is its beauty. It consists of a sharp and dramatic dialectical text in which arguments between Job and his companions go back and forth, and in a magnificent poetic response by G-d, which resolves the issue as far as G-d and Job, but hardly anyone else, is concerned. It is not surprising, then, that so much controversy should have arisen.

en over the Book. It is a bit like a detective story in which the police say the case is solved but no one else can see why. The temptation to explain why the case has been solved, or why it has not, and what might solve it, has intrigued thinkers for thousands of years.<sup>1</sup> And of course that is the nature of scripture, that it continues to play a role in the life of its audience as part of the continuing conversation between G-d and his creation from generation to generation.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Maimonides on Job

I am going to discuss in particular the views of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), the greatest Jewish thinker, on Job, since his views are especially interesting.<sup>3</sup> He makes two important points about Job. He notices that it never says in the Book that Job is intelligent, and from that he concludes that in complaining about his misfortunes Job reveals intellectual failings which lead to his complaints. Right at the start of the Book we are told that Job is good and so whatever leads to his suffering cannot be a reflection of something evil which he has done. That is something that his friends try to tease out of him, the evil action on his part which he fails to acknowledge and which serves as the cause of his misfortunes. His friends are operating on the naive calculus of good and evil, according to which there is a supernaturally determined balance between them, and justice will decide precisely how that balance is to be struck. Although by the end of the Book his friends are chided for this belief, there can be little doubt but that it represents the ordinary understanding by most people of the nature of divine justice. If someone has been good, then she deserves to flourish, and if someone has been evil then the reverse is the case. Of course, rewards and punishments can be left to the next world, but this is not much of a prospect in Judaism, and the weakness of the notion of the next world is actually directly mentioned in the Book of Job. The point about divine justice is that in some way or another one would expect that G-d would be behind the allocation of benefits and penalties in proportion to moral worth, and Job bitterly complains that this does not seem to be happening. Why does Maimonides think that this common view held by Job is evidence of his dimness?

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<sup>1</sup> O. Leaman, *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), which contains a bibliography of some of the main discussions of the Book of Job.

<sup>2</sup> O. Leaman, "The Future of Jewish Philosophy," in D. Frank & O. Leaman, eds., *The History of Jewish Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 895-907; and "The Philosophy of Religion," in O. Leaman, ed., *The Future of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 120-33.

<sup>3</sup> For background information, see O. Leaman, *Moses Maimonides* (Richmond: Curzon, 1997); "Maimonides," in R. L. Arrington, ed., *A Companion to the Philosophers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 683-85; "Maimonides," in Leaman, *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 64-101.

One thing which Job gets entirely wrong, according to Maimonides, is to think that the sorts of misfortunes which have been occurring to him are important. The other thing which he gets wrong is to think that just because he is good, these misfortunes should not happen to him at all. Let us look at the second point first. The argument here is quite simple, and rather compelling. It is that we are material creatures, and as such we cannot rationally expect to escape from the confines of materiality, at least not while in this life. In his discussion of providence Maimonides suggests that the more intelligent individual will manage to use his intelligence in order to escape certain sorts of problems, but not all problems.

He gives the example of setting out on a sea journey. Any ship can sink, as Maimonides himself knew to his cost in his commercial enterprises, but some ships are more likely to sink than others. If we are considering a sea journey and we see that the ship is leaking, the captain is drunk and the crew short-handed, we would be well advised to use our reason not to get on it. On the other hand, however sound the vessel and the crew, it is always possible for something material to suffer the fate of matter and be destroyed. No amount of intelligence on my part will prevent this happening. But should not G-d prevent it happening if the people on the ship, or some of the people on the ship, are good? Is this not what is meant by divine providence?

Maimonides answers in two ways here. One way is to argue that whatever divine providence is, it is very different from human notions of providence. He argues that we can say nothing positive about G-d, and we must not think that even negative statements give any real information. So we cannot say that the failure to save the good people on the boat is contrary to divine providence – we have no idea what divine providence is. The other argument works from the nature of matter. It is the nature of material things to be destroyed eventually, and one cannot complain when this happens with any expectation of rational understanding. It is just how things are, that is what is meant by “matter”.

Are these answers any good? The argument from the nature of matter is appropriate, it is true that we could not reasonably expect something material to remain impervious to other material and natural forces. People who discover that despite a lifetime of prudent and healthy activity they eventually fall foul of a dread disease are often surprised, as if they do not deserve to have the disease since they applied themselves to avoiding it. Yet the point of providence and the choice of a ship is relevant here. While it is a good idea to use our rationality to determine the most prudent course of action, that course of action will never be guaranteed to succeed. Given our materiality, all sorts of things can go wrong, and it is very sad that they do go wrong, but hardly something which we can rationally regard as unjust. For example, I ride a bicycle, and sometimes I get a puncture. I do get annoyed when it happens, but I cannot rationally say it is unfair. I may think it is unfair if I get lots of punctures, or a lot more than I did in

the past or more than most people get, but of course there will be an explanation as to why this has happened and that explanation will be in natural terms. It will take the form that "given the material and finite nature of x, x is prone to decay, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly". As Spinoza argues, we may be ignorant of precisely why something has happened and as a result regret its happening, but once we know or accept that there is a natural explanation, it is not rational to be sorry about it. It had to happen and it did happen, and once we understand this we understand that it is futile to regret it. Such regret merely deepens the negative aspect of the original event, whereas what we should be doing is trying to master it by understanding it.<sup>4</sup>

The argument from negative theology which Maimonides uses to show that we cannot identify divine providence with our notion of providence does fit in nicely with the Book of Job. After all, G-d tells Job towards the end of the text that the limited view of reality is far too limited to understand why things are as they are. This seems reasonable. And yet, it also seems like a rather convenient way of avoiding a vital issue, the inability of the way in which the world is organised to reflect a notion of justice of which we can make sense. G-d tells Job that G-d is much more powerful and intelligent than Job, which is not exactly new information to him, so it is perhaps surprising that it manages to convince him of the inappropriate nature of his complaints. The trouble with the theory of negative theology is that if it is valid, it proves too much. It proves, for example, that there is no point in rationally examining any theological issues such as that of theodicy, since the answer will always be that our language does not work when we apply it to G-d.

This might seem rather harsh, and inappropriate when applied to Maimonides, who after all constantly emphasises in his work the importance of theoretical enquiry and intellectual work. What Job lacked was rationality, something he came to realise and acquire at the end, and once he had it, he appreciated the limits to which that rationality could be applied. In other words, he came to understand the principles of negative theology. But according to Maimonides, before he became enlightened, as it were, Job was not only not intelligent, but his very ethical character was at fault. He had acted in accordance with morality, not for morality, to use a Kantian phrase. This is actually an important point, that there is little merit in acting in a way which is virtuous but where the motivation is habit or conformity to everyone else. But do not many believers act in this sort of way, out of this sort of motivation? Surely Maimonides is not arguing that they are all not really virtuous due to their lack of intelligence? If only the intelligent can really become virtuous, then this is going to limit the possibility of salvation to a relatively small group in society. Yet when talking about providence, he says he agrees with Aristotle that we can only talk of individual

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<sup>4</sup> See "Spinoza," in Leaman, *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 121-45.

providence when it is a matter of rational beings and that it is "dependent upon the intellect and linked with it" (III:17: p. 474), and "divine providence does not watch over all individuals of the human species equally, but in proportion to their human perfection" (III:18: p. 475).<sup>5</sup> It is pretty clear that this human perfection is understood primarily in intellectual and not physical or social terms, so that the most important thing about us is our capacity to use our rationality, not anything else, and it is that capacity which links us with the flow of providence which is continually emanating from the higher intelligences above us and our world.

This was an issue of great debate within medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, as indeed it was in a different form within Greek philosophy itself. It would not be true to say that according to Maimonides there was no merit in Job's ethical behaviour before his meeting with G-d, but that the merit, such as it was, is limited until he managed to put it within a wider theoretical perspective. That is the significance of prayer and ritual behaviour, it puts the individual on the route to exploring in more detail the nature of his faith and what lies behind it, a route which is not entered onto by everyone but which is there in religious practice and which calls out to the believer for investigation. Job finally understands this when he appreciates that a simple answer from G-d is not going to be given to the question of why he suffers, and an answer is not going to be given because the question is wrong. Job suffers because he is material and material things do fall apart at one point or another. So the question Job should have asked is why there are material things at all, how they fit in with divine providence, and to that question G-d gives what might be thought to be a reasonable reply, in terms of his plan for the structure of the natural world and what lies within it. Of course, we might not understand what that plan is, but then we should not expect to understand it, given the differences between us and G-d.

According to Maimonides, once Job understands that there is such a gulf between us and G-d, "all misfortunes will be lightly accepted" (III:23, p. 497). But why is this? It is one thing to suggest, as Maimonides does, that there is more to life than health, wealth and children, yet these are surely important aspects of our lives, and we should be concerned about them to some extent in anything which passes muster as an acceptable human life. It is one thing to agree that Job is mistaken to expect G-d to reward him personally for his virtue, and quite another to agree that the ways in which Job expects to be rewarded are of no significance at all. Why would realising that children, health and possessions are not really the ultimate goal of life cheer Job up? He might come to realise that coming to know G-d through intellectual means is superior to any-

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<sup>5</sup> References to the translation by S. Pines of Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

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