

DECONSTRUCTING  
THEODICY



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Why Job Has Nothing to Say  
to the Puzzled Suffering

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WITH A. H. JOHNS



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To  
† Frère Marcel Dubois, OP  
Jerusalem  
and  
Frère Jean-Jacques Perennès, OP  
and the Dominican Community  
Cairo



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## PREFACE

ONE HAS ONLY to consult a blockbuster commentary like that of David Clines to be humbled in the face of even attempting a “theological reflection” of this “strange and wonderful book” (Maimonides). Yet the modifier *theological* allows us to borrow freely from those whose lens is more philological and literary, as we shall indeed do, while allowing us to focus on the fruitfulness of this key scriptural work for the prosecution of philosophical theology today. My own enthusiasm to take up this task stemmed from an intuition that clarifying the role of this book in the Hebrew scriptures could also affect much of what passes for *theodicy* in contemporary philosophy of religion. The book of Job inserts itself into the Hebrew canon as a trenchant critique of a unilateral application of the Deuteronomic formula for the covenant of God with Israel: that observance of the terms of the covenant will be rewarded and deviation punished. Might it also be that any attempt to *explain* the ways of God to human

beings will face a similar critique? I shall argue that the very structure of the book of Job may be extended in such a way and so offers a salient critique of classical and contemporary theodicies.

Translations of the book abound; I have utilized (with the translator's permission) one completed at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute (Jerusalem) in the midst of the first Gulf War (1990) by a scholar from Slovenia, Dr. Juij Bizjak, currently serving as a Catholic bishop in that country. While the book of Job is replete with subtle literary features, as astute commentators will observe, we shall focus primarily on the difference in speech acts between the protagonist and his interlocutors, for that very difference seems to herald the book's significance for inquirers in philosophical theology. Moreover, beyond customary biblical commentaries, monographs celebrating the book's teaching abound as well. I will only mention three that have affected me: those of Gustavo Gutiérrez (1987), John Wilcox (1989), and Bruce Zuckerman (1991).

The book of Job is replete with poetic repetition, which suggests that line-by-line commentary would distract from the impact of such repetition. So this reflection contents itself with employing strategic citations to identify thematic patterns in the work itself, allowing the poetic repetition to do its work unimpeded (Pickstock 1998). After following those patterns through the text, we will be able to call upon them to illuminate the central questions of our inquiry, as well as use them to address other approaches to these issues as well.

The dedication expresses a longstanding gratitude to my Dominican mentor in Jerusalem, Marcel Dubois (1920–2007), as well as one which I share with A. H. Johns for the intellectual

and personal hospitality of the Dominican community in Cairo, in the person of its sometime prior, Jean-Jacques Perrenès. The personal and intellectual environment of Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem made this work possible through its rector, Michael McGarry, CSP, with Mrs. Vivi Siniora, the house matron of seventeen years, and now vice-rector, Bridget Tighe, FMDM, who together create a home for students and scholars of all ages and nationalities, in a thirty-five acre oasis at a checkpoint, so the realities of the Holy Land are never far away. Eleanor Stump provided the original impetus to venture on this journey, through a shared reading of Aquinas's commentary some years ago, and more recently sharing with me her Gifford manuscript, while Edward Greenstein offered an unexpected corroboration of these directions from a scripture scholar, in his "Truth or Theodicy? Speaking Truth to Power in the Book of Job," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 27 (2006) 238–58.

Finally, my continuing thanks to those who commissioned this study, Russell Reno and Robert Jenson, then to Rodney Clapp, who selected it for publication, and Rebecca Cooper, who shepherded it along its way at Brazos, in whose list of distinguished authors I am privileged to share.



# 1

## INTRODUCING THE STRATEGIES OF THIS REFLECTION

**I**T MAY HARDLY seem ironic to many that the plight of Job should have generated scores of “theodicies.” Yet it will be the contention of this study that the book that took his name is expressly intended to deconstruct those very theories that many have felt it necessary to concoct in response to the plight of Job. Such theories suggest how Wittgenstein might have felt to find modes of philosophizing he deplored resurging; so how better respect his memory than to employ a “theological reflection” to deconstruct philosophic pretensions? And what could be more pretentious than attempting to “justify the ways of God to us,” as the venture of theodicy has classically been described? (The term *theodicy* was introduced by Leibniz in his *Concernant la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de*

*l'homme, et l'origine du mal* [1710], in response to Pierre Bayle's contention that the very presence of evil in the created world constituted a prima facie argument against the existence of a good creator-God.) While the intent of that formula may well have been ironic in Milton's employ, many philosophers long after Socrates have lost an ear for irony. Yet while modernity sought to supplant theological reflection with philosophical clarification, or narratives with theories, one of the features that renders postmodernity "post-" is its tendency toward nonreduction, toward juxtaposing diverse modes of discourse in the interest of understanding what each seeks to expound. Admittedly, this is a benign postmodernity, akin to that of John Henry Newman, Bernard Lonergan, or even (at times) John Paul II; and Job will remind us that what makes theirs benign is precisely its grounding in scripture. Yet scriptures can leave ambiguous legacies, as Jews and Christians (with Muslims) know so well, and it is one such legacy in the Hebrew scriptures that the book of Job seeks explicitly to correct. Moreover, we shall see how it accomplishes that by deconstructing theories designed to do an even better job of disambiguating the scriptures than scripture itself attempted in the book of Job.

It is true that the very narrative framing of Job's story—a divinity bargaining with its alter-ego, Satan—sets up a quasi-philosophical problematic, inviting modernist reduction. Yet placing that framing conceit in the larger scriptural context that the entire book presumes, while it busies itself criticizing a narrow appropriation of it, will allow us to appreciate how God-soaked that context is. So a "theological reflection" will be pressed to an enhanced philosophical awareness as it becomes alert to the ways "theology" can also compromise the

faith-context it seeks to articulate. Yet *reflection* it must be, for the book itself emanates a ray of hope, finding its way through multiple baffle-plates like the sun at its winter solstice illuminating the headstone at Newgrange. The role that the book of Job plays in the Hebrew scriptures (to correct misapprehensions endemic to those same scriptures) will guide my effort to delineate the steps that the book provides for deconstructing modernist “theories of theodicy.” We will also see how medieval philosophical theologians in the Abrahamic tradition can help us utilize the book itself to expose its purported progeny. Attending closely to its structure should unveil the revealing God, and so provide us with the intellectual strategies needed to show how the theodicies emerging in its wake can often obscure that very revelation. Although at best parallel to our main thesis, offering a contemporary commentary on Job’s Qur’anic counterpart, Ayyub, may throw additional light on the impact of this biblical character.

## Structure of the reflection

While an initial reading of the story which frames the book of Job suggests a classical theodicy of divine testing and of reward and punishment, we shall later see (with the help of real friends) just how misguided a reading that is. For now, it will suffice to note how the drama’s unfolding belies such a reading, notably in the counterpoint between each of Job’s friends and Job himself. For while they each address arguments to Job, his riposte to their arguments is addressed not to them but to the overwhelming presence of the God of Israel, to inaugurate an implicit dialogue vindicated by that same God who ends by