



God's Own Guinea Pig

The Book of Job and Secularization

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Abstract

One of the most unlikely showdowns of world literature is the one between YHWH, creator of heaven and earth, and his humble creature Job. The latter has lost his children, his possessions, and finally his health. He is covered with sore boils and, sitting among the ashes, he tries to cure his itch with a potsherd. His wife has advised him to “curse God and die”, his friends are accusing him of intolerable arrogance, and a mere stranger has started to hurl insults at him. In this situation, Job engages in an argument with YHWH about who is to be held responsible for the calamities that have befallen him: Job himself or YHWH? In a Jungian analysis of the text we will follow the dispute between creature and creator step by step, and designate a winner. Subsequently we will consider the question of what the story of Job might express in terms of early secularization.

Keywords: Book of Job, Hebrew Bible, Jungian criticism, comparative mythology, theodicy, fundamentalism, secularization processes

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The Book of Job, commonly dated between the sixth and third centuries BCE, is notoriously difficult to categorize. It contains elements of a folk tale, a psychotherapeutic session, a natural history inventory, a philosophical treatise, and abstract theological speculation. Perhaps we should not try to pigeonhole it and just accept that it is one of a kind.

Even in its purely formal aspects, the work is *sui generis*. There is a short frame story that seems to come straight out of the *Arabian Nights*. This narration is in prose. The Book of Job begins with the first half of the frame story, and concludes, after a lengthy digression, with the second half. The style of the digression is radically different: in spite of its being mostly argumentative in character, with its fierce discussions and convoluted reasoning, it is written in highly poetic verse lines. The digression is sometimes seen as a later addition to the Book of Job, but this is mere speculation.

Though the reader may be familiar with the story, I will start this article by recapitulating the events (section I), so as to be very clear about what the subsequent Jungian analysis (section II) will be referring to. In my analysis I hope to show that, far from being subservient and meek – and ultimately being rewarded for such an attitude –, the figure of Job is astonishingly self-confident vis-à-vis the Judeo-Christian Most High. In the concluding section (section III), I will draw some farther reaching conclusions about the position of the Book of Job within the psycho-historical developments as depicted in the Hebrew Bible. More specifically, I will go into some secularizing tendencies that this Bible book reveals. In my view, the archetypal hero Job subtly emancipates himself from older, more traditional religious views, and paves the way for greater human autonomy in matters that had hitherto been seen as belonging to the realm of the divine.

I Content of the Book of Job

Much in the manner of a fairy tale, the text starts with the message that there once was a man in the land of Uz by the name of Job.¹ Now this man is blessed in all respects. He is the richest man in the whole East, has seven sons and three daughters, and is very pious. (Frankly, he is so pious, that in real life one would be tempted to call him an ‘obsessive-compulsive neurotic’, as he continually and painstakingly keeps on offering purification offerings in the purely theoretical event that one of his sons perhaps *might* have sinned and cursed God in his heart or turned away from God.)

In the next scene we find ourselves in heaven, where the celestial beings, including someone who is called ‘the satan’, that is to say ‘the adversary’,² are having one of their regular meetings.

1 The name ‘Job’ is not a familiar one in the Hebrew Bible, and where Uz should be located no one seems to know (for an overview of suggestions, see Vicchio 2020, pp. 46-49). Both of these data alone might be seen as a hint that the story was not meant as a realistic account of historical events to begin with. This is relevant to our Jungian interpretation, in which the Book of Job is taken as a reflection of archetypal – that is to say, collectively unconscious – processes of a civilization at a certain stage of development rather than as a description of actual physical events. The Jungian, archetypal approach is comparable to, but not identical with literary approaches of the Bible, such as for example found in Fokkelman 2012. In contrast to Jan P. Fokkelman, I will not focus on literary devices, but on the (symbolic meaning of the) mythological content of the text.

2 Note that, though the Hebrew term for the adversary who plays such a big role in the Book of Job is *hasatan* (‘the satan’), this figure should not be identified with the later Christian, personalized, utterly demonic lord of evil ‘Satan’. For an insightful discussion of the development of all the opposing forces that are indicated with *hasatan* in the Hebrew Bible, see amongst others Schärf Kluger 1967; Russell 1988, pp. 28-42; Breytenbach &

God³ asks the satan where he has been and the satan answers that he has been roaming the earth. Then suddenly God starts a conversation about Job. It almost seems as if he is boasting. In paraphrase: ‘Did you notice my servant Job, how he is absolutely perfect? That guy never sins at all!’ The satan: ‘Sure, but that’s because you spoil him so much with good fortune. Shall we take away everything he has and see how he reacts? I bet he will curse you then.’ God accepts the proposal, and Job is hit by one disaster after another. All his cattle, his servants, and even his children perish; literally everything and everyone around him is destroyed, murdered, or stolen, except for himself and his wife. Nevertheless, Job does not curse God. He says: “Naked I came out from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD has given and the LORD has taken. May the LORD’s name be blessed” (1:21).⁴

At the next meeting of celestials, God points out to the satan that although they ruined him without cause, Job is still as impeccable as ever. Thereupon, the satan proposes a second wager. The idea is to now rob Job of his health; then he will surely curse God. Again, the Almighty has no objection, and a little later we find Job, sitting in ashes and dirt, covered from head to toe with malicious sores while scraping himself with a potsherd. However, just as before, and against his wife’s advice, who tells him to just “curse God and die” (2:9), Job refrains from sinning. He simply declares that if we accept good from God, we should also accept evil. Three friends hear of Job’s great misfortune and they come to visit him. Their names are Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They shroud themselves in silence for a whole week and mourn with Job.

This is where the first half of the frame story ends (chs. 1-2). The lengthy, poetic interlude (chs. 3-41) begins with Job opening his mouth and cursing the day that he was born (but mind that he does not curse God).

The first part of the interlude consists of discussions between Job and his friends (chs. 3-27). These discussions boil down to the following: the friends cannot believe that God would torment people for nothing, so they insist that Job should confess that he has sinned. They say things to him along the lines of ‘all evil comes from man’ and ‘God is good, so you must be guilty’. Job’s defense is that to the best of his knowledge he is innocent, but the friends are not satisfied with that. They start increasing the pressure a bit. Is Job perhaps implying that God is unjust? If so, says Eliphaz, Job is an ordinary criminal and an enemy of God! Bildad even manages to accuse Job’s dead children: surely they must have misbehaved as well. The emotions are now running high. The more the friends insist, the more Job defends himself. He feels that he is being treated unfairly in two ways. Not only is he struck by catastrophe for no reason at all, but on top of that he is also held responsible for his plight. He would like to take God to court to find out who is to blame for his misery. Only, human justice does not count here, as Job understands all too well. Eliphaz thinks all these reflections are completely shameless: ‘You’re only making it worse for yourself, Job’. But Job does not give in. He becomes increasingly determined to have it out with God.

Day 1999.

3 In the book of Job, God is sometimes, as in this case, referred to by ‘YHWH’, and then again by ‘Elohim’ (for the difference in flavour, see for example Alter 2019a, pp. 50-52). While the variation is of course significant as such, we will leave it aside in the current article.

4 Unless otherwise specified, all verbatim quotations from the Book of Job are taken from the 2019 Hebrew Bible translation by the famous Hebrew and Comparative Literature scholar Robert Alter (Alter 2019b).

Next, a young man by the name of Elihu appears. He has heard everything and is angry that the three friends seem unable to make Job admit his supposed guilt. Elihu will now resolve the issue. He acts as a kind of self-chosen assistant of God. (In today's terms, we might call Elihu a religious fundamentalist, that is to say someone who just selectively shops in any of the traditional religions and uses the principles he finds as a weapon against others.) In several arguments (chs. 32-37), Elihu rages against Job. For starters, Elihu claims that Job's immense suffering is good for him, because it will teach him. According to Elihu, God is exclusively good, whereas Job is wicked, stupid, as well as stubborn. The young man is now in full swing and goes one step further: apparently Job needs an extra lesson on top of the agonies he is already experiencing. Elihu therefore wholeheartedly hopes that God has yet more calamities in store for Job.

It is clear that all of these discussions essentially revolve around what has later been called 'theodicy'. The term 'theodicy' was coined by Leibniz in his *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* from 1710, but the underlying problem is much older. Augustine of Hippo, among others, has dealt extensively with this subject. The question is this: supposing there is only one God, and supposing this one God has only excellent qualities, in other words (if we think this through to the very end), supposing that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, then where does evil come from? Not that in the Hebrew Bible God's omnipotence, omniscience, and utter benevolence is already a dogma or anything, but there is a tendency in the development of the God image in the books of the Hebrew Bible towards an increasingly uniform, ever more transcendent deity, and that development inevitably leads to the kind of problems we have later come to associate with a theodicy.

The three friends and Elihu solve the question of where in light of God's postulated all-goodness evil is supposed to come from in such a way that man, in this case Job, must be the rotten apple in the moral system. Job, on the other hand, thinks this conclusion is invalid and unjust, because to his knowledge he has done nothing wrong. As far as he is concerned, his suffering is completely undeserved. Of course, it would follow – even though Job does not say so explicitly – that in some way or another, God's role in the events is not an altogether respectable one.

There is much and heated discussion, but due to a lack of information, the interlocutors in this part of the story do not get any further. The problem now hanging in the air is this: if Job is, as he claims to be, innocent – and he is, as the reader is well aware, because the reader has more information than the actors in the story – then it follows that God is either not wholly benevolent or not all-powerful or else he is not always aware of the evil things that may be happening behind his back. In any case, he cannot be without a flaw in all of these three areas at the same time. So what is it, does God lack goodness, knowledge, or power?

This is the moment where God himself gets involved in the discussion. Out of a whirlwind, he delivers two lengthy and rather harsh speeches, the gist of which is as follows: 'First of all, I know everything, and secondly, I am terribly mighty!' God expounds on his immeasurable knowledge and immense power, but does not say a word about morality.⁵

5 Quite a few commentators believe that God makes a (rightful) claim to high moral standards in his speeches after all, for example: "God argues for his wise management of the world by pointing to his ordering of the heavenly elements and his care of the wild animals (38:25–39:30). His argument that he manages the heavenly

The way God expresses himself from the whirlwind seems to indicate that he is offended. In sharp terms, he devotes entire chapters to minute descriptions of what he knows and what he can do. As he explains in his first speech (chs. 38-39), he not only knows the way to the abode of the light and the unfathomable depths of the Ocean, but he also keeps track of when the cliff goats are about to give birth and where exactly the hawks and vultures have their nests. As to his power, if he wills, he can command the dawn to seize the corners of the earth to shake off the wicked. He can also close the doors of the sea if it threatens to break out. Job answers to all this with silence: “Look, I am worthless. What can I say back to You? My hand I put over my mouth.” (40:4).

In his second speech (chs. 40-41), God is even more fierce. Bluntly he expresses his displeasure at Job’s confronting him with the issue of guilt. He says, among other things: “Will you indeed thwart My case, hold Me guilty, so you can be right?” (40:8). To make it clear that this presumption of Job’s is ridiculous, God ends his diatribes with a description of two very powerful legendary monsters that are under his control (usually interpreted as hippopotamus and crocodile respectively). The following text is not from a Monty Python sketch, but a literal quotation: “Look, pray: Behemoth, whom I made with you, grass like cattle he eats. Look, pray: the power in his loins, the virile strength in his belly’s muscles. He makes his tail stand like a cedar, his balls’ sinews twine together. His bones are bars of bronze, his limbs like iron rods.” (40: 15-18). The other legendary monster is the Leviathan. God asks Job: “Could you draw Leviathan with a hook, and with a cord press down his tongue? Could you put a lead line in his nose, and with a fishhook pierce his cheek? Would he urgently entreat you, would he speak to you gentle words? Would he seal a pact with you, that you take him as lifelong slave? Could you play with him like a bird, and leash him for your young women? Could hucksters haggle over him, divide him among the traders? Could you fill his skin with darts, and a fisherman’s net with his head?” (40: 25-31).

For some reason Job does not go into these interesting questions. He confirms that God is all-mighty and that his knowledge indeed extends far beyond his own (42: 2-6). (In fact, at an earlier stage he had already elaborated extensively on God’s incomparable power – in chapter 9 – and knowledge – in chapter 28 –, so praising the Almighty for these two wonderful personality traits once again can hardly be difficult for him.)

The second half of the frame story (42: 7-17) then has a fairly happy ending. God is not pleased with Job’s friends, because, as he explains to them: “you have not spoken rightly of Me as did My servant Job” (42:7). Job, on the other hand, regains all his former wealth and happiness. His life becomes even better than before: he receives double his former property and has seven new sons and three new daughters. The latter are beautiful beyond compare. He calls them Jemimah (‘turtledove’), Qetsiah (‘cinnamon blossom’) and Qeren-Happuch (‘horn of eyeshade’). And Job lives happily ever after, 140 years to be precise.

elements so wisely and provides for the creatures of the desert so caringly implies that he certainly watches over people just as wisely and caringly.” (Hartley 2003, p. 77). The argumentation is somewhat difficult to follow. Apart from that, it is unclear how God’s general ‘wise management of the world’ and his ‘care of the wild animals’ would solve Job’s personal moral problem with God.

II Argument between Creature and Creator

The issue at stake between Job and YHWH (chs. 29-31 and 38-42) is, who is responsible for Job's misery, Job himself or the Almighty? (Again, mind that in the context of a monotheistic God as he develops in the Hebrew Bible, it makes sense to formulate the question this sharply; logically, at the most one of the two actors can have a clean slate, they cannot both be acquitted.)

Of course, it does not take a legal genius to answer this question, because – as we read in the text – God was persuaded by the satan to destroy Job and this was done, as God himself acknowledges, without cause (2:3). Moreover, God explicitly describes Job to the satan as “a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil”, and he does so twice (1:8 and 2:3), prior to both trials that is, so there can be no doubt about the latter being inflicted on Job without any provocation on his part. Job himself also knows that he did not sin. In chapter 31, he ponders what he might have done wrong to deserve his terrible fate. The answer is: nothing. His conscience is completely clear. Job therefore suspects – quite rightly in the context of this Biblical story⁶ – that God must have a dark side. In fact, Job draws this conclusion quite early in the story. In the second chapter, right after the disasters have occurred, his wife urges him to just give up, but Job refuses: “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10).⁷ Far from rejecting God, Job seems to effortlessly accept him in his totality and without resisting.

What Job cannot accept, however, is that, in addition to his undeserved misery, he should also be burdened with the moral responsibility for it. According to Job, that burden is not his to carry; it should remain where it belongs, that is to say with the Most High. This is what the dispute, first between Job and his friends, and subsequently – more importantly – between human and creator, is about, and the denouement in the last chapter of the Book of Job confirms that Job's perception of the situation has been accurate all along.

As an aside: in line with later points of view, more specifically with Christian ones, the last chapter tends to be translated, and sometimes also commented on, rather tendentiously. The New King James Version even deems it necessary to provide chapter 42 with an inauthentic subheading, namely: “Job's Repentance and Restoration”.⁸ In the same vein, the Dutch States Bible, which is the most authoritative and dignified Bible translation in the Dutch-speaking world, adds as a subtitle: “Job bekennt zijn schuld” / “Job confesses his guilt”.⁹ Not only is this absent in the original Bible text, but it is also evidently not intended. Indeed, Job stops accusing God – very wisely, given the balance of powers – but he never says that he himself is to blame for the evils that have befallen him. After all the thunderous speeches he has received, he politely remains silent about the issue of the moral guilt.

So, the answer to the main question discussed in the book of Job is plain enough: God himself is

6 At the risk of repeating myself, let me emphasize that the current article is not a theological one; it does not use the Book of Job in order to find out or claim anything about a transcendent God, but instead it attempts to understand the inner coherence of the text from a depth psychological perspective.

7 Translation taken from Mathews McGinnis 2001, p. 139.

8 NKJV 2007 [1982], p. 815.

9 Statenvertaling 1987 [1637], p. 550. Laudibly, the newest – also prestigious – Dutch translation chooses a more neutral subtitle for chapter 42: “Jobs antwoord aan God en zijn verdere lot” / “Job's answer to God and his further fate” (NBV21, p. 553). Finally, it must be remarked that the original King James Bible from the year 1611 (KJV 1611) does not have the patronizing habit of adding unbiblical subtitles to begin with.

the one responsible for Job's undeserved misery, or, in other words, God can sometimes be unfair.¹⁰ Nevertheless, when Job confronts the Almighty with his behaviour, the latter remains strangely noncommittal. Although God refrains from explicitly denying his moral responsibility, he apparently does not feel like admitting out loud his part in the awkward affair either.

His representatives on earth seem just as little inclined to this kind of thing. To name a few examples:

The usually very brilliant and precise, liberal-reformed theologian Martinus Beek, apparently has a hard time discussing the problem of God's morality in the Book of Job. He cryptically suggests that it would be "quite wrong to believe that God's righteousness was reflected in man's just reward". Furthermore, Beek points out that the people of ancient Israel did not take into account the possibility of an afterlife. He seems to suggest that any undeserved human suffering might be rectified in the Eternal Kingdom yet to come.¹¹

The South African Protestant Bible exegete J.H. Kroeze is of the opinion that the Book of Job means to express God's absolute majesty and sovereignty. If he wants to torment you, then you should thank him politely and that is all there is to it. Besides, Kroeze explains, God did have entirely valid reasons for turning Job's life into a hell, because only in this way could God make it clear to Satan that Job was really a good person. Satan was so evil that strong empirical evidence was needed to convince him. Although Satan is the one in the Book of Job who ultimately gets the short end of the stick, because he loses the bet, the whole enterprise has certainly not been easy for God. After all, he could not inform Job about the reason for his undeserved suffering, because then the testing would not have been fair. And finally, Kroeze says, God does not apologize, nor does he need to, for he is Creator and Sovereign.¹²

In the Dutch Roman Catholic Willibrord Bible (1995 edition) we find somewhat similar ideas, only here the emphasis is not so much on the sovereignty of God as on Job's lack of it. The reasoning is as follows (and it is a reasoning that one finds quite often): if Job wants to accuse God of something, he must have the same knowledge and power as God. As this is not the case, Job will just have to humbly give in.¹³

A more idiosyncratic view is defended in an article by Old Testament scholar B. Lynne Newell. Though she maintains that "Job recognized that he had sinned and he repented of that sin", she does not believe that Job committed his sins prior to his suffering nor that they were the cause of the evils that were bestowed on him. All the same, she thinks Job is the guilty one, and certainly not God almighty, because, as she sees it, Job must have, to some extent unconsciously, accused and condemned God while he justified himself.¹⁴

10 This is easy to say, but of course it is a message difficult to digest, no less in the present day than in the first millennium BCE. Jeffrey Berman lists a series of reactions to the contents of the book of Job that he received from students in a reader-response setting, and most of them were to some extent upset – either emphatically denying that God can be immoral or taking God's apparent immorality as a good reason not to believe in him (Berman 2009, pp. 96-101). Jung comments on the matter as follows: "Yahweh's dual nature has been revealed, and somebody or something has seen and registered this fact. Such a revelation, whether it reached man's consciousness or not, could not fail to have far-reaching consequences." (Jung 2002 [1952], 386).

11 Beek 1959, p. 214.

12 Kroeze ⁵2001 [1987], pp. 265-267.

13 Willibrordvertaling 1995, p. 682.

14 Newell 2003, p. 455. It seems remarkable that Job's sins should have taken place *after* his well-deserved

Comments that are not of a religious nature generally have fewer problems with the image of a misbehaving God. However, almost everyone who discusses the Book of Job seems to agree (with the exception of Carl Gustav Jung, about whom more shortly) that by the end of the story Job will eventually conform entirely to God's representation of the issue and will be required for this almost incomprehensible obedience. Job will give in and be rewarded.¹⁵

But nothing is less true! Job does not capitulate, at least not with regard to the question that matters. When it comes to power and knowledge, Job indeed wholeheartedly acknowledges God's superiority (42:2-3), but the question, as we may recall, was not who is the most powerful or who knows the most, but who should take responsibility for Job's undeserved misery. Despite all the suffering, the loss of his loved ones, his physical ailments, the lack of support from his wife, the pressure of his friends, the opinion of an outsider (Elihu) who comes to insult him unsolicited, and finally the furious reaction of the Almighty himself, who clearly intends to withdraw from the affair without losing face, Job refuses to take on that moral responsibility. His courage is unparalleled: not even God can make him confess what he has not done.¹⁶ He emphasizes his own humility before God, certainly, but leaves the responsibility where it belongs, which is with the Most High himself.

As I see it, the Book of Job is essentially about a duel between God and man. This view is very close to the first two chapters of Jung's famous 1952 essay 'Answer to Job'; God tries his utmost to intimidate Job and get the blame off the table, but finally he acknowledges that Job is right.¹⁷ The power relations could not have been more disproportionate. On the one hand, there is God who rules the entire universe, thundering from his comfortable high position about his immeasurable power and inexhaustible knowledge, and on the other the pitiable, tiny human Job, who is in quite a pickle: deeply unhappy, poor, sick, left to his fate, criticized, insulted, and shouted at. Job wins, however. The blame remains with God. Of course, this is not said out loud,

punishment. One is reminded of the case of Alexei Navalny, whose symptoms of poisoning occurred on the 20th of August 2020, during a flight from Tomsk to Moscow, while the actual poisoning took place several days later, in a hospital in Berlin, at least according to a range of spokespersons of the Kremlin.

- 15 For example, Greenberg 1990 [1987], p. 299; Bochet 1992, p. 658 and 659; Armstrong ¹⁰1995 [1993], p. 80; Schönau 2004, p. 6 and 8; Alter 2011, p. 85. Van Schaik and Michel distinguish two different traditions, each of which they claim has found its way into the complex Book of Job. One would be common sense based – or, in their terminology, be close to our first human nature –, while the other would rather be an intellectual-institutional construct. In the second tradition, Job would confess his guilt (van Schaik and Michel 2016, p. 272 and 277).
- 16 The Hebrew words in verse 42:6 – the only candidate on which to base a confession on the part of Job – are laconic and cryptic, no doubt for good reason, considering the delicate situation; poor Job has to walk on eggshells. Traditional translations opt for variations on “Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (KJV, p. 660). However, the most recent Dutch Bible translation chooses to take a different path, still within the possibilities of the original text, and renders 42:6 as “Daarom zal ik verder zwijgen, nu vind ik troost voor mijn kammervol bestaan” / “Therefore I will remain silent, now I find comfort for my sad existence” (NBV21, p. 553). Sylvia Huberman Scholnick comes up with some well-argued, though quite different, suggestions concerning verse 42:6 as well (Huberman Scholnick 2003, pp. 350 ff.). In any case, in the entire Book of Job we find no unequivocal admission of any guilt that would have justified Job's suffering, not even in 42:6 (and not even if one should prefer to stick to the most traditional of translations, because to “repent in dust and ashes” hardly amounts to a confession; given the context, not explicitly admitting guilt is equivalent to claiming innocence). Of course, Job is a little vague in this verse, but how else could he have said no to God? For a discussion of the ambiguities of 42:6, see also Newsom 2003, pp. 28-29.
- 17 Jung 2002 [1952], pp. 355-385. In one of his later works, Jung summarizes his earlier interpretation concisely as follows: “Yahweh allows himself to be fooled by Satan, deals faithlessly with Job, misjudges the situation, and then has to admit his error. But although Job is obliged to bow to brute force he carries off the moral victory.” (Jung 2002 [1956], p. 262).

because in the context that would be blasphemous and God is already quite annoyed as it is, but it is Job's view on the matter that eventually prevails. After all, the reason God gives for Job's later reparation and reward is that the latter spoke of God in proper terms; in other words, Job was right! This is in contrast to the three friends, who had claimed that God is always benevolent and just. To make it very clear that they were wrong, this is said twice by God (42:7 and 42:8), so there can be little misunderstanding.

III The Book of Job and Secularization

In short, we are dealing here with a confrontation between the Ruler of the Universe and an insignificant creature of his, and the latter wins on points. Astounding as this may seem, such victories are actually not exceptional in the Hebrew Bible. Job is by no means the only one who defies God's wishes and gets away with it. The people that populate the Hebrew Bible are a restless lot, never satisfied with the way things are. They often clash with boundaries set by God and are punished. However, despite the fact that God could easily smite thousands of them if he so wishes, it tends to be the human who in such clashes takes off with the victory. On those occasions, humankind gradually becomes more independent. Over the course of the books of the Hebrew Bible, a slow but steady process of secularization takes place, in the sense that the realm of human decision-making power is widening whereas the realm of control by God or other divine powers¹⁸ is shrinking. Unlike what is sometimes thought, secularization is not a recent phenomenon at all. The current secularization processes in Western civilization have had a long preparation.

These developments already start with Adam and Eve: God had only just created the first human beings when they already overstep his boundaries. God is not amused, but accepts the new status quo (Gen. 2-3).¹⁹ Their son Cain kills his brother, though God had warned him to be good. Yet he manages to negotiate God's protection, whereupon he builds the first city (Gen. 4). Patriarch Jacob is cutting it rather fine, too: when a supernatural figure, who on the basis of a close reading may be interpreted as God himself, attacks him at a border river, Jacob not only stands his ground, but even forces a blessing and enters the area that the numinous figure tried to keep him away from (Gen. 32). In a later period, the people of Israel want to exchange the theocratic government they have for a (slightly) more secular type of rulership, namely a worldly king such as all the nations have. God does not approve and advises against it a few times, but they get their king anyway (1 Sam. 8-12).²⁰

As Jung does not tire of emphasizing, not only in 'Answer to Job' but also elsewhere in his works,²¹ the Judeo-Christian God is not a static figure, but, quite the contrary, has undergone a

18 As is well known, the God of the Hebrew Bible is not a clear-cut figure, nor is he the only supernatural being in the Biblical universe. *The Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* discerns with ease several hundreds of them (van der Toorn, Karel, Becking, Bob, & van der Horst, Pieter W. 1999). Of course, from a theological perspective, there is a tendency to overlook any polytheistic aspects of the Hebrew Bible.

19 Although from a religious and especially Christian perspective the emphasis is on the punishment Adam and Eve received for their disobedience, this does not alter the fact that the first human pair, against the ban, did eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and that they thus made themselves, in an irreversible process, to a certain extent morally independent.

20 These and other examples of early secularization are extensively discussed in Kardaun 2011.

21 For example, Jung 2002 [1951], p. 42 ff.; Jung 2002 [1956], p. 262 ff.; etc.

spectacular development over time. (Of course, when Jung speaks about ‘God’, he means ‘God image’, it is important to keep this in mind.) As Jung sees it, in the Book of Job it is not God but man who possesses the greatest moral consciousness. Only through his confrontation with the “blameless and upright” (1:8 and 2:3) Job, who continues to ask questions in all sincerity, does God realize that he has been unwittingly unjust. The God of the Book of Job, through this awareness, transforms from a rather amoral deity into a deity better suited to human ethical needs. One could also put it this way: at the stage of religious development as depicted in the Book of Job, human rationality and the human sense of justice have advanced to such an extent that the image of God must somehow change with it, otherwise life would become incomprehensible and unbearable. Jung sees the transformation of the God image in the Book of Job as a logical consequence of modernization processes (and incidentally as just one step in a much bigger process of transformation of the divine).

Although I do not disagree with the above, I would like to put a different emphasis. As a classical philologist, well acquainted with Greek gods and goddesses, I have never been too fond of the Judeo-Christian monotheistic concept of God. In line with Jung (and Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and many others), it indeed seems reasonable to see any deities – God or gods and goddesses, that is to say any figures that are sincerely believed in and revered in a certain cultural setting – as the expressions of that culture’s most important values. In my view, cultures with a pluralistic pantheon, are more likely to have room for all those many, sometimes even contradictory, values that life tends to entail, than strictly monotheistic ones. At least in rigidly monotheistic cultures, the moral absurdities that are part and parcel of life are likely to cause problems sooner or later.

After all, if there is only one single God who rules the entire universe, then it is almost inevitable to attribute only good qualities to this all-encompassing divine power. For one thing, we are entirely at his mercy; even asking just one critical question about God’s goodness will easily be felt as blasphemy. Of course God is all-good! We cannot help but want him to be all-good, because if he is not, there is something fundamentally wrong with the parameters of life. Psychologically, we need to be assured that good behaviour will always be rewarded and that it is just a matter of human error if something goes wrong. Human error may be corrected. If we try our best, we will surely be able to avoid mistakes next time, and that is a comforting idea, or rather, the opposite is rather daunting. Behold the worldview of Job’s three friends and the religiously insane young man Elihu.

As attractive as it may be, unfortunately this viewpoint is not realistic, as anyone with a little life experience will immediately understand. In fact, insisting that God – and with him his creation as well – must be all-good is so unrealistic that it can ultimately only lead to atheism, as in fact it has done. As a way to deal with evil, however, atheism does not get us much further either. Without a supernatural framework, that is, all alone in the universe, we may be even more inclined to take responsibility for everything we perceive as ‘wrong’ than if we adhere to religious views. That responsibility is way beyond what we can handle. The ancient Greeks – that is, the Greeks of the Pre-Socratic, mythological era – would no doubt speak of *hybris* (excessive pride) in this connection.

Let us, by way of comparison, have a look at how the ancient Greeks, with their polytheistic array of gods, used to deal with the question of evil and moral responsibility. As everybody

knows, the Greek gods often disagreed with each other. It was entirely possible that one god wanted you to do this, while another demanded the exact opposite. The downside was that as a human being you had to be very cautious, because you could easily offend one deity or another; there were so many of them! On the bright side, being in conflict with a supernatural power was not such a heavy moral burden, even less so, because there might be gods who were on your side, so even while doing something bad (in the view of one deity), you might at the same time, accidentally or not, be doing something good (according to another deity). Times were not so moralistic yet, and things were not so black and white. Above all, you had to know your place and realize that you were just a tiny cog in a mysterious world full of conflicting demands and interests.

To continue the comparison: in Greek mythology – and in mythology in general – man is not such a major topic of conversation. Greek mythology, for example as presented by Hesiod in his *Theogony*,²² begins with an elaborate divine cosmogony and ends with a range of archetypal demigods and heroes of divine descent. Ordinary people are not part of this. By contrast, from a comparative mythological point of view, the Judeo-Christian Bible is very anthropocentric. In the first chapter of the first Bible book, the entire universe is created: heaven, earth, light, land, sea, sun, moon, stars, vegetation, animals, and also humans. The latter appear already in Genesis 1:26. In the Dutch States Bible (Statenvertaling 1987 [1637]), that is literally on page 1, and then there are still 1196 pages to go. It is quite clear that, unlike in mythology, the central, if not the only, theme of the Judeo-Christian holy book is the relationship between God and man. This gives man a hugely important place in the universe.²³ In the Christian part of the Bible, the New Testament, God finally even becomes human himself. From a comparative mythological perspective, that is hardly a divine thing to do. It is actually a form of secularization. Small wonder that many in the Judeo-Christian tradition eventually abolished God altogether.

In the Book of Job, a different, more moderate form of secularization is laid out. God is not abolished, but his power is somewhat curtailed. As I see it, the Book of Job contains two main messages:

1) According to the Book of Job, it seems that we do not need to take responsibility for things that are beyond our control. The case study ‘Job’ can be read as a kind of thought experiment. The events decidedly take place outside concrete reality. Suppose now that someone was completely guiltless, extremely pious, and beyond all reasonable criticism (in such unrealistic terms Job is described twice, and it is also emphatically stated that there is no one on earth like him, so he is clearly introduced as a fictional figure),²⁴ there would still be no guarantee that such a person would be safe from disaster. Happiness is simply not enforceable and when things go wrong, this is not always imputable to ourselves or to our fellow human beings. (Note: the opposite is of course the case: it is quite possible to behave in such a way as to inflict misery upon oneself or others.) In other words, the bad news is that we do not, or at least not completely,

22 Hesiod 2006 [7th C BCE].

23 Even the derogatory way in which God in the Book of Job treats his human opponent actually puts the latter on a pedestal. As Jung formulates it: “Anyone can see how he unwittingly raises Job by humiliating him in the dust.” (Jung 2002 [1952], p. 385).

24 1:8-9 and 2:3. It is particularly noteworthy that Job – very untypical in the Hebrew Bible – is depicted without any genealogical context. Clearly, the author(s) of the Book of Job did not mean their hero to be a tangible historical figure to begin with. See also footnote 1.

control our happiness in life. However, there is also some good news: we are not always morally responsible for everything that goes wrong. Bad things can happen, and if they do, it may be alright to simply accept them and suffer, without having to blame ourselves or others, as if anyone could have prevented them.

2) Keeping faith in life no matter what, on the other hand, seems highly recommended in the Book of Job. While life may not intrinsically make sense, humans need meaning, and, as meaning is unfortunately not handed to us from outside, we somehow have to create it ourselves. We cannot simply ground it in a transcendent God who should always have everyone's best interests at heart (nor, for that matter, in a logically and/or empirically verifiable world around us that should do the trick). The childish idea that a divine power has a plan of salvation for us, if only we behave well, is thoroughly discarded in the Book of Job, however – and this is crucial – so are resignation and cynicism. Job does not follow his wife's hasty conclusion "Curse God and die" (2:9). While he accepts that life can be unfair, he nonetheless takes himself completely seriously in his sorrow. Nowhere does our hero become indifferent. I fully agree with Jeffrey Berman who phrases this thought as: "The story affirms the value of questioning even if we can find no satisfactory answer to the enigma of innocent suffering."²⁵ Instead of giving up, Job fights for his sense of meaningfulness, against the limitations of traditional religion, which has run out of answers and has even become downright hostile, and without the help of anyone at all.

The figure of Job is thus for me a great hero of a commendable – namely moderate – form of secularization. In the Book of Job, God is thoroughly failing, that is to say, life shows its most terrible side for no reason at all, seems unpredictable and meaningless, and yet Job does not lose his confidence. Even though God does not answer Job's questions, Job asks them anyway because to him they are important and a matter of human dignity. In that sense, he is an autonomous creature who makes his own choices, if need be against the wishes of God himself, but in a modest way, without bravado, without *hybris*.²⁶

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²⁵ Berman 2009, p. 84.

²⁶ An earlier, Dutch, version of this article appeared under the name 'Gods eigen proefkonijn' (*Jaarboek van de C.G. Jungvereniging Nederland*, vol. 33 (2017), pp. 68-81).

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