

Words, wind and import: speech in the book of job



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An emphasis on the relationship between speech and sin is present from the inception of the test of Job's virtue. Satan challenges God that, if misfortune befell Job, he would "curse [him] to [his] face," making Job's sin not a psychological or physical one, but rather verbal in nature (1: 11). This equation of sin with discourse is fleshed out by the remainder of the text. By general consensus, the mouth is a den of iniquity; Job's friend Zophar explicates this idea through metaphor over four verses, saying that the godless "hold [wickedness] in their mouths . . . It is the venom of asps within them" (20: 13-14). These verses are full of imagery which construes wicked mouths as roiling with this venom and a perverse enjoyment. They seem intended to connote decadence, as though the godless relish, however briefly, the spoils of sin, misperceiving poison to be pleasurable. Their mouths are presented as the location and crux of their sin. Job, in pleading the case for his righteousness, says, "I have not let my mouth sin by asking for their lives with a curse" (31: 30). Here as elsewhere, it is clear that the act of speech itself is not sinful, but that sin instead resides in the meaning of spoken words. This idea is iterated, in slightly varied forms, several times throughout the Book of Job. When Job describes wicked people, he lists the actions which characterize them and then sums up their sins: "They say to God, 'Leave us alone!'" (21: 14). Perhaps this statement is implicit in their actions, or perhaps Job means that the wicked literally say that, but in either case, this statement is the focal point of sin. During his theophany at the end of the text, God construes verbal sin differently; he says that its essence is words spoken without knowledge (38: 2). This is a specific reaction to the speeches of Job's friends, which misrepresent the nature of God. What unites these definitions of verbal sin is the fact that each statement betrays its

speaker's flawed relationship with God. Job cursing other people would be unkind and would constitute taking advantage of his position, the sinful people he describes distance themselves from God, and his friends pass off their speculations and rationalizations about divine truth as fact. Rife with complexities and contradictions, the Book of Job makes two notable arguments against the equation of sin and speech. The first occurs when Job addresses God, making the case for his innocence. "If I sin," he says, "you watch me," and since one watches actions and hears discourse, this verb choice and the contradiction it creates seems, at first glance, inexplicable (10: 14). However, actions can be said to "speak", and perhaps Job is referring to this form of speech. It could also be that this is a slight, off-hand expansion of the definition of sin beyond speech acts, not intended to blend completely with the message of the rest of the book, but in either case, the issue is sufficiently resolved. The second argument is found in the institution of prayer, and its role in the verbal relationship between humans and the divine. While the sin of Job's friends is the words they speak, their salvation comes from speech as well. God demands that as recompense for their sins, "Job will pray for [them], and I will accept his prayer"(42: 8). Prayer is a considered, formal variant of everyday speech, and this may be its chief virtue. In contrast with the speeches of Zophar, Eliphaz, and Bildad, prayer assumes nothing of God but his existence. The ritualistic nature of prayer, as well as the fact that it traditionally subjugates the person offering it before God, distinguishes it from ordinary and potentially wicked speech. While these arguments serve to complicate the equation of sin and speech, they by no means undermine it. Though the content of speech, not speech itself, is construed as sin, silence is always represented as virtue. This idea, though

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finally confirmed by God, is expressed throughout the bulk of the text by Job alone. He articulates it on four separate occasions. The first, and necessarily the most lengthy of these instances, is an explication in the form of a criticism of his three friends. “ If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom!” Job tells them, and then goes on to explain that each word spoken of God risks offending him through deceit or over-partiality (13: 5). “ Your maxims are proverbs of ashes,” he concludes, metaphorically reducing their speech to a fragile construction of dust (13: 12). Job later uses his own situation as an exemplary tale: “ Look at me, and be appalled, and lay your hand upon your mouth” (21: 5). While on the surface this is directed at the three friends, it is in fact intended for the reader of the text as well, and could indeed be taken as the central message that this book is intended to communicate to believers. The final iteration of this idea occurs near the end of the text, and neatly concludes Job’s argument. Now espousing near-total silence in the presence of the Lord, he says, “ I have spoken once, and I will not answer twice, but proceed no further” (40: 4-5). His position validated, he can lapse out of discourse into observation of a code of virtuous silence. Silence is a human virtue only. “[God’s] voice roars; he thunders with his majestic voice and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard” (37: 4). There is a consensus throughout the book that God’s voice is not only sound but sound so powerful that its ramifications on the physical world are both spectacular and destructive. The speech itself is usually equated with thunder, and during the theophany, God describes a sea monster called Leviathan that can be read as a metaphor for God and God’s power. This creature’s mouth is represented as a pit of fire, and its every breath is accompanied by flame (41: 21). The choice of fire – and of thunder,

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which is closely related to it – as the physical corollary for God’s voice is an interesting one, since humans both need fire for survival and fear it as an agent of destruction. The fire metaphor seems carefully chosen to explicate by way of connotation the proper relationship of humans with God, at least as the Book of Job defines it: it should be an intimate one simultaneously characterized by both fear of and subservience to the divine will. The meaning of God’s words also have a direct impact on the world. God uses his voice, rather than an unspoken will, to bring things into being. It is his verbal command that brings about snow, rain, wind and icy weather (37: 6, 9). The text construes God’s power as almost entirely grounded in his speech; for example, at the beginning of his theophany, God describes his creation of the oceans, initially with verbs like “ shut in” and “ prescribed bounds,” but in the summary at 38: 11, the binding of the ocean is represented as a speech act, when God commands the ocean directly: “ Here shall your proud waves be stopped.” If speech is not the source of God’s power, then it is certainly the vehicle of that power. For all of its fiery magnificence and import, the human characters in the Book of Job seem to conceptualize the voice of God, as well as his words, at least partially as tools of instruction. The first notable evidence of this is when Zophar is criticizing what he takes to be Job’s impiety and sin. He says to Job, “ O that God would speak, and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!” (11: 5-6). It is not only the sinful friends who advance this conceptualization, since Job himself agrees with them when he says “ I would learn what [God] would answer me, and understand what he would say to me” (23: 5). Verbal, discursive teaching is integrally a speech act; it is the passing of concrete knowledge between minds on a bridge built with words. Teaching in this

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sense also seems to necessarily involve humans, since if it can be said that the Lord teaches Satan of the righteousness of Job, it is certain that Satan required a physical test rather than a simple lecture. By contrast, the men in Job attempt to teach one another through words, and God will eventually echo their approach, in effect joining their theological debate, albeit with a more certain perspective. However, if it stood alone, this viewpoint on the nature of God's speech would seem to locate the divine and the human much too close on the rhetorical spectrum. God asks Job, "can you thunder with a voice like [mine]?" and the question clearly separates divine speech from the human equivalent (40: 9). Elihu suggests some of the elements of God's voice that are neglected in a purely instructional conceptualization. Indeed, he ignores teaching altogether, and postulates that "God speaks in one way, and in two, though people do not perceive it" (33: 14). The two ways he goes on to name and explicate are speech through dreams and through punishment, deprivation and pain. Elihu's suggestions, perhaps representative of the younger generation, are much more indirect; they suggest that the Lord speaks through metaphor and encourage believers to read events as omens and representations of divine speech. Earlier in the Book of Job, Eliphaz postulates a similar idea, saying that "those who plow iniquity . . . by the breath of God they perish" (4: 8-9). However, God never confirms these ideas, and in fact the very actualities of the situation seem to deny its truth. Job's misfortunes are not the voice of God embodied but are rather random cruelties achieved at the hand of Satan. These erroneous speculations probably join much of the rest of Eliphaz's and Elihu's discourse as the body of their sin. Though speech, silence and the voice of God are facets of the verbal relationship between the divine and the human, nowhere

is this more directly expressed than in the human desire to speak with God. Elihu defines the human relationship to God's commands verbally, metaphorically equating listening with obedience and "open[ing] their ears" with instilling belief (36: 10-11). Despite his strong impulse to request this close verbal interaction, Job at first doubts its practicability. "How then can I answer him," he asks, "choosing my words with him . . . Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me" (9: 14, 20). Indeed, the gap between the human and the divine seems too great to bridge with words. This frustration does not destroy the impulse to speak with God, especially for the characters like Elihu, who do not perceive it. Job, who has a sense of the divine both more accurate and more nuanced, simply begins to request a formalization of the discussion: the forum of the legal court. He constructs the court as a point of verbal exchange: "I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me" (23: 4-5). Job's interest is not in receiving justice so much as in receiving instruction. This formal version of interaction with God is acceptable, in Job's mind, in much the same way that prayer is acceptable; since he lays out only conditional arguments before the court, as he would lay out only requests in prayer, and then passively awaits a divine response. If divine speech is irrefutably good, human speech is not so privileged. "Your words have supported those who were stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees," says Eliphaz to Job at 4: 4. The implication of this statement and the following argument, however, is that Job's words, once so powerful, are now as feeble as the knees they used to strengthen. Over the course of their speeches, Job's friends imbue his speech with less and less import, referring to it instead as "unprofitable talk" (15: <https://assignbuster.com/words-wind-and-import-speech-in-the-book-of-job/>

3). This decay of confidence in the significance and impact of speech – and therefore in the efficacy of speech acts – is mirrored in the rest of the Book of Job as well. God’s momentous decision to allow Satan to taunt the most righteous of men potentially undermines much of the Judeo-Christian tradition’s understanding of its deity as a rational and loving entity. It might also begin to undermine the power of speech to deal with such apparently irrational events, which are so far removed from the sphere of human power. If the system in which sin begets punishment and virtue earns reward in which the culture is soinvested is to hold true, Job’s words must lose their truth and power, since they directly contradict it. Therefore, his friends preface each of their rebuttals with an indictment of the verity of Job’s words, saying that “ the words of [his] mouth [are] a great wind” (8: 2). They thereby reconcile what they are witnessing with what they formerly held to be true. Job himself also begins to doubt the power of speech, especially as his prayers go unanswered. “ If I speak,” he says, “ my pain is not assuaged” (16: 6). In this case it seems the import of the words was couched in his expectation that they would have a perceptible effect, rather than in the achievement of that effect. For some time he was willing to suspend disbelief, to simply wait for God to act, but as a response seems less likely, he gives up belief in the power of prayer. While these dismissals of the power of speech may seem to be exceptions to the general rule, they are confirmed, oddly enough, at the conclusion of the Book of Job. In his final speech, Job admits to God that “ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; and therefore I despise myself” (42: 5-6). This statement, which passes without comment, construes the entire verbal relationship between God and humans as penultimate, and enthrones direct

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contact as the preferred method of learning holiness. These two modes of interaction are by no means mutually exclusive, since even in the first of the speech acts mentioned in Job – Satan’s challenge that Job will “curse [God] to [his] face” – seems to imply some sort of physical presence as well (1: 11). Verbal interaction is, therefore, presented by the Book of Job as a necessary component of the human relationship with God. This implies not only the direct discussion that Job is privileged to receive but also the more indirect implications of ignorant speech pregnant with sin, and worshipful silence. The Book of Job serves to define some formal modes of proper verbal interaction with God, such as prayer. For all that it questions, complicates and contradicts, the heavy textual emphasis on speech and speech acts confirms their central role. The Bible is, after all, thought by the Judeo-Christian tradition to be the authorized word of God. Job accuses God of “writ[ing] bitter things against [him],” equating the written word with action (13: 26). Given this, the Book of Job constitutes nothing less than a set of codes for believers’ verbal interaction with their god.