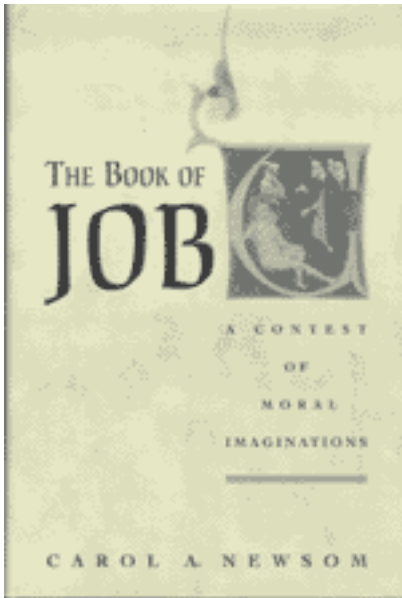


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Newsom, Carol A.

The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations

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The book of Job is subject to many interpretations, some of which the author of this new book illustrates via a pithy, brief *Forschungsgeschichte*. In the fourth century, for example, Theodore of Mopsuestia reads Job as something akin to Greek drama. In the seventeenth century, John Milton transforms it into an epic poem. Many of the book's newer problems, however, are largely the result of interpretations dependent upon the canons and dictates of historical criticism. Of particular concern are those theories that focus exclusively on sources and stages and historical levels of composition.

Addressing the “problem” of the book’s “integrity,” for example, K. Budde and B. Duhm interpret the prose narrative in Job as part of a preexisting *Volksbuch* into which the dialogues in Job 3–31 are later spliced. Even though contemporaries such as E. Kautzsch and E. Dhorme reacted negatively to this kind of interpretation, the ethos of the Budde/Duhm school took firm hold, and today it continues to exercise a profound influence on Joban studies, despite the advent of “final form” (N. Habel), “New Literary” (E. Good), and “deconstructionist” reading strategies (D. J. A. Clines). That Joban studies stands in such turmoil only underlines the historical fact that “reading the book of Job has never been easy” (3).

Carol Newsom proposes that we learn to read Job by relying “neither on the modernist assumptions of historical criticism and New Critical literary approaches nor on the assumptions of deconstruction” (11). Relying on Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of polyphony in Dostoevsky’s novels, she attempts to read Job as a “polyphonic text” in which the book’s dialogical truth claims clash and quarrel in what she calls a “contest of moral imaginations.” According to Newsom (see the more detailed description in L. Claassens, “Biblical Theology as Dialogue: Continuing the Conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Theology,” *JBL* 122 (2003): 127–44), the Russian critic’s approach to literary interpretation offers a way out of the impasse in Joban studies, and for several reasons.

First, Job, like all great narrative literature, is polyphonic, that is, comprised of dialogic truth claims and points of view. Where monological interpretations privilege a single (usually authorial) point of view, polyphonic texts delight in juxtaposing different points of view in deliberate, combative, even carnivalesque tension. Second, polyphonic texts cannot easily be reduced to uniform thought systems. They resist systematization the way Job resists his friends’ counsel. “Event” rather than “system” is what gives polyphonic texts their structure and character and function and meaning. Third, polyphonic texts are conversational and personal; as Newsom puts it, “participants in a conversation are not propositions, but the persons who utter them” (22). Fourth, polyphonic texts are open; in Bakhtin’s terminology, readers best understand their potential in terms of “great time.” Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, for example, is an “unfinalizable” polyphonic text because the ideas within it have yet to be fully understood and fully appreciated by each new generation.

In Newsom’s eyes, Job begins with a monologic prose tale *not* because prose tales are generically preferable and certainly *not* because this particular prose tale is historically older. Job begins with a monologic prose tale because this device so readily sets up the reader for the dialogizing events following, particularly the ideologically combative conversations between Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. On page 16 she states her thesis:

a single author wrote the book of Job (except for the Elihu speeches). But he wrote it by juxtaposing and intercutting certain genres and distinctly stylized voices, providing sufficient interconnection among the different parts to establish the sense of the “same” story but leaving the different parts sharply marked and sometimes overtly disjunctive.

Thus the problem of “inexplicable suffering,” though dominant in much contemporary conversation *about* Job, has little to do with the literary structure *of* Job. The prologue merely lays it out as a “plot device” to “allow the hero’s character to be foregrounded”

(17). This changes in the dialogues, of course, as Job's problem with inexplicable suffering drives him to push it toward the center of conversational attention, but the fact that Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu resist Job's agenda says something far more substantive and positive about their arguments than many (post)modern critics would allow.

Scholars often portray Job's argument with Eliphaz, for example, as something good and noble having to suffer the withering attack of something harsh and retribitional. Newsom finds this a shallow caricature of both Job and Eliphaz. Instead, she points out, Eliphaz and his friends offer three legitimate responses to Job's *rōgez* ("turmoil," 3:26): (1) they resist Job's *rōgez* "by attempting to construe Job's experience in terms of narrative structures that integrate and ultimately transcend the present turmoil" (96); (2) they try to displace Job's *rōgez* by calling him back to the symbolic forms, words, and bodily gestures of therapeutic prayer; and (3) they try to deny *rōgez* its ontological status by relaying the foundations of moral order through a series of iconic poems (the so-called "fate of the wicked" poems).

Job stubbornly resists all three of these good-faith attempts: (1) to Eliphaz's construals of narrative reliability ("the world makes perfect sense"), Job insists on the "radical nonnarratibility of human existence in general and his own in particular" (97); (2) Job also rejects his friends' suggestion that he engage in therapeutic prayer and (3) dramatically challenges whether the "fate of the wicked" is always the same in every place and every time. In other words, to each of his friends' arguments he offers up a set of counterarguments. The point is that neither set of arguments is overtly, specially privileged. Because this is a polyphonic text, neither set of arguments is immune from criticism. All are designed to be laid out, *Hamlet*-like, for the reader to ponder and weigh and consider and decide. For Newsom, Job is a profoundly "unfinalizable" text.

Brilliantly and clearly written, this book represents a major change in the direction of Joban studies, even though the problem it sets out to solve is the very problem it seeks to criticize. In the book's conclusion, Newsom admits that "Bakhtinian perspectives on dialogism and polyphony have provided the necessary starting place for my enquiry, (but) they are not of themselves sufficient" (262). Still, the book as a whole ironically represents a rather monological attempt to privilege one postmodern literary theorist (Bakhtin) over all others (e.g., Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, Foucault). The work of Mikhail Bakhtin, as Barbara Green points out (*Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* [SemeiaSt 38; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature], 2000), is indeed exercising a profound influence on a few biblical scholars today, particularly Kenneth Craig (Jonah, Esther), Ilana Pardes (Ruth), Robert Polzin (the Deuteronomistic Historian), and Carol Newsom (Isaiah, Lamentations, Job). But if Adele Berlin is correct

that biblical interpretations privileging specific literary theorists are “too late” because “scholars of literature are moving away not only from poetics and narratology, but also with a concern for theory *per se*” (review of Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship*, *JAOS* 122 [2002]: 131), then studies such as Newsom’s need themselves to be read polyphonically.

Newsome would welcome such critique, at least in principle. Anticipating objections to her thesis, she asks in her conclusion a number of agonizingly open-ended questions. Are all conversations (about Job or anything else) easily “summarized” (263)? Is human existence best characterized as “turmoil” or as “meaning-giving narrative” (263)? In the face of disaster, is it more important to pray or to litigate? Is truth “best grasped” through linear propositional argument or via “an urbane and ironic commentary on the inadequacy of all such attempts” (264)? Whether one ultimately finds answers to such questions or not, the fact that Newsom dares to ask them so clearly and so intelligently makes *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* one of the most stimulating conversations about Job I have ever read.