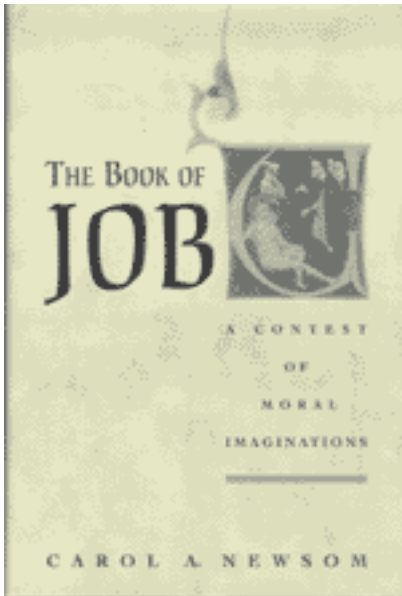


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Newsom, Carol A.

The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations

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This extraordinary study breaks new ground in its sophisticated exploration of the rhetorical dynamics of the book of Job, in its deft application of genre analysis and the insights of theorists such as Bakhtin and Levinas, and in its highly intelligent negotiation of the complex hermeneutical issues involved in interpreting this multigenre piece of ancient literature. Newsom's thesis is that several distinctive moral imaginations and symbol systems are brought into dialogical encounter in the book of Job in order to render a truth about human piety more multidimensional and profound than any one discursive system could account for on its own.

Relying on Bakhtin's understanding of genre and polyphony in texts, in chapter 1 Newsom argues that multiple dictions and moral frameworks are activated in the book of Job, mustered by a single "author" (per Newsom's heuristic; she excepts the Elihu material as having been added later). The dialogical dynamics of Job resist the subordinative processes of "monologization"—the coercive privileging of a single perspective as definitive—and resist finalization. Newsom's hermeneutic drives neither toward forced synchronic closure nor toward playful postmodern indeterminacy. Rather, her analysis constitutes a deeply serious honoring of perspectival differences in the biblical text.

Newsom eschews a static view of genre as fixed literary convention in favor of a more dynamic understanding of genre as the fluid and contextually responsive means by which texts structure their participation in the promotion, nuancing, or resistance of cultural mores. Genres employ characteristic literary forms and ideation as a way of framing alternatives in the meaning-making endeavor. Generic markers invite the reader to “see the world from a particular nexus of values and perspectives” (13). Texts allude to, draw on, and transform generic conventions in their creation of culturally comprehensible communication. The genres employed in the book of Job (didactic tale, wisdom dialogue, sapiential hymn) articulate a complex moral truth by means of “a plurality of unmerged consciousnesses engaging one another in open-ended dialogue” (24).

In chapter 2, Newsom explores the rhetorical strategies of the didactic tale in Job 1–2 + 42:7–17, arguing that elements of patterned repetition and other semantic redundancies work with plot and characterization to provide a powerful monological story that is reassuringly coherent, morally unambiguous, and authoritative (or “authoritarian” [46]). Suggesting that the unitary force of the didactic story is subtly destabilized by the dynamism of the unfolding plot, Newsom argues for the moral necessity of “interruption” in the Levinasian sense of the “ethical imperative of the disruption of discourse” (71), a breach that speaks the truth of an Other into the ostensibly closed system of monologic storytelling. Such an interruption, Newsom contends, is the wisdom dialogue that commences in Job 3.

In chapter 3 Newsom traces the parallels between Job and other ancient Near Eastern wisdom dialogues (especially the Babylonian Theodicy), arguing that juxtaposition of opposing views, rather than subordination or transcendence of one perspective, is characteristic of the genre. Here Newsom helps readers to see that juxtaposition is not a simple collocation of opposing propositions. Rather, dialogic signifying through juxtaposition is an “event” (87) that happens in the wisdom dialogue as it “privileges dissidence, as it lets unmediated perspectives speak to and against one another” (89).

The next six chapters of Newsom’s book seek to limn with precision and generosity the distinct moral imaginations of the friends, of the Job of much of the poetry and the (different) Jobs who speak in Job 28 and in 29–31, of Elihu, and, finally, of God. The friends urge recognition of the intrinsic order of God’s creation and the efficacy of spiritual “technique” (prayer, repentance) as a means of negotiating one’s place in that order. Job employs biting sarcasm, violently parodic use of language, and the urgent existential “now” of his anguish to emphasize alterity—the unbridgeable difference between the human and the divine—and to bear stubborn witness to the injustice of his turmoil. Elihu muses on what has been left unsaid and models for Job the displacement of human egocentricity through the spiritual discipline of praise. The voice of God affirms

the sublimely incomprehensible nature of deity and refuses Job's dominant legal trope of answerability, choosing instead to reconfigure Job as a tragic subject whose existence is both limited and precious.

These central chapters are replete with exegetical and hermeneutical insights too numerous to describe in detail here. Newsom considers the iconic function of narrative, probes the complicity of genre in the power relationships inscribed by ritual practices, works with moral dimensions of the notion of temporality, parses literary "double voicing" as rhetorical appropriation, reflects on the transactional character of honor, argues for a hermeneutic of self-representation as ethical witness. Two points may perhaps be highlighted as representative of Newsom's interpretive skill. First, nothing short of fascinating is Newsom's diachronic exploration of Elihu as a Hellenistic-era, self-consciously figured "belated reader" who comes dissatisfied to the poetry of the book of Job and inscribes his own readerly reactions in the text. The clumsy plying of redaction-critical tools as blunt instruments for textual dissection will no longer be possible in the guild, one may dare to hope, for those scholars who perceive the grace and hermeneutical agility with which Newsom employs the method.

Also worthy of mention is Newsom's contention that, because truth is constructed through polyphonic engagement of the wisdom dialogue and the prose tale, Job can be both correct (commended by God in 42:8) and incorrect. The divine speeches give the reader "the uncomfortable sense . . . that God's identification with the chaotic is as strong as with the symbols of order" (252). What Job had never grasped in his forensic testimony and in his insistence on divine justice is that "tragic rupture is the figure at the heart of human existence" (257). That truth is spoken by two voices simultaneously: the voice of the Joban poetry crying out against loss and disfigurement, and the voice of the prose narrator celebrating "the goodness of life in all its fragility" (257).

Newsom concludes that polyphony in texts requires the reader's willingness to hear competing truths—which means resisting the temptation to summarize or "monologize" the messages of the book. But polyphony need not imply relativism: "The book's own moral seriousness, coupled with its generosity toward a variety of perspectives, serves as a critique of those forms of postmodern intellectual display that embody pastiche without purpose" (262). Newsom's analysis of the complex voicing within the book of Job is rigorously argued and eloquent; occasionally, the clarity of her presentation approaches brilliance. Her conclusions should prove illuminating not only for interpretation of the wisdom corpus but for analysis of other multivocal biblical literatures as well (the prose and poetic traditions within Jeremiah, for example, and the diverse narrative and legal traditions within the Pentateuch).

The impressive scope of Newsom's book notwithstanding, there remain some potentially fruitful avenues for deeper exploration. First, given Newsom's close attention to the power of language to frame, (re)create, and even violate markers of identity and moral imagination, what might one make of the notorious philological problems and pervasive semantic fractures that characterize the Hebrew text of Job? The rhetoric of the biblical text is both affected and effected by textual "corruption"—quotation marks are necessary because some of the textual problems may be semantically freighted in their own right, inscribing meaning rather than simply constituting technical obstacles to be solved by emendation or excision. Coherence eludes the reader repeatedly in Job, and Newsom has beautifully articulated some of the reasons for this. For example, she notes that Job's refusal to confess and his naming of God as sadistic constitute "an act of linguistic sabotage, rendering the language of the psalm of lament literally and figuratively unspeakable" (138). Further, Job's "double voicing" of some of the friends' own arguments shows with "intolerable clarity the failure of the resources of their language to comprehend the realities of Job's torment" (183). Still to be worked out, though, is a more comprehensive taxonomy of the levels on which incoherence operates in Job, a mapping of potential relationships among the grammars of failed communication not only at the level of genre but also at the levels of syntactical entanglement, semantic confusion, and philological obscurity.

A second question has to do with the ethical force of the notion of character. Newsom addresses character briefly in the prose tale but not in the poetry, except insofar as she explores the diachronically contextualized persona of Elihu. It may be that the continuity implied (however tenuously) by the notion of the character of Job himself presents too great a problem for Newsom's case, built as it is on her exquisitely attuned alertness to markers of difference rather than similarity in the divergent moral discourses of the book. Yet character as a morally significant narrative category may matter not only across the prose/poetry divide but also within the poetry, which, after all, does narrate personas and plots, if in a more oblique way than does prose. Newsom does consider discontinuities of voicing in Job 28 and 29–31, but more attention might profitably be paid to ways in which the readerly experience of Job as character is complicated by those discontinuities. And what of unexpected continuities? Newsom's analysis becomes uncharacteristically evasive at those interpretive moments when potential sites of agreement are discerned between Job and the friends, or Elihu and the friends, or Elihu and God.

Third, desirable here might be a fuller engagement with current theory on the ways in which texts construct implied audiences. Newsom claims that in the didactic tale "the simple language, conceptual clarity, and redundant structures of narrative and moral authority all work together to produce an infantilized reader," whereas the wisdom dialogue is far more challenging: "the difficulty of the aesthetic forms and language of

the text implies a reader who is erudite and capable of appreciating the subtleties of the text” (83). Reasonable though her construals of the implied audiences are, these may not be our only choices for understanding the operations of the Joban texts upon readers. Gregory L. Bloomquist has argued that a single text can exert multiple pressures on a variety of audiences (implied, expressed, peripheral). Further complicating the matter, the potential presence of irony in an apparently monologic text such as the didactic tale in Job would require a significant reevaluation of the competence of its implied audience.

A fourth and related query, then: Might a more comprehensive poetics of irony help to elucidate not only the textures and tonalities of speech within Job but also the dialogical relationships among voices that overlap and shadow one another? While Newsom acknowledges that authors subvert the constraints of genre and notes in a variety of local poetic contexts that irony might be at work, she misses the opportunity to consider more fully the larger-scale ways in which irony may be organizing the semantic significance of the book. In particular, more attention could be given to ways in which irony may destabilize the monologic authority of the didactic tale and its metanarratological relation to the poetry. Newsom does note that hyperbole suffuses the prose tale (54–55) and concedes that ironic readings of the tale may not be wrong (47), but she stops short of exploring the ways in which the presence of thoroughgoing irony in Job 1–2 + 42:7–17 would fundamentally recalibrate the dialogical dynamics of the entire book.

A minor production flaw should be noted: the book’s index does not include the numerous author references in the endnotes. Because Newsom mentions relatively few authors by name in the body of her text, the failure of the index to collate endnote references makes it difficult to track instances of influence or disagreement vis-à-vis other interpreters of Job, a mildly ironic oversight given Newsom’s expressed commitment to unmerged polyphony.

This is a profoundly important book. Newsom’s study may change the landscape of Old Testament interpretation, not only because of its penetrating insights into the subtle discursive strategies of the book of Job, but also because of the unusual hermeneutical acuity with which Newsom mediates for biblical scholars some of the best fruits of contemporary philosophical and rhetorical thinking. With this work, Newsom has set an elegant new standard for the discipline regarding questions of literary voicing, the rhetorical performativity of texts, and the moral implications of genre for the articulation of truth and the construction of the listening community.