

# The Book of Job and *J.B.*: Faith and Reason

Gary Sloan

Archibald MacLeish's play *J.B.*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1958, offers an infidel's antidote to the relentless fideism of its biblical counterpart.

## THE BOOK OF JOB

Job is the archetypal man of faith. No matter how unjust, wayward, negligent, cruel, or sanguinary God might seem, Job resolutely accedes to his inscrutable will: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."

According to the Old Testament, Job was spotless. As the Lord himself says, "There is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil." Job is blessed with ten God-fearing children and a dutiful wife. He is also spacious in possessions: He has "seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred she-asses, and very many servants."

Satan, an angelic agent in the heavenly court, ventures that Job remains steadfast only because he has never been visited with affliction. "Put forth thy hand and touch all that he has," Satan tells the Lord, "and he will curse thee to thy face." The Lord forthwith looses Satan on the innocent Job: "Behold, all that he has is in your power."

In a trice, marauders rustle Job's oxen, asses, and camels and slay some of his servants. Fire from heaven consumes his sheep and more servants. A great wind destroys the house in which his children are feasting. All perish.

*Gary Sloan, a retired English professor, is a frequent contributor to the freethought media.*

Despite the fell strokes, Job retains faith: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Satan proposes another turn of the screw. "Put forth thy hand now," he says to the Lord, "and touch his bone and flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face." Short of killing him, the Lord bids Satan do what he will to Job's body. Job is soon crusted with "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." After he scrapes himself with a potsherd among the ashes, his wife offers succinct counsel: "Curse God, and die." Job rebukes his faithless spouse: "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"

Notwithstanding the censure, Job is baffled by his ill fortune. What has he done to incur the wrath of the Almighty? Has he not succored the poor, sheltered the orphan, defended the slave, cheered the disconsolate, emboldened the diffident, cowed the oppressor, chided the haughty, forgiven his foe? Why do the wicked prosper, command respect, live long, and sleep well while he, a paragon of virtue, is wracked with pain, marked for pillage, and branded with infamy? "Make me know my transgression and my sin," he implores the Lord.

Before the Lord vouchsafes a reply, three garrulous friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar) and a certain Elihu seek to vindicate the ways of God to Job. They offer a potpourri of exculpatory declarations: all men merit punishment because all sin; adversity strengthens piety; divine justice surpasses understanding; God moves in mysterious

ways; God recompenses losses. They caution Job against criticism, hubris, and impatience. They advise submission, humility, vigilance, and trust.

These "worthless physicians" can't cure Job's malady. He longs to plead his case at the celestial bar. Surely, he could persuade the Almighty to exonerate him:

Oh, that I knew where I might find him,  
that I might come even to his seat! I  
would lay my case before him and fill my  
mouth with arguments. I would learn  
what he would say to me. Would he con-  
tend with me in the greatness of his  
power? No; he would give heed to me.  
There an upright man could reason with  
him, and I should be acquitted for ever  
by my judge.

Job soon learns that reason isn't the Lord's forte. When the Lord speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, he immediately upbraids the hapless plaintiff and assumes the offensive: "Who is this that darkens counsel without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me."

The Lord then squashes Job with a battery of rhetorical questions designed to underscore the infinite gulf between divine and human power. Can Job lay the foundations of the earth? Fashion the ocean or the sun? Create snow and rain? Send forth lightning? Make an ostrich or a wild ass? Design the Behemoth or the Leviathan? Vanquish death?

Awed by the divine power, Job truckles: "I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted. . . . I had uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know . . . therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Subsequently, the Lord restores the fortunes of his upright servant, doubling the original estate.

Though the Book of Job belongs to an ancient genre called "wisdom literature," it sanctions a moral order repugnant to human reason and justice. For divine sport, an innocent man is scourged. When he seeks a reason for the punishment, he is chastised. Instead of divulging the reason, God flaunts his omnipotence.

To the faithful, the Book of Job rati-fies unconditional trust in the unfathomable will of Providence. To the faithless, it merely sanctions irrationality and despotism.

## J.B.

In *J.B.*, Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982) mingles biblical and contemporary material to create a mordant commentary on the Book of Job. A devout, wealthy, charitable, and humble businessman, J.B. is a modern Job whom God, pricked on by Satan, runs through the wringer. J.B. loses everything—his bank, his children, his health, his reputation. Angry that he won't vilify his Maker, his wife, Sarah, deserts him.

Like his biblical precursor, J.B. tries to ferret out his sin. Two comforters tell him sin and guilt are anachronistic concepts. A “psychophenomenal situation,” says the psychiatrist Eliphaz; a “sociological accident,” avers the Marxist Bildad. Zophar, a frowsy cleric, surmises that J.B. is guilty of prurient fantasies. J.B. will have none of this. Given the draconian punishment, he insists his transgression must be egregious:

My Sin! Teach me my sin!  
My wickedness!  
Surely iniquity that suffers  
Judgment like mine cannot be secret.  
Mine is no childish fault,  
no nastiness  
Concealed behind a bathroom door.  
... Mine is flagrant,  
Worthy of death, of many deaths,  
Of shame, loss, hurt, indignities  
Such as these! Such as these!

Eventually, in response to anguished entreaty, God deigns to address J.B. *à la* the Book of Job. The Almighty browbeats the supplicant with a scroll of divine feats: “Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades? Canst thou thunder with a voice like God? Hast thou commanded the morning? Hast thou given the horse strength?” And so on. Overwhelmed by the *force majeure*, J.B. bows his head, wrings his hands, and whispers: “I abhor myself—and repent.” Sufficiently prostrate, he recoups health, wealth, and wife.

The wife's reappearance precipitates a startling denouement. In the final scene, Sarah induces her husband to abjure faith in a benevolent Providence. Divine justice, she tells him, is a figment of the obtuse mind. It doesn't exist:

You wanted justice, didn't you?  
There isn't any. There's the world ...  
Cry for justice and the stars  
Will stare until your eyes sting. Weep,  
Enormous winds will thrash the  
water.  
Cry in sleep for your lost children,  
Snow will fall ...  
You wanted justice and there was

none—  
Only love.

On human love alone, J.B. must henceforth pin his hopes:

Blow on the coal of the heart.  
The candles in churches are out.  
The lights have gone out in the sky.

Sadder but wiser, J.B. concludes that God doesn't minister to human needs: “He does not love. He *Is*.” In the Broadway version of the play, J.B. adds:

I will not  
Duck my head again to thunder—  
That bullwhip cracking at my ears!—  
although  
He kills me with it.

In a play within the play, MacLeish skewers the Old Testament deity. From a lofty platform, two circus vendors *qua* ham actors, Zuss and Nickles, assume the roles of God and Satan. As they watch the turbulent life of J.B. unfold, they comment on events and their own characters. Nickles-Satan limns the Almighty as a swaggering ogre who bullies a spineless victim:

God comes whirling in the wind replying—  
What? That God knows more than he does.  
That God's more powerful than he!—  
Throwing the whole creation at him!  
Throwing the glory and the Power!  
What's the Power to a broken man  
Trampled beneath it like a toad already?  
What's the glory to a skin that stinks!  
And this ham actor [J.B.]!—what does *he* do?  
“Thank you!” “I'm a worm!” “Take two!”

Plays the way a sheep would play it—  
Pious, contemptible, goddamn sheep  
Without the spunk to spit on  
Christmas!

Zuss lamely defends the Almighty.  
God torments J.B. because misery  
begets piety:

It's from the ash heap God is seen  
Always! Always from the ashes.  
Every saint and martyr knew that.

Only a fool or a deity, Nickles retorts,  
would proffer such a vacuous premise:

And so he suffers to see God:  
Sees God because he suffers.  
Beautiful!  
... A human face would shame the  
mouth that said that!

Were J.B. schooled in logic, adds Nickles, he would have understood long ago that the Almighty, if indeed omnipotent, isn't benevolent:

I heard upon his dry dung heap  
That man cry out who cannot sleep:  
“If God is God He is not good,  
If God is good He is not God.”

A staunch humanist and *de facto* atheist, Archibald MacLeish scorned the concept of an inscrutable Almighty. Like William Blake, he deemed votaries of Yahweh (Blake's “Nobodaddy”) devil worshipers. For MacLeish, “God” was the manifestation of the human capacity for empathy and altruism. Human love, he remarked, creates God. While as natural creatures we were bound to suffer, the suffering needn't be bootless. “Our labor always,” he wrote, “is to learn through suffering to love.” **LE**

Plan a visit to America's only freethought museum this summer or fall. In the heart of New York's Finger Lakes region, which abounds with freethought-related historic sites. Look for the debut of the Freethought Trail on our Web site and at [www.freethought-trail.org](http://www.freethought-trail.org)!

**MUSEUM HOURS:**  
Sat.–Sun. Noon–5 P.M.,  
Memorial Day Weekend  
through Halloween  
**DRESDEN,  
NEW YORK**  
(off State Route 14 between  
Geneva and Watkins Glen)

For info, e-mail [tflynn@centerforinquiry.net](mailto:tflynn@centerforinquiry.net)  
or visit [www.secularhumanism.org/ingersoll](http://www.secularhumanism.org/ingersoll).  
For directions in season, phone (315) 536-1074.

## ROBERT GREEN INGERSOLL Birthplace Museum

