

Job and the Gaze of God

I am peeking through a keyhole. The people I am gazing at have no awareness of my presence. I am alone and without reflective consciousness. There is, therefore, nothing by which I can qualify my action or by which it can be judged. I am, in one very real sense, the act itself. The action behind the door is a spectacle "to be seen," the keyhole, a means to an end. I am free to "do what I have to do." Suddenly there are footsteps behind me; someone is watching me! Internal upheaval! Self quickens, and I can see myself as "the other" sees me. My reflective consciousness now has "self" as an object; my action is qualified and judged. My freedom escapes me, as I, like those on the other side of the keyhole, become an object of another's gaze. I am ashamed, baptized in debilitating guilt. I am reduced to nothingness.

As much as any secular thinker, Jean-Paul Sartre had a profound sense of the concept of shame and guilt. The above illustration was adapted from *Being and Nothingness* (340–350), which is demonstrative of Sartre's preoccupation with the exposure of human nature:

By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other...Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the other sees me...Shame is an immediate shudder which runs through me from head to foot without any discursive preparation...shame is shame of oneself before the Other...I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being" (302–303).

For Sartre, Hell is other people (*No Exit*). A person is reduced to nothingness under the gaze of another; he becomes "objectified" by the 'other's' analysis. Thus, there is an estrangement between subject (the one watching) and object (the one watched), as the object is reduced to a "thing" under scrutiny. The ultimate subject is God, "the concept of the Other pushed to the limit" (356). For humankind to live under the continual gaze of God is, for Sartre, a perpetual Hell, reduction to nothingness, continual shame and guilt. Because God is the infinite personal "Other," Sartre found it a necessity to postulate God's non-existence (epistemologically, if not ontologically). For if God is, humankind loses its subjectivity and consequently all freedom. For humankind to survive, God cannot exist.

The rub for the believer is that Sartre was an atheist; shame made belief impossible. Yet, his sensitivity to divine estrangement is woefully lacking in many who profess God as living and active in the affairs of humankind. Many believers have never experienced the numbing dread of alienation from His personal holiness. The believer's awareness of personal wretchedness and shame, because of a mere stolen pear (Augustine, 28) or any of the daily flirtations of the flesh (Rom 7:24), have all but been abandoned to the humanistic ideal of the individual's essential goodness. There is little diminution of being (certainly not to "nothingness") under the gaze of God, neither is there a genuine sense of creature – Creator estrangement. Therefore, it is credible to be comfortable before an all holy God. We have somehow managed to depreciate His "Otherness" and the dread of His presence. Kierkegaard articulates Sartre's dilemma, from a Christian perspective:

The God-relationship infinitizes; but this may so carry a man away that it becomes an inebriation, it may seem to a man as though it were unendurable to exist before God, for the reason that a man cannot return to himself, cannot become himself. Such a fantastic religious individual would say (to characterize him by putting into his mouth these lines), "That a sparrow can live is comprehensible; it does not know anything about existing before God. But to know that one exists before God, and then not to go crazy or be brought naught!" (Sickness unto Death, 165)

What for Sartre was a visceral reaction of postulatory atheism, and for Kierkegaard an incomprehensible conundrum of religious life, was for Job a disintegrating revelation of Divine presence. By theophany, Job realized what Sartre and Kierkegaard "sensed" existentially, the Wholly Otherness of Yahweh. This seems to be the thrust of the book of Job. It was not written as a theodicy;

if so, it was a poor attempt. At best, the traditionalist will use the text as a reaffirmation of the omnipotence of God, which does nothing for the sufferer. At worst, the skeptic will use the text to challenge the compassion of God, which only unsettles the sufferer.

It is interesting that Yahweh's answer out of the whirlwind does not present the same problem for Job—the actual sufferer—as it does for the reader. Of course, the reader is privy to the cosmic "conspiracy" (1 – 2), which at the same time provides fodder for the skeptic and disconcerts the faithful. Perhaps this is because the average reader places a disproportionate value on his or her own being in light of that of the Wholly Other. Such was true of Job, *until* he encountered the Divine presence: "But now my eye has seen you" (42:5).

What happens when one sees Yahweh "as he is," rather than as the finite god of the self's autistic microcosm? The Yahweh of Job's whirlwind, Isaiah's vision (Is 6), and the disciple's raging tempest (Mk 4) is not the Feuerbachian projection of what the self-preserving human ego wishes it to be. Rather, he is everything that humans dare not to conceive, for when this One is seen, the observer dies! He dies to the world of suffering (Job), psychological integration (Isaiah), and fear of the impersonal holy (Mk 4:35–41—the disciples are "more afraid" of Jesus, the personal Holy, than the raging tempest, the impersonal holy). In the whirlwind speeches this same contrast of Yahweh's infinite personal holiness is set off against the creation's finite impersonal holiness, even when the latter so overwhelms humankind, poetically culminating in the images of Behemoth and Leviathan). In the theophany, a "supra-existential" experience totally eclipses the viewer's body, mind, and environment.

In the theophany, it is neither the love of God nor his justice that one awakens to; it is His holiness, his "Otherness." This does not create in the witness sentimental drivel or emotional ecstasy that love might evoke. Neither is there "fear" born of retributive justice against sinful action. There is rather the numbing silence of a profound sense of "absolute profaneness":

But what is this? Again, something which the 'natural' man cannot, as such, know or even imagine. He, only, who is 'in the Spirit' knows and feels what this 'profaneness' is; but to such a one it comes with piercing acuteness, and is accompanied by the most uncompromising judgment of self-depreciation, a judgment passed, not upon his character, because of individual 'profane' actions of his, but upon his own very existence as creature before that which is supreme above all creatures. And at the same time he passes upon the numen (God) a judgment of appreciation of a unique kind by the category diametrically contrary to 'the profane', the category 'holy', which is proper to the numen alone, but to it in an absolute degree; he says: 'Tu solus sanctus' (You alone are holy)...It is the positive numinous value or worth, and to it corresponds on the side of the creature a numinous disvalue or 'unworth' (Otto, 51).

In much of the literature dealing with the book of Job, and especially the theophany and Job's response to it, a lack of appreciation for the importance of what Otto called the "Mysterium Tremendum" is revealed. Otto's sensitivity, to "the ideas, first, of the annihilation of self, and then, as its compliment, of the transcendent as the sole and entire reality" (21), is woefully absent. There seems to be a concerted effort among commentators to preserve the integrity of humankind—through the righteous sufferer, Job—and to diminish the Wholly Otherness of Yahweh by narrowing the gap between creature and Creator. This leads to an "apologetic" for God's actions in both His encounters with Satan (1–2) and Job (38–42). Otto, on the other hand, seems less inclined to defend humanity and explain the actions of the Divine. Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Otto seem more attuned to the experience of Job than most, although Otto goes too far by reading back into the Jobian theophany a prophecy of Golgotha (173). Much of what modern interpreters say concerning the Yahweh speeches and Job's responses may be true, but when the elements of God's Wholly Otherness and Job's utter profaneness are lacking, the thrust of the encounter is lost.

Gordis sees the Yahweh speeches as a setting forth of the mystery of the universe, which God did not create exclusively for humans, and therefore its Creator is not to be judged by human standards. In addition, one is not to

deduce, according to Gordis, a comprehensible moral order from the order in the universe; so how can Job reprove and dispute with God (435, 458)? After all, is not this very order in the universe that which made the dialogue between Job and his friends (concerning retributive justice) possible? Gordis also plays down Job's response to the theophany as a mere resignation of one disputant to another whose argument is far superior (459). Habel likewise reduces the encounter to anthropological categories of legal litigation with Job as the accuser and God as the adversary (528–529). Perhaps these elements are present, but secondarily. Giving them primacy runs the risk of approving what Job later repents of, *viz.*, approaching God as an equal:

*Oh that I had one to hear me!
Behold, here is my signature;
Let the Almighty answer me!
And the indictment which my adversary has written,
I would declare to Him the number of my steps;
Like a prince I would approach Him (31:35, 37).*

On the other hand, MacKenzie is right when he says that the Yahweh speeches,

must be some form of self-revelation, which will, at least remotely symbolize the impact on a human soul of an immediate encounter with God. The manner of the speech too is important. A mere description in absolute terms of Yahweh's character, on the lines of Ex 34,6 s, or Is 40,25 s, will not do, since a specific personal reference to Job is needed; but if it is in direct address, it must at the same time convey the overwhelming Otherness of God and His transcendence with respect to the man who is before Him. (441)

The encounter must reduce human importance and magnify Divine importance in order to paint an accurate picture of reality. Any equating of the two misses the truth of the encounter and what Job finally understood.

Certainly, the truth of God's justice must not be considered apart from his holiness. Yet, many have difficulty putting into proper perspective humanity's relationship with God because of a distorted view of Divine justice and grace. In practice, Job and his friends had the same view of retributive justice, otherwise Job would not have questioned his suffering in relationship to his "innocence"—which he stopped doing during the theophany:

*Oh that my vexation were actually weighed,
And laid in the balances together with my iniquity! (6:2)*

Job's understanding (at least at this point) is little different than that of his friends', in that he only believes his suffering is disproportionate with his sin, not that suffering is not punishment for sin. Yet, even the friends' idea of retributive justice is not carried out fully; if it were, ALL sin would be punished with death before an all Holy God.

On this point, the pop culture poet and songwriter Kris Kristofferson was out of sync with Job, his friends, modern humanistic interpreters, and most of us when he asked:

*Why me Lord? What have I ever done,
to deserve even one of the pleasures I've known?
Tell me lord, what did I ever do that was worth loving you,
or the kindness you've shown?*

"Pleasures" here strikes a discordant note in an otherwise familiar lament—"Why me Lord?" Ordinarily we frame our laments in categories of suffering, challenging the justice of God, rather than in categories of pleasures, challenging the kindness or grace of God. In other words, we have come to expect the grace that we do not deserve, and question the justice that we do deserve. To the "average" believer, grace is not so "amazing" after all.

The failure to appreciate the grace (and justice) of God rests in one's ignorance or denial of the sinful nature, and how it stands in diametric

opposition to the holiness of God. Because God ordinarily operates in the realm of his grace rather than his justice, we underestimate the gravity of ALL sin. Even the "man after God's own heart" was known to forget. When Uzza received what he deserved for touching the Ark of the Covenant, David's anger burned against Yahweh (1Chron 13:9–14). He too had come to take God's grace for granted and recoiled in the face of pure justice. This is part of the difficulty of making a distinction between "the God of the Old Testament" and "the God of the New Testament." A lack of grace is seen in the twenty or so capital offenses of the Old Covenant and a fullness of grace under the New Covenant where capital punishment is abolished altogether. However, the Old Covenant is also one of grace because EVERY sin is not regarded as a capital offense, as it should be before an all Holy God (Rom 6:23; Gen 2:16–17; Gal 3:10; *et. al.*).

Sproul refers to Hans Küng's observation on this point: "the issue is not why does God punish sin, but why does He permit the ongoing rebellion of man?" (153). Perhaps this concept is behind Jesus' peculiar response to questions about innocent people being sacrificed by Pilate (to which Jesus adds his own example of innocent people suffering accidental death): "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Lk 13:1–5). The question, "Why do the righteous suffer?" presupposes that the "righteous" are so declared by God's justice rather than His grace, and that ALL sin does not deserve death. The "righteous" should be the first to proclaim, "By the grace of God I am what I am," even in suffering. For, it is "in Him we live and move and exist." To suggest that the One on whom we depend for each breath must answer the question of suffering, when He is not even obligated to give breath, is to suggest he is less than holy and somehow duty bound to the essential goodness of humankind.

Job came to a full realization of who he was only before the Wholly Other revealed in theophany:

*Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee?
I lay my hand on my mouth.
Once I have spoken, and I will not answer;
Even twice, and I will add no more (40:4–5).*

There is a striking similarity of Job's response to the presence of Yahweh with that of the prophet Isaiah's: "Woe is me, for I am ruined (undone)" (6:5a). This "righteous" man of God before the thrice-Holy One of Israel "disintegrates." In modern vernacular, we might say he is having a nervous breakdown; he is falling apart! It is the living out of what Kierkegaard imagined: "to know that one exists before God, and not go crazy or be brought to naught" is incomprehensible (165, see Hab 3:16). Job, to use Sartre's categories, sees himself as the Other sees him in all the structures of his being and he is reduced to nothingness.

But unlike the unrighteous Sartre, who postulates God into non-existence from this experience, the "righteous" Job repents, overwhelmed by God's existence:

*I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees Thee;
Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes (42:5–6).*

Again, many interpreters reflect a humanistic sympathy by eviscerating Job's repentance of its focus on the sinful nature of his very being. His repentance is limited to his "challenging God" (Gordis 573) in the words he uttered in his dialogue with the friends:

Job's repentance is not of any sin which had brought his suffering on him, such as the friends had called for. It was of the things he had said IN HIS IGNORANCE in the course of the debate (Rowley 342, emphasis mine cf. also Pope 348).

Of course the reader knows Job's suffering was not a result of direct sin (1–2), but Job does not have the cause revealed to him, which is significant with

regard to his repentance. Job is NOT vindicated concerning sinfulness, which the theophany makes all too clear. He has spoken rightly in contrast to his friends (42:7), inasmuch as he has denied the absoluteness of retributive justice (Delitzsch, 386), but in practice, the friends exhibit this belief anyway. Perhaps Job is also repentant of ever questioning (challenging) God (which he should be), but more is involved in this encounter, much more. Like the prophet Isaiah (who was probably just as "righteous" as Job), Job is reduced to total insignificance not just by what he said "in his ignorance" (notice how Rowley saps even the words of Job of their significance), but by the nature of his very being exposed by the presence of God. Job's words were revelatory of what he really was (Mt 15:15–20; Jas 3; *et. al.*), which the Other brought him to see. Isaiah saw his "unclean lips" as the expression of what he was essentially (6:5).

In spite of Job's confession, Habel goes to great lengths to defend Job's "integrity" and "innocence." He reduces Job's repentance "in dust and ashes" to a retraction of his lawsuit against God and a renunciation of his former role "as isolated sufferer and humiliated litigant" (578–583). Along similar lines, Cooper views Job's repentance as a healing of his "dread," which "is rejection of life and of God who creates life" (432). First, it does not follow that rejection of life is a rejection of God (Mt 16:24–25). In the second place, it should not be suggested that Job rejected God; on the contrary, his belief in God is what contributed to his anxiety in suffering. Long articulates the subtle humanistic agenda:

What is striking here is that Job is NOT (emphasis Long's) reduced to nothing. He has become instead what he truly is, a human being, a creature made of dust, living before God in a real world that no longer needs to be sustained by fantasy. And he takes comfort in that (19).

This all sounds very insightful and may be attractive to the selfish human spirit, but it is nothing more than a masked effort to retrieve the sinner from the depths of his or her sinful nature.

Job's repentance is more attuned with the psychology of the humble prophet Isaiah than that of the modern cult of self-worship. Isaiah's disintegration was the result of his sinful nature exposed and set off against the holy nature of the One before whom even the hosts of heaven must hide their faces:

*Woe is me, for I am ruined!
BECAUSE I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;
FOR my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts (6:5).*

Isaiah and Job were humbled before the presence of Yahweh. Modern liberal theology is determined to make theophany an opportunity for humankind to be proud of its humanity, inverting the Biblical model.

For Jansen to be "dust" is to be a king participating with God "in the dialectic of order and freedom manifest in creation" (257–259). For king David to be "dust" is to be blown in the wind (Ps 103). Self-exaltation mocks justice and cheapens grace. In contrast, Job and Isaiah in humility felt the condemnation of God's justice ("woe is me"), and utter dependence upon His grace (Is 6:6–7). Both Job and Isaiah came to know who they truly were only when they saw themselves, having looked upon the face of Holiness:

*Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy—this pride is innate in all of us—unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured...what in us seems perfection itself corresponds ill to the purity of God.
Hence that dread and wonder with which Scripture commonly represents the saints as stricken and overcome whenever they felt the presence of God. Thus it comes about*

that we see men who in his absence normally remained firm and constant, but who, when he manifests his glory, are so shaken and struck dumb as to be laid low by the dread of death, are in fact overwhelmed by it and almost annihilated. As a consequence, we must infer that man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty (Calvin, 37–39).

This rather lengthy quote from one whose respect for Scripture and awe for the majesty of God goes unchallenged, expresses well what many of us neglect in our understanding of God and ourselves. It is easy to get lost in the subterfuge of the secular mind-set that determines to maintain human integrity, even in the face of the eternal I AM. Nevertheless, the choice is really reduced to two: under the gaze of God, we join Sartre in disintegration and denial, or we join Job in disintegration and repentance.

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