

Jennie Han  
WPSA  
April 2014

More Mortal than God: Hobbes's Leviathan, the Book of Job, and the Bureaucratization of  
Sovereign Power

In studies of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the story of Job and his suffering at the hands of God stands as little more than a poetic illustration of Hobbes's vision of the absolute power of the sovereign over citizens. Hobbes's sovereign is that "mortal god" from whose uncontested power political order hierarchically flows, and under which citizens, like Job, are patient, dutiful subjects. That Hobbes names his sovereign after the Leviathan, that "River Beast" of whom God warns Job that "even to glance at him is to fall" (41:2),<sup>1</sup> seems perfectly to capture the power and status of the sovereign within the state. According to Carl Schmitt's well-known interpretation of Hobbes's text, the sovereign possesses a divine character, but not because he represents God on earth. Rather, the sovereign's power, in a sense, replaces God's such that the civil sovereign is himself the "the creator of none other than an earthly peace. He is a *Creator Pacis*."<sup>2</sup> In each of their respective domains, the sovereign's order is uncontested, because the sovereign himself creates the order that establishes him as that "king of the haughtiest beings" (41:27).<sup>3</sup>

In her 2010 article "Vainglory, Modesty, and Political Agency in the Political Theory of Thomas Hobbes," Julie Cooper seems to present an opposite, or at least much more modest,

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Job*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 41:2, p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 32-3, emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Job*, 154.

interpretation of the power of the sovereign. For Cooper, the mortal god does not replace the immortal one. In fact, obedience to the former relies on the continued presence of the latter to remind citizens of the “limits of human mastery”<sup>4</sup> and to instill in individuals that civic virtue of modesty that is necessary to keep them obedient to and cowed in the face of sovereign authority. The immortal god, in other words, continues to exert his influence in the civil domain, but he does so not as a potential challenger to civil authority, but as a reminder of the potential arbitrariness of a higher power and fate that serves to bolster this authority. The immortal god reminds citizens that whatever their creative, productive potential, human beings are mere mortals whose security can never be guaranteed. The immortal god reminds citizens not to get too comfortable—or too cocky—in the face of the security that the sovereign offers, for “His ‘great power’ notwithstanding, the king ‘is mortall, and subject to decay.’”<sup>5</sup> The modesty that accompanies this recognition, not sovereign power as such, is, according to Cooper, what sustains civil society and sovereign authority.<sup>6</sup> Cooper’s is Job the patient sufferer of Kierkegaard<sup>7</sup> and of religion. This is the Job that says, “Yahweh has given and Yahweh has taken” (1:22)<sup>8</sup> in response to losing all of his possessions and children.

But whether the mortal god replaces the immortal one or the traditional hierarchy between the two is retained such that the immortal god continues to sit above the sovereign, both positions take a particular similar lesson from the story of Job. For Schmitt and Cooper both, the Jobean lens opens us up to a political order sustained by a strict hierarchy in which the position

---

<sup>4</sup> Julie E. Cooper, "Vainglory, Modesty, and Political Agency in the Political Theory of Thomas Hobbes," *The Review of Politics* 72, no. 02 (2010).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 264. Internal quotes from *Leviathan* Chapters 28, 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See, Søren Kierkegaard, "The Lord Gave, and the Lord Hath Taken Away," in *Edifying Discourses* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1962), 130-49.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Job*, 56.

of the sovereign is a position of absolute, uncontested rule. Whether due to the creative powers of the sovereign or the modesty of his subjects, the resulting political order is a direct reflection of hierarchy.

But what if there is a different lesson to be gained from the story of Job? There is a strong tradition of biblical interpretation that takes the lesson of Job not as a lesson of man's piety in the face of an unintelligible power, but as a story of man's rebellion against God and the unintelligibility of an authority that claims transcendence. In this paper, I closely examine the text that inspired this vision of Hobbes's sovereign—and the title of his book—to ask the simple question of whether this lesson of the hierarchical character of political order is the only one that we can take from the story. I argue that a close reading of the Book of Job affirms not the absolute power of the sovereign. Rather, it illustrates a moment of transition from a politics in which order flows downward from a single source to a politics in which order is a function of the fact that the world is reconceived as a space in which the reasons behind events are in the first place accessible to all human beings. Politics, in other words, becomes a sphere not of power as such, but of reasons that individuals can comprehend. In my interpretation, Job neither rebels against God nor does he cower to God's blustering shows of force. Rather, he simply realizes that God does not need to be a part of his world, and Job ends his days entirely in the temporal world—in the company of his family and worldly possessions and the domestic order to which such company can give rise.

My intention is not to make a claim about what Hobbes himself took to be the lesson of the story of Job. Rather, I want to show that in reading this text closely, one discovers in this seemingly simple story of man's deference to God's power a fascinating and much more complex story of human beings' recognition that political and social order is something that must

be not only created by them, but also, and more importantly, constructed in a way that makes the reasons behind political authority readable and intelligible to everyone. This reading of the Book of Job makes it possible to reconcile the interpretations of Hobbes's *Leviathan* that rely on a strict hierarchy between the sovereign and citizens with readings such as Quentin Skinner's liberal conception of sovereign order. The latter largely ignores the more colorful, religious aspects of Hobbes's text in emphasizing the fact that Hobbes himself recognizes that

“no sovereign can ever hope to make the people endorse his legitimacy, and hence obey his laws, merely by ‘terroure of legall punishment.’ (Hobbes 1996 ch. 30, p. 232). If the state is to survive, the people must obey it not because they fear the consequence of disobedience, but rather because they recognize that there are good reasons for acquiescing to this rule.”<sup>9</sup>

Schmitt and Cooper, on the other hand, may endorse Skinner's general conclusion of Hobbes's state as one of republican liberty, but given the status and character of either the sovereign or the citizens they affirm, they do so in a way that cannot fully recognize Skinner's most salient point, namely that citizens must recognize that there are *good reasons* for obedience. A close reading of the Book of Job can help us to reorient the position of Job's story within Hobbes's text and, I argue, ultimately help us to see radically different parts of Hobbes's text as part of a single, coherent project of constructing a modern, bureaucratic state.

### *Patient Job and His Rebellious Counterpart*

The picture of the patient, suffering Job is a familiar one. In the face of an irresistible and unknowable power, the story goes, all Job can do is accept God's power and his authority to arrange the world and mete out rewards and punishments as only he see fit. This view of Job would appeal to Hobbes for obvious reasons. In appealing to Job's story, Hobbes gives, as

---

<sup>9</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Martinich points out, “an account of the traditional claim that all of God’s actions are just even though they do not always satisfy the demands of ordinary morality.” Martinich continues, emphasizing what he sees as Hobbes’s most salient point, that “[i]rresistible power justifies, that is, makes an action just or good” just as the God of the Book of Job can “justly do whatever he wants to do, because of his power.”<sup>10</sup> Cooper picks up on this theme when she identifies Job as “the authoritative biblical text on pride because it offers a chastening dramatization of the reciprocal relationship between divine omnipotence and human finitude.”<sup>11</sup>

There does seem to be a great deal of textual evidence to support this picture of Job and his lesson of the proper, modest stance that human beings must take with respect to power and authority. Job says of God, “I know that you are all-powerful and that no plan is beyond You” (42:1), and he concludes his speech with these words: “I retract. I even take comfort for dust and ashes” (42:5).<sup>12</sup> This ending seems to be a perfect mirror and restoration of the Job at the beginning of the story who was “innocent, upright, and God-fearing” (1:1)—so God-fearing in fact that when his sons held their annual feast, Job would rise early in the morning to offer wholeburnt offerings for each of them, just in case they had sinned. Even Job’s thoughts were God-fearing: “‘Perhaps my sons have sinned by cursing God in their hearts.’ Job did this every year” (1:6).<sup>13</sup>

But as a number of biblical scholars have pointed out, this image of the patient, suffering man isn’t so obvious. Robert Gordis points out that the famous “patience of Job” (James 5:11) “stands in sharp contrast to the bitter and rebellious Job who dominates the poetic substance of

---

<sup>10</sup> A. P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 94.

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, “Vainglory, Modesty, and Political Agency in the Political Theory of Thomas Hobbes,” 265.

<sup>12</sup> *The Book of Job*, 155.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

the book.”<sup>14</sup> Interestingly—and a surprise to me—William Safire reflects this view in a book entitled *The First Dissent*. For Safire, Job is the first rebel, the first dissenter against authority. The tone of Book of Job is, he writes, “not a weary resignation to life’s unfairness. Rather, it is a sustained note of defiance” and its message is that we “should object to Authority’s injustice or unconcern, and assert our morality as best we can.”<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to religious interpretations of Job, which highlight what seem to be Job’s final surrender to an omnipotent and unknowable God (a reading I will contest), Safire’s is animated by passages that express Job’s outrage. In his response to the first speech of Zophar, one of the three friends who come to Job after Job’s afflictions, Job affirms God’s power and acknowledges his omnipotence, as Zophar implores him to do. But Job draws a radically different conclusion than does his friend. Zophar claims that God punishes only the guilty and, unlike Job or any other man, knows guilt in its greatest, most shrouded depths (11:1-20). Thus, he concludes that man must submit to God’s punishments and presume them to be just. Job’s response is scathing. He points out that it is trite to point out such a fact, for it is obvious to everyone that God has created the world and is all-powerful: “I am no less a man than you; and who does *not* have such ideas as these?” (12: 2) Even birds and fish could attest to that (12:7-10).<sup>16</sup> But at issue is what God *does* with this power. Yes, “If He tears down, there is no rebuilding; if He confines, there is no release” (12:14).<sup>17</sup> And yet Job refuses to make himself a supplicant in the face of such absolute power.

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 13.

<sup>15</sup> William Safire, *The First Dissent: The Book of Job in Today's Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992), xiv.

<sup>16</sup> *The Book of Job*, 79.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

Let him kill me! –I will never flinch,  
but will protest His conduct to His face,  
and He Himself will be my vindication,  
for flatterers can never come before him (13: 15-16).<sup>18</sup>

Job approaches God as though he himself is a being who *knows* and is therefore on the same level as God. He, unlike Zophar, is no flatterer and refuses modesty in the face of even the most awesome power. “I am laying out my case,” Job contends, “knowing I am in the right (13:18),” and he challenges his so-called friends to try to contest his righteousness (“Who will contend with me?” [13:19]).<sup>19</sup> He is so secure in his righteousness that he is willing to give up his life for this.<sup>20</sup>

For Safire, Job’s is a “sufferer’s outrage at God’s refusal to do justice,” and it is in this outrage that the “moral excitement” of the Book of Job lies.<sup>21</sup> In willing to stand up to God and to demand of him that he give an account of himself and explain why Job must suffer so, Job expresses the power play of politics in its most basic, pure form. In his suffering, Job’s relationship to God comes to reveal the “play of power between master and subject, the interchange and constant tension that we call politics.”<sup>22</sup> What is more, Job is willing to die for his belief in himself and in this commitment, Job becomes in our eyes “the gutsy little guy defying distant Authority, shaking a fist at Establishment fiat, getting on the case of ukases, and demanding a hearing or even a share of Authority’s power.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> It’s interesting to note that, as the Accuser and God up the ante on the wager over Job’s loyalty to God, Job’s life is the one thing that God does not let the Accuser touch (2:6). This seemingly necessary boundary will become significant as the story moves from one of man’s lack of understanding to one of God’s need for man’s company and recognition.

<sup>21</sup> Safire, *The First Dissent: The Book of Job in Today's Politics*, xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., xviii.

## *God without Job*

In Job as dissenter, we clearly have a very different figure from that of the traditional reading of Kierkegaard and the derived lessons that largely inform our understanding of the *Leviathan* in political theory. But in both the traditional view of Job and the rebellious figure of Job, authority and power are exerted hierarchically. The resulting political order is therefore one that depends on power being exerted vertically in some form on an obedient people. There is, however, another reading of Job, one that makes God not an object of man's rebellion, but simply irrelevant. Job displays not a rebel's cry against God's injustice—a concept that Job himself recognizes as incoherent given that God himself is the author of justice. Rather, the story of Job ends with a man who, through his suffering, acquires a dignified indifference to God's temperamental outbursts, as well as his vain desire to have his power acknowledged by man and his great longing for the company of man. In this section, I focus on God's reply to Job to interpret this theophany not as a moment of God's cowing Job into submission in the face of his irresistible power, but as the moment at which Job clearly *sees* such power for what it is—an irresponsible, blustering abuse of power that is not at all necessary for a human—and humane—order. In fact, Job ends up rejecting God in favor of his friends and family to live out his days without reference to God at all. I end this section with some preliminary reflections on how this reading of Job's suffering and transformation might inform both our understanding of the structure and coherence of Hobbes's text and our understanding of political order in general.

The end of the Book of Job understandably has disappointed those who want Job to be the rebel against authority. Safire sees in the epilogue despair, as “the browbeaten and awestruck Job caves in.”<sup>24</sup> Job's words admittedly seem disheartening. In reply to Yahweh's speech from

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

the storm—a speech in which God challenges Job to a fight and subsequently provides Job a laundry list of all the splendid, powerful, deadly creatures he has created—Job says, “I retract. I even take comfort for dust and ashes (42:6).<sup>25</sup> Even more disheartening is that God seems to have bought Job off in the epilogue (Scheidlin calls this section “Job’s Restoration”), which is surely what Safire is reacting so powerfully to. Job accepts the material wealth that God restores to him and, in his silence, seems satiated.

But this reading is too hasty, and it does not consider carefully enough the dialogue between Job and God. Job, I argue, does not accept God’s gifts with a supplicant’s gratitude, nor with a restored faith in God as a power and force in the service of justice. Job’s reply to Yahweh, that “You are all-powerful” is, upon closer examination, not an expression of acquiescence, but one of indifference. Immediately following God’s bombastic, braying, almost frenetic accounting of his creations the “River Beast” and the “River Coiler” from whose “mouth come torches” and for whom “Might resides in his neck; misery dances before” (41:14),<sup>26</sup> Job’s reply, “I know that you are all powerful,” seems less an admission of his own relative insignificance than a forbearing concession intended to mollify an insecure, needy child.

Consider exactly what Job has beheld in his encounter with Yahweh. Job has, quite undeniably, encountered a God for whom no plan is beyond reach. But it is also a God who does not use this power in any way that is befitting someone with such capacity. It turns out that the inscrutability of God’s power might lie not in its awesomeness, but rather in the raw, uncontainable bombast and show that seems to motivate its exercise. It turns out that God, while impenetrable to the human mind in his particular motivations, is quite transparent in his overall

---

<sup>25</sup> *The Book of Job*, 155.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

character. And it is this that Job sees when God finally appears: “I knew you, but only by rumor; My eye has beheld You today” (42:5).

God’s speech to Job is interrupted by Job’s answer to the first part of the speech. God begins by challenging Job to a fight: “Cinch your waist like a fighter” (38:3). And he asks of Job,

Where were you when I founded the earth?  
Speak, if you have any wisdom:  
Who set its measurements, if you know,  
laid out the building lot, stretching the plum line?  
Where was the ground where He sank its foundations? (38:5-6)<sup>27</sup>

From here God grows increasingly sarcastic.

Have you reached the depths of the sea  
and walked around there, exploring the abyss?  
Have you been shown behind the Gates of Death,  
or seen the Gates of Deathdark?

....  
Tell me if you know everything!—  
Where is the path to where light dwells,  
and darkness, where does it belong?

....  
You must know, you were born long ago!  
So many years you have counted! (38:16-21)

And on and on God brays. Job’s answer is simply the following:

I see how little I am.  
I will not answer You.  
I am putting my hand to my lips:  
One time I spoke;  
I will not speak again;  
two times I spoke,  
and I will not go on. (40:4-6).<sup>28</sup>

What is God’s reaction to Job’s deference? Again God challenges Job to “Cinch your waist like a fighter.... Is your arm as mighty as God’s? Does your voice thunder like His?” (40:7-9). Job had

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 149.

just conceded that he is so little, that he will not speak, and that he is dropping his challenge to God to appear in a court of law before an arbiter and explain himself. And here is where God, becoming a bit mad with anger, starts to create mythical characters—the Behemoth and the Leviathan, which Scheindlin translates as the River Beast and the River Coiler—further to impress upon Job his might. God asks Job of his creation the Leviathan,

Can you draw the River Coiler with a hook?  
Bind his tongue with a rope?  
String him through the nose with a reed?  
Bore his cheek with a thistle?  
Would he beg you for mercy,  
gentle you with words?  
Would he deign to be your ally?  
Could you make him a slave for life?  
Could you pet him like a bird,  
leash him for your girls to play with? (40:25-29)

The answer, clearly, is no. But this does not stop God from continuing:

Look: Hope of him is delusion;  
even to glance at him is to fall.  
Is he not fierce when aroused?  
Who could stand ground in his presence?  
Who could address him unscathed? (41:1-3)

....  
Might resides in his neck;  
misery dances before him.  
The cascades of his flesh cling,  
like cast metal on him, immovable.  
Solid as rock is his heart,  
millstone-solid.  
When he erupts, the gods cower,  
shrink from the waves. (41:14-16)

The question to which the answer is less clear, however, is why God would be asking this of Job at all. Job had just acknowledged his own smallness relative to God. There is, of course, the poetic, rhetorical flourish of repetition that both may actually be quite typical for the bible and is certainly present throughout the poem of Job. But to the extent that God appears in this poetry,

artistic flourish doesn't capture the whole of it. This structure also reveals the fact that God is not seeking an answer from Job; he is seeking to *show* Job how powerful he is and to have Job simply see him (God) as this power.

When Job says that *today*, his eyes have beheld God, what he has witnessed is God's need to proclaim his omnipotence and significance. He has seen God for what he is, and this vision has replaced the rumors of God that had previously been Job's sole source of knowledge of God. What Job had known previously only by rumor (represented, I think, by Job's three friends who, in their speeches to Job represent various traditional views of God), he now can see with his own eyes. In fact, Job had already anticipated such a reaction on the part of God, for his suffering started to allow him to begin to suspect and to see God in a different way than the rumors would indicate. Long before God appeared, Job predicted that God might not be capable of justice or maturity. Job asks, "...He is single-minded—who can deter Him? He does whatever His heart desires" (23:13). God of course can't be a genuine adversary for man, for "who could gaze at Him when He thunders in might?" (26:15) and thundering in might, God has shown, is all He *can* do. What Job recognizes and sees is that such thundering is incongruous with an authority and power that he can live under.

If He should seize a thing, who could restore it?  
Who could say to Him, "What are You doing?"  
A god could not aver His anger—  
Rahab's cohorts bent beneath Him—  
how then could I raise my voice at Him,  
or choose to match my words with His?  
Even if I were right, I could not answer,  
could only plead with my opponent;  
and if I summoned him, and if He answered me,  
I doubt that He would listen to my voice,  
since He crushes for just a hair,  
and bruises me for nothing. (9:12-17)<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 72-3.

And Job asks of such a God, I think rhetorically and bitterly, for he already knows the answer:

Is it power? He is mighty!  
Is it judgment? Who can summon Him?  
I may be righteous, but my mouth convicts me;  
innocent, yet it makes me seem corrupt. (9:19-20)

He sees in God not only the inscrutability of an awesome power, but a power that is all too transparent in its arbitrariness and boasting.

Accordingly, Job's relationship to God changes in subtle, but dramatically important, ways. The final scene of the poem recreates the opening scene in which Job is surrounded by his (new) family, but with critically important, albeit subtle, differences. In this second telling of Job's family life, Job similarly enjoys God's material gifts, but now, he enjoys them without reference to God. Yahweh is a prominent figure in the narrative told in "Job's Restoration," of course. He is, after all, the source of this restoration and wealth. But he is a background figure, a stagehand who merely sets the scene on which Job will live his life as the principal actor and agent. In contrast to the narrator's continued references to Yahweh's actions, Job makes no reference to God at all. There is, even in the narration, no indication that Job regards or takes account of God at all. In fact, even the end of his life—a life that a pious, modest, cowed Job would presumably devote to a God who has displayed his power and subsequently ended his suffering and rewarded—Job dies without reference to God. He ends his life with only his earthly family in his mind and heart: "he lived to see his sons and grandsons to the fourth generation and died in old age after a full life span" (42:16).<sup>30</sup> He did not die as God-fearing at

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 157.

all, no longer offering sacrifices to God. Instead, he fills out his life, even naming his daughters, who will inherit alongside their brothers.<sup>31</sup>

What is especially striking is that while Job does not thank God, he also doesn't curse him. By the end, God is simply absent. We began Job's story with God as a source of wealth and grace for Job, and as we progress God becomes a source of his pain and anger. In both of these orientations, God's power and authority remain intact and undiminished. Job's *particular* relationship to and experience of this authority and power certainly changes throughout the course of God's wreaking havoc on Job's life. But it remains throughout a relationship of authority, with God being its sole source and unchallenged embodiment. By the end of Job's life, God's absolute or objective presence hasn't necessarily diminished. God remains the source of all that Job has or does not have, determining the material conditions of his life completely. But Job's relationship to God is different. This power that God undoubtedly exercises no longer serves as the basis of Job's regard for and relationship with him.

In fact, we are not told what kind of relationship Job has with God at all. Instead, we see how Job relates to his temporal life and world, whether this is his family or his friends. Previously, Job thought of and feared God constantly, even in the absence of any reason for Job rationally to fear him. After his suffering, after God has revealed himself as a blustering, irresponsible, potentially tyrannical being, Job has finally seen God and can ignore him. This does not mean that Job rejects everything that God has bestowed upon him, which would demand suicide. This was, in a sense, what Job was demanding throughout his trials. Job curses

---

<sup>31</sup> Scheindlin points out in his notes that it was unusual for daughters to inherit. *Ibid.*, 223. This seems to indicate a kind of expansion of Job's worldly existence beyond the boundaries that were set around it when Job was God-fearing.

the day that he was born and cries, “Blot out the day when I was born and the night that said, ‘A male has been conceived!’” (3:2)<sup>32</sup>

But in light of an interpretation of Job as indifferent, it becomes possible to see Job’s demand for death not as a curse on God nor as an expression of pain, but as a threat to God that he will be without any company to witness the power that God so desperately wants Job and man to see. As soon as the Book of Job moves from its folk legend narrative of the prologue to the literary mode of the poem,<sup>33</sup> we see that Job suspects that God might needs Job much more than he needs God, and Job deduces from this the significance of man’s presence more broadly. In his reply to his other comforter Eliphaz’s first speech, Job transitions from lamenting his own fate and trying to speak directly to his friends about *his* suffering (he asks of Eliphaz that all he do is teach him what he has done wrong, for he will listen to his friend [6:24]) to consider the human condition more broadly. Job sees that *human* life, not just his own, is a term of indenture (7:1). And at the same time, he intuitively suspects that part of the terms of this indenture is to serve as witness to God. Hence, Job, outraged about his situation, threatens God that “In no time, I’ll be lying in the earth; when You come looking for me, I’ll be gone” (7:25).<sup>34</sup> The disappearance is complete; not even God could reverse it, and Job warns that the “questing eye will not detect me; Your eye will catch me—just!—and I’ll be gone” (7:7).

If it is the case that God needs Job to witness his creation, Job’s cursing the day that he was born is less an expression of his own pain and more of a blotting out of God’s creation and His order, which seems so violently to demand that man constantly accompany—and look up

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>33</sup> For a summary of the structure of the Book of Job, see David Robertson, "The Book of Job: A Literary Study," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 56, no. 4 (1973). and Herbert Fingarette, "The Meaning of Law in the Book of Job," *The Hastings Law Journal* 29(1978): 1581-88.

<sup>34</sup> *The Book of Job*, 69.

at—God. And with this new realization, Job can himself assume the kind of dignified responsibility that we fail to find in God. Job forgives, without hesitation, the friends who denounced and him and refused to comfort him in his time of need. It is striking that Job forgives not from a position of impotence, but rather from the position of God himself. God offers himself up to Job as a kind of agent—an omnipotent one at that—to punish these friends who failed to speak “rightly” of him.<sup>35</sup> It is to Job, not God, to whom these friends must offer wholeburnt sacrifices, and it is Job who has the power to forgive these friends through his prayer to God. But unlike God, Job is both magnanimous *and* responsible in his exercise of this power. His friends know that Job had not wronged God, and that the trials he suffered in no way reflected Job’s thoughts or actions against God. To destroy his friends’ lives or to disgrace them at this point would be little more than a gratuitous display of force—a petty show of power for the sake of the show.

Job recognizes that he, just like God, needs the company of men. Job’s interlocutors started out as friends who came to Job upon hearing of his troubles. They did not question him, nor did they try to find out exactly why Job deserved the punishment he was receiving. Instead, they simply witnessed Job’s suffering and kept him company.

[Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar] agreed to meet to go and to mourn with [Job] and comfort him. Peering from the distance, they could not recognize him. They raised their voices and wept, and each tore his robe, and all put dirt on their heads, throwing it heavenward. Seven days and seven nights they sat with him on the ground, none saying a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great (2:11-15).<sup>36</sup>

When these friends turn into his accusers and interrogators, Job is not defiant, as he is with God. Rather, he’s simply lonely and weak in his loneliness.

You have wiped out all my company,

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 57-8.

crumpled me; my witness is  
my own emaciation, rising in witness against me. (16:7)<sup>37</sup>

Unlike God, Job recognizes that he needs this company and recognizes that the company of men demands a responsible exercise of one's power. God took full advantage of the luxury that power and wealth affords their possessor. He rashly and vainly accepts the Accuser's challenge to punish Job, and eventually he tries to keep Job close by doubling his wealth and by offering Job a taste of the power to destroy those who have wronged him. The face that God had shown to Job is a visage that should bring God shame. In refusing to think through the destructive consequences of his actions and in his blustering, crass proclamations of his creative omnipotence, God also displays his unworthiness to possess this power. He shows Job—and us—that not only is he not to be trusted with power, but also that a world in which we grant power and authority to an entity that cannot, for whatever reason, explain himself may not be a world in which any of us actually wants to live.

This indifference to absolute power and the turning toward a human community that can be read, discussed, counted, and understood, just as Job can count the number of children, sheep, camels, and oxen he owns,<sup>38</sup> is the core lesson of Job. It is the lesson that arises out of what Ernst Bloch phrased as “the discovery of utopian power at the heart of the religious sphere: a man can be better, can behave better than his God. Job has not merely given up the workshop but he also leaves the community: it is an all-out attack.”<sup>39</sup>

In closing, I want to make a few preliminary observations about how this reading of the Book of Job might influence our reading of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. On a very basic, structural

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>38</sup> Compare the prologue with the epilogue.

<sup>39</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J. T. Swann (London: Verso, 2009).

level, it might be the case that those like Skinner who advocate a “republican” interpretation of Hobbes’s text have no reason to ignore the references to and images from the Book of Job and the divine power that the term “leviathan” necessarily brings with it. In fact, it seems to me to be the case that the Book of Job to which Hobbes refers in the title perfectly captures Skinner’s position, namely, that civil order depends on community sustained by the existence of reasons that human beings can understand and, in a sense, buy into. This is not about modesty or any other civic or religious virtues. Rather, it is about Hobbes’s acknowledgement that political order on the scale of a modern state demands something other than authority that hierarchically organized.

This also helps to explain the attention Hobbes gives to constructing a language by which his readers might understand his project and, more importantly, by which citizens can speak to one another and to their sovereign under the protection of a neutral arbiter that could “lay his hand on both of us, to make Him take His rod away, so that His terror would not cow me, then I could speak without this fear of Him” (9:33-35).<sup>40</sup> The language that Hobbes constructs is this arbiter that allows individuals to speak and listen to one another without the fear that constantly silences them in the state of nature, turning the civil society into one that is legible to everyone.

---

<sup>40</sup> *The Book of Job*, 74.