

God's Struggles¹

Howard Wettstein
University of California, Riverside

"I am Y-H-V-H and there is none else;
I form light and create darkness,
Peace is my doing, and I create evil
I, Y-H-V-H do all these things."²
Isaiah, 45:7

"A person should always stand in awe of Heaven, in private as well as in public, and admit the truth, and seek the truth in his heart."
Jewish morning prayer

"Public discussion of [religion] lurches uncomfortably between overconfident denial ('God' certainly does not exist, and anyway it's all His fault) and blind allegiance."
Tony Judt, "Leslie Kolakowski (1927-2009)," *The New York Review of Books*, September 24, 2009

¹ This paper derives from "Concluding Remarks" I gave at the University of Notre Dame conference, "My Ways Are Not Your Ways: The Character of the God of the Hebrew Bible." I'm told by friendly critics that the written version does not quite capture the oral presentation, available at http://www.nd.edu/~cprelig/conferences/video/my_ways/wettstein1.htm

² I use the transliterated letters of the Tetragrammaton name since the usual "The Lord" obscures the fact that the term is a proper name (unvocalized); "The Lord" and a proper name also differ dramatically with respect to distance and formality.

It is important to note that it is difficult to be precise in the translation of the crucial and final word of the penultimate line of the quotation from *Isaiah*, like other key words at focal points in *Tanach*. The word is used in many nuanced ways in *Tanach* (all designating something in the vicinity of evil). See CARM.org, for the reading "calamity," as in natural evil.

The power of our religious traditions is a function, at least in part, of the edifying, morally elevating texts so central to them. Being ancient, however, these texts inevitably reflect—sometimes in shocking ways—the cultural settings from which they emerge. God, for example, is said in *Tanach* to command, or at least to allow slavery, genocide, rape, and other assorted horrors. Critics of religion often seize on these things, paying scant attention to the edifying and elevating; Defenders do the opposite.

The power of the ancient texts is not that of straightforward articulation, the way of many philosophical texts. Rather, their meanings are displayed by way of poetically infused narrative, and dramatic and mythological tropes. As with mythology, one does not want to put the stories through the wringer of the categorical imperative. Better to struggle with the dark side of God's world than to reject such ancient gifts.

How might one even begin to come to terms with divinely mandated moral horror? Given our reverence for these texts there are temptations here, most notably a tendency to minimize the moral awfulness or explain it away. At the Notre Dame Conference on the Hebrew Bible, as in the history of theology, there were many such defenses. Some seemed at the extreme: God, it was said, having granted the gift of life, a temporary gift, can justifiably withdraw it at will. There is, it would follow and it was urged, no issue at all about the death of good people. Being with God in heaven is, for all we know, a superior situation than life on earth, so that even the killing of babies, when divinely mandated, may not represent a morally significant problem. At lesser extremes were variations on familiar modes of theodicy.

Needless to say, and worth saying, not all the contributions by religiously committed contributors were along such lines. But those that were dominated, or so it seemed. Moreover, one had a sense that the Critics and many Defenders of traditional religion agreed on the general idea that some such defense is what traditional religion implicates. For the Critics such defenses provide ample reason for skepticism about the whole enterprise.

My aim here is to provide a very different sense of traditional religion, one that agrees with the Critics on the utter unacceptability of such defenses. The quotation from Isaiah at the head of this paper speaks of a dark side to God's world; a part and parcel of creation, no mere surface appearance. This is less than a happy thought—to all of us, religiously committed or not. But it has the ring of truth.

Peter Van Inwagen points out³ that *Tanach* is more like a library than a work, indeed one whose ethical ideas are under development, one that represents no single doctrine on many key notions. And this applies to my Isaiah-inspired view of evil and its place in creation. Such is clearly not the only attitude towards evil in *Tanach*, but it is one to which I want to focus attention.

Our problem, though, is not just the dark side of creation, natural evil for example. It's difficult to read the text naively—a good thing in my view⁴—and not come away with a sense of a dark side to God. In the cases of *Amalek* and the *Akedah*,

³ In his talk at the conference. See his paper, ..., in this volume.

⁴ Such naïve readings may not prove tenable in the end. And a religious tradition, almost like the courts in our legal tradition, may provide another reading of what, as it were, the constitution meant. But it is important to pay significant attention to what the text *seems* to say, to stay with the naïve reading for a while.

had we not seen such texts we likely would have denied their possibility. For God asks of us what is not only immoral, but a violation of something at the heart of what God presumably stands for, killing children for example.

Indeed, in the case of the *Akedah*—even more horrendous—God commands Abraham not only to violate a moral norm, one that resides close to Abraham’s core. God commands Abraham to kill his child, his only child, his beloved child. If asked to do this, the last thing one (other than maybe Kant...) would naturally think about is the moral violation. (It helps here to have had children of one’s own.) “But it’s my boy!” we can imagine him screaming, to himself if not to God. Indeed the very language of the command seems to rub it in, to put it, so to speak, right in Abraham’s face.

My emphasis here will be on the *Akedah* and also on the strange story of Job. These stories represent God’s treatment not of His (or Israel’s) enemies, but rather of His beloved, and so they have a special sting. God considers Abraham one with whom He is intimate,⁵ and yet asks of him the unspeakable. God mandates the death of Job’s children as an Accuser-inspired⁶ test of this person whom God judges to be the most righteous on earth. Why is this not moral monstrosity?

⁵ See Genesis 18:19, where God refers to Abraham as (translating literally) one He has known, or perhaps one he has singled out. The verb, *la’daat*, suggests intimacy in biblical Hebrew.

⁶ The Hebrew “Satan” is, in context, not the fallen angel of the Christian tradition, but a kind of heavenly accuser, a heavenly investigator/prosecuting attorney, so to speak.

Such a question, admittedly on the edge of blasphemy, seems a religious imperative. Let me selectively choose several biblical texts in support of this idea. I'll return below to my selectivity.

In Genesis 18, only a few chapters before the *Akedah*, God approaches Abraham with his plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Imagine Abraham's reaction; an intimidating situation, even terrifying, not to speak of confusing. For many of us, standing up to social pressure is difficult enough; standing up to God is unimaginable. And yet Abraham challenges God in the strongest moral terms. "Heaven forbid that the judge of all the earth would punish with good along with the wicked." Nor, as God begins to back down, does Abraham hesitate to repeat and renew the challenge.

Perhaps God approaches Abraham in this way to allow Abraham to do just what he does. Perhaps this is part of Abraham's moral training. Nevertheless, Abraham's lack of care for his own safety, for his life after all, his being nothing less than appalled at God and unable to keep quiet about it, these things are no doubt part of why he is so revered by the tradition. And if one can say it, perhaps this is part of why he is revered by God, honored with intimacy.

At the end of the Book of Job, God rebukes Job's ironically named "Comforters." They appropriately begin their visit with the bereft Job, sitting silently with him for a full week in the manner of Jewish mourning practices. Silence is difficult to sustain, however, and when the conversation begins, it quickly degenerates. They criticize Job in the manner of conventional religious thinking, ways that are all too familiar. God is just; so Job must be deserving of what's befallen

him. He should repent and beg for God's understanding and forgiveness, and the like. We, the readers, know better, having been apprised at the beginning of the book of Job's innocence. What happens does so as a result of a challenge to God from "the Accuser," a representation according to C. G. Jung of God's insecurity about Job's love. Jung's suggestion is irreverent, but hardly out of line with the text.

God's eventually rebukes the Comforters; they, unlike Job failed to tell the truth about God. This, I want to suggest, is an ethical moment of inestimable importance. God appears to be saying that the usual pietisms are false and objectionable, that Job's pre-Whirlwind near blasphemous remarks about God's injustice were well taken.

In selecting the passages from Genesis and Job I am, admittedly, being selective. Religious texts and even more so the larger traditions that house them allow for multiple moral emphases. One could as well pick texts that support a point of view very distant from my own. But this very fact also works against the Defenders, for whom God's authority can justify what looks to us morally horrendous. For it suggests that religious traditions of the sort known to us are too inclusive to provide a definitive foundation for the ethical life. One can cite too many contrary verses; one can cite widely divergent religious authorities. In the end, one is left with one's ethical good sense.

This is not to deny that one's religious tradition may help to form and develop one's ethical stance and character. There are multiple and exceedingly rich connections between religion and the ethical life. In selecting these passages about Abraham and Job I bring to bear my own substantive ethical views. But those views

have in part been formed, enhanced, developed by my contact with those and similar passages as well as by contact with religious models of the ethical life.

The religious perspective I have begun to sketch—it is here that I take issue with the sense apparently shared by the Critics and Defenders—reflects my own Jewish sensibility. This is hardly to suggest that there is a single Jewish view on these matters. Nor is it to suggest something uniquely Jewish. Better still if there are resonances in other traditions. But there is a distinctive flavor perhaps especially to the three passages I am about to explore.

To begin with a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *B'rachot* (Blessings)⁷, Rabbi Yochanan mentions God's prayer. The interlocutor—as shocked as you or I might be at such mention—immediately poses the question, “And what does God pray?” He prays, we are told, that when his children are at issue, His attribute of mercy/nurture overwhelm his anger and his other attributes—presumably his desire for strict justice. But this is to suggest that it is no trivial matter even for God to subdue His anger, to allow His love to vanquish His demand for justice. In short, God struggles. This is an idea that is difficult to incorporate into the picture of religion shared by Critics and Defenders.

I move now to the Book of Hosea, astounding in many respects. Its hyper-anthropomorphic talk of God would be blasphemous if not itself found in the holy text. The book begins with God telling the prophet to marry a whore. The idea appears to be—and this is of a piece with the tone of much of the book—that only in

⁷ Folio 7a. The translation—really paraphrase—is my own but follows the text quite closely.

the context of such a marriage can the prophet understand what it is like for God to be wed, as it were, to the people Israel.

God, as reported by the prophet, seems to jump between extreme moods, at one moment longing powerfully and painfully for His beloved people; at another furious with her and promising to punish or destroy her and her lovers, the foreign gods.

At one moment (2.16):

Assuredly,
I will speak coaxingly to her,
And lead her through the wilderness,
And speak to her tenderly,
(2.17) I will give her vineyards....

At another (2.4):

Rebuke your mother, rebuke her—
For she is not My wife
And I am not her husband—
And let her put away her harlotry from between her breasts.
(2.5) Else I will strip her naked
And leave her as on the day she was born:
Render her like desert land,
And let her die of thirst.

In the 1948 Academy Award winning film, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a daughter who is suffering through a difficult relationship cries to her parents about the contrast between her own relationship and that of her parents. She remarks that

her parents have always had one another; their intimacy was a constant source of untroubled support, this as opposed to her own situation. Her mother looks at her father, turns to her, and replies, “If you only knew how many times we had to fall in love again.” The comment applies well to the intimacy between God and His people as depicted in *Tanach* and as understood and experienced in Jewish tradition.

Such is quite a different conception of loving and being loved by God than our usual one: grace on the part of God and adoration of perfection on our side. This is not to say that on the suggestion I am developing God’s love for Israel and Israel’s for God are one and the same. But the Bible’s model moves us closer to a human love relationship. In neither direction does this sort of love presuppose that its object is perfect. God as depicted in *Tanach* is not the perfect being of later tradition. Even before we get to serious moral problems with God, He is spoken of as changing his mind, as angry and resentful, even petty at times, and subject to flattery, and the rest.

It is striking that the Song of Songs (or of Solomon) with its depiction of erotic love, was canonized and used by the religious traditions to model the relationship between God and the people Israel, or God and the Church, etc. We should, I think, not pass over the eroticism too quickly.⁸ What does it mean to model—even as one model among others—the relationship between persons and God in this way? Seemingly important is the central role of our longing for intimacy with God, someone with whom we share our deepest longings, pains, and joys. There is also

⁸ In my own tradition, it is often passed over instantaneously, as if (some actually make this suggestion) the erotic imagery was a mere superficial appearance, not deserving of focus.

the suggestion of a certain longing on the part of God, for intimacy with His people, for sharing their love in the context of a transformed world.

I turn now to my final passage, from the rabbinic commentary, *Midrash Rabbah* on the Book of Lamentations,⁹ an attempt by the Rabbis of the Talmud to bring Lamentations to bear on the destruction of the Second Temple, their latest and by far greatest tragedy. (Lamentations itself was written some 650 years earlier, in connection with the destruction of the first Temple in 587 B.C.E.)

The aspects of divinity a literature emphasizes reflect salient features of the community's experience. Subject a community to great trial or triumph and its way of thinking about God may well alter or enlarge. The Temple's destruction accompanied by the prospect of an unending exile certainly qualifies as such a great trial. And the *Midrash* on Lamentations evidences an important theological development, an altered – but of course not historically discontinuous – perspective on God. God is, one might say, super-anthropomorphized.

Anthropomorphic depiction was of course characteristic of Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ Early in Genesis, for example, God is angry at our antics, even regretful that he initiated the human experiment. But these were the emotions of a being that was – despite the anthropomorphism – somehow wholly other, the awesome Creator of

⁹ Soncino Press, (London, 1983).

¹⁰ See my paper, "Doctrine," *Faith and Philosophy* (1997), also available on my website, <http://www.philosophy.ucr.edu/people/faculty/wettstein/index.html>, for an exploration of the contrast between, on one hand, Biblical and rabbinic anthropomorphic characterization, and, on the other, the anti-anthropomorphism of Greek philosophy-inspired medieval theology.

the universe in whose hands was its destruction, a somewhat remote purveyor of rage, passion, justice and the rest.

It has been said that the Biblical narrative is the history of God's learning that He cannot do it alone, that His plan crucially requires partnership with His human reflections. By the time of the *Midrash* on Lamentations, and in the perception of its authors, the lesson is well learned. Not only cannot He do it alone, the project is not going well.¹¹ And God's reaction reveals a new level of affective engagement and self-awareness. He suffers, weeps, even mourns. "Woe is Me!" he cries in Proem 24, "What have I done?"

Sometimes the *Midrash* sees God in maternal terms – or, more accurately, God, as the *Midrash* has it, sees Him/Herself in such terms (Proem 22):

"Just as when you take away its young a sparrow is left solitary," so spake the Holy One, blessed be He, "I burnt my house, destroyed My city, exiled My children among the nations of the world, and I sit solitary."

Sometimes the imagery is paternal: God is compared with a king who, enraged at his two sons, thrashes them and drives them away. The king afterward exclaims, "The fault is with me, since I must have brought them up badly" (Proem 2). Indeed, not only does God mourn, God, it would seem, needs instruction in mourning from us.

¹¹ This is to some extent true of the prophetic literature more generally. What is new here is a matter of degree and sustained emphasis.

The Holy one, blessed be He, said to Jeremiah, "I am now like a man who had an only son, for whom he prepared a marriage canopy, but he dies under it. Feelest thou no anguish for Me and My children? Go summon Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Moses from their sepulchres, for they know how to weep." ¹²

One aspect of this humanizing of the divine image, interestingly parallel to (roughly simultaneous) Christian developments,¹³ is a new emphasis on divine vulnerability. God is, as it were, exposed to the elements to a degree scarcely predictable by what we knew of Him.

Closely related is what we might call divine approachability. God, in Genesis, is available to the patriarchs, and to some extent to the matriarchs. But the *Midrash* on Lamentations (in the continuation of Proem 24) imagines the three patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and Moses pleading with God for mercy. God, however, is unaffected; he cannot or will not comply. Eventually, he does promise to restore Israel to its place, but the promise is made not to the patriarchs or Moses. It is only mother Rachel who can move Him. Rachel tells God that she knew of her father's plan to substitute Leah for her in marriage to Jacob. She attempted to foil the plan, but when that failed

¹² Proem 24. For more detail see my paper from which this discussion of the *midrash* is adapted, "Coming to Terms with Exile," H. Wettstein, ed. *Diasporas and Exiles* (UC Press, 2002). For a more complete treatment see Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, (Syracuse, N.Y., 1996).

¹³ A key difference of course is that in Jewish thought, there is no suggestion of God becoming – or having an aspect that is – human in some more serious or literal sense.

I relented, suppressed my desire, and had pity upon my sister that she should not be exposed to shame...I delivered over to my sister all the signs which I had arranged with Jacob so that he should think that she was Rachel. More than that, I went beneath the bed upon which he lay with my sister; and when he spoke to her she remained silent and I made all the replies in order that he should not recognize my sister's voice. I did her a kindness, was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to shame. And if I, a creature of flesh and blood, formed of dust and ashes, was not envious of my rival and did not expose her to shame and contempt, why should You, a King who lives eternally and is merciful, be jealous of idolatry in which there is not reality, and exile my children and let them be slain by the sword...

Forthwith, the mercy of the Holy One, blessed be He, was stirred, and He said, "For your sake, Rachel, I will restore Israel to its place."

It is interesting that Rachel does not argue on the grounds of justice. Nor does she appeal on the basis of her own merit, as do the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (earlier in Proem 24). Her appeal is more personal, predicated on issues of character.

My aim in this paper is not to answer the central questions of the Conference. I don't know how to do that, although I'll say a bit by way of speculation below. Instead I've attempted to alter our perspective in a way that puts those questions in a different light.

I want to return now to the *Akedah* and Job specifically to note some features common to both stories. These stories have a kind of resonance that defies time. We somehow feel that things haven't changed that much. Of course God does not ask us to sacrifice our children. But we, like Abraham, are put in situations that test us, or test our souls, situations—writ large and often small—in which we have to choose between incompatible but truly non-negotiable values. And while the mythological sounding text attributes Job's losses to God's wager with the Accuser, the fact is that awful things happen to people without apparent reason, often pretty obviously undeserved. And so we can feel and share Job's hurt and his eventual outrage. "These things really happen," the texts seem to speak to us; the sense that the universe treats us as if by a whim is familiar.

So there is a kind of truth, or universality, to these stories, right at the outset. I see a certain truth as well in the human heroes' responses. I use "truth" here in a way that I don't have entirely under control. Perhaps it would be more cautious to say that both Abraham and Job, as I read the stories, are moral heroes; they exemplify ethical virtues of the first importance. And in the case of Job, God's revelation to him from the Whirlwind—I'll discuss it below—is at once a revelation to us, another measure of the truth I see in these stories.

My reading, though, is certainly controversial; to take the case of Abraham, some see mere obedience—ethically deficient—where I see ethical/spiritual valor. Job is often praised for his patience, actually rather short lived, and not the integrity, even spiritual stubbornness, which I will emphasize. What follows is a quick sketch of my readings of those texts.

Abraham, I want to propose, does *not* decide to obey God; not that he decides against it. Nor is this indecision. Abraham holds in his hands two incompatible non-negotiable loves, two non-negotiable commitments—commitments do not go any deeper than these—towards God and towards his son. Nor does Abraham, I’m imagining, have any conception of what it would mean to prioritize such commitments. The idea of making such a choice boggles the mind. There is almost something obscene about it.

The text, strikingly spare, invites us to imagine Abraham’s reaction. How could he not have been feeling alone in the universe? It must have been a long and lonely night. As I imagine his response the next morning—all one can do is dwell in the language, letting it seep in—what he does is to proceed, to march resolutely ahead, his eyes fixed, together (the Hebrew *yachdav*, repeated several times, suggests intimate togetherness) with his beloved son.

Abraham’s transcendent faith is exhibited in his ability to so march forward, not knowing where the path will lead, but ready to follow it, with confidence that he will know what to do when he has to.¹⁴ To withstand any such an experience must be transformative. And *sometimes*, as the text perhaps suggests, one comes out the other end having survived that ordeal, loves intact, having grown in ways otherwise unavailable. I hope it is clear that I mean this as a comment on Abraham, and hardly a justification of God’s command. If I am even roughly on track, there is universal significance here.

¹⁴ I see this sort of faith as an important, if rare, human virtue. Attendant to it is the ability not to look too far ahead, not to anticipate the moment of decision.

Turning to Job, let's distinguish the core of the story from the very strange beginning—God and the Accuser—and the equally strange end—when Job is restored, a new family, riches, and the rest. The core is a classic tale: someone having had everything loses it all, hits bottom, finds God, and through God finds peace.

The peace Job finds seems in part a consequence of his spiritual straightforwardness, his own deep commitments. In his stubborn responses to the Comforters, it is as if he were speaking about a love relationship and said things like, "I don't understand. My love for her was boundless. She understood all that, and she clearly reciprocated. Until today. I am lost."

When Job hits bottom—sitting on a pile of ashes, scratching his lesions with potsherd—God appears and Job is, as it were, taken on a strange journey to a new perception of reality. God, hardly in a soft and comforting mode or mood, somewhat strangely becomes a poet and equally strangely shares with Job the view from above, the view *sub specie aeternitatis*, God's own sense of His achievement. The vision—not to speak of the experience of God—is overwhelming. It inspires awe, and a strange comfort, the latter a consequence of seeing in a new perspective his own pain and the lack of justice in the world. He gets philosophical, one might say.¹⁵

Whatever one does with the thorny business of God's role in these "tests," there is genuine moral and religious power in these stories. From my own perspective it would be a real loss to overlook that power in favor of an exclusive

¹⁵ See my paper, "Against Theodicy," in *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* (1999), also on my website.

focus on what is so genuinely difficult—even appalling—God’s moral role in subjecting his beloved to such tests, a topic to which I now turn.

The conception of love between people and God that I sketched above finds resonance in these two stories. Prayer experience is at its best an experience of intimacy, of sharing one’s longings, pains, joys and the rest. It is, however, a strange intimacy for our experience of the Other is through a glass darkly. There is here a religious idea—I mean one that derives not from philosophic reflection but (in my own tradition) from *Tanach* and Talmudic literature—that in thinking about, trying to understand, God one is over one’s head. Intimacy with God tends toward the *sui generis*.¹⁶

As I read these texts, neither Job nor Abraham know quite what to make of God. In the case of Job this is easier to see; by the end of the Whirlwind he is overwhelmed, chastened by his lack of understanding how it all works. The text emphasizes no such thing in the case of Abraham. But his notorious silence in response to God’s command to kill Isaac signals that he knows that this is not the time to argue with God. He knows that God knows that he, Abraham, will not understand; Abraham senses that what is appropriate here—as opposed to the case of Sodom and Gomorra—is to follow the path and see where it leads. And reflecting more generally on the matter of understanding God’s ways, we should not forget

¹⁶ I say “tends towards the *sui generis*” since it may be that the phenomenon I’m discussing has a reflection in the sense of imperfect connection even with those people with whom we are most intimate. The topic deserves real scrutiny; the eroticism of the *Song of Songs* seems relevant here.

that Moses—closest of all to God according to the Bible—is sharply rejected in his request to see God’s face.¹⁷

There is a folk fable, perhaps a piece of actual history, concerning the inmates at the Auschwitz concentration camp. As the story goes, they put God on trial for crimes against humanity and against his chosen people. The jury deliberates; God is found guilty. And then the group proceeds to its afternoon prayers. A focus on this story pays dividends for understanding the religious perspective I’m trying to elucidate.

A student of mine suggested recently that one would need some doctrinal understanding in order to pray responsibly. “One needs to know to whom one is praying,” as she put it. My response was that religious experience may be otherwise. One prays; one achieves (sometimes) a sense of intimate contact. But exactly who or what “stands on the other end” is another question, a matter well beyond us.

Religion, suggests William James, is in the end a matter of the gut rather than of the head. In this spirit, I want to suggest that religion’s natural bedfellows are more the arts than the sciences. Religion, wrote Santayana, pursues wisdom through the imagination. It is productive not of a system of the world, a sort of super-physics or metaphysics, but of a way—a literature and set of related practices—to ennoble human life, to give meaning to and make meaning of our deepest hopes, fears, longings, and dreams.

¹⁷ There is a tradition in Jewish commentary that Moses was asking to understand the problem of evil—the apparent lack of justice in God’s world.

A SPECULATIVE APPENDIX

Anthropomorphism is deeply entrenched in biblical literature, in the Talmud, not to speak of our religious lives. The Rabbinic attitude to anthropomorphism, unlike that of the later philosophers, was dual: on one hand, we experience God in these anthropomorphically describable ways; at the same time, we experience Him as beyond all that. Such “inconsistency,” characteristic of the sort of literary theology we find in the Bible and Talmud, is disastrous if one wants a coherent theoretical theology.

But whatever one does with the thorny problem of Biblical anthropomorphism, it is there and very prominent. God so presents Himself, and not always in the best light. Indeed, it is striking how little the Bible seems interested in creating or protecting the image of a perfect being. It is especially striking by comparison with the works of philosophers and theologians.

What then, allowing ourselves speculation, might we make of God’s treatment of Job and Abraham? One is inclined to smile at Jung’s suggestion that the “Satan,” the Accuser in Job, represents God’s insecurity about Job’s love. At the same time, Israeli religious thinker David Hartman advances a related idea concerning language of Deuteronomy when God is speaking to the Israelites about their forthcoming entrance into the promised land. God, says Hartman, sounds a bit like an parent of a teenager about to leave for college. “We were together from the time of the exodus,” God seems to be saying. “I was with you, led the way, protected

you. Will you remember me—will you still love me—when you are in your own land, not dependent upon me for sustenance and protection?”

The idea that God is vulnerable is not new, not after the prophets and the *Midrash*, only a bit of which I made mention of above. Might these strange “tests” of Job and Abraham be a function of God’s as-it-were humanity? Perhaps.

If one can think of these stories not as history but as parables¹⁸—so that one doesn’t have to ponder actual deaths and the like—another idea suggests itself. I will introduce this suggestion by way of another similarity between the Job story and the *Akedah*. The language of both stories, specifically, the description of God’s initial command to Abraham and his mandates to the Accuser are, to put it mildly, quite stark. It is as if the reader is invited to extreme discomfort and confusion, perhaps to outrage. It would not have been inappropriate for the writer to warn the reader: “**what you are about to hear will make your hair stand on edge.**”¹⁹

Perhaps the reader is encouraged to experience discomfort to the point of moral horror, to join Job pre-Whirlwind, to join Abraham in his reaction to God’s plan for Sodom, to inquire about justice, to ask how God can be indifferent to the spiritual torture of his beloved Abraham, how He can be influenced by the Accuser

¹⁸ Job reads like a parable; the *Akedah* less so. Maimonides, in the *Guide*, announces a highly controversial methodological principle that one might think to apply to the *Akedah*. Strikingly, and unexplained, he does not so apply it. The idea is that when a biblical text mentions an angel, what that text formulates is not a piece of history, but rather the vision of a prophet. So Maimonides, to very mixed reviews over time, interprets the story of Abraham and the three men/angels that visit him in Mamre. To apply this to the *Akedah*—an angel is indeed mentioned in the text—renders it a nightmarish vision of Abraham. It would remain a tremendously interesting vision, one whose messages are hardly mooted by its vision status.

¹⁹ Thanks to Jeff Helmreich here.

in the face of what God knows about Job. Perhaps these texts are challenging us to ask hard questions that have no answers forthcoming. Why this would be is a speculative matter for another day.

These of course are the merest speculations. Here's another, from a very different direction. The Bible seems to sometimes attribute natural occurrences, the work of God's creation, to God. One quick example: Exodus speaks of God's hardening Pharaoh's heart, perhaps the outcome of natural processes, as when one sets out on a ill-chosen course of action and nevertheless finds sustenance and encouragement for that course. Perhaps then it is the universe that, as it were, tests us, killing our children, removing our riches, nullifying our accomplishments, putting us in a position where we must choose between alternatives, none of which can be abandoned virtually at the cost of our selves.

I don't have a settled view, or even something that approaches one. Job and the *Akedah*, however, virtually reek of truth for the reasons explored above. Better to suffer in confusion about God, an appropriate state for us if not a pleasurable one, than to forego these stories that, in their own way, edify.