

## **JOB AS A WORK OF LAUGHTERS AND LEARNING COMEDY, PAIN, AND AUDIENCES' EMPATHY**

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Any analysis of Job as comedy must take seriously the question of pain in Job. So, how do comedy and pain relate? Landy suggests that a 'transformational link' exists 'between the comic, the tragic, and the uncanny' (Landy 1990:104). But how does the transformation occur? Perhaps one helpful avenue for thinking about this is through research that exists on trauma and tragedy. Zupančič's contribution to comedy is helpful here, through her argument that comedy emerges from a 'short circuit' of representation and difference, through which to better understand and recognise reality. She argues that there is a paradoxical realism in comedy. However,

tragedy confronts us with the Real; it always gives the Real this or that face, the face of this or that tragic split that resonates with something in our own imagination: we experience it through the play, we can feel it. Comedy, on the other hand, does not confront us with the Real, it repeats it ... (Zupančič 2008:179).

Comedy's role in tragedy and pain could potentially be very instructive. Through repeating, rather than confronting, people with reality comedy plays a role in enabling us to recognise it albeit in a gentler way. This can be subversive. As Biddle explains, through 'the recognition of incongruity, humour points out that the emperor has no clothes' (Biddle 2013:6). But alongside encouraging a recognition of reality, comedy is also potentially a mechanism for resilience in the midst of pain and trauma.

Comedy's role within pain and tragedy can be especially when affiliative humour and comedy are involved, since they can be used adaptively and in a non-hostile way to enhance social relationships (Kuipera 2012). After various psychological tests, Martin even concluded that there is 'quite consistent empirical support' for the 'observation that laughter' or more specifically 'the positive emotion of mirth' actually 'reduces pain' (Martin 2007:326). Examples of this can be found in the face of extreme suffering, where laughter and comedy provide a means of human communication that goes beyond language. For example, Bussie reports a Shoah survivor's recounting of her experience on arrival to Auschwitz:

When they cut our hair in Auschwitz, that was something terrible ... They cried after long hair and I started laughing and they asked, "What are you out of your mind, what are you laughing about?" I said: "This I never had before, a hairdo for free?" ... I started asking them: "who did your hair?" (Bussie 2007:50).

In this example, Bussie demonstrates the way that laughter can simultaneously affirm contradictory thoughts and emotions. Comedy in the midst of pain and trauma has a paradoxical role, therefore, acknowledging the reality of trauma, yet also offering the possibility of survival through the defiance involved in reframing things. This is because the internal logic of comedy and trauma are rather similar: they both involve incongruity and a violation of our expectations. However, comedy creates openness, creativity, and social connectivity; trauma instigates anxiety, rigidity, and isolation. This may be a helpful critical framework for thinking about the relationship between comedy and pain in Job.

## Comedy and pain in Job and the key role of the audience.

A helpful neologism that might be appropriate here is Joyce's term, from *Finnegans Wake*, that Job is a play potentially evoking the 'laughtears' of the audience.<sup>1</sup> Joyce coins this term suggesting that man suffers so much that he has to invent a new word to describe how he feels (Joyce 1939). This is helpful for illustrating comedy's key role in suffering and also for highlighting the complexity of talking about comedy in Job. Although Job engages with the depths of suffering, the way this approached is not always sentimental and bitter. Sometimes, for example, a comic tone plays out through parody. For instance, Job's sarcastic doxology, for example, where he darkly mimics Psalm 8 (Job 7:17-20). This is a comedy of resistance, about defying simplistic attributions of accountability that so regularly occur in the Psalms (indeed, Psalm 37 is a key example of this).<sup>2</sup> Here in Job we have bodily experience pitted against ideas about retribution. Job's bodily experience is not, according to Job, brought on by some wrongdoing or other. Rather, the problem is with the deity. Given the fact that audiences are told from the first verse that Job is innocent, and that they have been made aware that the problem is that YHWH has allowed the Accuser to strike Job, the character Job is, ironically, quite *right* about this assigning of responsibility. Therefore, the very premise of Psalm 8 is comically overturned, pushing the notion of the deity from a caring guardian or the Psalm to an obsessed guard, with the unflattering title "Watcher of Men". Here the audience are faced with a reality that subversively challenges simplistic notions of retribution. This is not frivolous comedy. Through repetition, realities about agency and responsibility are played out in front of audience. Comedy is key here because it prompts greater emotional engagement with Job's tragic situation. For any audience members who maintain a strict view of divine retribution as found in other parts of the Biblical material, comedy functions as a pivotal 'you are the man!' moment of self-recognition and learning (2 Sam. 12:7-8).

One, perhaps slightly unexpected resource that demonstrates how swiftly line between comedy and pain can be traversed in bodily suffering is through resources from medical anthropology. A valuable resource here are patient illness narratives. Lambek and Antze's research into these helpfully highlighted, among current patients, some of the key questions concerning responsibility and agency that emerge in Job. Lambek and Antze argues that irony 'contextualizes and compromises naïve notions of agency' in social responses to illness (Lambek and Antze 2004:10). Therefore, they suggest that irony functions not to displace or conceal suffering during illness but to recognise the reality of the human body. They argue:

there is often a fine line between tragic and comic interpretations of the recognition of the limits of moral agency. Irony can serve as a transfer point between tragedy and comedy ... what turns irony in one direction or the other? When does the despair of Job give way to what Laura Bohannan ... memorably called a "return to laughter"? With respect to illness, one can abhor or appreciate the Rabelaisian effects of bodily or mental breakdown and the collapse of personal agency. Why not celebrate the carnivalesque or grasp the comic dimension of suffering? When is the situation seen as one of tragic linear inevitability and when of comic indeterminacy? (Lambek and Antze 2004:13).

What is interesting in this quotation is how comedy and pain both point towards the question of agency. This is because illness causes people to doubt one's stewardship of the body. A key issue here is the transfer point between the tragic and the comic. This is a crucial transfer point in Job too, often situated in the character's own, sometimes rather graphic, descriptions of corporeal suffering as divine violence. This transfer point, from cruel inevitability to comic indeterminacy, as described by the Shoah survivor's example earlier, is all important for audience engagement and growth. Perhaps audiences would have related to Job's situation in some sense, given the trauma induced through the Babylonian exile (2 Kgs 24-25; 2 Chr. 36; Jer. 52; Babylonian Chronicle)? The

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<sup>1</sup> Morreall writes that 'For the Greeks, as for Shakespeare, the world presented in comedy was the same world presented in tragedy, and no subject was off-limits to comedy, not even the gods' (Morreall 1999:3).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the claim towards the end of the Psalm 'I have been young, and now am old, / yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken / or their children begging bread' (Ps. 37:25). The colloquial English phrase 'you should get out more!' may be one way to use humour to resist the view of the world presented by the Psalmist here.

psychological and emotional fracturing that was induced by the event should not be underestimated (Crouch 2021; Carr 2014; Smith-Christopher 2002). Under the crucible of exile, the theology of divine retribution may have been an explanation emphasising the people's wrongdoing. Ezekiel, for example demonstrates a theology of Israel's judgement and absolute responsibility 'as though Ezekiel wishes these things upon his own people' (Joyce 2008:17). Perhaps it is this kind of theology that Job is enabling audiences to recognise and reconfigure?

Comedy in pain invites a reframing of events that draws us closer to the reality of things. This can be noticed in Job when the character moves from conveying his tragic and deeply disturbing somatic experiences to communicating about his pride. Through the characterisation, audiences are invited to reflect on their own values; especially if see parts of themselves in Job (as noted, in a fashion similar to 'you are the man!' in 2 Sam. 12:7-8)? Consider, for example, the ruthless and extended deity attack metaphor that occurs in Job 30:16-19.

And now my soul is poured out within me;  
    days of affliction have taken hold of me.  
The night racks my bones,  
    and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.  
With violence he seizes my garment;  
    he grasps me by the collar of my tunic.  
He has cast me into the mire,  
    and we have become like dust and ashes (Job 30:16-19).<sup>3</sup>

Here is a truly tragic scene of cruelty and aggression. Job's 'being' נפש is poured out, an expression similar to that found in Laments (Lam. 2:12). The character is depicted as 'afflicted' (עני), a term which has a semantic range covering illness, somatic distress, misery, poverty, and humiliation. The description of night that 'racks' Job's bones is also interesting; the word נקר can mean pierce, creating the implication that Job is under attack by an enemy with arrows, perhaps consistent with other parts of Job where the character reports such torment directly (Job 6:4; 16:12-13).<sup>4</sup> The description of Job's 'garment' being 'seized' (*hithpael* הפש) is also tragic. Finally, the mention of 'dust and ashes' is resonant and tragic. Dust and ashes regularly occur together, functioning as a hendiadys, to emphasise human mortality and frailty (Gen. 18:27; Job 42:6). This is deeply tragic, shocking, and, difficult to read. Job calls himself, at the end of the attack, a companion of ostriches and brother of jackals: this is a scene filled with pathos. The low and booming howl of the ostrich, evoking human sobbing, and the high-pitched wails of the jackal, evoking human weeping.

However, the juxtaposition between this scene and the one immediately beforehand in chapter 29 creates comedy. Here we see a Job who proudly highlights his former status and importance (Job 29:7–25). Job presides above the community both in status and wealth. Job says he sits 'as a king' and like a god he claims to 'tabernacle' (שכן) amongst them (Job 29:25; cf. Exod. 25:8; Jer. 7:3). Thus says the Job, the light of his face would shine on the councillors following which he lists his gracious and charitable activities (Job 29:24; 29:12, 15–16; cf. Num. 6:25). Note the incongruence of the character talking so very proudly about himself with such allusions of grandeur while sitting amongst the ashes.<sup>5</sup> How are the audience to react to this? Job's high opinion of himself shines through. Indeed, the airs and graces only highlight that even in his suffering Job does not count himself among those vulnerable Others that he lists. The poor, the orphan, the blind, the lame, the needy, Job does not count himself amongst these types of people. This is problematic. It exposes the weaknesses in Job's supposed uprightness and innocence. The sheer indignity of

<sup>3</sup> One can also hardly fail to notice the connection between dust and ashes here, and the mention of them in Job's responses to YHWH during the whirlwind speeches where Job 'consoles himself' (assuming the reflexive sense of the *niphal* נהם) 'concerning dust and ashes', or human frailty (Job 42:6). As I have argued elsewhere, Job's responses to the deity are ironic. He submits 'but only grudgingly with a backhanded, and not so subtle, dose of rejection and disappointment' (Southwood 2021:173; cf. Southwood 2022:107-109). With dust and ashes, he consoles himself, yet dust and ashes are what the deity attack renders him.

<sup>4</sup> Arrows are sometimes associated with destructive diseases (Deut. 32:23-24; Ps. 91:5-6).

<sup>5</sup> It is hardly surprising that his puffed-up and lordly soliloquy is met with laughter (as is reported in Job 30:1).

the sanctimonious Job having become like one of ‘them’ is what he grieves about and that’s perhaps part of the reason for this hyperbolic comedy. Does it matter that Job himself is sometimes the object of the comedy? No: we don’t have to operate in over-simplified binaries of “either Job is right or the friends are right”. In displaying a lack of empathy here for those who are suffering and less fortunate, Job shows how similar he is to his friends. For audiences looking on and realising that perhaps they are not so different from Job this is an opportunity for growth. Job’s flaws are exposed, as are those of his friends. A mirror to reality is held up through the juxtaposition of pain with comedy, wherein a pivot point between them allows the audience to see things from a different perspective.

The point of the comedy in Job is about the lack of empathy. It is a question about the ethics of interaction. For Job, it is no longer possible to uphold crude macarisms about the joys of being disciplined by the almighty. As Eliphaz says ‘happy is the man whom Eloah reproves. Do not reject the disciplining of Shaddai’ (Job 5:17). The audience knows this advice is wrong-headed. Note here the absence of ‘moral witnessing’ among Job’s friends.<sup>6</sup> However the key to the comedy is the fact that the way that the audience function here is as the moral witnesses. Job’s pain cannot be theorised away by a committee of friends who are learned in the art of reducing life’s complexity to a set of maxims. This is because pain poses ethical problems and demands a recognition of the other. As Medical Anthropologist Throop, who went to Yap – a small island in Micronesia – to experience responses to pain, discovered,

In confronting the suffering of another, we may be compelled to reorient our attention to the other as a subject and not an object of experience, as a complex self-interpreting being and not a simple determinable thing. The other’s unassumability as a suffering subject may bring forth a shift away from interpreting the other as a mere token of a type (Throop 2010:223).

Enabling the audience to recognise the friends lack of empathy and to broaden their own horizons of empathy are one reason why comedy is a helpful tool for thinking about Job. Comedy is part of the iconoclastic way that Job draws audiences into thinking about pain and empathy. Comedy acts in a sophisticated way by creating a safe space for audiences to question the idea of retribution behind which perhaps at the time of composition, a weight of tradition must have stood. Evidence of this is the regularity of the friends’ allusion to it. As Newsom points out ‘When Eliphaz introduces an argument’ he speaks of it ‘not only as something he knows to be true but as something that Job and every other person would share as part of a stock of shared knowledge’ he and the others do not ‘actually quote a tradition, yet their speech is thickly populated with the commonplaces of Israelite moral discourse, which, they appear to believe, lend their speech a kind of overwhelming obviousness’ (Newsom 1993:128). Job also admits, that ‘I have intelligence as well as you ... who does not know such things as these?’ (Job 12:3). Comedy allows audiences to be at once critically detached but at the same time emotionally involved in engaging with the problem of simplistic retribution which is cited by his friends to explain his suffering. Audiences become emotionally involved because in Job and his friends they may see, given the authoritative status of tradition, a reflection of themselves and a challenge to change.

Comedy and pain go hand in hand and easily slide from one mode into another. At the heart of the comedy is an attempt to showcase the deep flaws associated with the retribution-centered advice provided to Job by his friends. This advice, in response to seeing Job’s physical condition is filled with incriminating assumptions about Job. Job’s overblown protestations of innocence, in

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<sup>6</sup> Moral witnessing may be defined as

the offer of personal and family support in face of the burdens of illness, bearing witness to the moral experience of suffering, providing suffering with a coherent meaning, and preparing for a socially appropriate death and for religious transcendence are universal features of societal responses to suffering. (Kleinman et al. 1992:13).

Job requires what Goffman calls a ‘circle of lament’ wherein consolation is found not in an answer, but in respectful companionship (Goffman 1968:20). This is because often, when facing suffering, the question “why me?” is not only a question, it is a lament. Therefore, answering the question and providing reasons, as Job’s friends do, at length, is rather tone-deaf.

response, feature a violent deity who is responsible for Job's suffering, thus emphasizing Job's lack of choice or agency. Dramatic irony is an organizing principle for the play. Because from the very first verse the audience to the play are told of Job's innocence, the increasingly blame-filled and blustery pontifications of his friends that are delivered to Job with such confidence are completely undermined (superiority theory). The audience, therefore, is the key to the comedy. Note again the fact that much of the advice given by Job's friends rests on the assumption of his guilt. For example, Eliphaz asks 'who that was innocent (בקי) ever perished, and where were the upright (ישר) cut off?' (Job 4:7). Similarly, Bildad asserts that 'if you were pure (זך) and upright (ישר) then surely he would cause himself to wake for you' and suggests that 'God will not reject a blameless תם man' (Job 8:6, 20). Zophar goes even further, suggesting that although Job says his 'insights are pure (זך)' he must be wrong. Therefore, Zophar advises Job to 'prepare his heart and stretch out his hand towards Shaddai' (Job 11:4, 13). Here retribution-centered ideas here are pitted against corporeal experience but it is a *dialogue de sourds*: neither party is really listening attentively to the other or taking the time truly to recognize and acknowledge the other. But this repetition is important because this is how comedy holds a mirror to reality (Zupančič 2008). Instead of comfortable resolution, we have an often uncomfortable, windy and verbose set of dialogues wherein the audience witnesses baffled characters trying to account for suffering. Paradoxically, however, these characters remain totally certain that their own views are correct. Crowning all the hot air and puffs of advice (הבל)<sup>7</sup> is a grandiose and gusty theophany from a whirlwind.

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<sup>7</sup> Job 16:2; 19:2; 21:34 cf. 13:12.