

A LECTURE ON JOB

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0. The Book of Job offers many poems. Poetry comes with a strict discipline that governs the creation of full poetic lines, and a serious study of poetry suggests that counting is of the essence.

A first glimpse is this. The Psalter has 148 poems, the book of Job has 40. The Psalter offers a collection, whereas the book of Job is a through-composed text. 40 is a number with historical prestige; remember the years Israel had to dwell in the desert before entering the Holy Land. 40 does more: it points at the longest poem in the book of Job: chapter 31, which has exactly 40 verses.

Now what about the person called Job? Our approach to the man may well start with a passage from the Prophets. It is chapter 14 of Ezekiel, where the prophet quotes an oracle of doom. Verse 14 then tells the prophet how the land can be saved by holy men: "when these three men are in it – Noah, Daniel, and Job – by their righteousness they should save themselves." So the man Job is a legendary figure from primeval times, just like Noah; and this is said by Ezekiel, a Babylonian exile at the start of the 6. century BCE. This leads me to the conclusion that we may call the person called Hiob a *tzaddiq* from a primeval era, and should regard him as a proverbial character.

1. Now let us turn to poetry. Where verse is being composed, counting comes naturally. Often it even has a role to play in narrative; compare the two words German has for counting and telling: *zählen* and *erzählen*, or in Dutch *tellen* and *vertellen*. Verse often has to do with meter. The word meter is not far from measuring, and measuring implies counting.

Europe (think of Homer or Horace) had the dactylic hexameter and Shakespeare applies the iambic pentameter all the time in his Sonnets. And so the discipline of counting is master in the making of verse.

How is this in the Bible? We find a lot of poetry in TeNaKh, but there is no metric at all. And yet there is a lot of discipline inherent in the books of the Psalms, the Proverbs, in Job and in the single poems we find here and there spicing narrative prose. There is so much rhythm! Can we find a pervasive principle, a kind of hidden regularity? I am afraid we now have to consider forms of counting.

2a. TNK gives us a wink in its very first chapter, which uses the scheme 6 + 1. And let us now see what First Samuel applies in chapter 16. In that chapter we find the story about the prophet Samuel who is sent to the region of Judah. There he encounters the family of "Jesse and his seven sons" – as verse 10 says literally. So how many sons does Jesse have? Seven, right? Wrong, there is

one more youngster, somewhere over there, in the field, tending the sheep. This story wants to practise an order of seven plus one, and it demonstrates that the eighth instance is a kind of climax; and so, we understand that David is the clou of Samuel's search. He will be the best known king of Israel, and what is more, the most famous poet.

2b. Another example: the round number 100 indicates the number of times that the word 'ach occurs in the book of Genesis. Why is that? The word for 'brother' suggests in this way that brotherhood is the main theme of the first book; it is a metonymy that stands for fellowship. There are at least three compositions in Genesis which show how difficult it is for the participants to realise Mitmenschlichkeit. The very first attempt leads to fratricide: Genesis 4.

3. What about measures or figures in biblical poetry? On the basis of the 148 poems we find in the Psalter, plus the 40 poems in the book of Job, I can report the following results. There is no meter. However, counting remains indispensable:

a) The verse (i.e. the full poetic line) has two or three short parts (cola), and the same figures two or three recur on the higher text levels: The strophe contains either two or three verses, and the stanza has two or three strophes.

b) A full syllable count in ca. 220 poems (sc. 148 Psalms, 40 poems in Job and more than 30 in the Book of Proverbs) leads to the following totals: The Psalter has 2695 verses with 45.723 syllables, and the book of Job has 1005 verses with 16.630 syllables. The sum of these two books: 3700 verses with 62.353 syllables.

c) There are many interesting details; they prove that counting is productive. Here is just one: the Psalms 1, 3, 11, and 14 have 144 syllables each; here we recognize a fascinating square of ... the holy number twelve.

4. Holy numbers (we knew already) are 7 and 12; the number 40 is prestigious as well. The 144 which occurs four times in the start of the Psalter hides a new surprise: In three cases the number of cola is 18, so that the average length of the colon is a perfect integer, the figure eight. The very first Psalm puts its 144 syllables in 16 cola, so that it is the precise integer nine which measures colon length in this poem.

The observation of colon length is relevant for the entire collection of Psalms. No less than 83 poems – which is more than half of all the 148 poems in the Psalter – score an exactly whole number as the average number of syllables per colon: This integer is a seven (in 21 poems), an eight (in 41 poems) or a nine (in 18 Pss.). And so it becomes clear that the middlemost measure of colon length, the precise eight, is prominent. This gives an extra dimension to the story of the most famous king and poet. Here are a few examples of the number eight as the central normative figure:

Ps. 76 25 cola with 200 syllables, and once more:

Ps. 99 25 cola with 200 syllables

Ps. 104 80 cola with 640 syllables

Ps. 37 90 cola with 720 syllables

5. The measures for strophes in Job are the same as those in the Psalter: S or L. The strophe is either short, that is two verses, or long, that is three verses; and so, I am used to speak of S- or L-strophes. However, right at the beginning we'll find a remarkable exception: It is Job 3 which increases both of these measures with one.

The book of Job has 232 short strophes and 180 long ones; so together there are 412 strophes. Are these figures important for you? The next count offers a surprising answer. It is the way these units are distributed over the hero and the five persons he will meet:

<i>The total of 412 strophes:</i>	<i>206</i>	<i>206</i>
	<i>Job</i>	<i>five speakers</i>

And this is not all; the 206 strophes spoken by Job are neatly distributed, in short and long ones: 103 S and 103 L.

Now I get back to the holy numbers 7 and 8. Seven times eight is 56; is that important? Yes; the proper name Iyob occurs 56 times in the entire book, and this quantity creates echoes, so to speak:

- There are 560 words in chs. 12-14 (a long speech by Job).
- There are 560 syllables in Elifaz's answer = ch. 15.
- The first person singular for Job gets 56 morphemes in the next poem, ch. 16.
- In the poetry at the end, 40:2-5 plus 42:2-6 (halves of one poem), speaker Job gets 56 words.

6. The longest poem, chapter 31, has 672 syllables, and that means 7 x 8 x 12 syllables. They appear in 40 verses which have a total of 84 (! read seven times twelve!) cola. In the meantime there is a brilliant chiasm: "the count of my steps" x "my steps counted" in position / colon eight after the start and before the end; see v. 4b and v. 37a.

NB. This beautiful case of mirroring could function well as the title for the Bible book as a whole! By the way: my counting efforts seem maniacal, but now appear to have been anticipated (and surpassed) by the poet himself ...

7a. Here is a survey of all the chapters: The central mass of texts in the book of Job consists of three big rounds of discussion between Job and his three friends who take turns while firing at him:

Round 1 Elifaz chs. 4-5 / Job ch. 6-7 / Bildad ch. 8 / Job chs. 9-10 / Zofar ch. 11 / Job 12-14
 Round 2 Elifaz ch. 15 / Job chs. 16-17 / Bildad ch. 18 / Job ch. 19 / Zofar ch. 20 / Job ch. 21
 Round 3 Elifaz ch. 22 / Job chs. 23-24 / Bildad ch. 25 / Job chs. 26-27

Conclusions (A) Job 28 (on Wisdom) and Job 29-31 (Climax I); one more friend, Elihu chs. 32-37. After all this there is (B) a kind of outcome, being Climax II: God chs. 38-39 / God chs. 40-41, after which we find Job's last words in 42:2-6.

All these speeches are verse. They are kept in a narrative frame, which we find in chapters 1:1-2:13 and in chapters 42:7-17: and so, start and finish of the book of Job form a prose envelope. The words of this frame border on another frame: Job's very first poem (ch. 3) stands for deepest desperation, as it refers to his birth with words of curse and a death wish, and in his last speech (42:2-7) he takes a deep breath and dares to use the word consolation, in an attempt to accept survival.

7b. There are many more forms of numerical perfection throughout the book of Job. They are all noted down in vol. IV of my series Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible, and summing up all of them would be boring, so I limit myself to a few examples (source: p. 406). Have a look:

Chapters	together have	this number of syllables
11 + 31	125 cola	328 + 672 sy = 1000
12 + 38	125 cola	398 + 602 sy = 1000
23 + 30	100 cola	260 + 540 sy = 800
23 + 39	100 cola	260 + 540 sy = 800

Note how these seven (!) poems, all of them, score the precise integer eight per colon.

8. Job is the one who opens the body of poetry with chapter 3; this very first poem receives a unique outline, as we see when we remember the standard measures in biblical verse: the poems have strophes consisting of two or three full poetic lines. Here, in chapter 3, the poet applies a unique measure; he expands both the S- and L-units with one extra verse. Perhaps he does so in honour of his hero.

Job himself is the first speaker here. Chapter 3 has seven strophes which show a consistent alternation of length: SL / SLS / LS, i.e. 3+4 / 3+4+3 / 4+3 verses, which means two totals, twelve verses in S and again twelve in L !

And so, we get this overview: The measures of the four S-units: 12 verses / 26 cola / 97 words / 211 syllables; and the three L-strophes have this: 12 verses / 26 cola / 95 words / 213 syllables.

Now have a look at the word counts: They play here with 2 x 96, and we recognize the figure 96 as twelve times eight. And so the average number of words per full poetic line is exactly eight. The totals for verses and syllables can be divided easily by the normative eight as well.

The central eight appears right away: The first strophe has eight cola. These lines stem directly from his bitter state of mind, and they launch the power and the rage of a curse at once. Let's listen to the start of his lament:

Perish the day on which I was born
and the night that said: 'A man is conceived!'
That day – let it be darkness;
may God above not seek it
and may no light shine upon it.
Let darkness and thick gloom reclaim it,
clouds settle upon it,
blackness of day terrify it! (Job 3:3-5)

9. The friends have an easy time, they think, for the time being. They follow an iron-clad logic, which runs like this: a) It is the hand of God that has stricken our friend, b) this means punishment, c) the reason of His intervention can only be that Job has committed severe sins, and so d) he should now confess without any delay how he has misbehaved. The most glaring quality of all their comments and stabs is the total absence of trust and empathy for the suffering man whom they call their friend.

Here are some of their strophes; Elifaz is first in ch. 4:17-21:

*"Is a mortal more righteous than God?
Is a man purer than his maker?
He does not trust even his own slaves,
and ascribes error to his angels."*

*"How much less those who dwell in clay houses,
whose foundations are in dust!
They are crushed like a moth,
between dawn and dusk they are shattered,
unnoticed, they perish forever.
Is not their tent-cord pulled out?
They die, and not with wisdom."*

Bildad starts his first speech in ch. 8 with vv. 2-7:

*How long will you prattle like this?
The utterances of your mouth are a gusty wind!
Will El pervert justice
and will Shaddai pervert what is right?
If your sons have sinned against him,
he dispatched them into their crime.*

*But if you personally seek El
and beg for mercy from Shaddai,
If you are pure and upright,
he will surely rouse himself for you
and bring peace to your righteous dwelling.
Your beginning may seem small,
but your end will be very great.*

In ch. 11 the second stanza of Zofar has this (vv. 7-11) :

*Do you want to find the mystery of God?
Can you find the limit of Shaddai?
Higher than heaven – what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol – what can you know?
Longer than the earth is its measure
and broader than the sea.*

Talking is easy for the friends. They show no empathy, and they feel certain that a) Job's pain is inflicted by God, b) God is a rational person, so that c) Job's suffering must be pain and punishment for committing sins, and so d) Job should confess those sins, to begin with. Harshness, and zero empathy, on the basis of their specific image of God (a projection of their own callousness

and total lack of solidarity). All this lands with Job as a hammer blow, he won't find understanding or comfort from his friends.

10a. The chapters 3-27 offer three rounds of painful sparring; a desperate Job versus his harsh friends. The chapters that follow, a single one plus a threesome, do not bring any solution, but they are exceptional. All four are spoken by the hero, and they follow an unexpected form of organisation: first a philosophical treatise on Wisdom by Job, then an exceptional triad of chapters kept together in a baffling dialectic.

10b. The Hebrew Bible contains hundreds of good poems, which cover an astonishing wide range in terms of genre. Job 28 has 28 verses with a meditation on Wisdom, and while Job does the talking, the poet has adopted the stance of a philosopher. He presents a sophisticated analysis of knowledge and gives his hero the floor to present this in a brilliant poem. Here are the dimensions of a veritable epistemology:

	<i>animals</i>	<i>people</i>	<i>God</i>
<i>observation</i>	+	+	+
<i>knowledge</i>	-	+	+
<i>wisdom</i>	-	-	+

This poem is a splendid piece on mining. It opens with no less than five strophes (with 24 cola) on digging, and there are shining results (stanza I: SL + SSL, stanza II: LLS). Finding costly metals, however, cannot be the answer to the quest for wisdom. The poet sounds almost desperate at the start of stanza III (three L-strophes, vv. 20-28):

But Wisdom – where does she come from?
 And where is the place of understanding?
 She is hidden from the eyes of all living
 and from the birds of heaven she is concealed.
 Abaddon and Death say,
 'what we heard of her is hearsay.' (vv. 20-22)

When he made a rule for the rain
 and the way for the thunderstorm,
 then he saw her and gauged her;
 he established her and searched her out,
 and he said to man,
 'Truly, awe of the Lord – that is wisdom
 and to shun evil – that is understanding!' (vv. 26-28)

In the face of this impressive analysis turned into poetry, it can hardly be a surprise that the numerical offers some striking figures. The poem consists of 448 syllables that can be taken as seven times the square of the normative eight (7 x 64).

All these syllables appear in 28 verses, so that the precise average of syllables per verse is 16 – the double of eight. The three L-strophes in vv. 9-17 have 144 syllables, a famous square, and the poem as a whole has 18 cola with the length of eight syllables each, so that we find one more group of 144. (We remember the proper name 'Iyob occurs 7 x 8 times in 'his' book). One final surprise: when we multiply his number 56 with the prestigious eight, we reach the 448 of this chapter once more!

11. In the chapters 29-31 the writer transforms into a dialectic thinker. The chapters 29 and 30 offer a radical contrast of fortune and misfortune; they function as thesis and antithesis, in the spirit of Hegel, the founding father of dialectical philosophy. In chapter 29 Job's life has found its zenith, he is blessed in every way: with family, the authoritative voice in the city council, being

pious, etc. Chapter 30 delivers a radical and horrendous opposition: Job is made a wreck, physically as well as socially.

12a. Chapter 31, then, is the climax of the Hegelian triad. It is not only the longest poem of the book, with its 40 verses, but it also wants to reach beyond the enormous clash between 29, the chapter of fortune, and 30, the chapter of disaster and bereavement; chapter 31 manages to bring closure to the triad. Job is on his way to beat all that is negative or threatening, and his tenacious defence will win the day. The Hebrew Bible has hundreds of poems, and I would like to put Job chapter 31 in the top five.

What, then, is so special here? Job manages to rise above the level of fighting. He simply sticks to his values. He says no to his precarious situation and simply dismisses the false claim that he must have committed grave sins. Moreover: he wants to limit his verse to the positive. He presents the full range of his moral and religious tenets, as if nothing has happened.

12b. The special position of this climax and the unique quality of Job's defence can also be found when we look at the numerical. In honour of his hero and as the master of his craft, the poet has left his signature on all levels of chapter 31, and so we need to count verses, cola, and syllables.

a) This longest poem of the book has 40 verses; a prestigious figure.

b) There are 84 cola; as we have seen the result of seven times twelve.

c) When we multiply these 84 with the central normative figure in colometry, eight, we get 672; lo and behold, that is the total number of syllables in this chapter. This sum then has brought the three figures of prestige together: $7 \times 8 \times 12$.

d) Because these 672 syllables occur in 84 cola, the poet has put the precise integer eight to work as the average number for colon length. King David would have liked that!

e) At this point I'd like to remind you how many times the personal name 'Iyob occurs in 'his' book: 56 times, which is the product of seven times eight.

f) Winding down, I'd like to point at a delicacy to be found at start and finish. It is an amazing chiasmus that connects v. 4b and v. 37a. In v. 4b Job says about God, "all my steps He numbers", and in v. 37a he says: "the number of my steps I would tell him." What a delicacy: both clauses are colon number eight from the ends, and filling in the chiasmus, they work closely together. While the subject changes, both mention the same job: counting. This combination is attractive enough to suggest a proposal: could "counting of steps" not be an attractive title for this entire book of poetry, as an expression that reveals what is going on all the time?

13a. Skipping the six poems of the section Elihu, chs. 32-37.

Elihu is the fourth friend, and he has nothing new to report. His thinking follows the lines we know from Elifaz, Bildad and Zophar: Job's pain points at God's hand, it must mean punishment, and that in turn implies Job must have sinned gravely. To us, readers, who are in sympathy with the hero, this is a superfluous voice which I decide to skip. It is time to listen to the great supervisor in heaven.

13b. The chapters 38-41 are four big poems that are all spoken by God himself. Can we expect much content, and can we expect a surprise? The title "answer from the tempest" sounds promising, if not threatening! Paradoxically, the great majority of verses in these four chapters consists of rhetorical questions, spoken to Job with an intimidating continuity.

The size of the speeches offers a surprise. The measures of these chapters are the opposite of unique; they seem to bring us back to the beginning, where Job, the hero of the book, was the speaker of the very first poem:

<i>Job 3 has</i>	<i>24 verses, 52 cola, 192 words in seven strophes</i>	<i>+ Leviathan in v. 8</i>
<i>Job 40 (v. 4 sqq)</i>	<i>26 verses, 52 cola, 176 words in twelve strophes</i>	<i>+ Behemoth vv. 15-32</i>
<i>Job 41 has</i>	<i>26 verses, 52 cola, 176 words in twelve strophes</i>	<i>+ Behemoth vv. 1-26</i>

and when we consider the figure 176, I am tempted to read this as 22 times eight. The 192 words of ch. 3 are 24 times eight!

The chapters 38 and 39 are a pair. In them, we can find exactly 40 interrogative particles which open that amount of questions. The next pair (chs. 40 and 41) adds another 20 questions. In this way God seems to exert a maximum of pressure on his target, the mortal Job. Here are a few quotes, in order to give you an impression of all this questioning by God:

*Where were you when I founded the earth?
Tell me if you have understanding!
Who set its measurements? Surely you know!
Or who stretched the line over it? (38:4-5)*

*Do you know the rules of heaven?
Can you impose its order on earth?
Can you raise your voice to the clouds,
so that a flood of waters may cover you?
Can you send out lightning bolts, so that they go
and say to you, 'here we are!?' (38:33-35)*

*Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars,
spreads its wings to the south?
Is it at your command that the eagle mounts
and builds its nest on high? (39:26-27)*

And so, God goes on and on, in a barrage of questions that pin Job down as a tiny mortal. No wonder our hero answers in 40:4 with "Look, I am small; what could I reply to You?" Much later (in 42:5) he will say:

*"By the hearing of the ear I had heard of You,
but now my eye has seen You."*

14. The verse that follows, 42:6, is Job's last answer. Its final colon (42:6b) gets a horrendous mistreatment in all the standard translations I have seen, in five European languages. Whether you consult *La Bible de Jérusalem* or the so-called *Verdeutschung* by Martin Buber, the *Nueva Biblia Española* (by Luis Alonso Schökel and company) or other national versions in English, Dutch or French -- all of them mistreat the last colon hopelessly by rendering the verb *nicham* with "I regret". This terrible translation is in a hopeless contradiction to the entire book of Job; it belies the portrait of the hero himself who all the time has resisted the cruel treatment he has undergone and at the same time consistently defended his innocence.

And so, what then is the correct rendering of 42:6b? Two recent authors have understood that the verb *nicham* points at consolation; the British scholar David Clines in 2011, in vol. 3 (2011) of his Job commentary which is part of the series *Word Biblical Commentary*, and a bit earlier a lady from Belgium, Françoise Mies, in her book *L'espérance de Job*, Leuven 2006 (in the series BETHL no. 193). David Clines, then, renders v. 6 as "So I submit, and I accept consolation for my dust and ashes."

Both authors have failed to mention me; I published the correct translation already in 2004, in vol. IV of my series *Major Poems* etc. Here is the rather literal rendering I gave of vv. 5-6:

*"By the hearing of the ear I had heard of You, but now my eye has seen You.
Therefore I quit, and I am consoled over dust and dirt."*

This rendering of the verb *nicham* with 'consolation' is perfectly in line with the verse on 'the ear' and 'my eye'. Seeing has an immediacy that cannot be matched by the ear. Much more than listening, it points at a real meeting. In this way, the entire mass of poetry now has got a special and dignified climax: a true encounter, painted in physical terms. Finally, Job has got what he wanted. As verse 5b had it, in simpler words: "my eye has seen You."

15. *The closing prose: a few points.*

The verb “to console” is a keyword in this Bible book, occurring nine times. [Note: see 2:11 (the poet) – 6:10 (Job) – 7:13 (Job) – 16:2 (Job) – 21:2,34 (Job) – 29:25 (Job) – 42:6 (Job) – 42:11 (the poet)]. N-ch-m appears in both ends of the prose envelope (i.e. the writer’s report) and in this way contributes to an inclusion for the book as a whole. The verb is spoken seven times by Job himself! Is consolation possible or available? In the start of the book and during the entire poetry section there was an unrelenting no, but in the final chapter (as we just have seen) the hero himself says yes, completing the inclusion. It is such a long time that he languished for compassion; but now he got it, finally.

After 42:6 (Job’s very last words) the writer resumes his task as narrator and finishes the drama with his prose, in vv. 7-17. The friends who were visiting Job and in vain tried to give him any consolation (2:11), appear again and this time manage to console him. The key word, the verb nachem, has recurred (v.11) and in this way supports the inclusion of the book as a whole.

Postscriptum:

I dedicate this lecture to the memory of my mother, who in Batavia (Java 1942) weighed 63 kilogram, but in the autumn of 1945, when we could leave ‘our’ Japanese concentration camp, was 36 kilogram.

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