

A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK OF JOB, BASED ON JOB 42:5.6

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And that's supposed to be it?

By the hearing of the ear I had heard of you,
but now my eye has seen you.
Therefore I quit,
and I'm consoled over dust and dirt.¹ (Job 42:5.6)

Job, who according to the judgment of the all-knowing narrator and the narrating character of God was 'blameless and upright, one who feared God and shunned evil'², had experienced a series of catastrophes. First he lost all his property, then his children and finally his physical integrity through boils from head to foot. Job is sitting in the ashes, scratching himself with a shard. He has encountered more suffering than one single human being can bear. Why? Job doesn't complain, accepts what happens. His three friends come to comfort him, they are silent with him. But then the complaint breaks through with great vehemence! Why was I born if such a fate befalls me? I curse the day of my birth, the night in which I was conceived! The grave would be preferable, there I would be at rest, would be an equal among equals! And now the friends also break their silence, confront Job by saying that after all he must have become guilty of something, that he must have sinned, otherwise such a fate would not have befallen him. So there is only one thing to do, he must admit his sins and confess them to God. Then the perfect, almighty and sublime God, who trusts neither his own creatures nor his angels, will appear before him as a just judge and perhaps grant him forgiveness, and only then! – Job wouldn't dream of it. He knows of his integrity, his innocence, his purity. And he is willing to stand up to this to the end! He can't get any further with his friends. They maintain their point of view that Job must confess his guilt. There is only one instance that can justify him, that can answer the question Why – God himself! And so Job challenges God: Once upon a time I was a wealthy and respected man, prosperous, with integrity and with a flawless reputation – then I lost everything, fell into the deepest depths, am reviled and despised – now show me where I have sinned! Where did I ever go against your commandments, where did I commit adultery or act disloyally against my wife, where did I sin as a landlord, where did I sin against the poor, the hungry, toward those who needed my help, where against the foreigner or against enemies, where did I behave dismissively, heartlessly or

¹ Original translation J.P. Fokkelman, *Het boek Job in vorm. Een literaire vertaling met toelichtingen*, Amsterdam 2009, p. 129:

Van horen zeggen had ik van U gehoord, maar nu heeft mijn oog U gezien.
Darum heb ik er genog van, maar ik ben getroost over stof en as.

English translation by J.P. Fokkelman, *The Book of Job in Form. A literary translation with commentary*, Leiden / Boston 2012, p. 193.

² Job 1:1 in the translation by J.P.Fokkelman, *The Book of Job in Form*, p. 35.

unjustly, where was I dishonest – You all-knowing observer, tell me! I challenge you to a legal dispute! And if I have sinned, may I be given the just punishment! Tell me! Tell me!

Who would not be curious about the answer? (Will there be any answer?) Who would not wish that Job would finally be shown to be right? Who would not wish that his flawlessness, his integrity, his fear of God, his shunning evil would finally be given the recognition that Job deserves? And from whom could this justification, this recognition come other than from God?

We have to wait another six chapters. A fourth friend may also speak, but that doesn't bring Job's case any further either. And then HE appears – in the tempest – a great film! And yes, he speaks to Job, he answers him – with a volley of counter questions: Where were you when I created the earth? Can you send the ocean into its boundaries? Are you the lord of time? Did you ever walk around in the depths of the primal flood or were you at the gates of death? Do you know the path to light, the place of darkness? Can you give orders to the weather or the stars? Are the wild animals prepared to serve you? Is it you who established the life of the animals with wisdom? And finally: can you tame *Behemot*, the monster of chaos? – Is God making his escape here by simply turning the roles around and making the challenger into the one challenged? Doesn't God know how to help himself in any other way?

I must admit that as a reader, I am pretty irritated when reading this for the first time. What kind of an answer is this? Where are Job's justification, his recognition? Does God even take Job seriously? And then Job's final word – he is satisfied with this for the reader at first sight so unsatisfying and alienating appearance by God, Job even feels consoled – and that was supposed to be it? Where is the consolation in this? – Or am I lacking in openness for what happened here?

All the same, Job doesn't take anything back³, he does not revoke or reject anything⁴, does not declare himself to be guilty⁵, he does not do penance in dust and ashes⁶, no, nothing of all this, he remains faithful to himself – this is a first consolation for the reader! – For centuries, translations in the tradition of the Vulgata⁷ have enticed readers onto the wrong track by always showing Job at the end of the book as a repentant sinner, entirely according to the expectations of traditional Christian theology. Ultimately, the human being can above all and exclusively only be a sinner before God – this is an absolutized and (unfortunately) one-sided core of the traditional Christian image of the human being. Didn't Job's friends also think like this? Are they and not Job to be shown as in the right? What a scandal! And if at the end is established what one believed to know already in the beginning, why continue to read?

When they translate Job 42:6, the old Syriac translation, the *Peshitta*, as well as Aramaic targums show different paths⁸ that should be decisive already because of their proximity in space, time and language to the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Following such traces and based on the careful examination of words⁹, Jan Fokkelman translates *Salmā*, *æm'as* not as 'I reject' with objects not to be found in the text, but as 'I quit' without object, and *yTmjj hl nichamti* not as 'I repent', but as 'I'm

³ This is how *Salmā*, is translated in the *New Jerusalem Bible* or in the translation by the 1951 Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap Bible (2005).

⁴ These translations of *Salmā*, can be found in the *Einheitsübersetzung* (1980 and 2016) and in the *Elberfelder Bibel* (2006).

⁵ Translation by Luther (1984) for *Salmā*. The Luther Bible as revised in 2017 translates, 'Therefore I give up'.

⁶ In the German-speaking regions, *yTmjj hl* is translated for example in the *Eberfelder Bibel* (2006) or by Luther (2017) in this way; corresponding examples from the English-speaking regions can be found in the *English Standard Version*, *King James Bible*, or *New Jerusalem Bible*, examples of translation in the Netherlands in the *Statenvertaling* or *NBC* 1951.

⁷ Latin wording: 'idcirco ipse me reprehendo et ago paenitentiam in favilla et cinere'.

⁸ The *Peshitta* translates *Salmā*, as 'eštoq – I shall be silent'; J.P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible*, Vol IV, Assen 2004, p. 331.

⁹ Vgl. J.P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems IV*, pp. 325-331.

consoled'. This translation opens up the possibility to look more closely after all: What exactly happened through the appearance of God, through God's answer in rhetorical questions that don't seem to be at all a fitting reaction to Job's challenge, that cause Job to be satisfied and to feel consoled?

The answer is as astonishing as seemingly simple and can be found in the previous verse 5, 'my eye has seen you' – Job has ENCOUNTERED God! In contrast to the friends whose knowledge of God is fixed and is based on theoretical knowledge, Job has had a living *experience* that changes his perspective, that corrects his previous *knowledge* of God, which was more theoretical, 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear'. But I have to ask some more: What kind of an experience is this? What is experience?

Emphasizing the significance of experience in the faith process is a continuous thread in Edward Schillebeeckx's theological writings. To begin with, faith experiences are no different in their structure from general experiences.¹⁰ The subject who experiences and the object experienced are thereby in interaction: I situate everything that is there for me to experience in an already existing frame of interpretation that is made up of experiences already had and acquired knowledge. On the other hand, what I experience expands my frame of interpretation and possibly corrects it. Learning through experience only occurs when this interaction can take place. On the part of the experiencing subject, this requires a fundamental openness and readiness to expose the experiences already had and the acquired knowledge to expansion and possibly correction through what is experienced.

How this happens can be shown clearly through a little story with the title 'Joke' that Anne Frank wrote:

Joke stands in front of the open window in her room and deeply inhales the fresh air. She's hot and it does her tearful face good to get a little air.

Her eyes wander higher and higher until they finally linger to look at the stars and the moon.

'Oh', Joke thinks, 'I can't go on, I can't even be sad anymore. Paul has deserted me, I'm alone now, maybe forever, but I can't go on, I can't do anything anymore, I only know that I'm in despair.' And while Joke looks, always only looks at the nature which this evening reveals itself very beautifully to her, she becomes quiet. While one gust of wind after the other brushes through the trees in front of the house, while the sky is dark and the stars hide behind big, thick clouds that in the light of the clouds look like balls of blotting paper which take on all possible forms, Joke suddenly feels that she isn't in despair at all, that she still can do something, and that no one can take away her own happiness, that which she herself feels. 'No one can do that', she whispers without being conscious of it, 'not even Paul'.

After Joke has stood in front of the window for an hour she is healed, she is still sad, yes, but no longer in despair, and everyone who just looks at nature long and deeply enough will heal him- and herself of all despair exactly like Joke.¹¹

What happened here? Not much at first sight, one is almost inclined quickly to lay the little story aside. Joke is sad and in despair, her friend has deserted her. At the end she feels consoled, she is healed, she can again meet the world full of confidence and self-confidence. The story allows us to take a look at how this transformation came about. Joke exposes herself – with all that she is and brings with her – to an experience, nature lets itself be experienced. And Joke opens herself to nature that is so much bigger than she is, than her small world, than her pain. She opens herself – with all that she is and brings with her – but without expectations. Thus, nature can 'work'. The encounter with the beauty of nature that is so much bigger than she is herself finally brings her back to herself, to her indestructable foundation. No intervention of a '*Deus ex machina*' who would bring back her friend changes her situation for the good, her openness is the pre-condition for the transformation, for the healing that she experiences. The end of the story suggests that this is about an experience that Joke has for the first time, that is surprising, that both changes her per-

¹⁰ Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, 'Erfahrung und Glaube', p. 80, in: *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft* 25, pp. 74-116.

¹¹ A. Frank, *Verhaaltjes, en gebeurtenissen uit het achterhuis*, Amsterdam 1982, p.119.

spective and determines in a lasting way her dealing with despair and suffering because of a fateful blow. A new entry into her frame of interpretation, a lasting experience. And at the same time an experience that touches deeper dimensions than an every-day learning experience.

Other than her creator and the story's author Anne Frank, Joke doesn't interpret her experience. Like Joke, Anne Frank also doesn't simply stay looking at nature; she too experiences a force working in it. She gives this deeper dimension of reality a name – God. In her diary she noted on February 23, 1944 'Reflections to Peter':

Here we miss much, very much, and for a long time too. I miss it too, just like you. You mustn't think that I'm talking about external things, we are wonderfully provided with that here. No, I mean the internal things. Just like you, I long for freedom and air, but I believe that for these privations we have received compensation in abundance. I mean internal compensation. This morning as I sat in front of the window and looked precisely and well at God and at nature, I was happy, nothing but happy. And Peter, so long as there is this inner happiness, happiness over nature, health and wealth and a lot more, so long as one carries this in oneself, one will become happy over and over again.

Wealth, recognition, everything one can lose, but the happiness in one's own heart can only be covered over, and so long as you live, it will make you happy over and over again.

When you are alone and unhappy, try when it's good weather to look from the attic to the sky. So long as you can look at the sky without fear, that long you will know that you are pure inside and that you will again be happy.¹²

An experience in which a deeper dimension of reality reveals itself / opens itself – here with Anne Frank the experience of God when seeing the sky – Edward Schillebeeckx calls 'disclosure experience'.¹³ The surface of that which becomes accessible in a disclosure experience can be perceived by every human being: the sky at night, the wind that brushes through the trees, the clouds with their special forms, but also the friendly smile of a person whom I meet. These phenomena can be objectified, which is to say, they allow themselves to be objectively described. But for some, something more than becomes accessible, something that goes beyond what can be perceived objectively, that can be grasped empirically. Thereby both the experiences already had and the collected knowledge of the experiencing subject as well as his/her present situation and the openness for that which lets itself be experienced play a part. Such an experience of a deeper dimension of reality also always brings the experiencing subject to him- or herself: While seeing the nightly sky and the clouds, Joke recognizes/experiences that no one can take her own happiness, that which she herself feels, from her. While looking out of the window at the sky, Anne Frank experiences such an inner happiness as something that carries. Joke's or Anne Frank's experienced insights, those gained through experience can no longer be objectified, but perhaps they can be understood inter-subjectively. Others can mirror their own experiences there, when such experiences are shared. For this, a language that doesn't objectify is necessary, Edward Schillebeeckx speaks of an 'evocative faith language'.¹⁴ This is a language that calls forth something, that activates the experience already had, that makes new insights, other perspectives possible – the language of narrative and of poetry.

In the film 'American Beauty'¹⁵, Ricky, one of the five persons around the protagonist and narrator Lester, tries to share such a disclosure experience with his girlfriend Jane. In connection with the search for beauty, the film asks from the perspective of the narrator and the five persons surrounding him what is really worth seeking in life, what carries in life. Ricky collects beauty with his video camera – and experiences therein a deeper dimension of reality. On their way home together, he tells Jane about a frozen homeless woman on the edge of the street whom he filmed.

¹² A. Frank, *Diary*, Version (in German) by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler. From the Dutch to German by Mirjam Pressler, Frankfurt 1992, p. 193.

¹³ Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus. Die Geschichte von einem Lebenden*, Freiburg i. Br. 1975, p. 647. Original: *Jezus, het verhaal van een levende*, Bloemendaal 1982 (Eerste druk 1974), p. 601. The following explanations regarding disclosure experience are based on the reflections by Schillebeeckx.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *American Beauty*, USA 1999, Directed by Sam Mendes. The film drama was awarded with five Oscars.

Why would you film that? – Because it was amazing. – What’s amazing about it? – When you see something like that, it’s like God is looking right at you, just for a second, and if you are careful, you can look right back. – And what do you see? – Beauty.

Jane’s curious questions motivate Ricky to seek a path that speaks, to communicate this dimension that made itself accessible to him in gazing upon every-day phenomena that he like Anne Frank calls ‘God’. He refers back to his video films, which for him are a source of memory, and shows the most beautiful that he has ever filmed. What can be seen is a white paper bag on the sidewalk, which the wind whirls back and forth together with a few dried autumn leaves in front of a red brick wall. The phenomenon’s surface can be grasped with the camera – a bag in the wind. Everybody can see this. The surface is equivocal. The camera images alone would not be enough. But they inspire Ricky to his narrative that brings the images on the surface to speak. Camera images then call forth language images and make available what had become accessible to him. The objectifiable and the non-interchangeable subjective side come together.

And this bag was ... just dancing with me, like a little kid begging me to play with it, for 15 minutes. That’s the day I realized that there was ... this entire life behind things ... and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid – ever!¹⁶

Like Joke and Anne Frank, Ricky comes into contact with a deeper dimension of reality – an experience that changes his perspective on life fundamentally, that from now on is determinative and that brings him to himself. And he communicates himself in his illustrative and interpretative narrative images of the film images – and finds an echo in his conversation partner.

Back to Job. Job had a disclosure experience.

By the hearing of the ear I had heard of you
but now my eye has seen you. (Job 42:5)

Job *experienced* God as *real* when he himself saw him, and this corrects his previous theoretical second-hand knowledge from hearsay – it changes his perspective on God, on himself, on life. But God does not show himself as the one whom Job expects from his knowledge, and Job is open enough to encounter this God in his otherness. Job expects an answer to his urgent questions, a justification of God, if what has happened to him came from God, he expects an advocate for his cause. But God encounters him as the Creator. Thus Job sees himself in God’s counter questions as placed before the whole of reality, before creation that is so much greater than he himself, his small life, his pain. Job exposes himself to this, God speaks for two chapters about the creation that no human being can fathom in its deepest depths, and two chapters more about the pacification of the powers of chaos that no human being can put in their place. Job opens himself, Job hears. The readers are also invited to hear, to open themselves, to go along with this process, to mirror experiences, to correct expectations. In the end, Job does not deny himself by confessing to being a sinner and thereby bowing to the demands of his friends and of traditional theological expectations. In the end, Job bows solely before his Creator and finds to himself – in his reality as creature:

Therefore I quit,
and I’m consoled over dust and dirt. (Job 42:6)

And then in accepting his reality as creature – dust and ashes refer back to the second creation narrative – there is consolation! *This* was it – no more, but also no less!

The Book of Job is narrative, is poetry – evocative faith language, Edward Schillebeeckx would say. It thus offers more than every theoretical treatise on dealing with suffering. The readers are given the possibility to go with a process of experience and to seek their own place. Empty spaces leave

¹⁶ The film character Ricky’s discourse. The whole narrative in the original: ‘It was one of those days where it’s a minute away from snowing ... and there was this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it. Right? And this bag was ... just dancing with me, like a little kid begging me to play with it, for 15 minutes. That’s the day I realized that there was ...this entire life behind things ... and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid – ever!’

room for asking further questions, spaces that can be filled with deepened reading in dialog with one's own life experience. Images activate one's own experiences, insight reaches other layers than just the intellect.

And by the way, with the protagonist's wise closing words we are not yet at the end. Once again, the narrator speaks in order to playfully serve the readers in their expectations that were previously so vehemently thwarted – with a winking fairy tale ending. Now everything happens for which we had hoped. First of all, God justifies Job in the face of his friends. For they only spoke *about* God, but not *to*¹⁷ God in the right way like Job. (And with my inner eye I now see all the theologians and biblical scholars who wish to follow tradition because it is the tradition ...) The friends are told to bring burnt offerings for themselves and to request Job's intercession for them. God will accept his request – complete rehabilitation! And after his intercession for his friends, Job receives the double of everything that he had lost; his relatives and people he knew come to him in complete sympathy. God blesses Job's later life more than his earlier one, and he sees children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. End good, everything good? – Job names his third daughter *Keren-Happuach* – 'little powder jar'¹⁸ or 'little makeup pot'. Isn't that too much? You don't feel taken seriously? Again an expectation thwarted! In the end there is still yet another small, modest revelation: Possibly the matter's seriousness is to be found in humour ...

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¹⁷ For the translation of Job 42:7 cf. Fokkelman, *The Book of Job in Form*, p. 319f.

¹⁸ Cf. Fokkelman, *The Book of Job in Form*, p. 320.