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In Job 1:20, Job performs four actions: 1) he rends his garment; 2) he shears his head; 3) he falls to the ground; and 4) he prostrates himself. The third of these can be read either (with the first two) as an act of mourning or (with the last) as an act of worship. I suggest that this is a deliberate literary choice: the poetic technique of Janus parallelism. Since Janus parallelism has already been demonstrated to be both frequent in the book of Job and significant for its meaning, this unexpected Janus parallelism in the prose portion of the book confirms that those chapters are not an early survival but a creation of the author of the book as a whole.

Keywords

Job, poetry, Janus parallelism, Cyrus Gordon, Avi Hurvitz, Scott Noegel

Disciplines

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The third of these can be read either (with the first two) as an act of mourning or (with the last) as an act of worship. I suggest that this is a deliberate literary choice: the poetic technique of Janus parallelism. Since Janus parallelism has already been demonstrated to be both frequent in the book of Job and significant for its meaning, this unexpected Janus parallelism in the prose portion of the book confirms that those chapters are not an early survival but a creation of the author of the book as a whole.

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“Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped”
(Job 1:20, NRSV).

Immediately after being informed—by the last of four messengers, each of whom arrives on the heels of the last—that his children have died, Job “rises” (whether

literally from a seated position¹ or using the idiom for initiating action is not clarified) and then does four things:

- 1) he rends his garment;
- 2) he shears his head;
- 3) he falls to the ground; and
- 4) he prostrates himself.

The Masoretic punctuation suggests, and most commentators agree, that these four actions fall into two groups. The first two are recognized as demonstrative of mourning, while the second combine to form an act of worship. (Indeed, the final verb in the sentence is generally translated directly as “he worshiped.”) The expression “he fell on his face” presents so little difficulty for understanding that commentators commonly ignore both the phrase and the action entirely.² Those who remark on it do so to point out that the verse shifts here from mourning rituals to acceptance of what has

¹ Amos Hakham, *Job* (Da’at Mikra; Jerusalem, 1970), 11 (Hebrew) understands Job to have been seated on a chair, from which he now rises to lower himself.

² E.g. John Gray, *The Book of Job*, ed. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield, 2010), 130; Norman Whybray, *Job* (Sheffield, 2008), 27; Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (AB 15; Garden City, N.Y., 1965), 15; N. H. Tur-Sinai (H. Torczyner), *The Book of Job: A New Commentary*, rev. ed. (Jerusalem, 1967), 19. Xuan Huong Thi Pham, *Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 302; Sheffield, 1999), quotes the verb but does not explain the nature of the action, somewhat surprising in the context of her study (though her primary focus is on ritual).

happened.³ What Job says in v. 21, immediately following, makes clear that his prostration is indeed an act of religious submission, not one in which he is attempting to conceal his reaction from God, as when Abraham falls on his face in Gen 17:17.⁴

Yet the reader of the book of Job could be pardoned for assuming that falling to the ground was not the beginning of an act of worship—a complete emotional reversal from the symbolically self-destructive acts that preceded it—but a further act of mourning. This is the position of Robert Gordis and it is elaborated at great length by my teacher Mayer Gruber, who clearly demonstrates, in his study of nonverbal communication in the ancient Near East, that sitting on or falling to the ground is a gesture of mourning.⁵ Of the texts cited by Gruber, Josh 7:6 is of particular interest:

³ E.g., Hakham (op. cit.), 11; Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, (OTL; Philadelphia, 1985), 93; Raik Heckl, *Hiob: vom Gottesfürchtigen zum Repräsentanten Israels : Studien zur Buchwerdung des Hiobbuches und zu seinen Quellen* (FAT 70; Tübingen, 2010), 254. The translation and punctuation in NRSV, following the Masoretic punctuation, implicitly make the same point. Anthony R. Ceresko, *Job 29-31 in the Light of Northwest Semitic* (Rome, 1980), 146, points out that *npl* and *ḥwy* are found together already in Ugaritic literature.

⁴ Contra Mayer Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (Rome, 1980), 469-471.

⁵ Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Studies* (New York, 1978), 17; Gruber, *Nonverbal Communication*, 460-479, esp. 464-474; Pham, *Mourning*, 26. David's contrary actions when his son with Bathsheba is dying (not mentioned by Gruber) similarly, though paradoxically, present lying on the ground as a

After three dozen Israelites are killed in the attack on Ai, “Joshua rent his garments and fell on his face to the ground.” (See also Ezek 9:8 and 11:13). Both Gordis and Gruber, however, understand all four of the actions undertaken by Job as acts of mourning; in this (I presume) they follow their teacher H. L. Ginsberg.⁶ I have found only one commentary that recognizes prostration as an act of worship but describes falling on the ground as a third “ritual act of mourning.”⁷ Indeed, some commentaries that mention it do so only to imply that a reader might think so by mistake.⁸ David Clines argues at length against the possibility:

Job’s falling to the ground is not, as Driver points out, “some immediate half-involuntary physical reaction against the distressing news” (contrast 1 Sam 28:20). Unlike the former two mourning rites, whose conventionality cloaks any individual expression of feeling, this third act makes Job’s inner attitude plain.

Falling to the ground (not itself a mourning rite; contra Gordis) and “worshipping” gesture of mourning; note his courtiers’ surprise in 2 Sam 12:21, after the child dies, when David gets up.

⁶ “Job ... performed the usual acts of mourning (1:20), but never a disparaging word about God crossed his lips.” H. L. Ginsberg, “Job, Book of,” *EncJud* 10:112. The comment is unchanged in the 2nd edition of 2007 (11:342), revised by Gruber.

⁷ Samuel E. Balentine, *Job* (Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, Ga., 2006), 56.

⁸ E.g., H. H. Rowley, *Job* (NCB; Greenwood, S. C., 1976), 33: “this was not in despair but in reverence”; Gerald H. Wilson, *Job* (NIBC OT 10; Peabody, Mass., 2007), 26: “He then **fell to the ground** not as another sign of his agony of grief, but **in worship.**”

or “doing obeisance” ... are here the same act of conscious and deliberate piety before God.⁹

Clines is certainly correct that falling to the ground regularly accompanies acts of obeisance, as seen most clearly in the 19 cases where a biblical character “prostrates to the ground” (e.g. Gen 18:2, 1 Kgs 1:23) and especially the five other cases (e.g., Josh 5:14, 2 Sam 14:22) where someone “falls to the ground” and “prostrates,” thus performing both of Job’s second two actions as an act of obeisance. One of these, 2 Sam 1:2, may have shaped the commentators’ perspective on Job 1:20 as well.¹⁰ There, a messenger comes to report to David that Saul is dead. He appears with torn garments and dirt on his head (Job’s actions 1 and 2), approaches David, and falls to the ground and prostrates himself (Job’s actions 3 and 4). Both linguistically and narratively, the gap between these two sets of actions groups action 3, falling to the ground, clearly with action 4, obeisance.

The new commentary by Choon-Leong Seow does not put the psychological hinge in Job 1:20 between actions 2 and 3 or (following the suggestion Cline and Driver argue against, adopted by Balentine) between actions 3 and 4. Rather, crucially, Seow *makes action 3 the hinge*:

⁹ David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20* (Word Biblical Commentary 17; Dallas, 1989), 35. This argument, as Driver’s comment (ICC; New York, 1921, 1:18) makes clear, is directed against our implicit sense that a bent posture and a position low to or on the ground is a natural concomitant of sadness.

¹⁰ My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who called for attention to this verse.

[T]he falling of Job to the ground (1:20) ... leads one to wonder about the nature and consequence of that falling. Is this the end of Job? It is with a sigh of relief, therefore, that one reads at the very end of the sentence “and he worshipped.” Job has been personally spared after all. He falls but only to worship...

The release of narrative tension [in 3:1] ... is similar to what one finds in 1:20, where, following the reports of a series of tragedies that had befallen Job (1:15, 16, 19) one is told that Job fell. Only at the last moment, at the end of the sentence, do we learn that Job had fallen to the ground simply to worship.¹¹

As Seow explains, we first assume that Job’s falling to the ground is an act of mourning, but when we read on we realize it is an act of prayer. This reader response is of course created by the writer’s literary technique, and in this case the literary technique has a name, coined for it by Cyrus Gordon: Janus parallelism.¹² In this technique, a word or expression has one meaning when one reads up to it, but what follows encourages or forces the reader to go back and give a second, different meaning

¹¹ C. L. Seow, *Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Illuminations; Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2013), 261, 318. Clines (op. cit., 33 f.) also notes that the author “has artfully kept us waiting” for Job’s reaction to the news, but does not go so far as to describe our response to this particular phrase.

¹² See C. H. Gordon, “New Directions,” *Bulletin of the American Association of Papyrologists* 15 (1978): 59–66.

to the same word or phrase. In Job 1:20, one might well (as Seow points out) read “he fell to the ground” as a third demonstration of his grief.¹³ But the subsequent physical act and verbal expression of worship suggest that “he fell to the ground” was, instead, the beginning of Job’s acceptance of what had happened.

Scott Noegel devoted an entire monograph to the subject of Janus parallelism in the book of Job, adding a full 49 occurrences of the technique to two that had been identified earlier by other scholars.¹⁴ Yet he did not mention this one; the first he notes (39-41) is in Job 3:23-24. He did not find any Janus parallelisms in chapters 1-2 of the book; one might well not even expect to find them there. After all, those chapters are written in prose, and parallelism—of any kind—is a poetic technique.¹⁵

¹³ The commentators who argue against this in fact demonstrate that it is a reader’s possible reaction to the verse.

¹⁴ Scott B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job* (JSOTS 223; Sheffield, 1996). See further Noegel, “Janus Parallelism,” in the article “Polysemy,” *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Brill Online, 2015), and the references there. My thanks to him for his helpful comments on this paper.

¹⁵ Noegel (*ibid.*, 30) notes a Janus parallelism pointed out by Walter Herzberg in Ruth 1:21, but this is the exception that proves the rule: “Ruth 1.21 occurs in direct speech and thus may be considered poetry within prose” (*ibid.*, 184 n. 4). One finds parallelism in otherwise prose texts when there is a momentary shift to a higher register of the language, as a quotation or implied quotation or for rhetorical purposes. There is another example of poetic parallelism (though not Janus parallelism) in direct speech in Ruth 4:11, and see also (e.g.) parallelism in the heightened legal rhetoric of Deut 24:17.

And that is what makes this occurrence significant. It has long been a question whether the first two chapters of Job (the “prologue”) were simply an ancient tale prefixed by a later author to the elaborate poem that follows them. The skill and complexity that this poem demonstrates are so different from the folktale-like qualities of the prologue that Nahum Sarna wrote an article proposing that Job 1-2 “is directly derived from an ancient Epic of Job.”¹⁶ In a recent survey, Katherine Dell notes that a “sharp stylistic division” between prose and poetry “indicates that the sections known as Prologue and Epilogue (1-2; 42.7-17) may have had an earlier existence as a separate folk tale...”¹⁷ A Janus parallelism in the prose tale blurs this sharp division.

Noegel’s study of Janus parallelisms in Job was not merely an accumulation. He found such a remarkable number of them that he concluded, “Indeed, it is so commonplace in Job that it is difficult not to see the device as fundamental to the book’s message” (131). Others have subsequently pointed out that poetry in general is essential to the meaning of the book.¹⁸

¹⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, “Epic Substratum in the Prose of Job,” *JBL* 76 (1957): 13-25, at 25.

¹⁷ Katharine J. Dell, *Job: Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (Sheffield, 2013), 6.

¹⁸ E.g., Edward L. Greenstein, “The Language of Job and Its Poetic Function,” *JBL* 122 (2003): 651-666; David J. A. Clines, “On the Poetic Achievement of the Book of Job,” in Vicente Collado Bertomeo (ed.), *Palabra, Prodigio, Poesia: In Memoriam P. Luis Alonso Schökel* (Rome, 2003), 243-252; Greenstein, “The Invention of Language in the Poetry of Job,” in James K. Aitken et al. (eds.), *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J. A. Clines* (Atlanta, 2013), 331-346. Though Greenstein (“Poetic Function,” 651; “Invention of Language,” 331) refers in both articles to the “poetic core”

Approaching the book from a strictly linguistic perspective, Avi Hurvitz has demonstrated that the prologue has numerous instances of Late Biblical Hebrew usage,¹⁹ making it plausible and even likely that the author of the poem was also the author of the prologue. Now, the identification in the prose prologue of an example of Janus parallelism—ordinarily viewed as a poetic technique, and indeed one “fundamental” to the poetry of Job itself—further strengthens the conclusion that the poet of Job was also the author of the carefully crafted folk tale that precedes his great poem.²⁰

of Job while Clines (246) views the prologue as only “falsely” naïve, both see the shift from ch. 2 to ch. 3 as, in Clines’ words, “a momentous disjunction.” Sarna (op. cit.) finds the prose of Job to be “saturated with poeticisms,” but this too indicates not a link with the poetry that follows but a much earlier poetic source of a different kind.

¹⁹ Avi Hurvitz, “The Date of the Prose-Tale of Job Linguistically Reconsidered,” *HTR* 67 (1974): 17-34. He notes that the Prose Tale must be considered post-pre-exilic “not *in spite of*, but rather *because of*, its language” (33).

²⁰ I would like to thank Donald Antenen and Zachary Miller, the students whom I was teaching when this insight occurred to me.