

Foes, Fools, and Fouls

Unsound Logic in the Speeches of Eliphaz the Temanite (Job 4–5; 15; 22)

Mitchel Modine

Introduction

Over one hundred years ago, Horace M. Kallen claimed to have, as he wrote in the preface to the revised edition, “restored the Book of Job of the Old Testament to what [he believed] was its original form—that of a Greek tragedy in the manner of Euripedes.”¹ Though this was an intriguing proposal—for one may see many elements in common—it did not gain traction in Joban scholarship. It seems guilty of what Samuel Sandmel famously called “parallelomania” in 1961.² That is, it perceives a parallel, perhaps even a conscious imitation, of a literary form conspicuously alien to the society that produced it. Based on this, a parallelomania patient argues for literary dependence of the document in question (e.g., Job) upon that supposed to be imitated (e.g., Euripides’ tragedies). By contrast, it would make more sense to compare Job to the Mesopotamian “Poem of the Righteous Sufferer,”³ as ancient Israel and Babylonia are a lot closer to each other in terms of worldview than ancient Israel and classical Greece. Mark Larrimore recently salvaged something of Kallen’s proposal. Though noting that it was a “quixotic idea . . . [because the] historical claim is far fetched,” Larrimore nevertheless suggested that “Kallen’s sense that the Book of Job may work

¹ Horace M. Kallen, *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1959), vii.

² Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81.1 (1962): 1–13.

³ See Benjamin R. Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1995), 298–313.

as drama is right on the mark.”⁴

In this paper, I suggest a different way in which the opponents of Job can be said to have not spoken correctly about God. I take inspiration from Kallen in looking to Greece, but to rhetoric rather than its drama. I will examine the speeches of Eliphaz for logical errors.⁵ Dispute literature,⁶ like Job, usually directs its readers to see one side as the hero and the other(s) as the villain(s): Job is hero and good; Eliphaz is villain and bad.⁷

The dialogues running from Job 3–41 (including the unanswered Elihu in chs. 32–37 and the largely unanswerable God in chs. 38–41) always begin with the verb ענה “he answered.” This verb implies responding to something a dialogue partner had said earlier. Perhaps contrary to expectations, we find this word even in the opening of the dialogue: ויען איוב ויאמר, “Job answered and said.” The English versions mostly ignore the ויען to say, “Job said” (so NRSV) because it is unclear who Job is answering. The NET Bible, with “Job spoke up and said,” recognizes that ענה may be used in response

⁴ Mark Larrimore, “The Book of Job as Community Theater,” *Public Seminar*, March 2014, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/03/the-book-of-job-as-community-theater/>.

⁵ For the definitions of the fallacies, I rely on the following website, especially the taxonomy: Gary N. Curtis, “Logical Fallacies: The Fallacy Files,” n.d., <http://fallacyfiles.org/>.

⁶ Other examples in the Old Testament are the disputes over leadership in Numbers and the various disputes involving the prophet Jeremiah. In the latter case, the LXX consistently calls Jeremiah’s prophetic opponents “false prophets,” a designation which the MT only has in the verbal phrase “The LORD said to me, ‘The prophets are prophesying lies in my name’” (Jer 14:14).

⁷ The work of Judy Fentress-Williams problematizes easy categories of hero and villain, as in American Western movies, in which the “good guys” usually wear white hats and the “bad guys” black hats. See, for example, “Abraham and the Multiverse,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 77.1 (2023): 33–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00209643221132547>, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00209643221132547>.

to a situation more than simply a speech.⁸ Moreover, even when Elihu inserts himself into dialogue in 32:6, ויטן אליהוא בן ברבאל “Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite answered.” Here the NET, consistent with itself and the alternative meaning of the verb, reads, “Elihu . . . spoke up.”

I describe my methodology through a sports analogy. I have followed association football (in American English: soccer) for a few years. Soccer is governed by the ominous-sounding Laws of the Game. These laws contain several levels of foul, remedied by, according to severity, an indirect free kick, a direct free kick, a penalty kick, a yellow card, or a red card. I will identify four of the fouls in the fallacious fray of the foolish foe Eliphaz, proposing increasing levels of severity for them according to the schema of fouls in soccer. As the intensity of the dialogue increases, so do Eliphaz’s attacks on Job seem to increase in severity: affirming the consequent, *ad hominem*, scarecrow fallacy, and *tu quoque*. The first of these is a formal fallacy, while the other three are variations of a red herring, a spurious argument that distracts from the point at hand. The final foul, red card, will serve to bring my study to a close with a suggestion as to the fate of Job’s friends, with whom, as the American saying runs, he had no need of enemies.

Laws of the Game

In 2018, Troy W. Martin proposed a different reading of the ending of the book of Job.⁹ Martin says that analysis of Job’s concluding words in 42:2–6 has generally fallen into three camps: penitentialist, consolationist, and existentialist. Importantly for the present project, Martin sees problems with all three of these approaches. On existentialist readings—which he says are the least coherent of the three approaches—he writes that “Edwin M. Good

⁸ The lexeme occurs 176, most of them clearly indicating who is responding and to whom they are responding.

⁹ Troy W. Martin, “Concluding the Book of Job and YHWH: Reading Job from the End to the Beginning,” *JBL* 137.2 (2018): 299–318.

asserts that what Job abandons is the ‘entire structure of the world’ in terms of guilt and innocence.”¹⁰ I argue that the traditional understanding, exemplified here by Good, is misguided. I may cite James Crenshaw as representative of this typical view:

Guardians of the theory that virtue is rewarded and vice punished in exact measure championed God’s justice, sparing no effort in their zeal to secure cherished belief. As a consequence of this intense search for appropriate responses to the hue and cry of spiritual rebels, several explanations for suffering presented themselves with varying degrees of accuracy.¹¹

James Kugel agrees, a bit more succinctly: “[Ecclesiastes] is not . . . one long protest against the wisdom ideology (as is, for example, the book of Job).”¹² Kugel continues:

In the end—as with many a book of dialogues—the author of Job is playing both sides and with his whole heart. His answer is neither Job’s nor the comforters’ nor, for that matter, even God’s, but all three together—which is to say, his answer is the back-and-forth of the book itself.¹³

In my view, the traditional reading that Job, both book and character in that book,¹⁴ argues against Wisdom’s basic formula lacks a critical piece of textual evidence. This reading falters in that nowhere in the dialogue, at

¹⁰ Martin, “Concluding the Book of Job and YHWH,” 302–303.

¹¹ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 117.

¹² James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*, 1st Free Press trade pbk. ed. (New York: Free Press, 2008), 512.

¹³ Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 641.

¹⁴ This is one of the many important distinctions made by literary approaches to the Bible, i.e., examining the Bible as a work of *literature*, using the theories and methods associated with secular literary theory.

least not in so many words, does Job explicitly make this argument. I may state it more strongly. It is not enough to note that Job does not rebel against what one may call the zero-sum theory of divine retribution and reward. However, assuming this view was as pervasive in ancient Israel as we are led to believe, Job could not make this intellectual move. As far back as 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville understood how difficult it would be for someone to rebel against such an ingrained idea: “No man [*sic*] can struggle with advantage against the spirit of his age and country; and, however powerful he may be supposed to be, he will find it difficult to make his contemporaries share in feelings and opinions which are repugnant to all their feelings and desires.”¹⁵ The book of Job allows us to say only that the traditional Wisdom formula is insufficient, not that it is wrong.

Indirect Free Kick—Affirming the Consequent; Job 4

Eliphaz the Temanite begins to speak in 4:1. The text says that he answers Job, again using the verb ענה. However, it seems clear here and in the entirety of the dialogue that all the speakers—Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu, and God—are not really answering one another. Instead, they are so entrenched in their own opinions that the expectation the reader may take from calling their conversation a “dialogue”—namely, that any or all of them could have had their minds changed—strains credibility. The “dialogue” is, instead, more like the comments in a social media thread, wherein, according to a popular meme, nobody changes their opinion and everyone’s mad.¹⁶

Eliphaz’s contribution to this collective stubbornness quickly falls into logical errors of his own making. His first appearance in the dialogue is a fine example of the wisdom tradition as classically understood. He assumes

¹⁵ Alexander de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Project Gutenberg., vol. 2 (Project Gutenberg, n.d.), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/816>. Kindle location 4039.

¹⁶ Robert Ford [@raford3], “Whenever You’re Thinking of Getting into a Political Debate on Facebook, Use This Handy Pie Chart as a Guide. <https://t.co/18nNMjv7eh>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, 12 July 2016, <https://x.com/raford3/status/752890254621749248>.

that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. The error Eliphaz commits turns this around and judges Job as sinful based on his (apparently) being punished. He says: זכר נא מי הוא נקי אבד ואיפה ישרים נכחדו, “Think about it: who was innocent and punished? Or where were the upright banished” (4:7)? Eliphaz here attacks Job’s claim of innocence because no one is punished while innocent, and he treats the situation as a binary. Job is either innocent or guilty. No other scenario may explain what is happening—say, for example, a bet between God and Their Majesty’s Loyal Opposition¹⁷ concerning the veracity of Job’s righteousness.¹⁸ To be fair to Eliphaz, neither he nor Job has been granted access to the board room of the divine council, and the transcripts of the meetings are still classified, but this does not exonerate Eliphaz. (Assuming it would do so would also commit a fallacy, that of the argument from ignorance.)¹⁹

I must admit that Eliphaz’s affirmation of the consequent in this chapter

¹⁷ This is my preferred, though wordy, translation for השטן ‘the satan.’ I think it is helpful for multiple reasons. First, by not using the word “satan” (here, a common noun because of the Hebrew definite article), it avoids improper associations with Satan in the New Testament (aka “the Devil”), for the book of Job certainly does not mean this, and building upon the first, it sidesteps the apparent theological problem of how “Satan” or “the Devil” got access to the throne room—or at least the board room—of Heaven. Third, the term “Loyal Opposition” suggests that the satan is not at all opposed to the designs of God, but in fact works within them. See the Wikipedia definition here: “Loyal Opposition - Wikipedia,” n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loyal_opposition. Fourth, the plural pronoun Their with the singular possessive Majesty’s serves two functions. On the one hand, it makes a Trinitarian affirmation even while recognizing that the book of Job is not Trinitarian; and the Trinity itself is not an biblical concept strictly speaking, but it was developed after the biblical period based on hints contained in the Bible. On the other hand, it avoids masculine pronouns for God, which have become increasingly problematic in spite of the Church of the Nazarene’s insistence that alternatives not be adopted (see “Careful Use of Language (Paragraph 918),” in *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2023* [Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 2023], 402–3).

¹⁸ I recently described this in a Q&A as “God’s gambling problem,” which elicited the convener’s odd response that there is nothing at stake, when in fact, at least for Job, everything is at stake.

¹⁹ Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 93.

is implicit rather than explicit: “If you are wicked, God will punish you. God is punishing you. Therefore, you are wicked.” What Eliphaz explicitly says, however, is that punishment and innocence cannot exist together. Therefore, since Job is being punished, Job’s claim of innocence must be false. According to Eliphaz, Job cannot be innocent. I must note that this does not make Eliphaz’s statement false; it is just supported by faulty reasoning. This is another fallacy, what Gary Curtis calls “the Fallacy Fallacy.”²⁰

Direct Free Kick—*Ad Hominem* Attack; Job 5

Chapters and verses, as is well known, are arbitrary divisions in the Bible. Nevertheless, for the present purposes we may say that as Eliphaz continues his first speech in chapter 5, he turns his attack into one on Job’s person rather than his argument. This is known as an *ad hominem* attack (Latin for “against the man”). This is an informal fallacy, or one might say a content fallacy since, as Curtis maintains, “what makes such an argument fallacious is not purely a matter of logical form.”²¹

Within Wisdom literature, the “fool” often appears in opposition to the wise. NRSV uses this term for several related Hebrew words: כסיל (68x), אויל (21x), and נבל (7x). When Eliphaz uses this language, the implied author²² likely invokes the entire wisdom/foolishness complex. This is particularly true in Eliphaz’s attack upon Job’s anger in 5:2, כי לאויל יהרג בעש, ופתה תמית קנאה “For anger murders the fool, and jealousy slays the easily

²⁰ Gary N. Curtis, “Logical Fallacy: Fallacy Fallacy,” n.d., <http://fallacyfiles.org/fallfall.html>.

²¹ Gary N. Curtis, “The Fallacy Files: Informal Logical Fallacy,” n.d., <http://fallacyfiles.org/inforfal.html>.

²² This is a term from literary criticism. Stated simply, the implied author is the apparent authorial perspective (i.e., “point of view”) presented in the text, which may or may not be consistent with that of the real author, the latter being unavailable for cross-examination.

swayed.” Linguistically, it is helpful to note that the participle פתה, “simple,” shares a root with Jeremiah’s difficult lament, “LORD, you have enticed me” (Jer 20:7).

Eliphaz, argues, perhaps on the basis Prov 29:11, “A fool breathes out hot anger, but a wise person exercises restraint.” Nevertheless, this is fallacious reasoning. He does not address Job’s argument or complaint, but instead dismisses him as a fool. His response in v 8, that he would seek God rather than express anger, is like the opponents implied in Ps 22:8, “Roll your burdens onto the LORD! Let God deliver, let God rescue the one in whom God delights.” Both the poet of Psalm 22 and Job objectively experienced unjust suffering: in both cases, the opponents attack them rather than work to assuage their calamity or show their beliefs to be unfounded.

Penalty Kick—Scarecrow Fallacy; Job 15

After Job responds to Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar have their turn—each responded to by Job—Eliphaz again comes in to speak.²³ As noted, his attack becomes more severe on Job, as well as continuing to support his position through faulty reasoning. We have already seen that Eliphaz first accused Job of a logical impossibility and then attacked him personally. Here, in chapter 15, he suggests that, if Job were correct, then the entire system would come crashing down.

I accuse Eliphaz here of the scarecrow fallacy. This fallacy is also an informal or content fallacy, distracting from the main point under consideration, namely whether Job’s contention that he does not deserve his suffering is correct. The specific distraction Eliphaz employs here is to accuse Job of undermining religion. He says, אף אתה תפר יראה ותגרע שיחה לפני אל, “You have reduced reverence and maligned meditation before God.” This is related to the affirmation of the consequent in ch. 4 but indeed increases the intensity. Were the traditional wisdom conception wrong, that

²³ This pattern continues through a second round of dialogues, only to be broken down in the third round, when Bildad speaks only briefly and Zophar not at all.

is one thing; if the whole of the cult of Yahweh were wrong, that is something else entirely. Engaging Job on the level of Wisdom theology would be more difficult for Eliphaz and may or may not win him adherents among the people. Accusing him of the attempt to rend religion would be easier because it is generally easier to refute an extreme argument than a subtler one. Moreover, the crowd, had one been present, would likely be more inclined to support him against Job.

Yellow Card—*Tu Quoque* Fallacy—Job 22

Another variation of the red herring, or language that distracts from the main point of the argument to win by defeating something else, is the *tu quoque* fallacy, named for the Latin phrase, “you, also.” Curtis says that in committing this fallacy, “one attempts to defend oneself or another from criticism by turning the critique back against the accuser. This is a classic Red Herring since whether the accuser is guilty of the same, or similar, wrong is irrelevant to the truth of the original charge.”²⁴

הלא רעתך רבה ואין קץ לעונותיך “Isn’t your evil vile? Is there no end to your iniquity” (Job 22:5)? This is like the affirmation of the consequent in Job 4, though Eliphaz gets quite specific in his charges against Job. The litany of crimes of which Job stands accused in this passage reminds the reader of another cross-cultural parallel, this time to ancient Egypt. In the *Book of the Dead*, ch. 125, the spirit of the deceased individual argues its way into a blessed afterlife by denying that the person committed various offenses while alive.²⁵ This passage is often referred to as the “Negative Confession.”

Two things stand out in this chapter. First, Job seems to respond rather

²⁴ Gary N. Curtis, “Logical Fallacy: Tu Quoque,” n.d., <http://fallacyfiles.org/tuquoque.html>.

²⁵ E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: (The Papyrus of Ani) Egyptian Text, Transliteration, and Translation*, Reprint. (New York: Dover, 1967), 344–353.

directly to these accusations in his final speech in ch. 31. If this speech is indeed a response to Eliphaz in ch. 25, the parallel to the Negative Confession is quite strong, as Marvin Pope maintains: “Job’s repudiation of evil here has been compared to the negative confession . . . Both catalogues of sins reflect high ideals of social ethics.”²⁶ Again, following Sandmel, we need not suggest dependence here, not least because Job’s “negative confession” follows the narrative frame of the book, which proclaims that Job “feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1, 8; 2:3). Proverbs 8:13 suggests that these are two sides of the same coin. In other words, perhaps fearing God meant, in part, perhaps even specifically, not doing evil things.²⁷

The second interesting thing comes later in the chapter. Eliphaz seems to develop a soft spot for Job, even if it is a small one. He says: “Agree with God, and experience peace. This is how good things will come to you.” This is quite different from the advice of Job’s wife in 2:9—“Do you still insist on your uprightness? Curse God and die!” Though his wife may have had some sympathy for her husband, wanting his suffering to end, by counseling this “suicide by God,” her advice was rather more violent than Eliphaz’s in 22:21!

Red Card—You Have Not Spoken Well of Me—Job 42

Finally, it seems, Eliphaz and his friends are sent off. They do not receive redemption and restoration. True enough, they didn’t have anything taken from them as Job did. This leads me to the conclusion that suffering can only be seen as a test if it is defined as such beforehand. This is so even if it is done in an abstract way, as Paul in Romans 5 and James in James 1 do. In this way, it is a bit unfair for God to accuse Eliphaz and the boys of

²⁶ Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, 3rd ed., The Anchor Bible 15 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990), 227.

²⁷ Etienne Ellis, “Reconsidering the Fear of God in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible in the Light of Rudolf Otto’s *Das Heilige*,” *Old Testament Essays* 27.1 (2014): 88, http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_abstract&pid=S1010-99192014000100006&lng=en&nrm=iso&tlng=en.

wrongsgiving, at the very least, because they didn't know God was watching and listening.

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אָמַר יְהוָה אֵלֵינוּ כִּי לֹא דַבַּרְתֶּם אֵלַי נְכוֹנָה כַּעֲבָדֵי אִיּוֹב God says to Eliphaz: "You have not spoken well of me, as my servant Job has done." The content of God's instruction to Eliphaz is that God will accept Job's intercession to not destroy them, but this is not forgiveness for their sin. The Torah, in different places, describes the עֹלָה, "whole burnt offering" in different ways. Most relevant for the present argument is Lev 4:26, which links it with forgiveness of sin, specifically for that of the priest.

In effect, God refuses to do something foolish in response to Eliphaz not speaking well of God. The purpose of Job's sacrifice is not necessarily to forgive Eliphaz's unsound speech, except in the sense that God's withholding of supposedly deserved punishment (see Ps 51:4) for sin can typically be described as forgiveness. In other words, forgiveness of sin is often, or often entails, a cessation or remission of punishment, but here it is not the case, and in any event, it does not make the situation as if sin had never been committed. God does not offer forgiveness for Eliphaz, but merely holds himself in check through the good feelings that Job's prayer gives God. Numbers 15:3, in this connection, suggests that an עֹלָה gives a pleasing odor to God. Perhaps one can say that, at least here, prayer soothes the savage God. The book of Job, through the voice of God, is repudiating retributive justice. Thus, God holds back from committing a foul against Eliphaz. In sports, acting or responding angrily is a foul, and in a fight between competitors, it is usually the second person to throw a punch who gets ejected from the game.

Conclusion

Eliphaz the Temanite commits (at least) four logical fallacies in his dialogue with Job. I have identified them as affirming the consequent, *ad hominem* attack, scarecrow argument, and *tu quoque*. As the intensity of the dialogue increases, so do the attacks on Job. Finally, I argued that when God judged Job to be right and Eliphaz to be wrong, God did not offer forgiveness to Eliphaz but merely a cessation of punishment. Perhaps the 43rd chapter of Job needs yet to be written.

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