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# Taking God to court: Job's deconstruction and resistance of dominant ideology

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## ABSTRACT

Using poststructural criticism, we explore how the book of Job deconstructs the deed/consequence nexus that stands at the core of the Hebrew Bible's theological framework – i.e. the doctrine of reward and punishment. Building on both Derridean deconstruction and Foucauldian resistance, we show that the book of Job refuses to comply with the opposite binary of reward and punishment. First, we demonstrate how the friends in their speeches enforce the binary and, thereby, exercise power over Job. Secondly, we consider Job's resistance and deconstruction of this binary through both his lived experience and desire to argue with God. Finally, we argue how Job's desire to argue with God challenges God to defend himself in court. In God's answer, however, one is introduced to a different God than as portrayed by Job's friends. Moreover, God's boastful reply, which lacks any justification for Job's suffering, makes God appear fragile and weak. As such, this article argues that the book of Job may not merely deconstruct dominant ideology, but also God itself.

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Book of Job; poststructural criticism; deconstruction; resistance; retributive justice; deed/consequence nexus

## Introducing Job to the poststructuralists

David Wolfer begins his work on the book of Job with the following statement: 'Best known and least well understood of books, the book of Job is a favourite of philosophers and poets, but not of priests'.<sup>1</sup> Wolfer's observation is of particular interest to this article as it testifies to the puzzling theological trajectory of the book of Job. As many scholars have observed,<sup>2</sup> the book of Job challenges the status quo of dominant religious thought. One of the main ideological constructs of the Hebrew Bible is the system of reward and punishment (e.g. Prov 11:21; Ps 11:6; and Isa 13:11).

It has been argued that the book of Job puts this construct to question through God's torture of an innocent man, Job. In this respect, the book is a lot more than merely an intellectual exercise as it ultimately aims to explicate the nature of God through the perspective of human suffering. In so doing, the book of Job contests the doctrine of retributive justice in many creative ways: it raises scepticism on the nature and role of God's power, the role of one's deeds (e.g. sinful or good) in determining their fate (e.g.

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reward or punishment), and humanity's value before God. To put it more bluntly, the book of Job does not merely question how God exercises power, but also if God has the power to maintain such a system of reward and punishment. Moreso, in the book of Job, God might not be who God is portrayed as by the representatives of dominant religious thought (i.e. the friends of Job), but instead is constructed as either unjust or weak.

In ancient Israel's religious thought, several hierarchical binaries, such as punishment and reward, played a key role—e.g. purity and impurity, justice and injustice, knowledge and ignorance, and righteousness and wickedness. Several scholars have observed that the book of Job challenges many of ancient Israel's key religious beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the idea of the book of Job putting such a binary way of thinking to question is hardly new. Whereas a part of our argument also touches upon these themes, our main goal is to apply poststructuralism to show how the book of Job puts such overarching hierarchical binaries to test (a), the debates between various characters characterize a power struggle (b), and it opens up a new space where alternative voices can coexist beyond the binary where hierarchical ambiguity is embraced (c). In doing so, we move beyond the questions of the historical dimensions of how the book of Job challenges traditional beliefs and interpret the book of Job through concepts of two French poststructuralists, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. We demonstrate how the application of such concepts can enrich our understanding of the book of Job, revealing crucial aspects of the nature and significance of the dialogues between God, Job, and his friends on the theme of God's justice. We apply poststructuralism to show that through its message, the book of Job puts such overarching hierarchical binaries to test and opens up a new space where alternative voices can coexist beyond the binary, where hierarchical ambiguity is embraced.

In the following, we begin with a brief discussion of poststructural notions of deconstruction, resistance, dominance, power, and knowledge to show how and where they intersect in a useful manner for a poststructural reading of the book of Job. Then we move on to demonstrate how the speeches of the friends of Job portray that the friends represent the dominant ideologies and how Job's innocence poses a resistance to these dominant discourses. And, finally, we focus on the speeches of God, who instead of providing the answer justifying the suffering of the innocent, muddies the waters even more.

## Poststructural criticism

Poststructuralism has found its way into biblical scholarship ever since its emergence in contemporary philosophy. One of the main contributions of poststructural criticism is that it uncovers contradictions, repressions, silences, and ambiguities of the biblical text. In this uncovering, poststructuralism is concerned with the moment that dominant and imposed meaning is no longer agreed upon as a structure of meaning. As Koosed remarks: 'A poststructuralist orientation recognizes different voices, even contradictory voices, within biblical scripture, and refrains from attempting to smooth out inconsistencies'.<sup>4</sup>

As we have seen, the book of Job is no exception to the contradictory voices and ambiguous texts of the Bible. In fact, in this article, we argue the book of Job should be understood as a text that deconstructs itself, calling out the ambiguity of human

experience and oppression of ideological binaries. There are scholars who have employed a similar approach. David Clines, for example, argued that Job presents itself as a self-deconstructive text.<sup>5</sup> However, some of these readings have merely included Derridean deconstruction in their assertion of Job. As a result, Clines argues that the self-deconstructive element in Job is only illusory. However, including Foucault's understanding of resistance and discourse, this article aims to demonstrate how the book of Job inhabits a deconstructive space indeed.

Building upon the poststructural groundwork of both Derrida and Foucault, the overarching binary of reward and punishment, including its consequences for human experience and the perceived nature of God, will be analysed through the lenses of deconstruction and resistance.

Moreover, the problem of suffering (theodicy) and the book of Job is a much-discussed matter in both philosophical and theological treatises over the centuries. Although this article does not claim to counter the complex problems arising from the theodicy, our poststructural analysis aims to expose power dynamics within ideological structures that inform dominant thought on God's justice in the face of human suffering.

### **Deconstruction and Derrida**

Derrida argued that our understanding of the metaphysical is governed by binary oppositions, in which '[o]ne of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand.'<sup>6</sup> The metaphysical analysis of the world, Derrida observes, has 'proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc.'<sup>7</sup> Consequently, binary oppositions imply a power relation as it consists of hierarchical and dichotomous dynamics. Derrida then introduces deconstruction 'to avoid both simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply *residing* within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it (emphasis original)'.<sup>8</sup> Through the method of deconstruction, Derrida exposed how such binaries uphold the incoherence and exclusion of structures. In his own words, deconstruction serves to 'practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition and a general *displacement* of the system (emphasis original)'.<sup>9</sup> Deconstruction can thus be understood as locating the incoherence of structures and an undoing it of its illusory idea of completeness.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, deconstruction is ultimately concerned with justice. For Derrida, 'to deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition.'<sup>11</sup> This deconstructive space is characterised by 'the urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge',<sup>12</sup> referring to the necessity of pursuing justice in the face of suffering and oppression. However, for Derrida the horizon of justice, remains a horizon, an event that is always yet to come. Consequently, justice is both impossible and absolutely necessary.<sup>13,14</sup>

In that sense, one could argue that every claim to eternal or universal knowledge of justice is an injustice. Derrida states that justice 'cannot furnish itself with infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules, or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it'.<sup>15</sup> Claims to knowledge of justice are unjust. However, as we will

see in Foucault, knowledge also implies a hierarchical power dynamic. Therefore, for Derrida, and Foucault, structures of power, consisting of binaries, composing meaning and knowledge are to be reinterpreted – or deconstructed.<sup>16</sup>

To Derrida, the illusion of fixed structures resembles the transcendental signified, as such fixed structures form the basis of existence and knowledge. Anything pertaining to be a fixed system necessitates deconstruction through difference. Thus, '[...] the central signified, or original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences'.<sup>17</sup> In other words, difference liberates the signified from being fixed, rather it poses that the signified cannot be fixed but merely *different*. Consequently, the transcendental signified is indeed deconstructed through difference – through it being different from other signs. For a sign cannot exist exterior to the signified—i.e. the material, form, or contingent context – as its meaning is dependent on its relation to the signified. As signs are dependent on both different and deferring signs for their meaning, they are both unstable and ultimately not fully knowable. In fact, difference liberates fixity and allows for ambiguous reality. Thus, the instability of systems is in the encounter itself, for in encountering a different context or the other, the possibility of change is induced. Deconstruction, therefore, 'is suspicious of any view that there is a natural fit between language, world, and meaning'.<sup>18</sup> Translating systems of meaning – including theological or dogmatic meaning – is always a *translation*. Therefore, as the seemingly fixed system is iterated in a different context, that is, encountering difference, its meaning may change.

In the book of Job, the transcendental signified, the underlying structure which supposes to be outside of existence, might be understood as the meaning-governing system of punishment and reward. Yet, as this article will explore, when such a fixed structure encounters the experience and voice of alterity, what will remain of it?

However, deconstruction remains relatively abstract and text-focused. Although Derrida's understanding and use of deconstruction mainly focuses on the inner logic of texts, he left space to apply it to whatever form 'texts' present themselves. Therefore, we now turn to Foucault, whose analyses of structures moves beyond texts and, instead, also includes the impact of oppressive structures on individuals, social groups, and society in general.<sup>19</sup> Complementing Foucault's ideas with Derrida's, benefits our post-structural approach to the book Job, as we centralise the lived experience of an individual in relation to its dominant structures and not merely inner-textual structures.

### **Resistance and Foucault**

In tracing historical genealogies, Foucault laid bare that the discourses of knowledge constitute reality. These discourses of knowledge go together with an excursion of power. In fact, Foucault argues that:

we should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and at the same time constitute power relations.<sup>20</sup>

When a social – or in the case of our argument, a religious – system is one of fixed and asymmetrical power relations, the concept of power can be understood as dominant. However, whenever power is exercised it ‘presupposes a weakening of control – a crisis or dislocation of the structure so to speak – and the emergence of possibilities that are not evident in the existing structure of domination’.<sup>21</sup> This dislocation arises from what Foucault calls resistance. In fact, Foucault states that:

even though the relation of power may be completely unbalanced or when one can truly say that he has ‘all power’ over the other, a power can only be exercised over another to the extent that the latter still has the possibility of committing suicide, of jumping out of a window or of killing the other. That means that in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance – of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation – there would be no relations of power.<sup>22</sup>

Power here is not located in a central or absolute structure, person, or law. Yet, as power necessitates resistance, power exists only in a complex relation of powerful and resisting forces. Power is also not solely negative, as the necessary relation between power and resistance means that everyone has access to power. Moreover, power does not equal normative binaries. In fact, as power is characterised by its adamant relation to resistance, power is subject to reversal and change. In other words, there is power in resistance too.<sup>23</sup>

Even though resistance is a necessary element in a power relationship, resistance is also an element of the dominant structure itself. Resistance as such is not an external force aiming or able to transform or remove current structures of power. Instead, resistance creates the possibility for alternative practices and ultimately opening up the possibility of an alternative option. The consequence of this necessary resistance is also that structures of power are unstable and, therefore, subject to change.<sup>24</sup> On this point, Derrida and Foucault share a similarity, whatever resisting forces may be at work, they are a necessary part of the structure they oppose.

### ***Derrida and Foucault make job a hero***

Both Foucault and Derrida are thus concerned with the oppressive and hierarchical structures that govern social meaning and truth. Yet, as we have seen, where Derridean deconstruction mainly seems concerned with textual binaries and hierarchies, Foucauldian resistance introduces deconstruction to the social normative binaries (e.g. around gender, crime, etc.).<sup>25</sup> Simultaneously, where Foucault remains somewhat sceptical about the agency within resisting the dominant binaries of the world, deconstruction is more positive about the agency in resistance. For wherever violence and ignorance dominate hierarchical relations, ‘deconstruction can enact a form of resistance by insisting on looking, thinking, and feeling in sites of acute discomfort from which it would be easier to turn away’.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, when reading the book of Job in a poststructural light, we argue that where claims to power are resisted and dominant binaries (i.e. reward and punishment) are deconstructed in the book of Job, voices from the margin may reconfigure dominant ideologies. Where the dominant voices of Job’s friends and God are trying to exercise power over Job through knowledge (i.e. friends) or omnipotence (i.e. God),

Job's voice resists them through his lived experience and as such deconstructs power dynamics.

Consequently, we argue that poststructural criticism can be used as an important lens as it presents the dynamics between the participants in the book of Job in a different light. Using the insights from the works of Derrida and Foucault, we examine the different voices in Job from a perspective of power and argue that the book of Job as a whole can be interpreted as a discourse of power and resistance. Moreover, such a reading exposes that knowledge is not infinitely true at all times. In fact, the ideological structures that constitute the friends' speeches, are deconstructed when resisted by voices from a suffering human being, like Job.

In the book of Job, such a destabilisation of central ideologies could thus be seen as a direct challenge, or resistance, to the dominant discourse of knowledge on God's justice, represented by Job's friends. And subsequently, Job's life experience itself may come to function as a deconstructive resistance, as his suffering cannot but challenge the dominant discourse of knowledge. Therefore, if the book of Job provides such a deconstruction of the central structure of punishment and reward, it could be considered as an invocation of reshaping theological meaning.

### **Knowledge, dominance, and power: Job's resistance and challenge to the power**

Many scholars have characterised the book of Job as literature that uses literary devices such as parody and irony.<sup>27</sup> Such literary techniques helped the book of Job not only to question the dominant religious discourses of its time but at the same time create a social space where the ideologies presented by minority groups are given a voice in social and religious discourse.<sup>28</sup> It is clear that the book of Job is written in the form of a dialogue where different parties engage in a conversation, directly or indirectly, about the problem of the suffering of the righteous. In this section, we aim to show that through the speeches, the book of Job features a clash between voices of power and resistance.

For our understanding, we begin by naming the important characters in the book of Job. The following characters are explicitly set out in the book: Job and his three friends (Job 3–31), the fourth friend, Elihu (Job 32–37), and God (Job 38–41). Besides these, another important voice is that of the narrator(s) (more explicitly heard in Job 1–2 and 42). On the one hand, it can be argued that the whole of the book of Job represents the voice of its narrator(s). From the structure and the overall message of Job, it becomes clear that while the narrator(s) represents different positions in the form of the speeches, they do not necessarily adhere to them. Our point of departure is that it is in the prologue and the epilogue to the book of Job where the position of the authors of the book is reflected.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it is the first verse of the book (Job 1:1) that scandalises not only the concept of reward and punishment but also the figure of YHWH. For the purpose of our study, we read the book of Job as a literary unity: that means, we read the prose and the poetry sections in light of each other.

In the following, we begin with a discussion of how the four friends of Job impose the binary of righteousness and sinfulness and their corresponding effects—i.e. reward and punishment – and through this discourse claim to possess absolute knowledge about God's justice and thereby, exercise power over Job. Since the book of Job is a lengthy



work, it is not possible to treat the dialogues of the four friends individually in detail. Hence, we focus on the first speech of Eliphaz (Job 4–5) and add brief observations on the dialogues of the other friends. We opt for the first speech of Eliphaz because of its clear structure as well as its captivating theological impulses that makes it suitable for our analysis (a).<sup>30</sup> Next, we demonstrate how Job resists power through both his words and lived experience and, in doing so, destabilises not only the theology of the friends but also the perceptions about the figure of God (b). And, finally, we argue how God's speeches turn out to be nothing but a fiasco, when read in the broader perspective of the book of Job (c).

### ***The deed-consequence nexus as a crucial binary in the theology of Job's friends***

The efficacy of the deed-consequence nexus is one of the most important issues in the book of Job,<sup>31</sup> as the whole book can be seen as a debate on why the lived experience of humans contradicts the sweeping promises about the prosperity that results from one's righteous behaviour. The fundamental principle of the deed-consequence nexus is that God punishes the sinful and rewards the righteous. Based on this understanding of God and the world, Job and his friends engage in a debate where the friends represent the traditional and dominant view of the theology of deed and consequence. On the other hand, Job's lived experience demands him to reconsider this binary view of reality.<sup>32</sup>

Firstly, the prevalence of the punishment and reward binary becomes apparent in Job's soliloquy (Job 3), where he provokes a debate on God's justice and human suffering. Job desires to undo the day on which he was born and wishes death for himself, as he sees death as the only possibility to escape injustice and suffering around him (3:17–19). However, he complains that God keeps the sufferers alive to torment them (Job 3:17–18).<sup>33</sup> Job's desire to omit the day of his birth can also be seen as Job's desire to defend the theology of the deed and consequence. Job's very existence and his unwarranted suffering have threatened the status quo: had he not been born, the enigma of the suffering of an innocent man and a just God would not have arisen.<sup>34</sup> So from the first speech of Job, it is obvious that Job wishes to remain within the system, as he does not desire for the binary of deed and consequence to be abolished. Job's desire to uphold the binary is understandable, because, as is narrated in Job 1, it is in and through such a system that he prospered in the first place.

Interesting for our discussion is how Job's friends come to defend God's justice and the manner in which they seek power over Job through the discourses of knowledge. In particular, Eliphaz, who is the most prominent out of the three, perhaps because of his age,<sup>35</sup> sophisticatedly constructs his argument against Job. He employs various rhetorical plethora to show Job that he has superior knowledge; therefore, Job should simply surrender the position of resistance that he took in Job 3. Linguistically, the strategies that Eliphaz uses to overpower Job can be observed in the framing verses of Job 4–5: 4:2, 3, 7; 5:1, and 27.<sup>36</sup> In the following, we discuss these verses and the content of the respective sections that they open up:

- (1) *To hold back a word from you—(even) you could not!* (Job 4:2).<sup>37</sup> In this opening sentence, Eliphaz seeks to provide justification for his speech: He *must* address Job



because he cannot keep silent to Job's vehement protest against God. In this statement, excessive hubris is assumed, which is later confirmed by the following harsh rebukes. Eliphaz's purported appreciation of Job's efforts toward social justice (Job 4:3–4) only serves as a bridge to reprimands (Job 4:5–6). Eliphaz accuses Job of hypocrisy for the reason that whereas once Job prospered because of the same system of God's justice, he now protests against it since he is at the lower end of the social hierarchy.<sup>38</sup> Hence, Job is delusional and his protest against God originates out of a mindset that is self-centred.

- (2) *Think: what innocent ever disappeared?* (Job 4:7): In an attempt to bring him to the *right* way of thinking, Eliphaz invites Job to intellectual explorations about God's justice. Such explorations include metaphors from the agricultural and animal world, used didactically to polemicize the doctrine of retributive justice. (Job 4:7–11).

Eliphaz also claims to have received a divine revelation in which he receives a disturbing message: a mortal cannot be justified before God (4:13–21). According to this, if Job rejects Eliphaz's point of view, he stands in direct opposition to the divine revelation.

- (3) *Call out now! Does anyone answer you?* (Job 5:1): Eliphaz then moves on to announce it to Job that the only way forward for him is to admit his sin and repent – since there is no other explanation for human suffering than their sinful behaviour. This strategy is set to directly target Job's reasoning abilities and to produce fear in Job as questioning the dominant discourse would mean isolation for him. Later on, he authenticates his thesis through an anecdote in which he tells of his personal experience (see Job 5:1–7).
- (4) *Rather I would seek out El* (Job 5:8): At this point, using various techniques, Eliphaz has established that he can offer a better judgement as he possesses superior knowledge and the question that Job should be asking is, 'What should I do now?' To this, Eliphaz has a rather long response that is replete with didactic metaphors, promises, and exhortations (Job 5:8–26). The gist of this long passage lies in Job 5:8–9a that says, 'Before Elohim would I lodge my complaint. (El) who performs great things too deep to probe.' Such a statement, however, completely neglects the fact that Job believes it is God who has wronged him and should appear before a court as the offending party.
- (5) *You see, we have probed this – it's true* (Job 5:27): In the final statement, Eliphaz claims that his arguments have been constructed and proven through intense explorations.<sup>39</sup> Hence, Job should give up his adamance and embrace his viewpoint.

In the foregoing discussion, we have shown that Eliphaz creatively utilizes various techniques to claim intellectual power over Job. Beginning his speech with an accusation of intellectual dishonesty on Job, Eliphaz shrewdly illustrates why his knowledge is superior to that of Job and employs the following strategies: he claims to have received a divine revelation (a), he argues from his personal experiences (b), he manipulates Job's thought process, attempting to make him believe that going against the dominant ideology would result in isolation (c), and he asserts that his knowledge is confirmed through thorough investigations (d). All this is to claim power over Job and ultimately to bend him to accept the binary of deed and consequence.

The themes of the nexus between deed and consequence (Job 15:20–35) and human beings' inability to be right before God (Job 15:14–16) also play a very central role in Eliphaz's second speech. In his final speech in Job 22, Eliphaz directly accuses Job of sinfulness and urges him to turn to God.

The other two friends of Job present theses similar to that of Eliphaz. Unlike Eliphaz, Bildad begins with a direct attack on Job, condemning him for his sinful behaviour. For Bildad, suffering is a result of wickedness (Job 8:3–4), and the only way forward for Job is to confess his sin and seek help from God (Job 8:5–27). In his second speech, Bildad includes a long poem on the fate of the wicked in which he uses strong rhetoric to further intensify the argument, enforcing the binary of reward and punishment (Job 8:5–21). In his final speech (Job 25), Bildad abruptly states that because of their very nature, human beings cannot be justified before God.

Zophar, the third friend, has a slightly different strategy than Bildad and Eliphaz. He tries to defend the binary by appealing to the unknown part of reality. Nevertheless, while some aspects are unknown to Job, God has the ultimate wisdom, and God sees things that Job cannot perceive (Job 11:4–12). However, the discourse that starts off as a sophisticated debate on epistemology soon turns into a polemic about the reward-punishment theology, as Zophar seeks to bring Job to repentance implying Job's transgression and, therefore, deserving punishment (Job 11:13–20). The second speech of Zophar has nothing new to offer in the sense that it repeats the thesis that even though it seems that the wicked prosper momentarily, they are ultimately punished by God (Job 20:5–29).

After the three friends cease to speak, Elihu appears on the scene to address the situation. Somewhat disappointed in the answers of his colleagues, he begins his long, uninterrupted monolog (Job 32–37). In the end, however, his speech is, like his other three colleagues, a defence of God's justice (see especially, Job 34 and 35).

Through an analysis of Eliphaz' first speech (Job 4–5) and brief remarks on the dialogues of the friends, we have shown the driving force behind the arguments of the friends is their stern belief that they possess knowledge and a justification of Job's suffering and, therefore, have the right to categorise Job as a sinner. That knowledge holds a central place in the book of Job can also be seen through the fact that the Hebrew lexeme for the word 'to know' (יָדַע) is used sixty-six times.<sup>40</sup> All of these occurrences, except for the one in Job 42:11, are situated in the dialogue section of the book. Interestingly, the friends often use the phrase to persuade Job to give in to their argument and admit that he has committed a sin. One of the most explicit examples is Eliphaz's words in Job 15:9, 'What do you know that we do not know, That you understand – but not intelligible to us?', where it can be clearly seen that the friends wish to impose dominance on Job through their knowledge. Moreover, what should make their arguments more persuasive is that they have either acquired this knowledge from various sources or have long-standing social and religious traditions backing them (see e.g. Job 5:27; 8:8–10; 15:9–10; 20:4–5). The claims of the friends that they have authentic knowledge further push Job into a corner – as now it is not only that Job is sinful but also that he lacks understanding and knowledge. As the friends possess knowledge through the governing structure of punishment and reward, they push Job to the bottom of the hierarchy. It is Job who has done wrong and ought to

repent, whereas the friends possess agency and dominance over Job through their knowledge.

### ***The innocence of Job deconstructs his friends' powerplay***

We have shown in the previous section that the friends of Job advocate for a structure where those on the bottom-end of the binary – i.e. those who suffer, suffer because of their sin and – experience marginalisation and oppression. Subsequently, according to the strict theological ideology of the friends, Job should go through such an experience because according to the structure, this exclusion and abandonment from God is a necessary outcome of the binary of reward and punishment. The rigorous theological discourses of the friends, however, are merely intellectual and theoretical exercises, in that, they completely ignore the painful experience of those who are ‘punished’.

It is important to note that while Job resists the oppressive systems with his long speeches, the actual resistance comes from his very existence – his lived experience is a ‘report of misconduct’ against God. In his critique on the manifold of philosophical treaties on the theodicy, Kant mentions how Job’s *sincerity* about his lived experience, and ‘honesty in openly admitting one’s doubts; repugnance to pretending conviction where one feels none,’<sup>41</sup> is preferred over his friend’s justification of suffering in God’s eyes. One could say poststructuralism furthers Kant’s position through laying bare how Job’s sincere experience is not merely picked over ‘religious flatterer’<sup>42</sup> but more so, how Job’s sincerity challenges, or deconstructs, the oppressive discourse of knowledge that justifies God’s justice. A poststructural lens helps to consider the different voices in Job as discourses of power. In a similar vein, Carol Newsom remarks,

He [Job] has mastered one of the possible languages of subversive resistance in a totalitarian world. When the one whose existence contradicts the dominant ideology that he nevertheless speaks, while his body silently witnesses to the truth, he lays out the scandal for all to see.<sup>43</sup>

When read with sensitivity towards Job’s painful circumstances, the book of Job can be seen as corresponding to the Derridean notion that deconstruction can take a form of resistance that refuses to ignore discomfort: Job’s experience of utter discomfort unmasks the tension between his lived reality and the dominant ideological structures.

Moreover, Job’s desire for death in order to escape from the oppressive structure that makes innocent suffer (see Job 3:11 and 16), can be understood as a form of resistance. Although death, in Job’s eyes, is a possibility of freedom and escape from the inequities of this world (see Job 17–19), he complains that God keeps him alive. Thus, in Job’s view, God controls all matters in life and death and is ultimately powerful. Recalling Foucault, death for Job could be an option to ‘escape’ the oppressive structure and creates a relation of power and resistance between Job and God: for if there was no possibility of escape from suffering for Job, there would be no resistance and without resistance ‘there would be no relations of power’.<sup>44</sup> By the same token, God, and Job’s friends, can only exercise power over Job if he has the possibility to escape the oppressive structure through death or other forms of reversal of oppression. If there is no possibility of resistance, Foucault states, there would merely be violent dominance and complete obedience.

As Job believes that God controls all matters of life and death, here one might think that the binary of reward and punishment is involuntarily reinforced by Job: for the innocence of Job is both the reinforcement of and a threat to the system. In a similar vein, Clines argues that Job does not challenge the binary, but instead merely *appears* deconstructive.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Clines' critique must be considered, as Job seems to remain part of his theological system. For example, in claiming that he is innocent, Job states that he should not have been punished and thus commits himself to the language of the binary. However, we argue it is Job's lived experience that deconstructs the binary, for how can an innocent human receive punishment? Thus, Job's use of dominant, traditional language relating to the binary *as well as* his innocent suffering indeed suggests ambiguity rather than completely dismissing the dominant structure.

Both deconstruction and resistance always arise from within the system that is being challenged or destabilised. In other words, Job cannot challenge the prevailing dogmatic system without participating in it. For Foucault this is part of resistance, he argued that:

where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a *position of exteriority* in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, we argue that Job, despite upholding the dominant language, indeed deconstructs his friends' normative binary through his innocent suffering. In other words, Job's resistance can be interpreted as being not about surpassing the binary, but rather challenging it from within.

As mentioned before, neither Derrida nor Foucault desire to install yet another structure governed by binary oppositions, but rather longs for an ambiguous space of possibility. In fact, the conclusions poststructuralism provides, if one can speak of conclusions at all, are always ambiguous, neither wanting to submit to A nor B. Job's statement combined with his lived experience similarly refuses to submit to the dominant binary (a), or a total rejection or alienation of traditional thought (b). In other words, Job's language and experience neither reject nor accept the traditional dominant binary. Instead, deconstruction opens up a third reconfigured space, an *in-between* so to speak. In poststructural terms, the in-between is meant to address that space which is inaugurated by deconstruction.<sup>47</sup> As we have seen, to Derrida, justice is impossible because knowledge, at least unlimited and infinite knowledge – such as Job's friends seem to possess – is impossible.<sup>48</sup> As such, Job's experience of suffering deconstructs the friends' concept of justice by exposing the impossibility of its universality. It opens a deconstructive space enabling endless possibilities for justice in the face of ever changing contexts. Perhaps Job's resistance leads to such a deconstructive, in-between, space full of doubts, rather than answers, and ambiguity rather than a strict division of power. The questions the book of Job imposes on its readers is whether God is omnipotent or just and if these can be simultaneously true. For both Job and his friends, God is powerful and just, yet Job's experience leads to existential doubts on this ideological structure that governs the meaning of justice. This understanding of deconstruction and resistance goes to show that there is no absolute liberation or complete change, but merely a possibility of reconfiguring thought. Job's challenge is not, and cannot, liberate himself from the theological system he is in. However radical Job's challenge may be, the replacement of meaning can only occur in relation to and participation of what it

replaces. Moreover, replacement or reconfiguration necessarily implies yet another discourse of knowledge which in time must face its own resistance and deconstruction.<sup>49</sup>

In the end, one could say Job is deconstructive in so far that his lived experience disturbs and resists the present theological ideologies around human suffering. However, we would like to argue, in line with Clines, that Job's deconstruction does not and ought not to offer a conclusive or alternative answer to the problem of human suffering. The book challenges and invites to challenge but refuses to solve.

### ***God in court: YHWH's flamboyant and superficial display of power***

Having established Job's deconstruction of and resistance to the normative binary of the friends, we now turn to God's voice. In the final speeches in the book of Job (38–41), the much-awaited response from God comes. On a few occasions, Job expresses his want and need to talk to God directly. In a bold statement in Job 13:3, Job wishes to discuss his case with God 'to determine what is right'.<sup>50</sup> Even more striking is Job's wish to enter into an argument 'against' God in a forensic sense. Here, Job is not only talking about arguing with God as the judge of right and wrong, but that God should appear before another judge and prove his innocence – such a desire is unprecedented in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>51</sup>

The response of God is, however, confounding and complicates the situation even more. Contrary to the expectations, God's response does not revolve around the topic of Job and his unwarranted sufferings but around his own being. For one thing, whereas God should be standing in court to answer why he made an innocent suffer, he puts Job in a defensive position. Moreover, the theme of the discussion is completely different: for God, it is more important to display his ultimate knowledge – a practice that seems completely unnecessary at this stage. As we have seen before, the possession of 'true' knowledge has been a point of contention between Job and his friends. It is, nevertheless, clear to all the participants that God is ultimately all-knowing. Hence, though the chance of a court case against God is granted to Job, it is nothing but a parody of a court case – where the convict is the judge, the plaintiff is harassed and not given a chance to speak, and the witnesses are against the plaintiff – turning the concept of God's justice into a hoax.

Contrary to how God depicts himself in his speeches, he appears to be insecure and weak when the speeches are read from the broader perspective of the book. Why does God need to show off to Job, who is at the lowest point in his life? From the reader's perspective, the boastful response of God's creative power in front of a downtrodden miserable man appears to be distasteful. Here Foucault's statement is relevant as he states that through resistance 'the relationship of power may become a confrontation between two adversaries'.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, a relationship of power can at any moment be transformed into a relationship of struggle, which demonstrates the limits of power. From a Foucauldian perspective, one could thus wonder whether God's display of power in the answer to Job testifies to the limit of God's power. Slavoj Žižek argues similarly that in God's answer, we encounter 'a God who acts like someone caught in the moment of impotence – weakness, at least – and tries to escape his predicament by empty boasting'.<sup>53</sup> When faced with Job's suffering experience, God's power is ultimately put into question and suggests an element of weakness. In fact, Job's resistance seems to affect

power as the governing ideological structures lose their upper hand in face of Job's innocent suffering.

As Foucault's fifth thesis on power, in *History of Sexuality*, posits that 'where there is power, there is resistance,'<sup>54</sup> it follows that power is always relational. Howarth notes that this understanding of power means that for Foucault 'the exercise of power presupposes a weakening of control— - a crisis of dislocation of the structure so to speak— - and the emergence of possibilities that are not evident in the existing structure of domination (original emphasis)'.<sup>55</sup> In other words, resistance, or the refusal of power, demonstrates that power itself is unstable. As such, God's boastful answer, which steers away from an answer or justification of Job's suffering, supposes a destabilisation of power and a weakening of control. Job's resistance could thus be seen as affecting God's power. For the presence of resistance itself shows that the power it opposes repudiates the idea that power is absolute. Job can resist through his experience and speeches that power, including Godself, is absolute. Here it is helpful to recall Foucault statement that 'if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience'.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, in bringing God to court and refusing to remain silent, obedient, and to repent, Job resists power instead of obeying oppressive rule. Following this resistance the book of Job disrupts the idea that God's power is absolute, or that the binary ideology of punishment and reward is sovereign. Although God pretends to hold absolute power, the possibility of resistance itself is what destabilises it.

Consequently, that God does not respond to Job's allegations implies God's fragility in the face of human suffering. God is somehow unable or unwilling to uphold the binary that rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Therefore, in the broader scheme of things, God's lack of answer to Job and the display of power reflects the deconstruction of the binary and God's own power.

For Job, and readers of the book of Job, God's answer opens up the possibility of getting to know a different God. The book of Job embarks on a search for justice that never fully dawns and looks for answers that do not come. But then, this is what deconstruction is about and how systems are resisted from within. Derrida claimed that only justice is undeconstructible.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps the problem the book of Job exposes is that 'justice does not exist. Justice is always coming, always promised, but it never quite arrives, not as such'.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

The book of Job is 'disappointing' for its readers in the sense that it raises questions that are not answered. Even more so, it creates hype about the power and justice of God to the extent that a reader expects that God's voice would 'settle' the matter and provide all the answers. Nevertheless, God's refusal or inability to provide a finite answer to who he is and what meaning lies behind the existential questions of human suffering testifies to the deconstructive character of the book of Job. Job does not *arrive* at the answer to the questions that his suffering experience imposes upon him. And God, in the final speech, seems to leave both Job and the readers of the book of Job with an ambiguous open end. In fact, it is almost as if the book of Job, considering Job's resistance and God's ambiguous answer, leaves its readers with the task to deconstruct and reconfigure



some of its theological presuppositions. As if to say that the complexity and messiness of human existence require deconstruction. For as the unsatisfactory answers of Job's friends in response to his suffering leave Job with a demand to deconstruct the dogmatic binaries that silence his experience, the unsatisfactory answer of God requires the readers to do the same. Such a conclusion might seem unsatisfactory, but then deconstruction is not about being satisfying; deconstruction is not meant to provide yet another final answer, but another deconstruction.

Consequently, the book of Job does not aim to offer an extratextual meaning behind Job's suffering. Instead, the book requires the reader to keep looking and to allow for a possibility of reshaping systems of meaning. Even if that *reconstruction* is followed by yet another *deconstruction*. Hence, the book has for its readers to offer only a 'conclusion without a conclusion'.<sup>59</sup>

## Notes

1. Wolfers, *Deep Things Out of Darkness*, 13.
2. e.g., Clines, "Deconstructing the Book of Job," pp. 106–23; Hankins, *The Book of Job and the Immanent Genesis of Transcendence*; Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*; Lacocque, "The Deconstruction of Job's Fundamentalism," 83.
3. e.g., Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature*; Mettinger, "Intertextuality: Allusion and Vertical Context in Some Job Passages," 258–280; Janzen, *Job*, 12–13; Crenshaw, *Reading Job*; Kynes, *My Psalm Has Turned into Weeping*.
4. Koosed, "Nine Reflections on the Book: Poststructuralism and the Hebrew Bible," 502.
5. See, Clines, "Deconstructing the Book of Job," 5.
6. Derrida, *Positions*, 41.
7. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 93.
8. Derrida, *Positions*, 41.
9. Derrida and Bass, *Margins of Philosophy*, 329.
10. Aichele et al., "Poststructuralist Criticism," 120.
11. Derrida, *Positions*, 41.
12. Derrida, 'Force of Law: "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', 26. This is the third of three aporiae that Derrida distinguishes regarding the unstable relation between law and justice.
13. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
14. Lawlor, "Deconstruction", 126–27.
15. Derrida, 'Force of Law: "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', 26.
16. See, Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*.
17. Derrida and Bass, *Writing and Difference*, 354.
18. Aichele et al., "Poststructuralist Criticism," 129.
19. *Ibid.*, 121.
20. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 27.
21. Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After: Structure, Subjectivity, and Power*, 192.
22. Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 12.
23. We are greatly indebted to Barnett's analysis of Foucauldian resistance here. See, Barnett, "The Primacy of Resistance: Anarchism, Foucault, and the Art of Not Being Governed" 268–96.
24. Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After*, 192–93.
25. Foucault, "My Body, This Paper, This Fire," 9–28. In this article, Foucault criticises Derrida for his text-centred deconstruction and argues there are relations of power at play outside the textual activity.
26. Hirst, "Derrida and Political Resistance: The Radical Potential of Deconstruction," 19.
27. See, Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature*; Greenstein, "Parody as a Challenge to Tradition: The Use of Deuteronomy 32 in the Book of Job," 66–78; Seow, *Job 1–21*:



- Interpretation and Commentary* 82–84; and Meshel, ‘Whose Job Is This? Dramatic Irony and double entendre in the Book of Job,’ 47–75.
28. The phenomenon that every voice counts can be seen from the book’s structure and literary framework as it contains several competing voices. See, Stordalen, “Dialogue and Dialogism in the Book of Job,” 18–37; Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, 29–30; Hyun, *Job the Unfinalizable: A Bakhtinian Reading of Job 1–11*.
  29. See, Hoffman, “The Relation Between the Prologue and the Speech-Cycles in Job,” 160–70.
  30. Seow remarks, “The speech is well-crafted. Some might even say it is “crafty.” Seow, *Job 1–21*, 381.
  31. See for example, Dell, *The Book of Job*, 35–39; Dhorme, *A Commentary on The Book of Job*, lxx; Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, 53; Clines, *Job 1–20*, 205–9.
  32. Dell, *The Book of Job*, 35–36.
  33. See, van Loon, “But Man is Born to Trouble . . . : Metaphors in the Discussion on Hope and Consolation in Job 3–31,” 80–81.
  34. See, Schmid, “Innerbiblische Exegese und Schriftkritik im Hiobbuch,” 247–8.
  35. See Seow, *Job 1–21*, 381; Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 103; Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation and Special Studies*, 46.
  36. Habel, *Book of Job*, 118.
  37. Unless otherwise indicated, the translation of the verses from the book of Job is taken from: Greenstein, *Job: A New Translation*.
  38. For a discussion on how Eliphaz harshly criticises Job, even when he uses seemingly positive words, see Fullerton, “Double Entendre in the First Speech of Eliphaz,” 320–374.
  39. Habel, *Book of Job*, 137.
  40. For a detailed study on the theme of knowledge in the book of Job, see, Shackelford, “The Concept of Knowledge in the Book of Job.”
  41. Kant, “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,” 33.
  42. Kant., 33.
  43. Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 168.
  44. Foucault, “The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 12.
  45. See, Clines, “Deconstructing the Book of Job”.
  46. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95.
  47. The in-between, or third space, is a term often coined by poststructuralists. More specifically, found in feminist, queer, cultural and postcolonial theory – both offsprings from poststructuralism. For example, drawing from Derrida’s concept of *différance*, Homi Bhabha developed “third space theory” in cultural and postcolonial studies. See, Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. And Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 875–93, who relates the ‘in-between’ space to the binary of gender.
  48. Derrida, *Positions*, 40–44.
  49. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 230.
  50. Balentine, *Job*, 208.
  51. See Seow, *Job 1–21*, 543–4.
  52. Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 794.
  53. Žižek, *For They Know not what they do*, li.
  54. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95.
  55. Howarth, *Poststructuralism and After*, 192.
  56. Foucault, “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,” 167.
  57. See, Derrida, ‘Force of Law: “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’.
  58. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*, 194.
  59. John Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*, 315.

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