

Review of Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job*

James E. Harding, University of Otago

The purpose of this brief review is to respond to Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job*, but what I do not intend to do is to summarize the book in relation to Negri's life and work, or in relation to the development of Marxist discourse. Rather, I intend to situate it in relation to those recent commentators on Job who have focused on the "for nothing" aspect of the relationship between Job and Yahweh. In so doing, I want to suggest that, in spite of his own apparent intentions, Negri has produced a book that is not only of ethical, philosophical, and political significance, but perhaps also of *theological* value.

In the one passage outside the book of Job where Job appears in the Tanakh (Ezek 14:12-23), what is at stake is the reliability and predictability of the justice of Yahweh. This is conceived in terms of *measure*, the prophet being at pains to point out that his audience will know that, in destroying Jerusalem, Yahweh will not have acted gratuitously or arbitrarily: in other words, he will not have acted *ḥinnām*, without just cause (Ezek 14:23). The righteousness of Noah, Job, and Dan'el is not enough to balance out the sins of Jerusalem — indeed, Ezek 20 goes a step further, claiming that the notions of suffering for another's sins and vicariously saving another from their sins have been nullified in favour of a revised of divine justice as just measure, in which only the sinner pays the penalty.

It is precisely the claim of Ezek 14:23 that is disrupted in Job: the Accuser entices Yahweh to make Job suffer *without just cause* (Job 2:3) so as to test whether or not Job fears God *without ulterior motive* (Job 1:9). To have real, rather than superficial integrity (*tummāh*), Job's faith should be without ulterior motive (*ḥinnām*), but it is not, because it depends on Job being able to perceive that Yahweh is not acting arbitrarily or gratuitously (*ḥinnām*), a position that threatens both the integrity of Job's faith and the integrity of a god who seems both to play along with Job in protecting him so as to retain his devotion, and to allow himself to be bound in a way that compromises his creative freedom. It is in connection with the word *ḥinnām*, then, that the two strata of the world, the heavenly and the mundane, overlap. Negri puts this slightly differently, pointing out that the two strata of the world are united by the suspicion of sin, a suspicion provoked by the Accuser: "The suspicion of sin unifies the two strata of the world, the human and the divine, while one waits for the sin to be carried out and God's malediction to strike man" (p. 19).

The question of the gratuitousness of Job's faith and Yahweh's response has become a central element in certain strands of research on Job, especially, but not exclusively, those that approach the book with primarily theological concerns, such as those of Wilhelm Vischer (1934, 4-7), Karl Barth (1959, 443-448, 459-470, 486-499, 522-531), Susannah Ticciati (2009, 353-366), and David Burrell (2008).¹ Ellen van Wolde, from a different starting point, has also shown how the book of Job is structured around the question of gratuity, Job moving from a faith that is not *ḥinnām* through a change of heart in Job 42:6 (*niḥamti 'al*), signified by a wordplay between *ḥinnām* and *niḥam*, to a position where he can have faith without ulterior motive, and where Yahweh can likewise bless Job without being bound to serve a measured system of reward and retribution (van Wolde 1997, 139-140).

It is this strand in the reading of Job that — perhaps surprisingly — lies closest to the concerns of Antonio Negri in his rather idiosyncratic and, it must be said, often tiresomely obfuscatory study. I say "perhaps surprisingly", because Negri's approach is distinctly non-theological, though perhaps it would be more accurate to say that his study of Job resonates with the kind of turn to religion — especially to the writings of Paul — we find among contemporary continental philosophers such as Alain Badiou, and it is because of this that Negri's book deserves the attention of biblical scholars:

the parting shot by Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood at the end of *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar*, that “[w]e need to find religion” (Moore and Sherwood 2011, 131), is made in light of exactly this turn by critical theorists to the sources of the Christian tradition in particular.

For his part, Negri abandons both the theological basis of the book of Job and the truth claims inherent in the Christian tradition while clinging to an ethical dimension to both. Thus:

[W]e are entirely in favour of the secularization of Christianity’s theology (from the creation to redemption and resurrection), but only on the condition that we do not lose, through this pseudorationalist conversion, the practical, ethical, and passionate content of religious truth. It is not mystery that interests us, but grace and charity. (p. 77)

The basis for Negri’s argument is an analogy between the rupture in the traditional notion of measure in the book of Job, and the end of a quantifiable relation between labour and value in late capitalism. For Negri, Job’s suffering points to the impossibility of systems of measure and equivalence (p. 36), which for the book of Job would entail that the resolution to the book cannot come through the re-establishment of such a system of measure. Job reacts to his suffering not with fear before the exercise of absolute divine power — a fear which, in fact, he leaves behind as the book progresses — but with the expression of pain, a pain that is incommensurable, impossible to rationalise in terms of a system of measure (pp. xix-xx). In order to live beyond this bankruptcy of measure, the only adequate response is neither to restore the old system of measure, nor to replace the old system of measure with a new one,² but to embody a passion for creation.

Integral to this is the fact that Job’s struggle is embodied, not abstract, and it is this embodied experience of pain, rather than abstract reflection based on reason and proportion (with which the book of Job, according to Negri, is profoundly at odds: “[T]he book of Job is not only a provocation against the seduction of reason — it is the phenomenological discovery and the metaphysical announcement of the disaster to which instrumental reason leads” [p. 8]), that opens onto a definition of truth. Though Negri only touches on this point obliquely (p. xxii), it is worth pointing out that it is the very particularity of Job’s embodied and existential pain as opposed to the universal claims of his interlocutors, combined with the book’s deconstruction of the binary structures familiar from both prophetic and sapiential traditions in the Hebrew Bible, that have made the book of Job so open to postmodern re-interpretation, and yet at the same time so tempting to those who, in the history of the book’s reception, would try to reduce it to some form of orthodox affirmation of reason and measure (cf. pp. 13, 39).

Negri is working within a Marxist framework, with a concern for where Marxist discourse might go in a context where the quantifiable relation between labour and value has collapsed, and so unlike David Burrell, for example, he is hardly concerned with the consequences for *theology* of a book that spells the end of a theodicy based on measure. Certainly it is such a theodicy that above all highlights for Negri the “illusion” of measure, and in his comments on the first intervention of Eliphaz, an ardent defender of theodicy, he points out that the dogma of retributive justice “means that man receives a reward or a punishment according to his works. This is the anthropocentric thesis of justification through work” (p. 31). But while he is not concerned with the *theological* implications of this, at one point in particular Negri’s materialist approach raises questions that are of significant importance for theological and non-theological approaches to the book alike. That point concerns ethics: what are the consequences for *ethics* of the direction taken by the book of Job? I wish to focus on this question because it is one that, aside from its intrinsic importance, highlights a gap in Negri’s treatment of Job, a gap that might be filled by casting a brief glance in the direction of Levinas. I am not going to comment on Negri’s contribution to Marxism in the context of late capitalism, which is beyond my competence, but I do want to address the relevance of his work for ethics, especially in the wake of the collapse of theodicies based on measure after Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

For Negri, “the book of Job describes the path of the reconstruction of an ethical world once faith in God’s justice has been deconstructed” (p. 6). This is not simply an ancient question to be scrutinized under the exegete’s microscope, but one that continues to speak to a world marked by “the collapse of all horizons of value” (p. 13), in which it is not so much that the silence of God in the face of human suffering appears as a scandal, but rather that the human capacity to inflict gross suffering has exceeded all reason and measure. This finds an echo in Susan Neiman’s revisionist account of the history of modern philosophy (Neiman 2002), in which the beginning and end of the modern are identified in the way that the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 (Neiman 2002, 240-250), and the gas chambers of Auschwitz, created forms of conceptual devastation that led to paradigm shifts in the ways in which natural and moral “evil” could be addressed: Lisbon and Auschwitz came to stand for the limits of the human ability to comprehend human suffering in relation to an ultimately trustworthy — read perhaps *measurable* — underlying order, whether that order is evident in terms of a connection between natural disaster and underlying moral causes (overturned by Lisbon), or whether it is evident in a clear link between moral evil and specifiable, underlying human intentions (undone by Auschwitz; Neiman 2002, 267-281).

Negri’s analogy between the collapse of measure in Job and the crisis of value in capitalism finds a strong echo here, as Negri realises — but does not fully formulate — in his repeated references to Auschwitz and Hiroshima (e.g. pp. 59, 75). I want to draw this also into conversation with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, especially his short, oft-cited essay “Useless Suffering” (Levinas 2008/1998). But before we get to that, we need to look at the ethical dimension of the book of Job. For Negri, Job’s protest before God is an act of ontological will that is rooted in an ethical claim, outlined in his oath of innocence in Job 31. The ethical reasons for Job’s response are founded on “the series of oaths and pacts, the social commitments, pity, fidelity, respect, charity, integrity, the laws and obedience to them; in other words, the Alliance that Job had established with God” (p. 81). Job’s response is an act of creative power (*potenza*), “that of a man who constructs the world, society, interiority, removing them from the primordial chaos” (loc. cit.). God has, in a sense, failed to uphold justice because he has failed to secure Job’s efforts. Job’s God is dead (pp. 95-99), but this is not the end for ethics. Rather, a renewed conception of ethics emerges through Job’s experience of immeasurable pain. Commenting on the words of Elihu in Job 33:13-30, Negri sees pain as integral to Job’s — and thus humanity’s — path to salvation (p. 89). Negri points to Elihu’s presentation of this necessary pain as requiring “a mediator, a messiah, a redeemer, as the element which would solve a drama that would otherwise be excessive and insoluble”, referring to the angelic mediator of Job 33:23 but picking up on several texts that do not, of course, refer to a Messiah — an unfortunate lapse in Negri’s understanding of the book of Job — but do refer to some figure who will nullify the measured gap between the human and the divine (Job 7:21; 9:30-33; 14:13-15; 16:19-21; 19:25-29). Job’s experience of pain implies the existence, without any transcendental Power to constitute it, an ethical order and ethical community founded on compassion:

[E]ven if we will never know another’s pain, is it not precisely the verifiability of that pain that lead us, through compassion, the queen of ethical arts, to recognize the ontology of the ethical community? Is not the discourse of pain and compassion a value in itself? (p. 89)

It is not the divinity, then, not a meaning that descends from above, but suffering and pain, which come from below, that construct the very being of the world. (p. 93)

It is from this place, this ethical community, that humanity can begin to build a future beyond mystifying ideologies of measure.

It is here that a brief footnote to Levinas is apposite, because it is precisely the irreducibility of the pain of one’s neighbour that points to the collapse of theodicies based on measure, and it is precisely to Job among the traditions of Scripture to which Levinas appeals, against the theodicies of

measure represented by works such as the Deuteronomistic History. The difference, of course, is precisely that while Levinas does not let go of the discourse of “faith”, for Negri the transcendental is entirely rejected in favour of the irreducible materiality of the ethical community (p. 97).

My point here is that in spite of the avowedly a-theological stance of Negri’s book, it reaches a point with respect to ethics that is of profound *theological* significance in the wake of the horrors of the twentieth century. Furthermore, by constructing his reading around the collapse of measure, Negri is directing attention to Yahweh’s actions *without just cause* and Job’s actions *without ulterior motive*, precisely points that have proved of deep *theological* interest, especially to the Vischer, Barth (under Vischer’s influence), Ticciati (responding to Barth), and Burrell.

What, then, is the significance of Negri’s book? It is, first, another sign that biblical texts are proving foundational to serious critical reflection beyond the troubled boundaries of the Biblical Studies Guild, and particularly beyond the boundaries of both traditional historical criticism, and confessional theological hermeneutics. It also, second, signals another noteworthy moment in the reception history of the book of Job, which continues to provoke deep reflection well beyond the ancient theological frameworks that first gave birth to it. It is another sign of the endless adaptability and re-interpretability of the book’s themes.

ENDNOTES

¹ See also Harding (2010, 526).

² Though as Boer notes in his “Commentary” (pp. 121-122) Negri is ambivalent on this point (see e.g. pp. xx, 14-15, 47, 48, 51, 102).

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