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Possessions and Identity: Job's Problems and Ours

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Abstract: Recent research undertaken in the fields of anthropology and consumer behavior indicates that possessions play an important role in the construction of identity. While it is tempting to view both the connection between possessions and identity and the problems this engenders as a recent phenomenon, the Book of Job also recognizes this connection and is cognizant of its problematic nature. While Job does not offer answers to our contemporary dilemmas of possession, the book highlights the nuances of the problem as they existed in its own time and place, with all characters offering different perspectives on how the connection should be understood and how one ought to live in consequence of this understanding.

Keywords: Job; possessions; identity; self; consumer behavior; retributive justice; wisdom

1. Possessions and the Self, and the Problem of "Peak Stuff"

Is it true that we are what we own? If so, how ought we to live? These are the questions I want to ask the Book of Job in this essay. They are important questions because we find ourselves, in the Western industrialized world, in possession of what Ikea's head of sustainability recently described as "peak stuff" [1], that is to say, a quantity of "stuff" that no longer benefits us, but that threatens both the health of the environment and our own mental and emotional health. The environmental impact of having "hit peak stuff" is perhaps the most pressing problem, but a spate of recent self-help books also point to the negative mental and emotional impact of possessing too many things. James Wallman writes, "[I]nstead of feeling enriched by the things we own, [we feel] stifled by them. [...] Overwhelmed, and suffocating from stuff, we [suffer] from [an] anxiety that I call 'Stuffocation'" ([2], p. xiv). Similarly, April Lane Benson points out that "[w]hat we consume can end up consuming us" ([3], p. 5). Bestselling decluttering expert, Francine Jay, insists, "Contrary to what marketers would have you believe, you are not what you own. You are you, and things are things; no physical or mathematical alchemy can alter these boundaries" ([4], p. 13).

The role of advertising in the uptick in acquisition is widely stressed. Annie Leonard, in her *The Story of Stuff*, quotes marketing consultant Victor Lebow, who, in a 1955 article, wrote, "Our enormously productive economy demands [...] that we seek [...] our ego satisfactions, in consumption" ([5], p. 160). Yet, the link perceived between possession of objects and personal identity predates the post-WWII advertising push. In 1890, William James observed, "*[A] man's Self is the sum total of all that he* CAN *call his*, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children [...], [his] yacht and bank account" [6]. Anthropologist Daniel Miller insists that "non-industrial societies are just as much material cultures as we are" ([7], p. 4), and warns, "The idea that stuff somehow drains away our humanity [...] is really an attempt to retain a rather simplistic and false view of pure and prior unsullied humanity" ([7], p. 5). In the 1980s, consumer behavior researcher Russell Belk drew on James's 1890 observations to coin the term "extended self" to refer to the "sum total" that comprises a person's self, writing, "A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, [...] we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves. [...] That we are what we have is perhaps the most basic [...] fact of consumer behavior" ([8], p. 139). Belk contrasted the "extended

self" with the "core self," understood as an identity that preexists acquisition of possessions. Yet, as has been pointed out by another researcher, Aaron Ahuvia, the term "core self" may be misleading, given that it "can give rise to the idea that the core self is [a self that actually exists] prior to, and [is] ontologically distinct from, the extended self" ([9], p. 180), an idea that Belk did not mean to allege and that is the opposite of what research has shown. Rather, for Belk and others, the "extended self" *is* the real self, and a preexistent "core self" does not exist as a more authentic version of who a person is. Sociologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton use different language to make a similar point about the reality of the extended self over against the unreality of the core self, writing, "There are no 'people' in the abstract, people are what they attend to, what they cherish and use" ([10], p. 16). Miller further insists, "Yes, really, it is usually through the medium of things that we actually make people" ([7], p. 136). This, though, is problematic in our culture, given the problems inherent in our possession of "peak stuff." How can what research shows to be true—that people's identities are created by their possessions—be reconciled with the problems that seem to be inherent in possessing too much? How ought we to live faced with the contradiction that, though we are what we have, what we have may well be our undoing? Can the Book of Job help us answer these questions?

2. A Road Map to Complexity

Before engaging with the Book of Job on this topic, I must note that Job is a notoriously ambiguous text, offering more questions than answers. Carol Newsom has identified it as a "polyphonic text," a concept pioneered by Mikhail Bakhtin, meaning that the book does not proclaim a unified truth but, rather, presents questions "addressed [...] by a plurality of unmerged consciousnesses engaging one another in open-ended dialogue" ([11], p. 24). Even God's voice, Newsom insists, is not authoritative. Similarly, David Clines points out that neither the book nor its author offer "a resolution of [any of] the logical conflicts they create; there is no way of stating their 'position' other than that they have no position" ([12], p. 253). This may mean that we are not intended to read it as the kind of book that tells a coherent, conclusive story. Alternatively, perhaps, we are intended to try to read it that way and to experience our failure as indicative of the impossibility of finding conclusive answers to the problems it engages. If the book were the only road map we had to find our way in the world, we would find ourselves lost. Yet the book does purport to be a road map of sorts, not *through* the complexity of the world in which we live, but *to* the complexity that characterizes the world. Refusing to provide answers, the book highlights the complexity of the topics with which it engages and, in so doing, forces us, as readers, to engage with this complexity, too. It does not solve problems; it problematizes them for us.

How then should we engage with this book? Clines writes, "The book's effect [...] can only be to engage the reader in the conversation it engenders" ([12], p. 253); that is to say, it does not offer answers, but poses questions with which we are invited to engage, in our own way, from our own perspective. In a similar vein, the book might be described as "a space for thinking in" ([13], p. 17). To think in this space, though, requires two paradoxical types of engagement. On the one hand, in order to come up with any kind of potential answer to the questions with which the book is concerned, the reader must, in fact, engage with a simplified version of the text, paying attention to what one strand of the book says, while ignoring those other strands that work to contradict—or even deconstruct—the isolated strand. For the most part, this is how I will read the book in this essay. This is a valid way of engaging with the book, because it allows certain perspectives to be highlighted that might otherwise be lost in the churning iterations of the book's "unfinalizable" ([11], p. 29) conversation. At the same time, the book's overall complexity requires that we be on the look out not only for answers, but for the nuances of the problems it engages, so that we emerge from our encounter not with a solution, but with an understanding of the complexity of the problem, which is, after all, a kind of answer, and I will gesture toward this second kind of reading as well.

3. Possessions and Identity: What Job Has and Who He Is

The Book of Job clearly engages with the question of the relation between possessions and identity, and, despite the different perspectives advanced by the characters, it seems arguable that all of them believe that possessions play a role in the creation of identity. Where characters differ is in their sense of how problematic this is. Reading the book as affirming a link between possessions and identity, as I will below, however, goes against how the book is usually read. James Crenshaw describes the theme of the book as being "the possibility of disinterested righteousness," a possibility that must be confirmed, for "[a]t stake is the very survival of religious faith" ([14], p. 749). That is to say, Job must show that he serves God "for nothing" [15], for, if he does not, then "religious faith" will be shown to be unable to survive in situations where "reward" is not forthcoming. I do not think, however, that the book is so sanguine about "the possibility of disinterested righteousness" ([16], p. 112). The book's perceived preoccupation with the question of retributive justice is based on understanding Satan's [17] opening question to God, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9b) as meaning, "Does Job not serve God because he knows that, by doing so, he reaps reward?" It is possible to understand this question differently, though, in terms having to do with the relation between the "extended" and "core" self. I will discuss this interpretation of Satan's question in the next section.

Here, I want to claim that we are primed to understand Satan's question as having to do with the way in which identity is created by possessions by the narrator's opening description of Job. The narrator begins by describing Job as "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1b), but rather than following this with a description of the ways in which Job has demonstrated his righteousness, the narrator instead provides a list of Job's possessions—a multitude of children, servants, and livestock—that, because they are described as making Job "the greatest of all the people of the East" (1:3b), can be seen as parts of Job's self, existing to contribute to his identity instead of possessing identities in their own right. How do we know Job is righteous? Not by what he does, but by what he *has*, given that what he *has* is what makes him who he *is*. Greatness—literally "bigness"—and righteousness go hand in hand. Job has been created *as* a righteous man *by* his possession of material wealth, instead of the other way round ([18], pp. 793–94). The narrator tells us this when he describes Job's righteousness as embedded in his possession of great wealth. It is not that Job has a righteous "core" and has, in consequence, done righteous acts that have earned him the title. If it were, surely the narrator would say so. Surely, instead of describing Job's possessions, he would describe Job's activities. It is not Job's actions that show him to be righteous, but his possessions. It is his "extended self" that allows us to see him as a righteous man.

4. Satan's Question

As noted above, it is usually understood that when Satan asks God, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" he is asking whether it is not true that Job serves God because of the benefits he incurs by doing so, instead of because it is simply right to do so. When interpreted this way, it is assumed that Satan is gesturing toward a higher kind of righteousness—that engaged in "for nothing"—and asserting that Job does not really possess this authentic kind of righteousness, but only a corrupt kind. I want to suggest, however, that what Satan is challenging is not the *authenticity* of Job's righteousness, but God's claim that Job is *unique* in the world. "There is no one like [...] [Job] on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8), God says. God, in his boasting, seems to believe that Job has sprung, fully righteous, from nowhere, like a miraculous flower blooming in the desert. Satan's assertion is that Job is no miraculous flower grown from barren ground, but an expensive hothouse bloom that has been cultivated by God to be what he is, after which God has affected surprise at what he sees. "Have you ever seen such a splendid thing?" God asks, his face expressing baffled pleasure. "Of course I haven't!" Satan replies. "But his existence is no mystery, and you ought to know it. No one is like him, because no one has what he has!"

Satan's question, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" is a question about Job's "core self" as opposed to his "extended self," but Satan is not asserting that only if Job's "core" is righteous is he authentically

righteous. Rather, Satan is asserting that Job's identity as a righteous man has been constituted through his secure possession of material wealth, *just as it is for everyone*. "Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land" (1:10). It is significant that Satan does *not* say, "Is Job not righteous *so that* you will provide him with security and with wealth?" which would support the traditional "disinterested-righteousness-as-authentic-righteousness" interpretation, but, instead, "Is Job not righteous *because* you have provided him with security and wealth?" which indicates that Satan is claiming that God has provided Job with the possessions necessary to *constitute* him as a righteous man.

What Satan proposes, then, is to remove Job's possessions, to strip away his "extended self," so as to reveal that at his "core," he is no different from anyone else. If such a man as Job can be shown to be no better than other men, then it ought to be easy for God to have a world full of men like Job, "blameless and upright, who fear God and turn away from evil." Striking a blow at Job's "extended self" will demonstrate, Satan believes, that righteousness is a feature of persons' "extended selves," not of their "core selves." It is not that God ought not to have cultivated Job as a righteous man, but that, if God would only admit having done so, God would discover that he knows how to make a *world* of righteous people. "Yes, really," Satan says with Miller, "it is usually through the medium of things that we actually make people" ([7], p. 136).

5. Job's Answers to the Satan's Question

It is important to notice that Job understands the deaths of his children and servants and the theft of his livestock not as a blow struck against *them* but as a blow struck against *him*, just as Satan intends him to experience it, reminding us again that Job understands these people and animals to be parts of himself, contributors to his own identity, rather than separate entities in their own right. What Job seems to understand from this test is that he is on the verge of death. With his possessions gone, Job has already begun to die. He composes himself for death, shaving his head and tearing his robe, thereby bringing himself even closer to the "nakedness" that he acknowledges is proper to the moment of death. He then makes his deathbed speech: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there," he says. "[T]he LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (1:21). Recognizing that his life—the existence of his self, which is comprised of both a "core" and an "extended" element—has been a gift, or perhaps more accurately a loan, from God, Job is ready to let go of his claim to possess it. At this point, Job no longer sees himself as a person; he has entered a liminal, "naked" stage, proper to the moments of birth and death, and is in the process of crossing the boundary which will see the complete dissolution of his self.

Although Satan was wrong that Job would respond to his loss of possessions by cursing God, Satan was right in that Job had, in fact, been constituted by his possessions. Having lost his "extended self" in the form of his possessions, Job understands that he has lost his self in its entirety: he has become that oxymoron that only exists at the liminal moments of birth and death—a "naked man," that is to say, a "non-man," a man who has ceased to exist and is only waiting for his last breath to gasp from his lips. Job does not curse God. Why should he? Job no longer exists as Job; naked, like no one else in the world except a baby pushing its way from the birth canal, Job waits for the exit that has been signaled. Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, given that the Book of Job is filled with moments at which characters fail to understand the other's position, God and Satan do not recognize Job's words as deathbed speech, but instead proceed to administer a second test [19].

Although it may be tempting to view Job's response to the second test as the same, in essence, as the first, this is emphatically not the case. His second response, while not a curse, does move in that direction. "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (2:10) is not simply another way of saying, as Job has already said, "the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away" (1:21). In 1:21, Job is acknowledging that, since God gave him the gift of life, it is God's prerogative to decide when that life shall come to an end; Job is ready to surrender the gift, having used it well

and enjoyed it while it lasted. The loss of his children, servants, and livestock is not a tragedy that he must live with, but a signal to Job that his end has come. In 2:10, by contrast, Job has come to view the loss of his wealth and health as tragedies that he is being forced to live with; having accepted the good from God, he is now forced to accept the bad. Previously, Job thought that the things he had, the things that defined him as a man, were really *his*, even though there would come a time when he would need to relinquish his hold. Despite being dead, Job would still be remembered for who he had been through the medium of the things he once possessed. Now, though, Job has discovered that none of his possessions were really his. Everything he possessed contributed not to his own identity as a good, great man, but to his identity as God's dupe, the victim of God's predatory lending scheme. Who is Job? He is the one who was most taken in by God. He is the one who signed his name on the dotted line again and again, so that now God *owns* him and, calling him in to settle the terms of the loan, strips him of his possessions, covers his body with sores, and casts him onto the ash heap.

Job's recognition that God is a predatory lender leads directly into his third chapter cursing of the day of his birth. Job's idea is that, if he is able to reject his own possession of anything that originally came from God, he will cease to belong to God, and God will no longer have the power to harm him. Some scholars, notably Michael Fishbane, have read Chapter 3 as a "counter-cosmic incantation" ([20], p. 153) by which Job intends to "systematically" dismantle the entire creation. Others have rejected this view. Rebecca Watson, for example, writes, "Job 3:3–10 constitutes not a systematic dismantling of creation but rather expresses the much more limited wish never to have been born, uttered by a man undergoing immense suffering" ([21], p. 322). Similarly, Clines writes, "[T]he curses it includes are inconsequential [...] because it is too late to do anything about it [...] [T]he function is to bewail his unhappy lot." ([22], p. 79).

I want to suggest an interpretive possibility that lies between these two extremes. Job is not attempting to dismantle all of God's creation, but only to undo, to the greatest degree possible, his own status as a creature in God's created world. He wants to give up all claim to possess any part of the world. He does not want to possess a birthday or even a conception-day. Job's speech of 3:3–10 is not a systematic *dismantling* of the created world, but a systematic *rejection* of any "gift" Job might have received from God, even to the point of rejecting the possibility of having received a gift [23]. Although it may seem too late for Job to reject God's "gift," in 3:3–10, Job is making a formal statement of what he would *choose*, given the choice. Having not been given any choice in the matter of whether he was conceived or born, Job is making the argument that he cannot be held responsible for having accepted God's "gift"—or loan—of life. Now that he knows what its terms are, he fully rejects it, insisting that if it had been up to him, he would not have touched it. Previously, Job believed that his possessions showed him to be a great, righteous man. Now he sees that his possessions really made him a pawn in the hand of a malevolent deity, and, in order to reject this identity, Job attempts to reject possessions altogether, even to the point of rejecting "having" a day on which he might have been conceived.

6. Job's Friends and the Tent as Metonym for the Self

When Job's friends arrive to comfort him, they do not recognize him, and they mourn the fact that he is no longer who he was (2:12). Although Job continues to insist on his own righteousness throughout their discussion despite the loss of his former possessions, including his health, his friends are unable to believe him. It is usual for interpreters to agree with Job against his friends and to argue that here is where the book takes its stand against the functioning of retributive justice in the world: Job is innocent of any wickedness; therefore, it is not the case that only the wicked are punished and only the righteous rewarded. Job proves that old chestnut, by which the friends are so convinced, to have no merit whatsoever. Yet the fact remains that no matter what Job says, his friends simply cannot recognize him as a righteous man. The requisite possessions simply cannot be separated from the identity. Job's friends become angrier and angrier as he continues to insist on his possession of an identity that they can clearly see he does not possess; his words not only fail to convince them, but do not make any sense to them at all.

In this section, I want to focus on a trope that recurs throughout the dialogues, both in Job's speech and that of his friends: a person's tent (or dwelling) used as a metonym for his or her identity. The friends agree that wicked people can be identified by their inability to securely possess tents, while righteous people can be identified by the secure possession of tents. The successful destruction of a person's tent is a sure signal of his or her identity as a wicked person. A characteristic speech is offered by Bildad, who claims that the wicked "are torn from the tent in which they trusted [...] [and] nothing remains; sulfur is scattered upon their habitations. [...] Their memory perishes from the earth. [...] They have no offspring, [...] [nor a] survivor where they used to live (18:14a, 15a, 19) [24]. For the friends, the wicked are those who do not truly possess their tents, a fact that, even if it is not evident during their lives, becomes evident at the moment of death when the tent and all other possessions attached to it, including offspring who might continue to inhabit it, are also removed from the earth. If people truly possess their tent, then the tent will continue to exist, even after they have died, and will continue to speak to their having existed. Whether or not one securely possesses one's tent is, here, indicative of whether or not one truly exists. Individuals are constituted not only as righteous or wicked by their possession of tents, but as persons. The destruction of a person's tent at the moment of death indicates that he or she was never really a person [25].

Although Job disagrees with his friends' depiction of the insecurity of the tents of the wicked, it is important to note that he shares their sense of the way things ought to be. He does not disagree that the wicked do not really exist, but contends that, because of divine malfeasance, the wicked *do* find themselves in secure possession of tents. Even death does not show them for what they are, for "[w]hen they are carried to the grave, a watch is kept over their tomb" (21:32). The tents of the wicked remain, Job insists, and their tombs are watched over so that these individuals remain in possession of their identity as human beings who existed. Job does not go so far as to acknowledge that this secure tent-possession constitutes those in possession as righteous, though this would be the logical implication of his description of the so-called wicked tent-possessors. The friends cannot accept that the wicked possess tents, because, by definition, a wicked person is a person who does not have a tent; the possession, or lack thereof, defines the person. As the friends see it, Job is talking utter nonsense. As much as we might want to claim that Job is right and the friends are wrong, how right can Job be if his words seem completely illogical to his friends? Even Job believes that he ought to be wrong—secure tent-possession *does* define the righteous and lack thereof defines the wicked—and he believes that the only reason he is right is because God has done something wrong.

7. God's Speeches

In his speeches, God says nothing about human persons, righteous or wicked, with or without tents, but instead focuses on wild animals—animals that cannot be counted among humans' possessions. God, in fact, highlights certain animals' unwillingness to allow themselves to be possessed by humans, despite benefits they might be seen to incur by allowing themselves to be so annexed. About the wild ox, for example, God asks, "Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will it spend the night at your crib? [...] [W]ill it harrow the valleys after you?" (39:9, 10b). The implication seems to be that the wild ox will not allow itself to be possessed by Job, thereby existing as part of his identity instead of for its own sake. If the wild ox were to bind itself as Job's servant, then, in exchange, it would receive the security of "your crib," a place perhaps functionally equivalent to the human tent. In this way, the wild ox would gain an identity recognized by humans, as possessor of a crib, but also lose identity, becoming one possessed.

I want to suggest that one of the things God means to indicate through his depiction of the wild ox and other wild animals is that, though it may be true that humans create identity through possessions, there is a limit to what can be possessed and therefore a limit to how much any human being can hope to constitute him—or herself through possession. The wild ox and others, because they will not be possessed, limn the limits of humanness and also of righteousness, inasmuch as righteousness is an identity created through secure possession of the world. God describes the absolute limit of human

identity when he describes Leviathan, who is not only unwilling "to make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever" (41:4), but whose capture, because of its fierce strength, is impossible (41:9–11). Righteous human identity may be created by what humans possess, but there is a hard and fast limit to what can be possessed, which, in some ways, gives the lie to the whole system. Righteous humans must be equally defined by what they cannot possess. Faced with Leviathan, the tent cannot be held securely, and the possibility of righteousness—based as it is on the ability to securely possess the world—founders on the beast's impenetrable flesh.

8. The Epilogue

In the epilogue, Job receives from God "twice as much as he had before" (42:10b), and, whatever this may mean for questions about the book's portrayal of retributive justice, it does confirm the role possessions play in the creation of identity. As soon as Job regains material possessions, his community becomes able to recognize him again, as they were incapable of doing when he was possessionless, no matter how much he protested his innocence. Now that Job has possessions, his community demonstrates their recognition of him by "eating bread with him in his house," and they further contribute to this recognized identity by "each [...] giving him a piece of money and a gold ring" (42:11).

This reversal must bring home to Job with considerable force the way in which his identity relies on what he possesses. Instead, however, of resulting in an increased focus on maintenance of his possessions, Job turns this newly recognized power of possession outward. In the opening verses of the book, before he lost his possessions, the one action Job took was to offer sacrifices on behalf of his children lest they had "cursed God in their hearts" in the course of their feasting (1:5b), an activity undertaken not for the sake of his children's well-being, but in order to guarantee their standing as his possessions, for sinful children would have reflected poorly on Job himself [26]. In the epilogue, by contrast, Job unexpectedly gives his daughters an inheritance, granting them, through the medium of objects, their own status as persons.

This action demonstrates two things Job learns. First, he learns, despite his protestations throughout the book, that righteousness is a function of the "extended" rather than the "core self." Righteousness is not an attribute that exists independent of what one possesses, but, rather, is created by what one possesses. There is a certain cynicism to this view, but it is also liberating. Instead of working to maintain his own status as a righteous person, Job is able to bestow righteousness on others. It is as easy as giving an inheritance. Secondly, as a corollary, from God's speeches he learns that there is a limit to personal righteousness, simply because one cannot possess the whole world. This, too, is liberating. If there is a limit, Job is no longer bound to hold on to all his possessions, but, acknowledging a lower bar, can give some of them away.

9. Conclusions

The Book of Job would seem to affirm the idea that people are what they possess, while also acknowledging how problematic this can be, even for the long-ago inhabitants of the land of Uz. At the same time, although possessions are shown to be both necessary and problematic in the Book of Job, our current "peak stuff" situation—and the dangers entailed—is not the situation of the characters in the book. In Job, a lack of possessions would seem to be the site of the problem: those who *have* can *be*, whereas those who do not have cannot be, no matter what they may claim on behalf of their "core selves." Job simply cannot convince anyone of his righteousness once he has lost his possessions, but once he is reinvested with possessions, they see it immediately.

For us, though, an excess of *having* seems to threaten to unmake us and our world. Here, perhaps, God's words from the whirlwind may be useful. Depicting a wild world of animals that will not be possessed, God describes the limits of human self-making through possession. Humans may create identity through possessions, but there is a limit to what humans can possess. We might even think of our current ecological crisis as the result of our efforts to "lay hands on Leviathan" (41:8a), to possess

that which is beyond the limits of our ability to possess. God, though, does not really offer advice about what to do in the event of our having tried to conquer Leviathan, but only points out that, against Leviathan, we will not win.

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15. All Bible quotations are from the NRSV. *The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.
16. Clines notices, for example that "What the book has been doing its best to demolish, the doctrine of retribution, is on its last page triumphantly affirmed," much to its readers' discomfort. David J. A. Clines. "Deconstructing the Book of Job." In *What Does Eve do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990, pp. 106–23.
17. The character Satan is not the Devil of later writings and Christian teaching, but an accusatory member of the divine council, a kind of "devil's advocate."

18. Indeed, what righteousness might be in and of itself, separated from the possession of material wealth, remains ambiguous throughout the book. As has been noted, in 1:2–3, where we might expect a description of Job's righteous behavior, we are instead given a list of his possessions. Later, in chapters 29–31 Job himself undertakes to describe his own righteousness, but the effort, as Clines has pointed out, is plagued with problems. Clines writes, "Now...[that] we glimpse the shape of the honour he once had, we are not so sure...It is not a pretty picture." David J. A. Clines. "Those Golden Days Gone By: Job and the Perils of Nostalgia." In *On the Way to the Postmodern*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, vol. 2, pp. 792–800. Broadly speaking, the book seems to define righteousness as engaging in the correct behaviors towards specific categories of people, namely, the righteous and the wicked, who are themselves defined by their own correct treatment of the righteous and the wicked, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Running parallel with this definition, though, is the issue of the possession of material wealth. The righteous are those who ought to have possessions and the wicked are those who ought not to possess, and righteous behavior, therefore, involves redistributing material wealth between these two categories, so that the righteous *have*, and can be identified by the fact of their *having*, and the wicked *have not*, and can be identified by their lack of *having*. Confusion and ambiguity inhere in these definitions. Indeed, there must be an arbiter who can determine who is righteous and who is not, and that arbiter within this scheme would have to be the one who possesses the most—Job himself—which is why Job's loss of material wealth and health is such a crisis, placing him, as it does, in the ranks of the *have not* wicked.
19. Discussion of the terms of the second test, which are rife with strange contradictions, is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this essay.
20. Michael Fishbane. "Jeremiah IV 23–26 and Job III 3–13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern." *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971): 151–67. [CrossRef]
21. Rebecca S. Watson. *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of 'Chaos' in the Hebrew Bible*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005.
22. David J. A. Clines. *Job 1–20. Word Biblical Commentary 17*. Dallas: Word Books, 1989.
23. At the same time, Job's rejection of God's gift of life may have the same implications as Fishbane's "counter-cosmic incantation," even if undoing the cosmos was not Job's first intention. Insisting on his right to refuse God's gift—or predatory loan—of life, Job calls into question God's status as the creator of the world. If God's creative activity amounts to foisting existence on "non-creatures" who, if they knew what was entailed, would want no part of it, then God cannot really be called the world's creator. Job's assertion that his acceptance of God's gift of life should be regarded as invalid because, if he knew then what he knows now, he would not accept it, does amount to an assertion that the entire creation is invalid.
24. Zophar makes similar claims in chapter 20, as does Eliphaz, though with less graphic detail, in 4:3–4. Although it is the case that when Elihu appears and speaks in chapters 32–37, he does not use the figure of the tent as a metonym for the self as the three friends do, which might indicate that he is less concerned with possessions as the means by which identity is constructed, Elihu does indicate that the secure possession of social status is indicative of righteousness, saying, for example, "[God] does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings on the throne he sets them for ever, and they are exalted...If they listen, and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness" (36:7, 11). Further discussion of the nuances of Elihu's position is beyond the scope of this paper.
25. Miller, discussing research by Linda Layne on parents who have lost a late-term foetus or given birth to a stillborn baby, writes, "The central fear of these parents is that other people will think that what they have lost was not a human being...The paradox is that is is primarily through material things that they find the most effective means for insisting upon the humanity of their child" ([7], p. 136). That is to say, these parents demonstrate the humanity of their lost child by pointing to the things that belonged to him or her, because it is by having possessed these things that the child can be shown to have been a real person. A similar logic seems to be at work in what Job's friends have to say about the tents of the dead.
26. Although it might be argued that Job's community would not be aware of any "cursing God in their hearts" that Job's children may have done, it is made evident in the dialogues that Job and his friends do not believe that there is any such thing as a truly secret sin, for all wickedness calls down punishment. If God alone sees the sin, then God will punish, and the community, having had the sin made visible, will follow suit.

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