

Interpretation

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Volume 43 Issue 3

- 383 *Thornton Lockwood* The Political Theorizing of Aeschylus's *Persians*
- 403 *Rasoul Namazi* The Qur'an, Reason, and Revelation: Islamic Revelation and Its Relationship with Reason and Philosophy
- 431 *Leo Strauss* Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture, edited by Rasoul Namazi
- Book Reviews:**
- 461 *J. A. Colen* *On Human Nature*, by Roger Scruton
- 467 *Jerome C. Foss* *Rawls's Political Liberalism*, edited by Thom Brooks and Martha C. Nussbaum, and *The Cambridge Rawls Lexicon*, edited by Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy
- 475 *David Fott* *Cicero's Skepticism and His Recovery of Political Philosophy* by Walter Nicgorski
- 481 *Steven H. Frankel* *The Book of Job: A New Translation with In-Depth Commentary* by Robert D. Sacks
- 487 *Lindsay Glover* *The Second Birth: On the Political Beginnings of Human Existence* by Tilo Schabert; translated by Javier Ibáñez-Noé
- 493 *Pamela Kraus* *Cartesian Psychophysics and the Whole Nature of Man* by Richard F. Hassing
- 497 *Haig Patapan* *Modernity and Its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* by Steven B. Smith
- 501 *Nathan Pinkoski* *The Form of Politics: Aristotle and Plato on Friendship* by John von Heyking
- 507 *Linda R. Rabieh* *Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras' Challenge to Socrates* by Robert C. Bartlett
- 513 *Richard S. Ruderman* *After One Hundred and Twenty: Reflecting on Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in the Jewish Tradition* by Hillel Halkin
- 521 *Antoine P. St-Hilaire* *Brill's Companion to Leo Strauss' Writings on Classical Political Thought*, edited by Timothy Burns

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Few contemporary authors have taught us as much about the quarrel between Jerusalem and Athens as Robert D. Sacks. Sacks's translation and commentary on Genesis first appeared in *Interpretation* over the course of five years, from 1979 to 1984.¹ More than a decade later his translation and commentary on the book of Job was published in *Interpretation*.² These two commentaries, along with Sacks's primer for studying the Bible, titled *Beginning Biblical Hebrew: Intentionality and Grammar*, offer a guide for those who wish to approach the Bible as a coherent work of uniquely profound depth.³ Recently, Sacks revised and published his translation and commentary of the book of Job in a single volume that allows readers to appreciate more fully the significance of his lifelong project.⁴

¹ Robert Sacks, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990); originally serialized as "The Lion and the Ass: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis," *Interpretation* 8 (1979–80): 29–101; 9 (1980–81): 1–82; 10 (1982): 67–212, 273–317; 11 (1983): 87–128, 249–74, 353–82; 12 (1984): 49–82, 141–92.

² Sacks, *The Book of Job with Commentary: A Translation for Our Time* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1999); originally serialized in *Interpretation* 24 (1996–97): 135–70, 251–86; 25 (1997–98): 3–36, 155–80, 293–330; 26 (1998–99): 21–64.

³ Sacks, *Beginning Biblical Hebrew: Intentionality and Grammar* (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion, 2008). See my review in *Interpretation* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2014): 411–20.

⁴ Sacks, *The Book of Job: A New Translation with In-Depth Commentary* (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion, 2016). Parenthetical page references are to this book unless otherwise indicated.

Sacks's project is nothing less than a guide for the perplexed, or rather, for the skeptical contemporary reader who cannot bring himself to take seriously the Bible as an account of man's place in the world. In his discussion of the Hebrew word *melitz* (interpreter), Sacks remarks: "An interpreter's function is to make the thoughts of each person intelligible to the other; thus an interpreter must feel at home under [the horizon of each language], and to that extent he must live beyond either one of them taken singly" (230). Sacks's task as a translator of the Bible is particularly challenging since he is translating for an audience whose members have heard centuries of biblical criticism. Perhaps the most complete criticism was promulgated by Spinoza, whose *Theologico-Political Treatise* systematically attacks scripture's account of prophecy, law, and providence. What makes Spinoza's account particularly compelling is his knowledge of biblical Hebrew, which he uses to establish his thesis that scripture is fundamentally incoherent, written by multiple, superstitious authors and compiled by redactors with various inconsistent political goals. In light of this theological-political situation, and given the enduring force of superstition in human affairs, Spinoza suggests reducing scripture's teaching to an easy-to-grasp moral doctrine of *caritas*.

Thanks in part to its success, Spinoza's critique of scripture inevitably hardened into a dogmatic approach. As Sacks observes, "Too often what was once a living thought in the teacher becomes a hardened dogma for the student—precisely because he cannot reach out to a horizon that is no longer available to him" (194). One such dogma is the belief in progress, and the corresponding view that scholars can understand the text better than the authors themselves. In response, Sacks develops a meticulous method for reading scripture, which conscientiously avoids the assumption of the reader's superiority to the author. He approaches scripture with the presumption that it has something to teach us, even if the message is obscure. His method of translation is imbued with the spirit of modesty and care such that he prefers to admit ignorance rather than force an issue (cf. 123, 126, 155, 189, 285). Near the beginning of his commentary, he concedes: "It would be hard to find many works of which the Italian expression '*traddutore traditore*' (every translator a traitor) is more true than the book of Job. It is obscure both in word and in grammatical form" (103). Similarly, he eschews all speculation about authorship because "it is totally unclear how much one can know about such matters" (104, 205). At most, we can say that the book contains many different voices and perspectives, much like the plays of Shakespeare. Sacks sees little reason to explain this fact as anything other than evidence of the wisdom and talent of the author. Indeed, if he can show that the text

is written with the greatest care, as a possession “set down for all time,” then attempts to dismiss the book as a hasty compilation will be seen as betraying the readers’ ignorance (171, cf. 220).

Biblical criticism, however, is not the only or even the most daunting challenge for a translator of Job. Sacks’s account of Job must compete with the most formidable modern interpretation presented by Thomas Hobbes, whose very title, *Leviathan*, alludes to the central story told by God out of the whirlwind. Hobbes says that he chose the title to remind his readers of Job because his vision of politics is consistent with the biblical view: “Hitherto I have set forth the nature of man, whose pride and other passions have compelled him to submit himself to government, together with the great power of his governor, whom I compared to *Leviathan*. . . where God having set forth the great power of *Leviathan* called him King of the Proud” (*Leviathan*, chap. 28). The key to understanding Hobbes’s analysis of politics is closely connected with his reading of Job.

Sacks’s account of Eliphaz recalls Hobbes’s account of political life. Indeed, the character of Eliphaz raises the possibility that “the world is totally indifferent, if not essentially hostile to human life. Human concerns for justice which remain within the plane of the human cannot be of cosmic concern. It is all no more than a tent which by its outer surface looks much like a solid structure, but which at the mere pull of a pin can crumble out flat” (116). Hobbes fleshes out this account and proposes to strengthen the walls of the city so that they resemble the scales of *Leviathan*, which form “an impenetrable skin” so that the city “cannot be hurt by others” (285). Although human art may at first glance appear to be an imitation of God’s art, Hobbes assures us that in nature “the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place” (*Leviathan*, chap. 13). In short, nature—and her creator—have left human beings with no support for their political endeavors. The Hobbesian solution to this dire situation is nothing less than the conquest of nature, which according to Sacks is also laid out in “one of the most beautiful passages of the book” (197).

More broadly, Hobbes’s analysis does seem to conform closely to the meaning of the text. According to Sacks, Job “had grown up with his friends in a comfortable world with its demands and its proscriptions. It all made sense to him, and in the main, things turned out for the best” (138). Job’s suffering comes as a sudden shock, without explanation or sense. To make matters worse, Job was justly renowned for his piety. His punishment appears as a divine judgment on his life, but “why should a man like Job feel the weight

of guilt for a crime which he knows he did not commit?" (205). The tension between justice in the city and cosmic justice appears so sharp that one might reasonably conclude with Hobbes that there is no justice except conventionally, that is, where there is a human law supported by a common power.

One possible response to the Hobbesian interpretation is offered by the interlocutors in the text itself, who claim that the connection between cosmic justice and human justice is too remote for reason to perceive. One character, Zophar, argues that human horizons are too narrow for humans to perceive their place in the whole. Moreover, there are "a myriad of little separate worlds each of which might suddenly come into contact with any other. No world can perceive its effect on any other world till God brings them together—and then it's too late" (144, cf. 199). Of course, such a view suggests that *logos* is of little use in perceiving the true nature of justice, much less in guiding us toward it. Rather, we are thrown back on revelation, or as the character Bildad argues, the political wisdom contained in the tradition (132, cf. 205).

Although Job cannot reconcile his piety and understanding of justice with his punishment, he rejects the arguments of Zophar and Bildad. For one thing, their accounts make light of the very real suffering of innocent human beings like Job (161). Job cannot accept this indifference, bordering on contempt, to political justice. Further, it is not true that the world discloses itself to us only as a chaos that cannot be penetrated by our *logos*. "The world is too orderly, too revelatory, to be a chaos; and yet, chaos is where it always seems to find itself" (147). Hobbes's analysis cannot be easily refuted because it contains some truth, but as Sacks shows, not the whole truth.

Job insists on honoring justice, but without a comprehensive account of the whole he cannot find its grounds, nor can he explain its efficacy in light of the chaos and terror that appear to lie just beyond it (cf. 215). The last human interlocutor, Elihu, attempts to harmonize these clashing elements. He concedes à la Hobbes that the cosmos is indifferent to our fate and does not support the political sphere (238). Political justice requires a prepolitical foundation that is closed to *logos*. In other words, our human horizon, particularly our need to find lasting grounds for justice, points us to God. Elihu means to save us from becoming less than human, but does so at the cost of one of our most essential traits, "the need to see for oneself" (243). It is telling that God's reply "is not a telling but an asking." Rather than devalue *logos*, God's speech from the whirlwind nurtures it.

Still, if political life rests on wisdom embodied in and transmitted through traditions and texts, it appears that those same traditions foreclose the very inquiry which is essential to our humanity. The indomitable spirit of inquiry, especially in the search for justice and wisdom, reminds us not only of Job but, as Sacks reminds us, of Socrates. Indeed, one might argue that Socrates surpasses Job in his efforts to find justice even at the cost of tradition and piety. Though Job too is accused by his friends of impiety, he eventually reconciles with God and recognizes the wisdom of the tradition (195, 205). Socrates, in contrast, defies the tradition and even redefines piety in light of his search for wisdom. By raising the problem of Socrates, Sacks brings us finally to consider the tension between Athens and Jerusalem (150).

As we have already noted, the tension has been obscured by the tendency of modern readers to reject the possibility of revelation and side with secularism. Such a tendency distorts not only our view of Jerusalem, but also of Athens. Sacks's project aims at restoring Jerusalem, but in the process he also brings Athens into sharper relief. By showing that Jerusalem is a worthy, not to say superior, alternative to Athens, Sacks suggests that Jerusalem presents a more comprehensive account of the whole than does Athens. The book of Job presents an astonishing range of opinions about man's place in the whole, and does so in the form of poetry. Not only does it combine philosophy and poetry, but it presents the problem of Socrates as clearly as does Plato. In Sacks's commentary, Job is "the man of inquiry" whose desire to know transcends all earthly bounds such that he demands a hearing before God. As part of that spirit of inquiry, Job presents a critique of tradition itself, which tends to harden into dogma and hostility to reason (194).

In recognition of this critique, the Bible itself makes room for such unique individuals as Job (and Socrates) to challenge the tradition and to see its wisdom for themselves. Sacks points out that the book of Job presents an alternative account to the creation story in Genesis and to man's place in the whole: "The God we meet in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, the artisan God, has within himself the *to be* of the object. He shapes and molds according to his plan, while the more feminine, nurturing God we meet in the book of Job allows for the emergence of the *to be* which is in the thing itself" (253, cf. 266–67). The book of Job reveals another aspect of God, who invites us to observe the whole to appreciate not only our limitations but the proper place for each thing (272–73).