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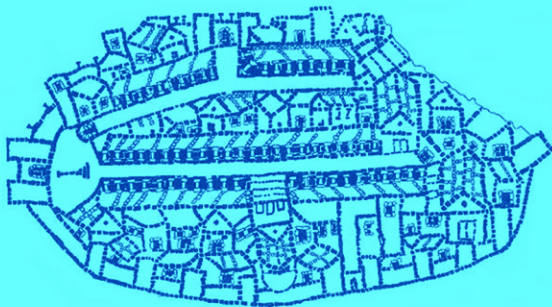
Imitating Job

A Micro-Ethnographic Comment

By Emanuel Pfoh

The Palestinian social anthropologist ABDULLA M. LUTFIYYA, in a now old ethnographic study about a Jordanian (Palestinian) village, writes the following anecdote:

> "The author [LUTFIYYA] recalls once listening to an old man telling another villager who had just lost his sick cow, the only property he had, 'this is the will of Allāh. By taking your cow, Allāh has tested your faith. Be thankful to Allāh and you may be given a better cow'. 'You are right', replied the second villager, 'this is *mashiʾatu Allāh*, there is no god but He, and let Him be praised in all circumstances'"[1].

It is certainly not difficult to recognise in these words the story of Job, or at least its essential details and outcome[2]. But, beyond this recognition, the key question with the present anecdote is: How did this Job-like situation end up among the peasantry of a Jordanian/Palestinian village in the mid-20th cent. B.C.E.?

A first and seemingly obvious answer can be found, of course, in the reception history of the biblical tradition in Islam in the Southern Levant, since the story of Job (Arab. *Ayyūb*) is briefly retold in the *Qurʾān*[3]. Yet another answer – which comes to supplement and complete the spectrum of interpretations of the story – may be provided by attending to the societal makeup of the region through ethnographic insights. In fact, data from anthropological research in so-called traditional societies can allow us to produce what may be called a micro-ethnography of a biblical motif, namely establishing an analytical connection between particular biblical depictions and social and cultural aspects guiding the behaviour and practices of people. In other words, the micro-ethnography of a story's character builds upon ethnographically attested practices and attitudes that help understand the codes of behaviour found reflected in ancient literature[4].

Ethnographic analogies, however, should not be taken as direct "windows to the past", or judged as primarily exposing a lack of historical and social change in certain societies or situations: we do not see the "evolutionary past" of humanity – as Victorian travellers in the Near East would do[5] – when conducting ethnographic research in non-Western communities[6]. Instead, such analogies should better be seen as keys to understanding social practices; namely, as guides for interpreting cultural features, opening possibilities for constructing knowledge about the past and about how ancient peoples conceived of their own realities and expectations.

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[1] LUTFIYYA 1966, 44.
[2] Cf. especially Job 1:21 and 42:10–16; see further GRAY 2010.
[3] Especially 21:83 and 38:41–44; see VICCHIO 2006, 67–86.
[4] Cf. an example in PFOH 2014.
[5] Cf. VAN DER STEEN 2013, 18–37; MCGEOUGH 2015, 140–183.
[6] Cf. FABIAN 1983; further PFOH 2017.

My interest in this short comment is not precisely on the proper historical background of the book of Job[7], but rather on the socio-cultural setting of Job's model of behaviour and piety within the realm of an agrarian society, a model whose characteristics were still to be found in pre-modern Palestine, or even in mid-20th cent. B.C.E. villages of the region, in spite of more than two millennia of historical change since the biblical texts were produced[8].

The figure of Job represents the motif of the "righteous sufferer" in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, as MARIO LIVERANI has originally called it while analysing the deeds of Rib-Adda, a ruler of the town of Byblos in the mid-14th cent. B.C.E. Levant[9]. In short, this literary motif embodies justice and the correct behaviour to be observed, as the main character is challenged, questioned or confronted by other characters or agents who are unjust or simply not as wise to know how to behave. In that sense, by opposition, the righteousness of the central figure is enhanced for the audience (or readership) of the story. This motif presents us then not only with an ancient means for teaching wisdom, but also with the possibility of scrutinizing ancient social values deemed as normative or expected to be followed by the peoples of the ancient Near East[10]. In Job's story, it is recognised, the main theological issue is the endurance of loyalty and faithfulness towards the inscrutability of divine will and omnipotence, and also about the heavenly recognition and reward to the faithful servant[11].

Now, what may be further known, assumed or deducted about the socio-cultural reception of Job's behaviour and his values? Considering the implied agrarian setting of the story, and if we attend to the historical and ethnographic records of agrarian societies, we rapidly find in the latter examples of alliance towards, and dependence from, higher parties of various kinds among the peasantry, especially by means of patronage or clientelism relationships[12]. Patron-client bonds imply essentially an asymmetrical dyadic exchange between a patron offering protection and assistance in different ways and a client in need of such protection and assistance, who offers in return his personal loyalty to the patron. Accordingly, in this ethnographic light, Job's behaviour as a righteous sufferer in the story coincides not only with what a loyal client is ideally expected to be and how he should properly act in a patron-client relationship (*i.e.*, accepting unconditionally the patron's will), but also expresses a socio-religious *ethos* anchored in an understanding of a divine patronage – coming from Yahweh or Allāh – over the worldly realm and its creatures, as illustrated by LUTFIYYA's anecdote. Job's story and the Palestinian peasants' dialogue reflect thus a dual, yet interconnected worldview about the dependence of servants/peasants on both divine and earthly factors and circumstances, a situation ultimately constituting and manifesting a "hierarchical ontology" of mas-

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[7] About this, see the detailed study by KNAUF 1988; cf. also GRAY 2010, 32–38, and for a socio-historical background, see KESSLER 2006, 141–172. Also, for the ancient Near Eastern intellectual context of the book of Job, see initially GRAY 1970 (also 2010, 5–20); and more recently, UEHLINGER 2007, with abundant bibliography and discussion.

[8] On the agrarian society of the ancient Southern Levant, see, for instance, the different approaches in GUILLAUME 2012, including relevant ethno-historical data; and BOER 2015, much less ethnography-oriented. On modern Middle Eastern examples, see, *e.g.*, GLAVANIS/GLAVANIS (*ed.*) 1990.

[9] LIVERANI 1974; cf. also ALBERTZ 1981; FOSTER 2003; GREENSTEIN 2017.

[10] See LIVERANI 1974, 175–176. Cf. further on this question THOMPSON 2005.

[11] See, however, the problematisation of the theme in CLINES 1990.

[12] See WOLF 1966, 77–95 and the theoretically, and still most valid, study by POWELL 1970. On the permanence of patron-client bonds and networks in recent times see, for instance, EISENSTADT/RONIGER 1982. An ethnography worth consulting on the survival of political personal networks in a Transjordanian village in the 1950s–1960s is ANTOUN 1979.

ters and servants through which events and situations acquire meaning [13]. The social hierarchy of earthly patronage is therefore subsumed into a greater scheme of divine patronage over the world and its creatures, including humankind [14].

As noted initially, the transmission of the biblical tradition through Islam in the Southern Levant until recent times might of course help explain the reference of a Job-model of behaviour by the peasants of LUTFIYYA's ethnographic study. But also does it the virtually uninterrupted presence of patron-client relationships at several levels of Levantine society during the last millennia [15], which actually reinforces such pattern of dependence and subordination behaviour and social expectations, as manifested in literary and/or intellectual creations. Even though further research on this question should be pursued, the preliminary conclusion one may draw, from the particular micro-ethnographic insight offered here, is that the message of the story of Job makes sense sociologically not only in a rural or semi-rural environment, but specifically in an environment organised socio-politically by means of patronage bonds, in which divine will and human fate are also integrated and understood as ruled by an inherent patron-client logic [16].

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[13] I borrow the notion of "hierarchical ontology" from GIORDANO 1982, 65–69.

[14] An example of this divine and human hierarchy in the Late Bronze Age Levant is studied by HANDY 1994.

[15] See PFOH/THOMPSON in press; also TAMARI 1982.

[16] Cf. further THOMPSON 1996, 257ff.

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