

The Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899-1990) and the Book of Job

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Abstract: This article seeks to bring attention to the life of Peter Wessel Zapffe and to translate his paragraph on Job (106) from his 1941 work *Om det tragiske (On the Tragic)* for the first time from Norwegian into English. We contextualize the work in the thought of biblical critics of the time and celebrate Zapffe's distinctive and radical stance on the book of Job. Notorious already in Norway for his biting and critical turns of phrase, so distinctive of his writings, and for his eccentric character, this article brings his work to a wider audience, an awareness of which is long overdue.

Key Words: Zapffe; Job; *On the Tragic*, critical, eccentric, Norwegian.

Article:

It is little known that Peter Wessel Zapffe, the Norwegian philosopher and arctic explorer, had a particular interest in the Book of Job in the Old Testament. It is this aspect of his work that we explore in this paper. One of the reasons that this fact is little known is that Zapffe's key work, *On the Tragic*, has never been translated into English.¹ Therefore, the majority of this paper is a translation of his section on Job in *On the Tragic* with footnotes supplied by the authors, followed by an assessment of his contribution. But first, a biography of Zapffe to put his work into context.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Peter Wessel Zapffe was born into an upper-middle class family in the Arctic city of Tromsø in northern Norway in 1899. His father was a stern disciplinarian and, as a result, the son soon became a strong anti-authoritarian maverick, with a deep-rooted distrust in God. Following High school in Tromsø, he was ordered by his father to study law at the University of Oslo and he is famed (in Norway) for having submitted one of his exam papers in rhyming verse form. During his student days he also got seriously involved in mountaineering, a lifelong passion of his, which he extolled for “being as meaningless as life itself”, and he has described his mountaineering activities in a number of, most often, humorous books and essays.²

Zapffe, arguably, also was among the first environmentalists, but, of course, in his own exclusive way. His form of nature conservation sprung from the intent, not of protecting nature as such, but of avoiding every form of culturalization of it. That involved avoiding the infringement of nature by all except the chosen few i.e. the ones with ideal attitudes (such as himself). This attitude is clearly exposed in his short essay, “Parting with Gausta”.³

His genteel environmentalist attitude is even present in his essay, “The Last Messiah”. Here he argues that “every single technological innovation has had more value to the inventor himself than to anyone else. They represent grand and ruthless larceny from the possibilities for others’ experiences and should be punished with the most stringent penalties. One crime among many of this sort is the use of aircraft to map unknown areas. In one fell swoop the tremendously rich possibilities for others’ experiences are destroyed, experiences that could have been held in trust for the common interest, such that everyone could have had the joy of discovery after his own efforts.”⁴

He moreover wrote textbooks on logic and dramatology, a couple of theatre plays, and innumerable newspaper articles. His last book was published when he was 87 years old, three years prior to his death at the age of 90.

Zapffe married twice, but in line with his pessimistic outlook on life he argued that children are brought into the world without consent or forethought. He was also deeply concerned about a coming overpopulation and the encroachment of nature which would follow, and, as a consequence, he remained childless by choice.⁵

After a short stint as a lawyer in Tromsø, he broke with the law for good and returned to Oslo to take up studies of literature, starting with the dramas of Henrik Ibsen. These studies resulted first in an essay, “Den sidste Messias” (“The Last Messiah”) from 1933, which was only translated later on.⁶ In this paper, in which a debt to Schopenhauer, Freud and Nietzsche is shining through, he attempts to sum up his pessimistic and fatalistic views of human existence. He argues that man has an existential angst as result of a tragically overdeveloped intellect which does not fit into nature’s design. Therefore, mankind is ultimately doomed, like the Irish elk (*Megaloceros giganteus*), which became extinct due to its overdeveloped antlers.

Zapffe’s most important work is undoubtedly his 600 page doctoral dissertation: *On the Tragic*.⁷ In this book which contains no less than 11 chapters with 112 sub-chapters, he dissects the concept of tragedy from every conceivable point of view. However, in our minds, the most interesting part of the book is in his Chapter 10, which is a kind of appendix, dealing with previously published literature on tragedy and the tragic. Within this chapter he has a section in which he is dissecting the Book of Job, which is arguably the highlight of the entire treatise. The book has appeared in several editions, but it never been translated into any major language and is heavy reading even for learned Norwegians... We have therefore taken upon ourselves to translate the section about the Book of Job, to give it the wider audience it deserves. It represents Zapffe’s own ‘reading’ of the book, at times a virtual paraphrase of its sentiments, but always from his own, original standpoint as an interpreter. Its portrayal of God as ‘traitor’ and Job as victorious is at once radical and challenging.⁸

1. On the Tragic, § 106 Job.

§ 106. *Job*. There is a kind of cool reporting about the Greeks' existential anxiety and Weltschmerz the way we meet them in the tragedies.⁹ The 'Apollonistic' element is present all the time, the passion has its proper expression, but there is always stylistic control over the scenes.¹⁰ The savage has learnt manners.

An exception is Sophocles' *Philoctetes*; his rags really stink.¹¹ Here the distance to the ashes, in which Job is sitting and scraping his rotting limbs with a potsherd, is shorter than the usual.¹² Jewish pessimism, as we meet it in Jeremiah,¹³ Job, and Ecclesiastes,¹⁴ is also artistically modified, but in such a way that 'Dionysos' appears stronger in it than 'Apollon' - if such symbols can be employed on the Hellenistically adjusted Jewishdom.¹⁵ Here it is hopeless to look for harmony and modesty, here it goes straight into the abyss. If this Weltschmerz is more intoxicating in its sublime beauty, it certainly is more dangerous; the artistic element is loose; It is not for everyone to return in good shape from this sightseeing in the land of despair.

Job is a soulmate of Prometheus; they are both suffering under the cruelty of the gods and they both appeal to the principle of justice.¹⁶ It is also a common opinion that there is a literary historical connection between the drama in Aeschylus and the book of Job, in the current version of the canonical scriptures.

The text history is interesting, although not as captivating as Ecclesiastes. The biblical text (Norwegian bible of 1904, which was translated *ad verbum* from Hebrew)¹⁷ is the basis for the following; only in the case of real contradictions have I made text-critical adjustments, and then on a general literary basis*.

*His footnote:

Of the numerous larger and smaller works about the Book of Job, I here mention but a few:
Mowinckel, S., *Diktet om Ijob* (The poem about Job), Oslo 1924; Nielsen, Fr., *Smaaskrifter til opplysning for kristne* (Small notes for the enlightenment of Christians), 1887 (Buhl); Martensen, H.

L., *Den christelige Ethik* (Christian Ethics) Spec. Part I, pp 395-400. Kbh. 1878; Cheyne, T. K., *Job and Salamon, or the Wisdom of the Old Testament*, Lond. 1887, pp 1-115; Giesebrecht, Fr., *Der Wendepunkt des Buches Hiob*, Dissert. Berl. 1879; Ley, J., *Das Problem im Buche Hiob und dessen Lösung*, in *Neue Jahrbucher f. Philologie u. Pädagogik* 1896. Sellin, *Das Problem des Hiob-buches*, in Univ. Progr. Berlin 18. Jan. 1931; Volz, *Hiob u. Weisheit*, in *Die Schriften des alten Testaments*, III Abt. 2 Bd. Gottingen 1921. The following works were unavailable, but are mentioned because of their unusually promising titles: Kallen, *The Book of Job as Greek Tragedy*, 1918, and Owen, *Five Great Sceptical Dramas of History*, 1896.¹⁸

Within the framework of the original folklore with original prose has an (Alexandrian?) author 400 BC presented his poem of wisdom and thereby made the tale about Job into one of the pearls of the world literature.¹⁹ He obviously is a man with deep personal knowledge of pain, with enormous passion and a penetrating and clear mind, a man with a fanatical affinity for intellectual honesty and an author who with overwhelming cosmic pathos presents his abysmal God-hate in a blinding satirical form. I cannot read the book of Job as anything but a blasphemous masterpiece, and there is a painful and golden irony over the fate of the Book: through interpolations by the faithful has this riotous book with all its burning condemnations ended up as a foundation for Christianity, whereupon people till this day build their metaphysical consolation.²⁰

The author begins with the tradition that Job was a *great* man in the eyes of his compatriots, both religiously, socially, and economically. He was honest, just and Godfearing, and he eschewed evil, and was at the same time positively helpful (I,1,5; IV,3,4,6, XXIII, 11,12; XXIX,12-17; XXX,25; XXXI, 1,5,7,9,13,16-34,38,39). He was the greatest of all the men of the east (I,3), happy and highly regarded by young and old, rich, and poor (XXIX,2-11,21-25). There is none the like of him in the east says the Lord himself (I,8; II,3). In other words, Job stands at the pinnacle of his society, and the very rare and exceptional abilities that have brought him there become the very reason for his complete destruction, his biological, social, autotelic, and metaphysical ruin. He becomes the apple, for which the mighty contend, he becomes a sacrifice for a kind of 'inverted' envy by the gods. The

Lord is showing off for Satan with his servant Job.²¹ And Satan answers: Job worships you in return for your blessings. Take it all away from him, and then we will see. Jahve takes him up on his bet (I,8ff; II,5ff), and now Job is flooded with disaster in two devastating tsunamis, until he is barely kept alive.²² God will show his opponent that Job serves and worships him (there is no talk about loving him) regardless of him sending him good or bad, only 'for God's own sake' – whichever way that should be motivated. Job shall surrender unconditionally and meekly accept – what? God's might or God's right? Yes, that is exactly the key question to be addressed in the following.

And Job surrenders, as he has been taught as the right thing to do, in both trials (I,21,22; II,10). In the official version of the Book he is promptly awarded, but it is here the author includes and demands a place for the *human nature* in Job.²³ And man is not only the obedient slave in the holy picture, it is packed with earthly life and power. Therefore, Job 'renders onto God the things that are God's',²⁴ but he curses, like Jeremiah, the day he was born (III,1-12).²⁵ It is better to be dead than to suffer a life like this (III,13,17-19; VI,9,10; VII,15; X,18,19), and even better not to be born at all (III,16). Why does God condemn those to life who do not wish to live (III,20-22)?

These thoughts release an avalanche of eloquence from his 'friends' Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar.²⁶ It is under their, more or less, soulless and dogmatic arguments that Job rises to a prosecutor of timeless dimensions, and acquires a voice which unites the whole of humanity's prayers and threats, complaints, hope and curses in a few immortal verses. Beside humans' rich and strong biological interests, the author introduces a new one: The book of Job is a cultural-creation-drama, it introduces a cultural 'mutation' like that of Prometheus, Eumenides²⁷ and in more recent times Grillparzer's Libussa.²⁸ One can see a new metaphysical consciousness become crystallized under the maximal pressure of pain, the realisation of the basic contrast between God as the Lord of the universe and man's holy demand for a *reason* for all that happens. His friends teaching consists, with small variations, of that God rewards the righteous and punishes the ungodly in this life, - a belief also Job has grown up with. When Job now is 'unpunishable', says the old Eliphaz (IV,6), then it follows that God with certainty will save him out of the pain again, provided he will endure the suffering with

patience and commit to God's right in what he does onto Job (V,8). Before God, no man is perfect, and neither are you (V,24-26). As long as the trials are sustained you can vail as much as you want, since nobody can hear you (V,1). Be grateful for the agony he puts upon you; it only shows that you are in his hands.

It could be that I exaggerated, said Job (VI,3), but this is too much to stand, I find no peace while I sink in my spit; after all I am a human being and not a mineral (VI,11-13), *comp.* XL,13 and XLI,15). But I shall try to be humble despite it all, if you can explain to me what my shortcomings are. *That* shortcoming for which I deserve this treatment (VI,24). It cannot possibly be my impatience now *after the fact*, which is the *cause* of my misfortunes (VI,25,26, *comp.* XV,6). Here we have no reason to believe that Job thinks of himself equal to God in moral splendour. Job only wants to express that there should be a proportionality between offence and punishment, in particular, when it is beyond every man to be perfect. He must be permitted to compare his own destiny with that of others, and it is *then* that he becomes sceptical with regard to the partitioning of good and bad. His friends misinterpret the intensity with which he emphasis his innocence; they think it is based on an obscene arrogance: Job regards himself as absolutely (not relatively) innocent. But Job's passion has quite another source; he is not at all 'self-righteous', it is for the sake of the problem, for the sake of its solution, that he is scrutinizing his life's doings. He wants to know what they mean with sin, when they build their entire argument on belief that the sinner shall perish, whereas the righteous shall triumph. It is easy for you to preach, he terminates his answer to Eliphaz (VI,5,6), who have all your fortunes intact. But *my* life is completely destroyed. I shall die from this disease, and that is it. That's the difference (VII). Since I have nothing more to lose, (*comp.* XVI,6) and does not gain anything by shutting up (IX,27-31), I shall at least treat myself to complaints about my situation.

And now he addresses his words directly to his own and his friends' God (VII,12 ff.). What good does this serve? Do you think that I am worthy of your destructive forces (VII,17,20; XIII,28)? (Have you not more important things to do? Don't you think you belittle yourself by these actions?). In any case, tell me the reasons for this unlimited mistreatment. Can you not stop while I am still alive, and give

me a moment of peace, - because when I die within short, then you will have to stop anyway (VII,21, *comp.* X,20-22; XVI,22; XVII,14,15).

Now the young Bildad takes the floor (VIII), he reiterates what Eliphaz has said and applies it to Job's sons, - they have probably sinned since they were killed at such an early age, because the justness of God is beyond question (VIII,4,3 *comp.* I,5).

I do agree with you on one count, is the pensive response by Job (IX); it is to no use for a human being to question the actions of God (IX, 2,4). But at this stage Job reaches a breakthrough in his thinking: Why not? Is it because we are too weak in our perception of justice, that we must look down in shame, if the God Almighty explained to us the smallest of his intentions? No, he concludes with the desperation of consequence, it is because of his overwhelming might compared with ours, his greatness in meter and kilo,²⁹ that we are unable to stand up to him (IX,4-10). *It does not at all matter* if we are right or wrong in the human sense (IX,22). It is irrelevant for two reasons: he does not let himself call upon to any negotiation (IX,19,32), he is invisible (IX,11), he does not employ our tools (12), he does not communicate with us the way human beings do (16). And second: Even if he showed up for any negotiation, what does it help? There is no appeal court with authority to decide between us (IX,33), and he does not acknowledge any judicial principle which is binding also for himself. He is an unlimited despot because of his strength and wisdom (IX,4), I can beg for mercy, but not for justice (15), He can even deem the innocent guilty (30,31) and force him to condemn himself (20). Let him make us equal under the law, and I shall respond to him (34,35, *comp.* XIII). But, as long as he has me on the rack of torture and stands over me as an executioner (VII,20) there are no opportunities for negotiations (IX,17,18). Even an indictment from God would therefore have an irreplaceable value (XXXI,35,36).

Here there is no question at all about justice, only about brute force, and power alone, is the conclusion of Job with increasing confidence (IX,15,20, 30,31; X,15-17). (And the prologue confirms that he is right. Jahve's motivation does not stand up either for Job's or for our moral judgement and seems in conflict with the dignity of our perception of deity. God has by his dealings himself

destroyed the basis for Job's faith). It is therefore useless to appeal to the principle of justice, even less since this is in no way established on earth (IX,24), a thought that Job later develops in full. Well, in that case one has to try if the tyrant can be moved by other means. Obviously, there has to be a *meaning* with the disaster, even if it is incompatible with justice.

Let me know why you harass me (X,2). I am in fact your creation (X,3,8-13), so there must be a reason why you destroy me. Man's craving for order and reason rises like a flame towards heaven: Job is hammering on the ear of God in hope of hitting a humanlike string. If you ask about my sins and misdeeds, then there is at least an understandable contact in one single point, then there must exist a common principle for thine and mine evaluation. Then there must exist something commensurable in our perceptions and verdicts, and that must also include my sense of justice, which you have created together with the rest (X,5,6,12,13). If, in fact, the judicial understanding of God differs from that of man, then it is for us the same as arbitrariness, then our last chance is lost; then there is no path for hope through perfection, then we are given up to a metaphysical tombola, then there is no longer any guarantee that our highest virtues, that faithfulness, meekness and charity are not the wide path towards destruction. But, if the gods' understanding of justice is different from ours, then we should not use the term 'right' with regard to the gods' dispositions. And then we should no longer accept the fraud in Christian theodicy that an action is described as a shameful crime, the most irreparable disgrace, when committed by man, whereas it is regarded as inscrutable love when it originates with God. One out of two: the same law and the same verdict for both parties, or a different law and different verdicts, but not the same law and different verdicts. If we shall accept a higher rule as just, says Job in X,2-7, *comp.* XXXVI,23, then the meaning must also be just in the human sense. Otherwise God may be as 'just' as he wants in his own language (for example in the understanding of Elihu, XXXIV, 12,14,15,17), whereas in our language it means injustice. Deep down Job has still not given up hope that also in a human sense there is justice behind whatever happens, *comp.* XVI,21, XIX,29. However, this hope needs at this stage to be strengthened with a ray of sense, and it is therefore that he is pushing the Lord so strongly.

Job is of the opinion that the problem of justice must also be valid for *experience*. If I see that a man is a crook, and I see that he in spite of that, or maybe even because of that, is doing very well, then the Christian defender cannot argue that he will end up bad without giving the words a new meaning. If he at the same time pretends to be using the words in the usual meaning, then he is logically dishonest. Therefore, when Zophar in XI repeats the established dogma of rewards for the good deeds and the demise for the bad, then Job is overwhelmed by the indignity of the fight.³⁰ He takes on his friends' (or opponents') faith and demonstrates that it is nonsense (XII,2, XIII,4,5,12; XVII,4,10; XXI,27,34) when it is gauged with the measure of common sense and experience (XII,3,11; XIII,1-3,18; XXI,29; XXIV,25). Even animals can sense that they are controlled by forces which have nothing to do with kindness and justice (XII,7-9), and if we have a look upon the human world, then *injustice* seems to be the overruling principle (IX,24; XII,4,6,17,24; XVI,11,17; XIX,6,7; XXI,7-33; XXIV,12; XXX,26). The conditions for man are disastrous when you look upon them *sub species mortis* (XIV; VII,9,10). You must not go as far as to save your comforting illusions that you defend God with pure fakery (XIII,7,9). If any of you can convince me, then I shall give up (XIII,19), but against pure foolishness I shall not. And I shall neither for any allegation of God's inscrutability (XI,7), because if I cannot envision him, neither can you (XIII,2,8,11). And with that Job has met the arguments of Eliphaz (XV).

In Bildad's second argument a new element appears (XVIII,4): What is the value of your demands for justice in the universal management? That is the Stoic philosophy: it does not easily combine with the talion principle, but Bildad manages to untie the knot by use of known apologetical means: he combines the incompatible with a 'even so' (XVIII,5, *conf.* XXXV,6 *contrary to* XXXIV,36).³¹ Job cannot see any comfort in that his destiny, in principle, is worthless; in fact, he has no interest in a world order where man is not a part. His craving for reason becomes stronger than ever; contrary to the Stoics he demands that his destiny (all the peoples' destiny) shall be written into the history of the universe with everlasting letters (XIX,23, *conf.* XVI,18,19).

His commanding opinion transcends to a higher entity than the God he has been taught to know and for which he has no use, - an entity with a conflict of interest with man's highest aspirations (XIX,25-29). And now Job rises above his own sufferings; the case is no longer about his personal wellbeing, it is about the principle (XXI,4). When I contemplate how destinies are partitioned in the world, then I am terrified and my flesh shivers (XXI,6). And if Zophar, who again has presented the orthodox view, withdraws to his second line of fake defence and argues that the punishment for triumphant parents' mischief will be laid onto their children instead (Exodus, XX,5), then Job's answer will be that that is not punishment; it is a misconception that it is a punishment, because a punishment has to be applied to the culprit himself (XXI,19-21,31). Job's sense of justice is incorruptible and raises from despair in uncompromising majesty. (That the author should let a man of Job's stature all of a sudden convert to his opponents views (XXIV,17-24; XXVII,13-23), is so unbelievable, that from a poetical point of view one must recognize a later insert into these verses.³² Or, has the author, like in XII and XXVI let Job fall into the mainstream to show that he can master that as well as the other?).

In XXV Bildad is coming back with new artillery: The quantitative greatness of God. Since Job has not got the Lord's astronomical dimensions, he should not try to promote himself (comp. XXXIII,2; XXXVI,22,23; XXXIX,35). Job cannot understand the argument and asks: Whom do you represent, and whose spirit emanates from you (XXVI,1-4)? Job is also fully cognisant with *this side* of the Lord's powerplay, and with superior poesy he gives Bildad a lesson in appreciation of all the mechanical wonders which we cannot copy. But - Job finishes on a threatening note - by this the limit for his qualifications are met (XXVI,14); he can shout as much as he wants, but it will not help him one iota in the case which here is in question. On the contrary: The Lord has *abused* his might to take my rights from me (XXVII,2). On this point I am unshakeable (4-6) because I cannot betray my convictions without *damage to my soul*. And I shall not yield from calling that universal might ungodly (7) that does not follow the path of justice. If Job in the 7th verse with the term 'my enemy' is alluding to Jahve (confirmed in XXX,21; XXXIII,10), then he is introducing a new religious principle: the concept of divinity shall not be associated with 'the given God', but with a God that we accept who shall comply with the norm in our picture of God as an optimum under human control

(*conf.* XVI,21). And we also demand that the God shall represent the highest wisdom, shall make his creation shine with order and meaning. Where shall wisdom be found, asks Job in XXVIII,12, and where is the place of understanding? God alone knows where this force is coming from (XXVIII,23,27) - and how has he employed it? To measure the wind in kilos, the rain in litres, and lightening in meters.³³ 'Fear the Lord and depart from evil', was all he got out of it!³⁴

In his marvellous closing arguments, Job is finally shutting up his three 'comforters'. A later author can see no way to rescue them, but Job cannot in all decency end up right either. He therefore introduces a young man, Elihu, who hitherto has been in the dark (XXXII-XXXVII). He is supposed to say the redeeming words and satisfy the demands of both faith and experience (XXXII,2,3; XXXIV,4). But, despite obvious pretensions to do so, he achieves no more than repetitions and adjustments to what has already been said.³⁵ It is therefore curious for the reader that the Lord fails to castigate him for falsifying the gospel, on the day of reckoning, like he does with the other three (XLII,7,8). It is even more surprising that he is castigating *them*, after having repeated the most important of their contributions. But, the reasons for our surprise is that we still harbour some understanding of the logic of God. After the Lord has made his personal appearance there is nothing more to cause surprise.

Because, this speech by God (XXXVIII-XLI) is one of the most marvellous parts one can read in the canonical scripture. If we did not believe that the author had passed on to the Lord his own naïve enthusiasm for all the odd and strange and splendid and curious in nature - then we would have to interpret his speech as rather elevated, although, even more, as biting irony. Job is in any case obviously confused by his overwhelming series of zoological demonstrations. And when the Lord, with anticipation, invites his response, Job meekly says: What I think about my sufferings, is well known to you, and these zoological tricks have no place in our dealings. What more do you want me to say? (XXXIX,36-38).

The Lord is then, most unwillingly, forced to address the concept of justice (the author now has the difficulty that God has entered the stage and no longer can hide without loss of prestige). How dare

you hint that I am not righteous, asks the Lord out of a whirlwind (XL,3). Can you not see that I am strong, and can't you hear how loud I can howl? Show me that you are as *mighty* as I am, and then I shall bow down and recognize your rights (4-9). Might is all that counts in my eyes. Do you know what is my most marvellous creation? Not the human soul with its sickly sense of justice, which is what you fools think. No, it is the hippopotamus!³⁶ Its legs are pipes of copper and its bones are like rods of iron! That is really something different from you, you soft sprout with all your 'refined senses'. Now, you might expect that man is next in line after the hippo? No, not at all, it is the crocodile.³⁷ The crocodile has armour and what have you? (XL,20 ff, XLI). Imagine, you of all think that you can teach me anything about justice!

One can only try to imagine Job's overwhelming bewilderment over this tangible appearance by the Lord. Here he has been sitting and has given the problem the deepest and most profound importance. He has, moreover, supposed that he was dealing with an opponent who should convince him, until deadly shame came as soon as his tongue touched upon the most burning problem: a God so holy and pure that even Job's petition of complaint should cause rejoicing! Instead, he finds himself facing a universal ruler of grotesque primitivity, a cosmic caveman, a show-off, who is almost sympathetic in his complete ignorance of true culture. Job is also immediately aware of the fact that it would be naïve in the extreme to bring up theoretical topics; If one should flag a conviction, then one must have an opponent who is able to understand it, and who can recognize a common basis for the discussion. Nothing could here be more amiss than to boast one's moral heroism, till Jahve puts his paws upon you and crushes you as a louse.³⁸ He might as well apply an aloof attitude towards the hippo and the crocodile. The situation is completely changed after Jahve unwillingly exposed his true nature, and no longer can profit from man's idealizing fantasy. Only by reputation did I know you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes (XLII, 5,6).

Job pretends to agree with the Lord in the manner one does with irresponsible people. He has until now fought the Lord on completely wrong terms (3). The new realization for Job is *not* the quantitative greatness in God; that he was fully aware of to begin with (XII,6-10,13-25; XXVI,5-14);

what is new is his qualitative shortcomings. Job's most elevated impressions of God have been devastated. Faced with such a stupid and primitive force, can Job afford to surrender without shame, since the fight has not at all touched upon the principle in question? A principle can be wiped out, but it cannot be won over just because its bodily bearer is annihilated. Neither has Job been bodily 'conquered', because, he never entered into any such fight. He has not been convinced of any misconception regarding the justice in the world-order on his part, on the contrary, he has got his own opinions confirmed. In capitulating in this way, he delivers the tyrant the worst of all thinkable insults; that his opponent is not worthy of a fight.

The one who is insensitive to this is Jahve; he is triumphant like a child over his victory and invites reconsolidation. Job's poor friends who were of the opinion that they had upheld the Lord's interests in a grand way, kept tight to his written commands, and got them confirmed by a personal revelation, which even forecasted reconciliation – receive a serious reprimand, whereas Job, who has not yet fully recovered from his introductory shock, lives to see that his goods and gold return in double. He also gets as many sons and daughters as those that were crushed (I,19) – it is no doubt the Lord's opinion that provided the *number* is the same, then nothing is lost. Even his wife, who sided with the devil (II,9), profits by the 'settlement' – What a merciless light that fall upon this God who think that everything is made right with money and livestock, even after Job has put his finger on the rotten peg in the entire word machinery.

So ended this metaphysical match in cosy comedy. Job is smart enough to keep quiet in his new won happiness, but the glimpse he got behind the scenes in his time of distress, he probably will not forget even if he should be 140 years old.

Has Satan lost the bet? If he is of the same calibre as Jahve: Yes. But if he is an intelligent Mephisto,³⁹ then he and Job have a little secret together. For himself Satan has won a victory much more valuable than meets the eye: the Colossus has unveiled his weakness, and his opponent has got a grip on the human soul that hitherto was impossible. God did not envision the scope of the test of Job; a whim 'in good company' by the Sovereign (I,6 ff.) developed into bloody seriousness.

Job's tragedy is firstly the material, that he is destroyed with all his house because he is the most prominent of men in the land. But here the causal connection is placed in '*Prolog im Himmel*' and cannot be connected to known earthly conditions. Riches can tempt robbers, for sure, but storms and leprosy are accidental in the light of experience. Such tragedies therefore have no philosophical importance.

Much more important is the inner tragedy. First, the one that the sense of justice (the new greatness which emanates by the material tragedy), of which Job is alone in his community and by which readers today can see his finest qualities, leads to melancholy and *Weltschmerz*, to the deepest of all psychical ailments. Second, that Job's vivid fantasy and advanced mind makes him particularly perceptible for this kind of ailment - the Almighty frightens Job by letting him see behind screens (XXIII,17). Less gifted persons are spared such insight, and the 'ungodly' have no such problem with the concept of justice. This concept concerns us so much more because it carries an aspect of the 'eternal human' with it.

But God, as he appears in the book of Job, are we concerned about him? Is all of it other than artistic playing with a foreign and outdated concept of God? Do we really *know* this God? Of course, we know him from the religious history, he is the Old Testament's God, the God for the multitudes, or what we would call the God for the armies, the zealous Jahve. But is he living only in the religious history? No, he is as prominent in our *experience* today as 2400 years ago. He represents a well-known biological and social environment; the blind natural force without contact with human aspirations for order and meaning, the uncontrollable appearance of sickness and death, the volatility of fame, the treachery of family and friends. He is the machine's and the might's, the dictatorship's, the party slave's and the conqueror's, the copper pipe's and the armour plate's God. There are many more than Job who meet him with immaterial weaponry. Some of those are trampled into historical martyrdom; others can also see the limits of martyrdom; they bow in public but hide their grief in their hearts.

2. Assessment of Zapffe's contribution to interpreting Job

All interpreters are to a greater and lesser extent products of their time, but Zapffe, although he inherits ideas from philosophers and biblical scholars, pursues a creative and original line that goes on to influence others. The early twentieth century was a time in which biblical criticism flowered and there was more daring in scriptural interpretation without the constraints of particular confessional stances. Scholars were looking towards a more rational and objective reconstruction of the history of Israel and of the development of its thought.⁴⁰ Whilst Pentateuchal criticism had dominated the earliest stages of biblical criticism, the book of Job amongst the Writings in the canon, and classified since the mid-nineteenth century as ‘wisdom literature’, soon proved a fascinating text with which to engage.⁴¹ Three issues dominated discussion of the book amongst biblical scholars in the late nineteenth century.⁴² The first was that of translation since the book demonstrates many obscure readings and philological challenges. Clearly this was not an issue for Zapffe who read the book of Job in Norwegian translation rather than in its original language of Hebrew.

The second was the problem with which Zapffe essentially engages – the theological problem of the righteousness of God in the book of Job. This was already raised in philosophical circles by Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard and it found its way into biblical theological discussions soon after.⁴³ Zapffe takes us step by step through the theological arguments employed in the dialogue section, briefly summarizing key points from each friend and airing Job’s responses, often in more depth. He finds the friends repeatedly offering a traditional line, with Eliphaz dispassionately saying to Job “be grateful for the agony...it only shows you are in his hands”.⁴⁴ Job’s reply simply seeks to know what his shortcomings are, since he thought he had none. What the cause is of his misfortune is Job’s primary question. Zapffe maintains that Job is not self-righteous or arrogant, as the friends wrongly think, rather he is simply concerned with the moral question of good and bad partitioning, especially when, as in his case, it goes awry. Bildad is seen to offer the idea that Job’s sons must have sinned thus leading to their death. But Job reacts strongly to that claim, stressing God’s overwhelming might. Zapffe portrays Job as coming to the realization that morality ultimately does not matter –

God is revealed as a despot. God is ultimately “incompatible with justice”. Basically God (and the gods) have a different understanding of justice from human beings. Zophar’s responding reiteration of the dogma of reward and demise, along traditional lines, does nothing to influence Job’s next tirade. Job indeed sees such words as “nonsense” and Zapffe brings in his interest in the animal world when he remarks that “Even animals can sense they are controlled by forces which have nothing to do with kindness and justice”. The principle of morality dominates over Job’s concern for his personal wellbeing and he starts to come to a view of God as enemy of humanity. Such is the way the dialogue builds up Job’s arguments to a climax, reached when he faces the presence of God in the speeches that are to follow.

It is then the God speeches that really draw Zapffe towards a radical conclusion. God does not attempt to answer Job on the questions of morality or justice that he raises, rather it is a demonstration of might. Human beings are firmly put in their place and the most important creature is revealed as none other than the hippopotamus! Although Job is overwhelmed by God’s appearance he comes to the realization that God is no more than “a universal ruler of grotesque primitivity, a cosmic caveman, a show-off”. Job realizes that there is no further point in arguing, in bringing up “theoretical topics” because God is not simply unwilling to engage, he is “unable to understand”. As a result Job in his replies pretends to agree with God “as one does with irresponsible people”. He becomes acutely aware of God’s shortcomings. This radical questioning of God is where Zapffe’s work really shines through in its originality and daring. In this he stands at the head of a strain of thought, epitomized by Jung in his 1958, *Answer to Job*,⁴⁵ but shared more widely too, of God as a tyrant and Job as the one who ultimately gets the better of God and emerges triumphant. With Job, as everyman, humanity also triumphs.

The third was the literary problem of the structure of the book. Literary-critical reconstruction of the way the book of Job evolved is clearly not a first concern for Zapffe, but he does mention some issues

of this nature in passing. The scholarship that he read (as indicated in his footnote) would certainly have been dominated by issues regarding the disjunction of the book's various parts, its literary classification in relation to its nature as a drama or as a dialogue and questions of authorship and date.⁴⁶ The work of T K Cheyne and of E Sellin, both authors Zapffe claims to have read, demonstrate the interest of the time in these kinds of questions.⁴⁷ Both saw the Prologue and Epilogue as separate and older than the dialogue section, to which the dialogue was added by an author exploring the potential offered by the older tale. Even within that Sellin saw the Satan passages (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7) and account of the visit of the three friends (Job 2:11-13) as added, with the old folk tale simply containing the narrative that God tempted Job, but Job survived the trial.⁴⁸ Cheyne sought a context for the addition of the dialogue in the Babylonian period of Exile but a final context for the whole book with some significant additions (the hymn to Wisdom in chapter 28, the Elihu speeches (chapters 32-37) and the God speeches (chapters 38-41)) in the Persian period well after the Israelite exile. Sellin agreed with these additions, regarding chapter 31, Job's final plea, as the original conclusion of the work. For Cheyne, a doubting, more sceptical tradition had entered Judaism as a result of Greek influence, the author of the dialogue being a Hellenizing Jew.⁴⁹ This scepticism had later been overlaid by the additions to the book by authorities concerned to solve the conflicting ideas about suffering that had been raised.

Zapffe himself by-passes this attempt to carve the book up and goes through the book systematically, taking it at face value. He also assigns a later dating of 400 BC to the book, so allowing for some Greek influence. He also tries to reconstruct the mind of the main author as "Abysmal God-hate in a blinding satirical form". He accepts that the prologue and epilogue have their own existence, the epilogue being the 'official' response and the dialogue being added to give "a place for the human nature" in the book, with Job uttering an opening curse of the day (ch 3) resembling those of Jeremiah (ch 20).⁵⁰ He focuses his attention on the dialogue at the heart of the book, accusing the friends of "an avalanche of eloquence" and of "soulless and dogmatic arguments" and seeing Job as a "prosecutor of timeless dimensions", a kind of everyman, universal voice. Clearly Job is his hero, a character who is

seen to contribute “a new metaphysical consciousness borne of pain”, the need for a reason for suffering. He also notes that interpolations have made the book more acceptable, dismissing the contribution of the fourth friend Elihu as “no more than repetitions and adjustments to what has already been said”. Crucially he does not see the God speeches as a later addition, but as integral to an understanding of dialogue and response in the main author’s conception. Nor does he regard mention of the Behemoth (the hippopotamus) in Job 40:15-24 and Leviathan (the crocodile) in Job 41 as added even later, as Sellin maintained, for example.⁵¹

Finally, Zapffe’s interest in the comparison with Greek tragedy was already known in literary-critical circles. There was an accompanying literary interest in Job as a dramatic text, with comparison with material from the Hellenistic world being an inevitable result of the late dating pursued by Cheyne and others. Zapffe mentions the 1918 work by H. M. Kallen on *The Book of Job as Greek Tragedy Restored*⁵²¹ which he had been unable to get hold of. This built on the idea of Greek influence and compared Job and the Euripidean tradition in particular. It looked at the literary form of the book of Job and likened it to a tragedy with choruses, even suggesting a reworking into acts and scenes. It saw Job and the problem of evil as contextualized in the social and political history of the Jewish state and yet airing universal issues of suffering, the divine-human relationship and a perspective of humanism, all related to the genre of tragedy. Zapffe was thus on the crest of the wave of comparison with Greek tragedy which took off after him, the topic with which he opens his famous Job paragraph. He too localizes Job in the context of Jewish pessimism, with biblical parallels in Jeremiah and Ecclesiastes given a mention, but he also shows knowledge of Prometheus and of other Greek authors and plays (as indicated in the translation) and airs the possibility of an actual historical connection between works of this literary genre, linked to the late dating.

To conclude this article, we have sought to bring attention to the life of Zapffe and to translate his paragraph on Job from *On the Tragic* for the first time from Norwegian into English. We have sought

briefly to contextualize the work in the thought of the time and yet have also celebrated his distinctive and radical stance. Notorious already in Norway for his biting and critical turns of phrase, so distinctive of his writings, and for his eccentric character, this article brings his work to a wider audience, an awareness of which is long overdue.⁵³ It is to be hoped that Peter Wessel Zapffe will take his rightful place as a key, influential interpreter of the book of Job alongside his many other talents, among them mountaineering, philosophy and arctic exploration.

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¹ Zapffe, *Om det tragiske (On the Tragic)*.

² Zapffe, “Hvad er tindesport?” (“What is mountaineering?”), 89.

³ Zapffe, “Avskjed med Gausta” (“Parting with Gausta”), 127-8. See www.openairphilosophy.org.

⁴ Zapffe, “The Last Messiah” (“Den sidste Messias”), 50-51.

⁵ Zapffe, “Farewell Norway” (“Farvel Norge”), 56.

⁶ Zapffe, “The Last Messiah” (“Den sidste Messias”), 50-51.

⁷ Zapffe, *Om det tragiske (On the Tragic)*.

⁸ This view of God was taken up most famously by Carl Jung in his *Answer to Job (Antwort auf Hiob)* written in German in 1952 in which he portrayed God as a tyrant and Job as having won the argument. It is a fascinating question to ask whether Jung knew of Zapffe’s work. It does not appear in Jung’s bibliography.

⁹ Weltschmerz means “world-weariness”.

¹⁰ The “Apollonistic Element” refers to a harmonizing tendency.

¹¹ *Philoctetes* is one of Sophocles’ tragic plays, it describes the attempt by Neoptolemus and Odysseus to bring the disabled Philoctetes, the master archer, back to Troy from the island of Lemnos. It involves trickery and various struggles between characters and raises the question of what morality means to each man and whether the common good should be more valued over individual preference. Like Job, Philoctetes suffers from physical illness, in this case with a wounded, painful foot that will not heal.

¹² This is a reference to Job 2:8 in which Job scrapes his sores with a potsherd and sits among the ashes. Job was frequently pictured by artists in this pose. The Septuagint (the Greek Translation of the Bible) gives us more information that Job specifically scraped away pus with the potsherd and sat on ‘the rubbish heap outside the city’, a place for outcasts, lepers and sinners.

¹³ It is well known that Jeremiah suffered because of the unpalatable message he had to convey at the Israelite Exile that punishment was to come to the people. His confessions indicate this (e.g. Jer. 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 20:7-12 and 20:14-18) as well as events that happened to him such as being thrown into a cistern (Jer. 37-8). The book of Lamentations is traditionally attributed to this prophet, a book of intense lament at the destruction of Jerusalem.

¹⁴ The book of Ecclesiastes contains the musings of Qoheleth, a sage and sceptic, and it is often ranged with Job as a product of Jewish pessimism.

¹⁵ i.e. More frivolous (Dionysian) than harmonious (Apollonistic).

¹⁶ *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus is commonly compared to the Book of Job, see Irwin, “Job and Prometheus”, who even posits that, “Literary dependence in one direction or the other, may not unreasonably be postulated.” (92). Aeschylus also wrote a sequel, *Prometheus Unbound* (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Unbound*) which only exists

in fragments. For a recent text and translation of *Prometheus Bound* see Griffith (ed.), *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound*.

¹⁷ This is the version of the Bible that Zapffe would have used.

¹⁸ It is fascinating here to get a glimpse of Zapffe's reading material on Job in which he engages with critical Job scholarship of the time. See further discussion after the translation.

¹⁹ Zapffe is here repeating the scholarly conclusion of his time that a later author added the main body of the Book of Job to an existing folktale. This includes the opening lament of Job in chapter 3, the dialogue between Job and the friends in chapters 4-27; the hymn to wisdom in chapter 28; Job's final lament in Job 29-31; the speeches of the fourth friend, Elihu, in chapter 32-27 and the God speeches in chapters 38-42. Only chapters 1 and 2 and 42:7ff are the remains of the original folktale in prose rather than in poetry.

²⁰ Zapffe is probably referring here to the tradition that built up around Job, started in the Epistle of James 5:11 which refers to Job's 'steadfastness' and continued in the *Testament of Job* and other early interpretations. The patient Job of the folktale was more appealing than the questioning Job of the dialogues. See Besserman, *The Legend of Job in the Middle Ages*.

²¹ This is a reference to the bet or wager of the Prologue between God and 'the Satan'. In the Hebrew we read 'the Satan' with the definite article, but this figure has become associated for Zapffe and his contemporaries with the full-blown Satan figure of later books such as Zechariah and Revelation.

²² The personal name for God, rather than the generic name, Elohim.

²³ A reference to the prose Epilogue in Job 42:7ff where Job is rewarded with exactly twice the number of animals that he had before and a new set of children.

²⁴ A loose citation of Jesus's saying to "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17 (KJV); cf. Matt 22:21).

²⁵ Cf. Jeremiah 20:14-18 which contains very similar sentiments of cursing the days of conception and birth.

²⁶ Whilst we are told that three friends come from afar to offer Job comfort and at first they sit in comforting silence with him (Job 2:11-13), they soon become verbose and unhelpful to Job and insults fly. If you call someone a 'Job's comforter' nowadays it means that they are less than helpful to you.

²⁷ *Eumenides* is also a play by Aeschylus, the third play of a trilogy, *The Oresteia*, with *Agamemnon* and *Libation Bearers*, all tragedies. The events of *Eumenides* take place after Orestes killed his mother out of revenge for the murder of his father when Orestes is a broken man, hounded by the Eumenides (or Furies) which are the daughters of the night and spirits of vengeance. On the verge of madness, he prays to Apollo for relief

from his agony and awaits trial in Athens at the hand of the goddess Athena. Similarities to Job's plight are apparent.

²⁸ Franz Grillparzer's, *Libussa*. Grillparzer was an Austrian playwright (1791-1872) influenced by Freud and Nietzsche (as Zapffe was) who wrote tragedies, but *Libussa* was one of three such plays found after his death amongst his papers. In *Libussa* matriarchal (nurturing and rural) and patriarchal (warrior and urban) claims are pitted against each other, with the patriarchal triumphing in the end.

²⁹ It is interesting that Zapffe here uses the language of measurement which is appropriate for God's creative acts, although in this passage in 9:4-10 creation language is combined with God's equal ability to be destructive in his anger.

³⁰ This is the doctrine of retribution which is assumed by the friends throughout and is based on traditional wisdom ideas as reflected in the book of Proverbs.

³¹ The Stoics (3rd century BCE) probably post-date the book of Job (at the latest 4th century BCE), although some have found evidence of Stoic thought in its pages. More commonly comparisons are made with Ecclesiastes; or with Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon (in the Apocrypha). Stoicism is a philosophical system that advocates living in the moment, not controlled by desires of pleasure or pain, and developing an ethic in accord with the natural world.

³² There is thought to be some dislocation of the third cycle of speeches in which Job and the friends seem to start contradicting themselves and it is usually put down to scribal error. suggestion of a later insert probably reflects Zapffe's awareness of critical scholarship of the time on this issue.

³³ Zapffe's picks up the language of weighing and measuring, notably in Job 28:25, putting it into modern terms of measurement.

³⁴ Job 28:28, the final verse of the hymn to wisdom in chapter 28.

³⁵ This repetition of what has come before (and anticipation of God's speeches) has led many scholars to see the Elihu speeches as a later addition, including authors that he read. Interestingly Zapffe doesn't entertain this idea and sees the section as from the hand of the main author.

³⁶ The Behemoth was widely thought to be a hippopotamus, and the description fits such a creature, but it is also arguably a description of a chaos monster.

³⁷ The description of the Leviathan, another chaos monster, is based on that of a crocodile.

³⁸ An interesting echo of the animal imagery used by God in his speeches in chapters 38-41.

³⁹ A reference to the devil, Mephisto or Mephistopheles, possible originating with Job 13:4, since Mephistopheles means ‘plasterer of falsehoods’. This is the name of the devil used by Faust in German folk tradition.

⁴⁰ This was the aim of Julius Wellhausen’s influential *Prolegomena to the Old Testament* in which he claimed to have written an objective history of the Israelite people, revealing a development in understanding from a natural covenantal religion in its earliest stages, that gradually evolved into a legalism that characterized the later stages of the Jewish faith, all revealed through four key sources of the Pentateuch, J,E,D and P, that came from different historical periods and contexts.

⁴¹ Most likely by Bruch, *Weisheits-Lehre der Hebräer (Wisdom Teaching of the Hebrews)*.

⁴² See Seybold, “Studies of the Psalms and Other Biblical Poetry”, 593.

⁴³ See Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Bare Reason*. See also Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion (1821-31)*, in particular his lecture from 1827, who stressed God’s unfathomable wisdom and absolute power but working in a rational way and saw Job as a man who saw his fate as conflicting with his sense of justice but who nevertheless did not lose his confidence in God. Kierkegaard also famously engaged with the book of Job in his “Fear and Trembling” (*Frygt og Bæven*) (1843), in Kierkegaard, *Samlede Vaerker*, in which he uses Job as a recurrent point of reference, the voice of Job representing the personal relationship between a human being and God.

⁴⁴ These citations of Zapffe are all from our translation above.

⁴⁵ C. Jung, *Answer to Job (Antwort auf Hiob)*.

⁴⁶ See discussion of nineteenth century trends in Job scholarship in Dell, “Studies of the Didactical Books of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament”, 614-19.

⁴⁷ Cheyne, *Job and Solomon*, 11-115. See also his section on Job in *Jewish Religious Life after the Exile*, 161ff; and his famous entry on “Job” in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*. Zapffe mentions a piece by E. Sellin in a Berlin University Programme of 18th January 1931. However, Sellin’s famous work, in which he discusses Job amongst all books of the Old Testament, is his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p 207ff.

⁴⁸ Joined by Cheyne, *Jewish Religious Life after the Exile*, who saw the Satan passages as evidence of a later mythological viewpoint and the divine council scenes as also added with their interest in other heavenly beings.

⁴⁹ Another example of this sceptical tradition was found by Cheyne, *Jewish Religious Life after the Exile*, and others in Prov 30:1-6 – the sayings of Agur – and in the book of Ecclesiastes, the author of whom was also seen to have lost trust in God.

⁵⁰ It was very much an interest of nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars to look at intertexts across the Old Testament or between the Old and New Testaments. The vast amount of material that started to come out of the ancient Near East only began in the 1920s and subsequently tended to dominate discussion from that point onwards - on Job in relation to this trend, see Heim, “The Phenomenon and Literature of Wisdom in Its Near Eastern Context and in the Biblical Wisdom Books”, 585-90.

⁵¹ Sellin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*.

⁵² Kallen, *The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy Restored*. A severe review of this book was published by Montefiore in the *Harvard Theological Review*.

⁵³ The authors have discussed this matter across a number of years of discussion whilst dining at the high table of St Catharine’s College, Cambridge but, ironically, it took the coronavirus lockdown to bring the article to fruition.