

Reflections of the Book of Job and Gregory's *Moralia* in Chaucer's "Monk's Tale"

Douglas Wurtele

In one of the crucial scenes in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* an appalled Stephen Dedalus is listening to the Lenten homily on the pains of hell that await unrepentant sinners. The Jesuit preacher is implicitly echoing the same despairing outcries from Righteous Job about the darkness of hell that Chaucer's Pilgrim-Parson explicitly recalled on the road to Canterbury some five centuries before. The two preachers have the same purpose: to arouse so overwhelming a sense of contrition in the sinner that heartfelt repentance and unrestrained confession will pour out. Both are also well aware of the central place occupied in the Office of the Dead by *lectiones* from the Book of Job. As Lawrence Besserman explains, Job became "the principal biblical figure in the fully developed Office of the Dead of the High Middle Ages," and the text of the office in use at Salisbury Cathedral, the so-called Sarum Use, well known of course to Chaucer, "had gained wide acceptance and had what amounted to official recognition from Rome."¹

One of the sinners on the Canterbury pilgrimage, perhaps secretly as conscience-stricken as the sixteen-year old Stephen for indulging the sin of lust, will very soon be feeling the lash of the Pilgrim-Parson's homily. He is the Monk, "A manly man, to been an abbot able" (I.167).² He too would have listened often enough to Job's outcries repeated in the Office for the Dead. Moreover, before his own turn comes in the Host's tale-telling competition he has heard several direct and indirect allusions to the Book of Job, but not yet, so far, the most heartrending lament cried out by Job:

"Shall not the fewness of my days be ended shortly?
 Suffer me, therefore, that I may lament my sorrow a little.
 Before I go, and return no more
 to a land that is dark and covered with the mist of death;
 A land of misery and darkness where the shadow of death.
 and no order, but everlasting horror dwelleth" (X.20-22).³

The Pilgrim-Reporter's sketch of the Pilgrim-Monk, who is about to hear the Parson's exegesis of this lament in the opening words of his call to repentance, follows the usual random design while hinting strongly at laxity and immorality. The oblique accusations, partly veiled in quasi-reported speech, point to luxuriousness, lechery, and gluttony by way of symbolical and physiognomical clues. Any glimpses of a tormented inner state seem to escape the not always perceptive Reporter. Yet as Edmund Reiss has noted, in the Monk there is no "real spiritual joy," for he has "no confidence in Providence"⁴ All the physical evidence points to carnal indulgence: the shining bald pate, the fat glistening face, the rolling, bulging, gleaming eyes, signs that for the physiognomists signify a tendency to be lecherous, envious, shameless, slothful, disobedient.⁵

Coupled with these signs go the innuendoes planted in the Reporter's description, such as the hint that the Monk "lovede venerie" and liked best of any roast a "fat swan" (I.166, 206). The swan symbol, in Cirlot's phrase one "of great complexity,"⁶ suggests devotion to Venus as an image of a naked woman, but also is a reminder of death, something that will be the omnipresent theme of the Monk's "tragedies" as it is the burden of Job's lamentation. But if the evidence brands the Monk as a rebel, it is not as a rebel in the the way Job can be thought of. The theologian Olivier Clément notes that while the Fathers dwell on the "patience of Job," it is his rebellion to which others have referred. "This rebellion is not aimless, however, but carried out in a kind of faith. Job ... knows that Someone is seeking him out through the very experience of evil."⁷ But the rebelliousness displayed by Chaucer's Monk points to the very opposite of patience — a reckless impatience. This may mean that of all the Pilgrims he could be the one most likely to be disturbed by the Book of Job, but if not to contrition, then to moroseness and despair.

That book of the Old Testament was of deep concern to the Patristic and Scholastic ages. In medieval Christian exegesis Job figures as a paragon of patience, a

miles Christi figure, an antetype of Christ himself. Seldom, however, except in irony, do the Canterbury pilgrims refer to Job in ways that cite his legendary patience. Conversely, Job's fear of the darkness of death and his grief that ever he was born do come into their reflections, all being listened to by the Monk. Some of these reflections sound merely proverbial, but others go deeper. One of these is the shadow of death metaphor, a fear that, with good reason, seems to oppress the Monk. Here Job, after reproving his friends and persisting in maintaining his innocence, muses on the shortness of human life. "Man, born of a woman, living for a short time, is filled with many miseries. Who cometh forth like a flower, and is destroyed, and fleeth as a shadow...." (XIV.1-2). The Merchant, speaking ironically of God's gift of a wife, calls all other gifts merely "yiftes of Fortune / That passen as a shadwe upon a wal" (IV.1314-15), and the Shipman also reflects, with irony conscious or unconscious, that in comparison with a wife other blessings "Passen as dooth a shadwe upon the wal"(VII.9), an image to be echoed by the Parson.

One of Job's most poignant sayings comes early in his grieving: "Let the day perish wherein I was born" (III:3). The Monk has to listen to one echo of this death wish after another. Perhaps in mainly proverbial, even jocular mode, the Knight tells how Palamon, before glimpsing Emilye, bewails the fact that ever he was born (I.1073) and that later Arcite also cries "Allas... that day that I was bore!" (I.1542). The Clerk makes Griselda's father curse the day that Nature "Shoop hym to been a lyves creature" (IV.903) when the Marquis dismisses her. The Squire relates how Canacee wept to hear the grieving falcon lament: "Ther I was bred — allas, that ilke day!" (V.499). The Franklin relates how the lovelorn Aurelius, "Curseth the tyme that evere he was born" (V.1558). Romantically incongruous though these echoes of Job may sound, it is possible that to the Monk they carry darker overtones.

Of Job's patience and humility, and even the ominous question of God's permission to the tempter, he also hears some reminders. Sarcastically, no doubt, the Wife of Bath relates that she told her "olde housbondes": "Ye sholde been al pacient and meke, /...Sith ye so preche of Jobes pacience" (III.434-35). Her antagonist, the Friar, sounds a more ill-omened note in the diabolical yeoman's answer to the summoner's questions. Sometimes, he replies, fiends act as "Goddess instrumentz / And meenes to doon his comandementz /... Witnessse on Job, whom that we diden wo" (III.1483-84, 1491). As might be expected, a pilgrim especially likely both to level his gaze at the Monk and to make veiled and open references to Job, is the Clerk of

Oxenford. One such echo is Griselda's response to Walter: "Naked out of my fadres hous ... / I cam, and naked moot I turne agayn" (IV. 871). He also seizes the chance to inject irony even while citing Job's humility: that Griselda, though banished by Walter, remained to him always "meke and stable" (IV.931), elicits the Clerk's reflection: "Men speke of Job, and moost for his humblesse, / As clerkes, whan hem list, konne wel endite, / Namely of men" (IV.932-34), yet no man, he adds, can acquit himself in humility so well as can a woman. But of all the allusions to Job heard by the Monk, none is so pointed as the one made by the Pilgrim-Poet himself, immediately before the Monk's turn to speak. Prudence launches into her appeal to the vengeful and weeping Melibeus by saying, "Remembre yow upon the pacient Job. Whan he hadde lost his children and his temporeel substance, and in his body endured and receyved ful many a grevous tribulacion, yet seyde he thus: 'Oure lord hath yeve it me ... blessed be the name of oure Lord'" (VII.999-1000).

All these reminders about Job come before the Monk's grudging response to the Host's call: "My Lord, the Monk ... be myrie of cheere, / For ye shul telle a tale trewely" (VII.1924-25). But the demeanour of this pilgrim has changed since the first night at the inn. It is nothing "myrie" that the pilgrims hear from the Monk, who seems unable to erase from his troubled mind the allusions to Job he has heard already. It is as if he is expecting the direct citations from the Book of Job with which the "Povre Persoun of a Toun" is about to harangue, when his turn comes, these uncontrite listeners.

The Parson has been well trained for the task. Job's roles of *miles Christi* and antetype of Christ figure prominently in Gregory the Great's *Moralia*, which was to dominate all subsequent medieval treatments of the Book of Job. As Besserman writes, "Whatever its critical merits and deficiencies, for almost one thousand years the *Moralia* was the best known and most authoritative commentary on the Book of Job in Western Christendom. More than just a commentary on Job, it was also one of the most important compendia of Christian doctrine to be had, as few medieval libraries were without it."⁸ Gregory's treatise is absorbed into the first of the two major sources for the Parson's sermon — the early thirteenth-century *Summa casuum poenitentiae* by St Raymund of Pennaforte. Hence much of the Parson's lecture to the pilgrims reflects Gregory's exegesis. In any case, this was a work so central to monastic learning that there can be no doubt about its place in the Monk's apparently well-stocked library. Whether it has served to bring any hope to the Monk or

has further reduced him to despair remains to be seen. But as to the Parson's concurrence with the exegesis of the Book of Job in both Pennaforte's strictures and Gregory's commentary no doubt at all will be left in the minds of his pilgrim audience, least of all in the Monk's.

The opening section of the discussion by this learned parish priest contains no less than seven references to Job, more in fact than he makes directly to Jesus. They fall within his prefatory treatment of the reasons why sinners should be moved to contrition. Hence, to remind them vividly of the pains of hell before moving on to his lengthy analysis of penitence itself, he declares "For Job seith, Synful men doon werkes worthy of confusioun" (X.134), a mistake picked up from the *Summa* for a maxim in fact from the Book of Proverbs.⁹ Then, in a homiletic exegesis of Job's fear of the suffering of hell, he explains that a man's sin "shal nat turne hym into delit, but to greet sorwe for drede of the peyne of helle. / And therfore seith Job to God, 'Suffre, Lord, that I may a while biwaille and wepe, er I go withoute returnyng to the derke lond, covered with the derknesse of deeth, / to the lond of mysesse and of derknesse, whereas is the shadwe of deeth, whereas ther is noon ordre or ordinaunce but grisly drede that evere shal laste'" (X.175-77).

In these ominous words Chaucer, following Pennaforte closely, has made the Parson strike to the heart of Job's anguish in tones that may be lost on a modern audience but which Chaucer's real audience, and the imaginary Pilgrim audience, could not ignore. As Anthony Bloom has observed, when today we think of hell "we think of Dante and of the place where all those poor people are being tortured.... But the Hell of the Old Testament has nothing to do with this spectacular hell of Christian literature. The Hell of the Old Testament is something infinitely more horrid; it is the place where God is not. It's the place of final dereliction, it's the place where you continue to exist and there is no life left."¹⁰ It is my contention that Chaucer is making his Pilgrim-Parson utter these words with that aspect in mind and that if any of the Pilgrims sees this, it is the Monk.

Aware of this sense and also, no doubt, of Dante's, the Parson now expands on "The cause why that Job clepeth helle the 'lond of derknesse': / understondeth that he clepeth it 'lond' or erthe, for it is stable and nevere shal faille; 'derk,' for he that is in helle hath defaute of light material" (X.181-82). He then reminds those who mistakenly think that by death they may escape pain, drawing out the sense of Job's

words "ther as is the shadwe of deeth" where everlasting horror dwells. Here he is reflecting Gregory's warning:

In the torments of this life, fear has pain, pain has no fear, in that pain never torments the mind, when it has already begun to suffer what it feared. But [in] hell both 'the shadow of death' darkens and 'everlasting horror inhabits;' in that they all, that are given over to its fires, both in their punishments undergo pain, and, in the pressure of pain coming upon them, they are ever stricken with fear, so that they both suffer what they dread, and unceasingly dread what they are suffering.¹¹

To emphasize Gregory's warning, the Parson adds "And eek Job seith that in helle is noon ordre of rule" (X.217) and reinforces the need for contrition by repeating: "Seith Saint Job atte laste that 'ther shall horroure and grisly drede dwellen withouten ende'" (X.222). Then, almost in his final words, the Parson gives the by now chastened pilgrims one last reminder of Job: "[A]lle the riches in the world ... passen as a shadwe on the wal" (X.1068).

All that the Monk has heard concerning Job that comes before the Parson's warnings, and certainly in the course of them, serves unmistakably to intensify not only his rebellious despair but also his aloneness on pilgrimage, the actual one and the pilgrimage of life. Job, essentially alone in dealing with life in most of his story, represents the ultimate problem of the way to deal with life—either focussed on the wisdom of God or directed by self-will, passions, and insecurities.¹² Though injured, Job finds the right way. Whether that will be true of the Monk can never be known: the pilgrimage ends with benediction, not conversion.

His own narration offers little encouragement. The burning question behind Job's plea for a brief respite before death is why God has been so ruthless as to have brought him to birth. He is perplexed to despair at the inscrutable purpose of the Almighty. But whatever meaning may lie in divine purpose, this the Monk transfers to the inscrutable power of Fortune and specifically to the ruin it imposes on certain lives. These he chooses to examine as "tragedies" where one who once "stood in greet prosperitee" falls into "myserie, and endeth wrecchedly" (VII.1975-77). "Tragedy" he may term his material, but in fact its deeper sense is history. Here is found the underlying link between Job and Chaucer's Monk. It has been said that Job

“believed, indeed he knew a living God, and that one he could no longer understand.... And at a certain moment, he says, ‘Where is the man that will stand between me and my judge...?’ He had a sense that only that could be the solution of his problem. *Indeed, of the problem of the meaning of tragedy, ultimately of the meaning of history*” [italics added].¹³

But to this stage of understanding history and tragedy, Chaucer’s Monk has not reached, as is seen all too clearly in his lugubrious depiction of famous, if not illustrious, figures from tragedy and history. Some full, some sketchy, his seventeen lives fall into three disconnected groups – the first, six pagan lives, mingling actual and mythological; the second, four modern lives; the third, seven biblical lives. Commenting that the “punishments are all violent” in the Monk’s choices of moral *exempla*, one of Chaucer’s major critics, Donald Howard, says “it is a hapless universe that the Monk reveals, and his obsession with it suggests that Chaucer has given us a study in the psychology of powerlessness.... He sees life as a hopeless and frightening state in which man has no control over his destiny....”¹⁴ Earlier, Bernard Bronson took the view that the Monk’s choices of “tragedies” were prompted by the Host’s taunting and hostile speech to him (VII.1924-64).¹⁵

Like many pronouncements on this ambiguous figure, these views of the Monk have some validity. But there is more to the problem of the Monk than psychology and riposte. Throughout his *exempla*, the dominating element is death. It is the most negative yet, because of the Monk’s immersion in the Office for the Dead, the most obvious side to the Job story that his mind could have fastened upon.

In the first group, Croesus is hanged, Hercules dies on a bed of hot coals, Alexander is poisoned, Julius Caesar is slain, Nero slays himself, though Cenobia, at least, is merely enslaved. In the second group, Peter of Cyprus is murdered in his bed, Barnabo of Lombard is put to death in prison, Hugelino of Pisa dies of starvation in prison, and Peter of Spain is slain by his brother. The third and largest group deals with biblical figures about whom a scholarly monk should make no errors, nor indeed does this one except over the two most significant. They include Lucifer, consigned to Hell “where he yet is inne” (VII.2003), Nebuchadnezzar, punished like a beast though spared, Holofernes, whose head is cut off, Belshazzar, slain by the Persians, Antiochus, dying hideously alone on a mountainside, and then Adam and Samson. On these two the Monk goes badly but perhaps not surprisingly astray. Adam, he relates, was “dryven out of hys hye prosperitee / To labour, and to helle,

and to meschaunce" (VII.2013-2014). But there he leaves Adam, ignoring the most basic facts of the Resurrection: that Christ descended into hell to redeem, in particular, Adam and Eve, a redemption amply attested to in commentary and iconography, to say nothing of the events in hell described in *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (passus XVIII).

"God's presence in history," as the medieval view of Providence has been termed,¹⁶ finds convincing proof in the Book of Judges, the main source for the Monk's lengthy and grotesquely distorted account of Samson the Nazarite. A cloisterer might be expected to have made better use of his glossed Bible to produce an account more to the purpose than that related in Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*. But, perhaps because of his concern with death, the Monk misses the import of Samson's ultimate sacrifice, the act that made him, in medieval eyes, a pre-figuring of Christ. All he can say of Samson's martyrdom is that "he two pilers shook and made hem falle, / And doun fil temple and al, and ther it lay, — / And slow hymself, and eek his foomen alle" (VII.2084-86). The phrase repeats his earlier verdict on Samson: "But to his wyves toolde he his secree, / Thurgh which he slow hymself for wrecched-nesse" (VII. 2021-22). The Monk's own tone and rhetoric makes it clear that he sees Samson's act merely as despairing suicide. Just as the true meaning of Job's story has eluded the Monk, so has the key phrase in Judges escaped him: "He said: Let me die with the Philistines" (16:30). This concession was deemed to signify Samson's realization that God has answered his prayer for his strength to be restored (16:28). Hence the scriptural text alone rules out the charge of self-murder committed in a state of "wrecchednesse." Apart from that, the glosses in the Monk's forgotten reading are unanimously and unequivocally clear on this point: Samson did not commit suicide. The literal-minded postillator Nicolas de Lyra, a near contemporary, explains that Samson did not intend to slay himself for the sake of doing so, but could not destroy the "blasphemers" without bringing himself down with them.¹⁷

But in the Monk's version the all-important matter of intentionality is left out in order to display Samson as a man ridden with despair, wishing for death. In Chaucer's depiction of the Monk—portrait, prologue, tale, conclusion, in what the teller says and equally important what he does not say—the Pilgrim audience, the actual audience, and the permanent audience are given a vision of monastic *acedia* in extreme form. It is an aspect of the "Monk's Tale" that has been explored before, notably by David E.

Berndt.¹⁸ The Monk “exhibits the philosophical deficiencies to be expected of a very worldly man” and, entrapped by these deficiencies, his limitations may be painful for him (436). His “unwillingness to work and difficulty in studying” indicate the vice of *acedia*, to which monks were thought to be “especially prone” (439). The Monk therefore displays the *tristitia* that is closely related to *acedia* and therefore is attacked by anxieties, so much so, in Berndt’s view, that we may even be called upon by the poet “to sympathize with the horror of his condition” (450).

If this sensitive view is correct, it would go far to explaining an apparently odd avoidance by the Monk to allude to a most obvious work. Earlier I mentioned the centrality of Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job* to monastic learning. It has certainly deeply entered into the Parson’s thoughts on repentance and death, and he is by no means a regular. Not only that: the memories of the Pilgrim narrators are so charged with snatches, from the Book of Job, direct and indirect, extensive or fragmentary that the text of the *Canterbury Tales* has over fifty examples.¹⁹ Yet not one is uttered by the Monk, the pilgrim-narrator more likely than any to be versed in the work. The “painful” vision of the “horror,” to use Berndt’s terms, accounts, I believe, for this seeming lacuna. Chaucer has not made the omission. The Monk has. It testifies to his own failure in faith and hope. It is the testimony of silence.

Chaucer’s century, like perhaps every century since human history began, can be described as an age of conflict. Yet it is not externalized social or geopolitical conflict that we find in Chaucer’s study of the human condition, but, rather, personal and inner conflict. This should not be dismissed as mere modern psychologizing, for by his time the concept of *psychomachia* had long been studied for its treatment of the battle in the mind, or, as we would say, internalized conflict. In *The Canterbury Tales* little if anything may be learned about inner conflict in, for example, the Knight or the Parson. But compelling signs of inner conflict emerge from the description provided for the Monk and from his own contribution to the pilgrims’ understanding of life. For of all the sacred books in his community’s library, few are to be found of such surpassing insight as the Book of Job, with Gregory’s commentary, in probing so acutely the depths of inner conflict, to reveal thereby not only the uttermost in human anguish but also, at the last, for those who take hope as the death of despair itself.

Notes

- 1 Lawrence Besserman, *The Legend of Job in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 58. The verses from the Book of Job recited in the first nocturn of the Office of the Dead were 7:16-21, 10:1-7, 10:8-12; in the second 13:23-28, 14:1-6, 14:13-16; in the third 17:1-3, 17:11-15, 19:20-27, 10:18-22.
- 2 All quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, ed. Larry D. Benson.
- 3 All biblical quotations are from the Douay-Rheims translation.
- 4 "The Symbolic Surface of the *Canterbury Tales*: The Monk's Portrait," *Chaucer Review* 3 (1969): 12.
- 5 On this point see my article "Chaucer's Monk: An Errant Exegete," *Journal of Literature & Theology* 1 (1987): 191.
- 6 J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1962, p. 306.
- 7 *Three Prayers*. Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2000, p. 80.
- 8 Besserman, p. 56.
- 9 See Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 958.
- 10 *God and Man*. London: Darton, Longmans & Todd, 1971, pp. 55-56.
- 11 Gregory, *Moralia in Job* (IX.lxvi). Oxford, 1844, p. 569.
- 12 See Johanna Manley, *The Book of Job*. Belmont, CA: Pericope Press, 1999, p. 7.
- 13 Bloom, p. 43.
- 14 Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 281-82.
- 15 Bernard H. Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*. Toronto: University of Toronto

Press, 1960, pp. 72-76.

- 16 M.H. Carré, *Phases of Thought in England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949, p. 29.
- 17 *Glossa Ordinaria*, IV (Lyons, 1545). For a different view of Samson see Derek N.C. Wood, *Exiled from Light: Divine Law, Morality, and Violence in Milton's Samson Agonistes*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- 18 David E. Berndt, "Monastic *Acedia* and Chaucer's Characterization of Daun Piers," *Studies in Philology* 68 (1971): 435-50.
- 19 See Lawrence Besserman, *Chaucer and the Bible: A Critical Review of Research, Indexes, and Bibliography*. New York and London: Garland, 1988.