

# Faith and the Absurd: Kierkegaard, Camus and Job's Religious Protest

N. Verbin

*Tel Aviv University; nverbin@tauex.tau.ac.il*

## ■ Abstract

Religious protest, such as the protest that Job expresses, reveals the manners in which believers experience the absurd while hanging on to God. The purpose of this article is to explore the “grammar” of this paradoxical faith stance by bringing Kierkegaard and Camus to bear upon it, and thereby to show the “family resemblance” between Job, Camus’s “absurd man,” and the Kierkegaardian believer. I begin with a discussion of experiences of the absurd that give rise to religious protest. I then turn to Kierkegaard to explore the manners in which “faith’s thought” renders the “experience of the absurd” a religious one, while pushing the believer further into the absurd. I end with a discussion of Job as an absurd rebel in Camus’s sense.

## ■ Keywords

Kierkegaard, Camus, Job, evil, suffering, protest, faith

## ■ Introduction

Religious protest, voiced in various sources and forms, from the book of Job to Elie Wiesel, expresses the manner in which believers experience the absurd while hanging on to God. This article explores the “grammar” of this seemingly paradoxical faith stance, particularly as it is expressed by Job. It does so by exploring Job’s relation to various “friends” who share some features of his experience and

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outlook or inhabit the same “logical space” that he inhabits, and bringing him into conversation with them, be they his contemporaries or otherwise, believers or nonbelievers, Jews or Christians.

The article’s philosophical presuppositions are Wittgensteinian. I assume that faith is a “family resemblance” concept; I assume that “faith” may show itself in a variety of different manners, which do not have a shared essence and which are not *all* susceptible to analysis in propositional terms, or in nonpropositional terms such as through the notions of “love” or “trust.” Moreover, I assume that an appropriate methodology for making perspicuous the “grammar” of faith, or the “grammar” of certain manners in which it shows itself, is by “assembling reminders” and “connecting links.” It is by considering certain manners in which faith shows itself together with or in comparison with others, that various similarities and differences can be made perspicuous and the “logic” of the phenomenon or phenomena in question can be brought to light.<sup>1</sup>

In order to shed light on the “grammar” of religious protest, I purport to engage with various experiences of the absurd, both religious and nonreligious, and with the manners in which they show themselves. I shall reflect on those who protest when experiencing the absurd as well as on those who acquiesce, on those for whom God is part of their absurd suffering, on those whose world is devoid of a divine master, and on those for whom the presence or absence of a divine master makes no difference. To reiterate, I maintain that it is by placing them one next to the other, discussing each of them in relation to the others, that a “perspicuous representation” of the “grammar” of faith in general and of protesting believers’ faith in particular can be provided.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For Wittgenstein’s comments on “family resemblance” concepts and on “games,” see particularly Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; 3rd ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1968) §65–§71. For Wittgenstein’s comments on “perspicuous representation,” on “assembling reminders” and “connecting links,” and their use in philosophy and in religion, see particularly §122, §126, §127; see also Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,” in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951* (ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993) 119–54. For a focused discussion and evaluation of “perspicuous representation” in the study of religion, see, e.g., Judith Genova, *Wittgenstein: A Way of Seeing* (New York: Routledge, 1995); B. R. Clack, *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion* (New York: Palgrave, 1999) 53–78.

<sup>2</sup> While much was written about religious protest by rabbinical scholars and by Shoah scholars, there is little discussion of its philosophical significance, particularly as it pertains to discussions concerning the nature of faith. Notable exceptions are Menachem Fisch and Avi Sagi. See particularly Menachem Fisch, *Covenant of Confrontation: A Study of Non-Submissive Religiosity in Rabbinic Literature* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2019) (Hebrew); Avi Sagi and Nir Sagi, “Religious Protest and Religious Loyalty,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12.2 (2020) 7–36. See also N. Verbin, “Three Knights of Faith on Job’s Suffering and Its Defeat,” *International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 78 (2017) 382–95. For a discussion of various literary sources from the Bible to Wiesel, which express religious protest, see Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998). For a helpful exposition of protest in rabbinical literature, see, e.g., David Charles Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For a theological attempt to incorporate the experience of “divine abuse” into one’s theology and liturgy, see David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God:*

The article has three parts. I begin with a brief discussion of different experiences of the “absurd.” I distinguish between Qoheleth’s nihilism and Job’s religious protest, characterizing both as “experiences of the absurd” in Camus’s sense. In the second part, I engage with Kierkegaard’s *Discourses* in order to shed light on one specific manner in which “God,” or “faith’s thought,” does not undo the absurd. I show that contrary to what Camus has supposed, “faith’s thought” pushes the believer further into the absurd, while at the same time adding another aspect to it—the eternal. I end, in the third part, with a discussion of Job as an “absurd man” in Camus’s sense, bringing to light the “family resemblance” between him and the other “reminders.” I argue that Job is well aware of the absurd, yet “without resignation,” and, unlike the Kierkegaardian absurd sufferer, opts for constant confrontation and revolt—above all, revolt against God.

### ■ Experiences of the Absurd

After losing everything that he holds dear, his property, his social status, and his children, and having been afflicted with painful sores from head to toe, Job is in turmoil: “Sighing has become my daily food; my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil” (Job 3:24–26).<sup>3</sup>

Job, however, does not merely suffer pain, disease, humiliation, and the loss of everything that he holds dear. His suffering and loss turn him into a stranger to his life; he becomes an alien in his world. The hinge around which his life was arranged, namely, the existence of a divine and just governance governing the cosmos and everything that has its life within it, collapses. Job loses his grip on his life. Pleading to his friends he exclaims: “Teach me and I will be quiet; show me where I have been wrong” (Job 6:24). Pleading to God he cries out: “Do not declare me guilty, but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked?” (Job 10:2–3).

Camus characterizes the “divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting” as the feeling of absurdity (Camus 1979, 13).<sup>4</sup> According to Camus, it is born out of our frustrated expectations for happiness, meaning, and understanding: “Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for

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*A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993). For a philosophical analysis of the experience of “divine abuse” as it is represented in the book of Job, see N. Verbin, *Divinely Abused: A Philosophical Perspective on Job and His Kin* (London: Continuum, 2010). For a discussion of protest as a response to the Shoah, see, e.g., Zachary Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotes from Job are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> All Camus 1979 references are to Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (trans. Justin O’Brien; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), and appear in parentheses within the text.

happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 1979, 31–32).

Job comes face-to-face with the irrational, with the frustration of his expectations, with the breakdown of his worldview. Confronting the world’s silent response to his cry for meaning, his understanding reaches a standstill. Not only does he suffer pain and loss, he also experiences them as absurd.

Unlike Job’s estrangement from his life, which has to do with his losing everything that he holds dear, Qoheleth’s estrangement from his life seems to have to do with his having everything that one could hold dear. Qoheleth has riches, property, concubines, social status, and even wisdom; he has everything that a man of his age could possibly desire. Qoheleth, however, finds no joy in it: “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Eccl 2:11).<sup>5</sup>

Nothing has intrinsic meaning for Qoheleth; nothing has value; everything is wearisome: “All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:8–9).

It appears that for Qoheleth the “chain of daily gestures is broken” and the heart “vainly seeks the link that will connect it again” (Camus 1979, 19). Camus describes the weariness, the estrangement from life, and the feeling of life’s absurdity with the following words, reminiscent of Qoheleth’s description of the weariness:

It happens that the stage-sets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness. (Camus 1979, 19)<sup>6</sup>

If we consider Job’s and Qoheleth’s suffering through Camus, we may conclude that the feeling of the absurd lies at the heart of our human existence, as Camus insists. If one can be alienated from one’s life regardless of whether one experiences fortune or misfortune, regardless of whether one has been blessed or cursed, then the feeling of the absurd can awaken at any moment; and, as Camus maintains, and as a consideration of Job and of Qoheleth reveals, no cure for it is to be found at the level of life’s contingency, of one’s fortunes or misfortunes, at the level of what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic.

<sup>5</sup> All quotes from Ecclesiastes are from *The New Revised Standard Version* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989). My reasons for shifting to the NRSV’s translation of Ecclesiastes are aesthetic.

<sup>6</sup> The similarities between Qoheleth and Camus have been noted by various scholars. See, e.g., John A. Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature on Revolt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959); John Weightman, “Review of *Albert Camus, A Life*, by Olivier Todd,” *New York Review of Books*, 15 January 1998. Fox goes as far as to argue that הבל in Qoheleth is to be translated as “absurd”; see Michael V. Fox, “On הבל in Qoheleth: A Reply to Mark Sneed,” *JBL* 138 (2019) 559.

Does God provide a cure for the absurd? Camus views the leap into faith, into God, as a false exit from the absurd, together with suicide and hope (Camus 1979, 38). He views the “cure” that Kierkegaard presents as the undoing of the absurd, as an escape from “the antinomy of the human condition”; he accuses Kierkegaard of mutilating his soul in the process (Camus 1979, 41).<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to what Camus supposes, however, God does not provide a way out from the absurd, either for Job or for Qoheleth, or for the Kierkegaardian believer. Qoheleth’s God does not undo the weariness that afflicts him and alienates him from his life, nor does he provide an answer to the “why” that renders the world meaningful and comprehensible. Indeed, for Qoheleth, the world’s incomprehensibility is enhanced by its opaque and distant divine master.<sup>8</sup>

For Job, God’s presence turns the feeling of the absurd into a cry of protest that is voiced *against God*: “know that God has wronged me and drawn his net around me. Though I cry, ‘Violence!’ I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice” (Job 19:6–7). Job’s God does not undo “the antinomy of the human condition,” nor does he provide consolation that renders life more bearable. Rather, Job’s God drives the absurd even deeper, being himself the central feature of the antinomy that constitutes Job’s absurd suffering.

Job experiences God as an abuser.<sup>9</sup> It comes as no surprise that, as such, God provides Job neither an escape from the absurd nor a cure for it: “I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer; I stand up but you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me. . . . I know you will bring me down to death, the place appointed for all the living” (Job 30:20–23).

Jewish sources, from Job to Wiesel, are replete with similar examples of absurd religious suffering and protest. We meet God as the central building block of the believer’s experience of the absurd in *Bereshit Rabbah*, for example, an ancient rabbinical homiletical interpretation to the book of Genesis. There, we read the following commentary on Cain’s murder of Abel:

Rabbi Shimeon bar Yoḥai said: It is difficult to say this thing, and the mouth cannot utter it plainly. Think of two athletes wrestling before the king; had the king wished, he could have separated them. But he did not so desire, and one overcame the other and killed him; he cried out “Who shall demand my justice before the king.” Even so, The voice of thy brother’s blood cries out *against me*.<sup>10</sup>

Rabbi Shimeon bar Yoḥai, a paradigmatic believer, traditionally believed to have written the *Book of Splendor (The Zohar)*, is here comparing Cain’s murder of Abel

<sup>7</sup> For more on Camus’s understanding and critique of Kierkegaard, see the next section.

<sup>8</sup> Fox emphasizes this point; see Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> For more on Job’s abusive God, see Verbin, *Divinely Abused*.

<sup>10</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* 22. My translation and my italics, based on *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis* (trans. H. Freedman; 10 vols. (London: Soncino, 1939) 1:189).

to a gladiator's assassination of his opponent before the earthly king, who did not desire to intervene. Genesis 4:10, which literally reads "your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" is interpreted in this bold exegesis as stating "your brother's blood cries out against me from the ground!" The spilled blood of the victim does not cry out to the king for justice; rather, it cries out against the king for the lack of justice. Rabbi Shimeon bar Yoḥai points the accusing finger at God, for moral evil, depicting God as the one who has orchestrated the immoral scene and has allowed it to come to its evil completion.

For Rabbi Shimeon bar Yoḥai, as for Job, God does not provide a way out of life's seeming absurdity, from the "antinomy of the human condition," from our frustrated expectations for happiness, meaning, and understanding. Rather, God is part of the problem, indeed the heart of the problem. God enhances the absurd.

How may we understand a religiosity such as Job's or Rabbi Shimeon bar Yoḥai's? In the next sections, I shall reflect on both Kierkegaard and Camus to shed light on it.

## ■ Absurd Faith

Camus notes that Kierkegaard begins with the absurd, with "the chaos of an experience divested of its setting and relegated to its original incoherence." He states: "Kierkegaard, for a part of his existence at least, does more than discover the absurd, he lives it" (Camus 1979, 30). As we have seen, however, Camus also maintains that Kierkegaard escapes it: "Kierkegaard wants to be cured. To be cured is his frenzied wish and it runs throughout his whole journal. The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antinomy of the human condition" (Camus 1979, 41). Camus argues that Kierkegaard defies the absurd and, thereby, blinds himself to it:

For him, too, antinomy and paradox become criteria of the religious. Thus the very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life now gives it its truth and its clarity. . . . If he substitutes for his cry of revolt a frantic adherence, at once he is led to blind himself to the absurd which hitherto enlightened him and to deify the only certainty he henceforth possesses, the irrational. . . . The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antinomy of the human condition. (Camus 1979, 40–41)<sup>11</sup>

He accuses Kierkegaard of mutilating his soul in the process of escaping this antinomy (Camus 1979, 41).

Contrary to what Camus supposes, and contrary to what many of his and Kierkegaard's commentators suppose, Kierkegaardian faith does not escape the absurd.<sup>12</sup> It presupposes it, enhances it, and ends with it; at the same time, it also

<sup>11</sup> Underlying this critique is Camus's conflation of Kierkegaard's attitude toward protest with Kierkegaard's attitude toward the absurd. See section 3 of this article.

<sup>12</sup> While much has been written about the role of the "absurd" in Kierkegaard (particularly in *Fear and Trembling, Philosophical Fragments*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*), the discussion revolves around the epistemology of the "absurd," i.e., whether the Kierkegaardian believer's faith

adds another dimension to it that defeats it. My purpose in what follows, however, is neither to provide a comprehensive argument against Camus's reading of Kierkegaard nor to provide a comprehensive argument against his and Kierkegaard's interpreters' understanding of their relation.<sup>13</sup> Rather, my purpose is to use Kierkegaard to shed light on the "grammar" of "absurd faith," on the "grammar" of "absurd believers," whether they protest, like Job and Rabbi Shimeon Bar Yohai,

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is irrational, a-rational, rational, or trans-rational. Such issues as the experience of the absurd, in Camus's sense, absurd suffering, God's role in the experience of the absurd, and the manners in which faith defeats absurd suffering without undoing it—issues that are prominent in Kierkegaard's *Discourses*—have received little attention in the secondary literature. This section will fill this lacuna.

For irrationalist construals of the "absurd," which emphasize the clash between faith and reason in Kierkegaard's writings, see, e.g., Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); idem "Commitment and Paradox," in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays* (ed. Alastair Hannay; London: Routledge, 2003) 126–36. For an influential a-rationalist construal, see, e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2nd ed.; Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984). Emphasizing the incommensurability between the aesthetic sphere and the ethical, MacIntyre has famously insisted that the transition from one to the other cannot be perceived as a reasoned one; rather it involves entering into a sphere in which reasons of a particular kind can be used. As such, his account is best described as a-rational.

The most prominent representative of the opposing camp, whose proponents deny that faith is irrational, is Stephen Evans. His position can be characterized as trans-rational. Denying that for Kierkegaard the Incarnation involves a formal, logical contradiction, Evans maintains instead that in faith, human reason recognizes its limits and partially overcomes them. See, e.g., C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's 'Fragments' and 'Postscript': The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983); idem, "Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox and Faith," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989) 347–62; idem *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 96–118; idem, *Faith beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); idem, "Kierkegaard and the Limits of Reason: Can There Be a Responsible Fideism," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 64 (2008) 1021–35; idem, "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*," in *Kierkegaard's "Concluding Unscientific Postscript": A Critical Guide* (ed. Rich Anthony Furtak; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 204–18. For other influential accounts that argue against an irrationalist construal of the "absurd" in Kierkegaard, see, e.g., M. Jamie Ferreira, "The Point Outside the World: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Nonsense, Paradox and Religion," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994) 29–44; John Lippitt and Daniel Hutto, "Making Sense of Nonsense: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: New Series* 98 (1998) 263–86; Anthony Rudd, "Reason in Ethics: MacIntyre and Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue* (ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd; Chicago: Open Court, 2001) 131–50.

<sup>13</sup> For an emphasis on the differences between Kierkegaard and Camus, see, e.g., Sheela Pawar, *Trusting Others, Trusting God: Concepts of Belief, Faith and Rationality* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009) 151–56. For a helpful account of some of the similarities between Kierkegaard and Camus, see Daniel Berthold, "Kierkegaard and Camus: Either/Or?," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 73 (2013) 137–50. For a careful consideration of the relation between Camus and Kierkegaard, which mostly emphasizes the differences between them, see Leo Stan, "Albert Camus: Walled within God," in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism* (ed. Jon Stewart; Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 9; London: Routledge, 2011) 63–94.

or acquiesce, like the Kierkegaardian believer.<sup>14</sup> I begin with a brief discussion of the prominence of suffering within the Kierkegaardian life of faith.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The relation between the epistemology of the “absurd” and the believer’s normative relation to her experience of the absurd is a complicated one. In other words, protest does not necessarily presuppose an irrationalist analysis of faith in general or of the Kierkegaardian “absurd” in particular, nor do acquiescence, submission, or obedience presuppose that faith is not irrational. One’s paradigms of religious perfection, the theological virtues that they embody, and the manners in which one’s community explicates its key religious metaphors often play a greater role in one’s normative attitude toward one’s experience of the absurd than one’s judgment concerning faith’s rationality. The virtues of courage, truthfulness, and a commitment to justice may suffice, in some circumstances, to (normatively) ground protest. In other words, confronting one’s boundaries, be they physical, emotional, or epistemic (as Evans, Walsh, and others aptly describe in their work on the epistemology of the absurd), particularly when facing injustice, may provide a normative ground for voicing protest, despite one’s commitment to faith’s rationality. Thus, pacifying the charge of irrationality does not suffice to pacify or to delegitimize protest. As Mooney insightfully notes: “a great deal of what Kierkegaard deems important to faith is compatible with Abraham refusing God’s demand. Dilemmas describe the incapacity of systematic ethics or Reason to sufficiently justify either compliance or refusal”; see Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 85. For insightful analyses of Kierkegaardian faith, which engage both with the epistemology of the absurd and the believer’s normative relation to her experience of the absurd, see idem, “Understanding Abraham: Care, Faith, and the Absurd,” in Kierkegaard’s “*Fear and Trembling*”: *Critical Appraisals* (ed. Robert L. Perkins; Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1981) 100–114; idem, “Kierkegaard, Our Contemporary: Reason, Subjectivity, and the Self,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 27 (1989) 381–97; idem, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, esp. 79–89; Sylvia Walsh, “Echoes of Absurdity: The Offended Consciousness and the Absolute Paradox in Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus* (ed. Robert L. Perkins; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1994) 33–46; eadem, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006); eadem, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For a consideration of the rationality of faith and the normative status of protest in the Jewish tradition, see, e.g., Fisch, *Covenant of Confrontation*; idem, “The Talmudist Enlightenment: Talmudic Judaism’s Confrontational Rational Theology,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12 (2020) 37–63; Avi Sagi and Nir Sagi, “Religious Protest and Religious Loyalty.”

<sup>15</sup> For more on the role of suffering in Kierkegaard’s understanding of the Christian life, see, e.g., Anthony Imbrosciano, “Inevitable Martyrdom: The Connection between Faith and Suffering in Kierkegaard’s Later Writings,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 36 (1994) 105–16; Michael Olesen, “The Role of Suffering in Kierkegaard’s Gospel,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2007) 177–92; Timothy Dalrymple, “The Ladder of Sufferings and the Attack upon Christendom,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2010) 325–52. For a lucid examination of how one is to relate to one’s suffering, according to Kierkegaard, see Samuel Cuff-Snow, “The Moment of Self-Transformation: Kierkegaard on Suffering and the Subject,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 49 (2016) 161–80. For more on the relation between suffering and happiness in Kierkegaard, see Verbin, “Three Knights of Faith”; see also, e.g., Thomas Miles, “To Be Joy Itself: Kierkegaard on Being Present to Oneself and Others in Faith,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2011) 221–37. For Kierkegaard’s manner of understanding Job’s suffering see, e.g., Frances Maughan-Brown, “Job’s Suffering,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2011) 365–81. For a particularly enlightening discussion of Job’s manner of relating to God and to his loss, see Edward Mooney, “Kierkegaard’s Job Discourse: Getting Back the World,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 34 (1993) 151–69. There are various important similarities between Mooney’s understanding of the book of Job’s ending and my own, as shall become apparent in the last section of this article.



Both in his pseudonymous and in his nonpseudonymous writings, both in his early and his later writings, Kierkegaard emphasizes that faith involves suffering, that God's love and loving God is "only in suffering":

The God of love is in heaven fondly loving also you. Yes, loving; that is why he would like you finally to will what he for the sake of eternity wills for you: that you might resolve to will to suffer, that is that you might resolve to will to love him, because you can love him only in suffering, or if you love him as he wills to be loved you will come to suffer. (SKS 13, 352; M, 294).<sup>16</sup>

Kierkegaard stresses that faith promises a greater deal of suffering than its absence; it offers a remedy "infinitely worse than the sickness" (SKS 12, 118; PC, 110), one that it would be lunacy to embrace. Speaking of Jesus, Kierkegaard states: "even those who suffered fled from him; they understood (and humanly speaking, very correctly) that when it comes to most human misery one is better helped by remaining what one is then by being helped by him" (SKS 12, 72; PC, 60).

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard speaks about the double danger of Christianity, which involves both the suffering of renunciation and sacrifice and one's being ridiculed or abused on account of one's readiness to realize such imprudent commitments. Kierkegaard emphasizes that such twofold suffering is not contingent but necessary for the Christian:

[T]he good is rewarded with hate, contempt, and persecution. . . . Would it not still be possible that a Christian would avoid these adversities in exactly the same way as one fortunately is not tried and tested in poverty or sickness? That means the world's opposition is looked upon as being in an accidental, not in an essential relationship to Christianity; opposition can perhaps come but also perhaps not arise. This point of view, however, is totally un-Christian. . . . Christianly the world's opposition stands in an *essential* relationship to the inwardness of Christianity. (SKS 9, 192–93; WL, 192–94; italics in original)

Is the Kierkegaardian believer, however, exempt from meaningless, *absurd* suffering? Is the Kierkegaardian believer free from the kind of suffering that Camus describes as resulting from the contradiction between a silent world and a craving for clarity?

<sup>16</sup> The following abbreviations of Kierkegaard's works will be used within the text. CD: Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses and The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). EUD: Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* (ed. and trans. Hong and Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). M: *The Moment and Late Writings* (ed. and trans. Hong and Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). PC: Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity* (ed. and trans. Hong and Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). UDVS: Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (ed. and trans. Hong and Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). WL: Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (ed. and trans. Hong and Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). SKS: *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (28 vols.; Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997–2013).

Not only is the Kierkegaardian believer *not* exempt from the absurd but she must be afflicted *with* the absurd in order to relate to it religiously. Kierkegaard emphasizes that relating religiously to one's ordeal involves finding *no* meaning in it per se, *no* use for it in itself, *no* future-directed hope in regard to it, or, as he puts it in various places: "faith sees best in the dark," that is, when no meaning, no use, and no benefit for what one endures can be perceived by wisdom; "when sagacity is able to perceive the beneficialness, then faith cannot see God; but when in the dark night of suffering sagacity cannot see a hand-breadth ahead of it, then faith can see God, since faith sees best in the dark" (SKS 8, 338; UDVS, 238). Kierkegaard emphasizes that "faith always pertains to what is not seen, be it the invisible or the improbable" (SKS 8, 336; UDVS, 235). In other words, suffering can be religiously significant when reason perceives no meaning and no use for it. It is by means of its insignificance that its religious meaning qua task can be realized.

Camus describes the predicament of the absurd with the following words:

I want everything to be explained to me or nothing. And the reason is impotent when it hears this cry from the heart. The mind aroused by this insistence finds nothing but contradictions and nonsense. What I fail to understand is nonsense. The world is peopled with such irrationals. The world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand is but a vast irrational. (Camus 1979, 31)

Faith does not undo the "vast irrational." The absurd, the irrational, the nonsense continue to afflict the believer: "Sagacity cannot see a hand-breadth ahead of it." The contradiction remains. It must remain if faith is to enter in. When the believer firmly holds on to God, while the understanding reaches a standstill, being struck by the absurd, faith defeats suffering:

However, if the sufferer firmly holds on to what the understanding admittedly *cannot comprehend*, but what faith, on the other hand, firmly holds on to . . . then eternal happiness has the overweight . . . the faith, *contrary to the understanding*, that the suffering, which seems to be utterly evil and useless, will procure a great eternal weight of glory gives the perseverance of eternity. (SKS 8, 406; UDVS, 313–14; italics added)

What the understanding "cannot comprehend" remains; the absurd remains; what seems to be "utterly evil and useless" continues to seem so. It is not, however, all that there is. Faith "holds on," bringing in "glory" into the "utterly evil and useless," into the absurd. In other words, embracing faith is placing the absurd at the heart of the religious life, while bringing in another aspect to bear upon it. It is living the absurd—not undoing it or leaping out of it.

Kierkegaard introduces the notions of "use," "task," "benefit," and "hope" to explain what it means to bring faith's thought to relate to one's meaningless, absurd ordeal and "procure a great eternal weight of glory." When he introduces these terms, they come to have different meanings, different uses and logic from their ordinary ones: "But in the main there is still only one thought, one single thought, that can determine the issue, one thought that contains faith's transformation from

the heavy burden into the light burden—this thought is that it is beneficial, that the heavy suffering is beneficial” (SKS 8, 335; UDVS, 235).

The notion of “benefit” that one is to bring to bear on the absurd, the notion that what seems evil and absurd “will procure a great eternal weight of glory,” is unlike the expectation of a happy ending. It is *not* future oriented. The benefit, the glory, does not involve, for example, a future recovery of one’s losses or injuries, a future vindication of one’s innocence, a future compensation for worldly damages by means of other worldly goods. The benefit, the glory, is *internal* to one’s very manner of relating to one’s ordeal; it is realized when one relates to one’s ordeal faithfully; it is realized when one brings in the thought of faith to bear upon it, viewing it as a task to endure in obedience and patience. In other words, the benefit is realized at the very moment of viewing one’s ordeal as beneficial:

One must, however, wait for the fulfilment of an expectation, but for the beneficialness of suffering one does not need to wait. . . . This can be done at once. Therefore, faith that the heavy suffering is beneficial is far more perfect than the expectation of a happy ending. The happy ending can fail to come, but the believer believes that the suffering is beneficial to him—thus the benefit cannot fail to come—when it is. (SKS 8, 338; UDVS, 238)

Thus, for the believer, suffering is always meaningful; it is always beneficial, since it always contains a *task*, namely, to endure it. The task, the benefit, however, is not perceivable to reason. If it was, it could not be of any significance for the believer qua believer. Perceiving an external, worldly use, benefit, or purpose for one’s ordeal obscures the matter. It renders it more difficult to realize the benefit: “he says it again in faith’s wonder that what he humanly cannot understand is beneficial to him” (SKS 8, 338; UDVS, 238). Thus, to reiterate, faith bringing in the notion of “benefit” and “task” to bear on the absurd and thereby to transform it does not undo the absurd but presupposes it: “But that the heavy suffering is beneficial—that must be believed; it cannot be seen. . . . Faith’s thought must be there and the inward, trusting repeated utterance of this thought to oneself” (SKS 8, 335; UDVS, 235).

What the believer *sees* is the absurd; what the believer believes is that it is beneficial, that is, that she is called to endure the absurd, that enduring it is her task. To put it slightly differently, for the believer, meaningless suffering is both meaningless, since sagacity cannot perceive any meaning in it, and also meaningful, since it always contains a task, namely, to endure it, viewing oneself as standing in one’s imperfection before God, heeding the divine tasks that one was assigned.<sup>17</sup> Such a manner of relating to one’s trials carries an internal benefit within it since life’s trials are brought into the framework of one’s relation to God. In it and through it lies the benefit of the “thought of faith.”

Both meaninglessness (absurdity, horror) and meaningfulness (through the notions of benefit, task, blessedness, and joy) coincide in faith’s thought. Faith and

<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard appeals to the notion of “essential guilt” in this regard. See his discussion of Job in UDVS, 264–88.

reason, seeing (by the eyes of wisdom) and believing (by the eyes of faith), are two incommensurable attitudes which do not cancel one another. Both are valid, both are present for the Kierkegaardian believer.

Although both are present, faith has the last word. Although the absurd is not undone, although the believer is even pushed further into it, by embracing a remedy infinitely worse than the sickness, the absurd is defeated.<sup>18</sup> Its defeat does not result from the elimination of the ordinary causes for suffering; it does not involve the dissolution of the antinomy of the human condition by the realization of one's hopes, e.g., for recovered health, reputation, or property, in this world or the next. Nothing is added and nothing is removed; "everything is unchanged" (SKS 8, 337; UDVS, 236). The defeat of suffering and the absurd is in the thought of faith itself, which transforms them into blessed suffering.<sup>19</sup>

Although "faith's thought" changes nothing—neither suffering's objective causes nor the subjective way in which it is experienced—it changes everything:

It is not true that the Christian is exempted from human sufferings as we know them in the world; no, but the person who bears the suffering in such a way that he believes the yoke is beneficial to him is carrying Christ's yoke. No new suffering, humanly speaking, has been added, but neither has any old suffering been removed. To that extent everything is unchanged, and yet it has now been given, this great thought, and yet the place has been found outside the world: faith. (SKS 8, 336–37; UDVS, 236)

The very same loving faith that produces and enhances suffering is its very defeat; by bringing new eyes into what is endured, faith changes everything while leaving it as it is:

In a certain sense the burden remains the same, since the burden is the suffering, the heavy suffering, and yet the burden becomes light. A person's lot here on earth has not become different from before because Christianity entered into the world. A Christian can come to suffer exactly the same as was suffered before—yet the heavy burden becomes light for a Christian . . . the one and the same burden is heavy and yet light. (SKS 8, 334; UDVS, 233)

The lightness of the burden does not entail that the sufferer suffers less. The joy that defeats suffering, that renders it "light," that "outweighs" it, is incommensurate with it; it belongs to a different "order of things":

Gold has a special value that makes it meaningless to weigh gold and feathers together. So it is also here with the two stated magnitudes. The distinction is not between happiness and suffering, but between *eternal* happiness and *temporal* suffering. The relation is this misrelation, and that it is a misrelation

<sup>18</sup> For more on the different manners in which suffering can be defeated, see Verbin, "Three Knights of Faith."

<sup>19</sup> For Kierkegaard, "suffering" and "joy" (*Glaede*), or "happiness" (*Salighed*), are not opposites. For a discussion of Kierkegaard's concept of "*Salighed*," see Abraham H. Khan, *Salighed as Happiness?* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1985).

shows up most clearly in this, that the relation between temporal bliss and eternal happiness is the same misrelation. (SKS 8, 410; UDVS, 318; italics in original)

Moreover:

Temporal suffering and eternal happiness are not only heterogeneous in the essential sense as gold and feathers are but are heterogeneous in the infinitely essential sense; the slightest part of the happiness of eternity weighs infinitely more than the longest earthly suffering. . . . Even when the temporal suffering is the heaviest, eternal happiness still has the overweight. (SKS 8, 410; UDVS, 319)

Since suffering and joy are in the “infinitely essential sense” heterogeneous when compared to one another, “faith’s thought” does not undo the sorrow, nor does it undo its perceived meaninglessness and absurdity. It neither abolishes it nor diminishes it. Faith alters it completely while leaving everything in place. It does so by bringing a new dimension into it, a new narrative, a new way of seeing, a new meaning. The ordeal is not seen solely as a horror; it is also seen under the category of a blessing. Various concepts come to play a role within that new perspective, within the new narrative: God, love, blessedness, eternity, happiness, and joy. The perspective of faith, however, does not annul the horror. Both the horror and the blessing are real: “Faith is the conviction, the blessed conviction, which is in fear and trembling. When faith is seen from its one side, the heavenly, only the reflection of eternal salvation is seen in it; but seen from its other side, the merely human side, one sees sheer fear and trembling” (SKS 10, 186; CD, 175).

Faith, for Kierkegaard, involves both the horror and the blessing, both God and the absurd. Although neither can be done away with, although neither can be ignored, joy has the final word: “Existence is blessedly secured with the help of eternity . . . in every danger there is a hidden trapdoor—to ascent. . . . Just when a person is closest to despairing, there is a place to step on . . . and everything changes infinitely” (SKS 10, 125; CD, 114). Kierkegaard refers to the transformative moment of faith, to the joy that defeats sorrow as a miracle: “In the external sense there certainly is no change; the sufferer remains on the spot, in his condition, and yet there is the change, the wondrous change, the miracle of faith” (SKS 10, 126; CD, 115).

There are various differences between the Job that I described in the previous section (and that I shall discuss in greater detail in the next) and the Kierkegaardian faithful sufferer. First and foremost, Job, unlike the Kierkegaardian sufferer, protests.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the Kierkegaardian sufferer, there is no joy and no consolation,

<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard explicitly engages with Job in *Repetition*, in “The Lord Gave and the Lord Took Away; Blessed Be the Name of the Lord” (EUD, 109–24), and in “The Joy of it that in Relation to God a Person Always Suffers as Guilty” (UDVS, 264–88). In *Repetition*, a protesting Job comes to light in the letters of the young man, who appeals to Job’s protest for support. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition in Fear and Trembling, Repetition* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong;

for him, in bringing “God” to bear on his ordeal; the absurd is neither overcome nor defeated for him. As I pointed out, God’s very presence turns Job’s experience of the absurd into a cry of protest that is voiced against God. In other words, God is part of Job’s very experience of the absurd, not another aspect that redeems it.<sup>21</sup> Despite the differences, there is a significant resemblance, a “family resemblance” between Job and the Kierkegaardian sufferer: God’s presence, for both, does not undo their absurd suffering. Both believers dwell in the absurd, and both appeal to God (albeit in different ways) while immersed in it.

Emphasizing the manner in which the Kierkegaardian sufferer’s experience of the absurd is not undone but rather presupposed by faith, making perspicuous the “family resemblance” between him and Job (which involves an observation of the differences too) is the very beginning of gaining a more perspicuous view of the “grammar” of faith of protesting believers. In the next section, I shall examine the “family resemblance” between Camus’s absurd man, the Kierkegaardian absurd sufferer, and Job by exploring their different attitudes toward protest. I shall argue that Job, both before and after the divine revelations, is an “absurd man” in Camus’s sense; he is well aware of the absurd yet “without resignation” opts for constant confrontation and revolt—above all, revolt against God.

## ■ Absurd Protest

The Kierkegaardian believer lives the absurd differently from Camus’s “absurd man.” Camus’s rebel does not merely stare bravely at the absurdity of his condition; he does not merely accept “the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe” (Camus 1984, 6).<sup>22</sup> Camus’s rebel protests against it, particularly, against injustice and wrongdoing done to him and to others. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus characterizes the revolt as “the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it” (Camus 1979, 54). In *The Rebel*, he names this attitude “metaphysical rebellion”: “Metaphysical rebellion is

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Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). It is implausible to assume that the young man’s letters that appear in Constantin Constantius’s account represent Kierkegaard’s understanding of Job. Moreover, Kierkegaard’s discourse “The Lord Gave and the Lord Took Away; Blessed Be the Name of the Lord,” published during the same year as *Repetition* (1843) under Kierkegaard’s own name, expresses an acquiescing Job. I therefore believe that it is the latter Job that represents Kierkegaard’s critical attitude toward religious protest. Kierkegaard’s Job can be understood through the analysis of the Kierkegaardian absurd sufferer that I have discussed in this section. In other words, the seeming incompatibility between the protesting young man and Kierkegaard’s normative attitude toward protest is resolved once we realize that the young man of *Repetition* is not to be understood as a believer, let alone a Christian. For a different account of religious protest in Kierkegaard, see Claudia Welz, “Trust and Lament: Faith in the Face of Godforsakenness,” in *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion* (ed. Eva Harasta and Brian Brock; London: T&T Clark, 2009) 118–35; eadem, *Humanity in God’s Image: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 120–66.

<sup>21</sup> For more on Job’s experience of the absurd and his religious protest, see section 3 of this article.

<sup>22</sup> All quotes within the text to Camus 1984 are from Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (trans. Anthony Bower; New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

a claim . . . against the suffering of life and death and a protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefulness, thanks to evil” (Camus 1984, 24).

Camus’s commitment to rebellion and revolt presupposes human innocence, or “reasonable culpability,” human dignity, and pride (Camus 1984, 11). The rebel, by revolting, demonstrates that “there is something in him which is ‘worthwhile’ . . . and which must be taken into consideration” (Camus 1984, 13). In his protest, “he confronts an order of things which oppresses him with the insistence on a kind of right not to be oppressed” (Camus 1984, 13). Thus, “metaphysical rebellion,” protest and revolt become expressions and assertions of human dignity and human rights. Camus states: “In every act of rebellion, the rebel simultaneously experiences a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights and a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself” (Camus 1984, 13–14).

Unlike Camus’s absurd man, who is committed to “reasonable culpability” and human dignity, and who therefore asserts his rights in protest and rebellion, when believing that they are violated, the Kierkegaardian absurd believer acquiesces. The Kierkegaardian absurd believer is committed to being patient and meek, particularly before God, and insists on always being in the wrong before God:

Faith’s eternal happiness . . . is that God is love. This does not mean that faith understands how God’s rule over a person is love. Right here is faith’s struggle: to believe without being able to understand. And when this struggle of faith begins, when doubts arise, or when “doubt assaults faith with many wild thoughts,” then the consciousness of guilt comes to the rescue as the relief, as the last reinforcement. . . . It specifically wants to help faith, help the believer by teaching him not to doubt God but himself” (SKS 8, 370; UDVS, 273).

Faith does not understand how God’s rule over a person is love. If one understood how God’s rule over oneself is love, there would be no room for faith to take hold: “faith sees best in the dark.” Thus, “doubt assaults . . . with many wild thoughts.” The believer experiences the absurd, the meaningless. However, instead of rebelling against the absurd, instead of asserting his dignity and rights, he turns against himself, invoking the notion of guilt, his guilt, his essential guilt before God, to block the road of religious protest: “When impatience, like a rebel, wants to attack God, the consciousness of guilt attacks the rebel; that is, the attacker ends up fighting with himself” (SKS 8, 381; UDVS, 286).

Kierkegaard invokes God’s ineffability too, along with human essential guilt, to shun the possibility of protest against God: “God’s omnipotence and holiness do not mean that he can be victorious over everyone, that he is the strongest, for this is still a comparison; but it means, and this bars any comparison, that no one can manage to fight with him” (SKS 8, 381; UDVS, 286). There is no room for struggling with God, no room for self-assertive protest. Instead of protesting, instead of asserting one’s commitments and rights, the Kierkegaardian believer is called to obedience and patience:

faith and faith's obedience in sufferings, love forth the growth, because the object of all faith's work is to get rid of egotism and selfishness in order that God can actually come in and in order to let him rule in everything. The more suffering there is—provided something is learnt from the suffering—the more all that is selfish is removed, rooted out, and the more obedience replaces it as the receptive soil in which the eternal can take root. (SKS 8, 356–57; UDVS, 259)

Underlying Kierkegaard's commitment to obedience and patience is his commitment to self-denial, to rooting out egotism and selfishness so that the eternal can take root. There is no discipleship without it, according to Kierkegaard: "To follow Christ means to take up one's cross or . . . to carry one's cross. To carry one's cross means to deny oneself" (SKS 8, 322–23; UDVS, 221). And: "there must not be anything, anything at all, that the follower would not be willing to give up in self-denial" (SKS 8, 323; UDVS, 222).<sup>23</sup>

Thus, instead of protesting, instead of asserting one's commitments and rights, instead of calling the world or God to take on a different course, to transform, the Kierkegaardian believer attempts to transform herself, to conquer herself, her needs, desires, commitments, and convictions, including those concerning her rights. Wishing to sacrifice herself for the sake of the good in self-denial, the Kierkegaardian believer attempts to foster patience. She attempts to endure quietly.<sup>24</sup> Protest is, thus, excluded: it is restless; it is impatient; it betrays a presumptuously defiant refusal to let God rule:

As soon as unrest begins, the cause is that you are unwilling to obey; but sufferings will help you to obey. Therefore, when there is suffering, but also obedience in suffering, you are being educated for eternity; then, there is no impatient hankering in your soul, no restlessness, neither of sin nor of sorrow. (SKS 8, 357; UDVS, 259)

Patience as an acceptance of God's rule is called for—not protest. The sufferer is to find rest "in the thought of obedience: that God must rule in everything" (SKS 8, 356; UDVS, 258).

A commitment to meekness too, which has its roots in the idealization of self-denial, excludes the possibility of protest. Protest is a self-assertive act through which one asserts one's rights; meekness is a self-effacing act, through which one relinquishes one's rights: "Christ was meek. . . . He did not assert his rights; he

<sup>23</sup> For more on the centrality of self-denial and self-sacrifice for Kierkegaard, see Walsh, *Living Christianly*.

<sup>24</sup> As an anonymous referee lucidly put it: "It is not the doctrine of submission that makes Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard but the *struggle* to submit." The centrality of the struggle to submit, however, is compatible with and directly related to the normative roles of humility, submission, and obedience, for Kierkegaard. In other words, it is because Kierkegaard is wholly committed to humility and submission, considering them as ideals that involve self-denial and self-sacrifice, that the struggle to realize these ideals in our life with God and our neighbors plays the role that it does in his thought.



did not plead his innocence. He did not talk about how they were sinning against him; he did not point out their scandalous guilt with a single word. Even in his last moment he said: Father forgive them, they know not what they do” (SKS 8, 343–44; UDVS, 244). “This meekness is the Christian’s most specific mark,” according to Kierkegaard (SKS 8, 344; UDVS, 245).

The process of self-emptying through obedience, patience, meekness, through the thought that “in relation to God a person always suffers as guilty,” through self-denial, ideally culminates in nothingness:

More and more is taken away from the struggler. The external world and every claim on life were taken away from him; now he is struggling for an explanation, but he is not even struggling his way to that. Finally it seems to him that he is reduced to nothing at all. . . . However great he is, he cannot manifest God’s likeness; God can imprint himself in him only when he himself has become nothing. (SKS 5, 380; EUD, 399)

Thus, the Kierkegaardian believer dwells in the absurd but does not protest against it, being committed to patience, obedience, and meekness, being committed to self-denial and aspiring to self-annihilation.

Although the Kierkegaardian believer does not point the accusing finger at God for the absurd that he confronts, although he does not protest, although he lives the absurd differently from Camus’s “absurd man,” the Kierkegaardian believer does live it, as I have emphasized, and, as such, exhibits a “family resemblance” to Camus’s “absurd man.”

Job, read through the long tradition of Jewish protestors against God, is another absurd believer.<sup>25</sup> In his protest, he displays a greater deal of “family resemblance” to Camus’s absurd rebel than the Kierkegaardian absurd believer. Job stares bravely at the absurdity of the world and at the absurdity of his condition, unable to understand how “God’s rule over a person is love”; unlike the Kierkegaardian believer, however, he is unwilling to yield.<sup>26</sup>

Job experiences God as the God of disruptions: cosmic, social, and personal; he experiences God as an abuser of the world, humanity, and himself. God causes earthquakes and eclipses: “He moves mountains without their knowing it and overturns them in his anger. He shakes the earth from its place and makes its pillars

<sup>25</sup> For more on the tradition of protestors, see Laytner, *Arguing with God*.

<sup>26</sup> In the remainder of this section, I will assume a specific interpretation of the book of Job, defended in Verbin, *Divinely Abused*. I will expand on some of its features, when necessary for the exposition made in this section. In using this interpretative framework for reading the book of Job, I maintain that it is a possible, plausible, and helpful interpretation of the book of Job. There are other plausible and enlightening readings too. As Eleonore Stump states, one need not argue that “one particular interpretation is the only right one . . . interpretations of texts can invite one to see the text in a certain light, but they cannot compel assent as philosophical arguments are meant to try to do” (Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010] 178). Similar to Stump’s assertion, my intention here is “to invite readers to see the text as I see it and to consider whether that view of the text makes sense to them, too” (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 178).

tremble. He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the light of the stars” (Job 9:5–7). God disrupts the social order, confusing the minds of the old and the wise: “He . . . makes fools of judges” (Job 12:17); “He silences the lips of trusted advisers and takes away the discernment of elders” (Job 12:20). God disrupts the moral order, frustrating the expectation for justice when destroying “both the blameless and the wicked” (Job 9:22). Unwilling to yield to the God that he experiences as a God of malevolent disruptions, Job boldly protests to God, and against God. He lives the contradiction between an incomprehensible world, saddled with an incomprehensible God, who appears capricious and cruel, and his human consciousness, which craves meaning, order, and justice; he protests against the “antinomy” as an “absurd” rebel. He insists that “there is something in him which is ‘worth-while’” and which must be taken into consideration (Camus 1984, 13); he insists that he has “a kind of right not to be oppressed” (Camus 1984, 13).

In his protest to and against God, Job expresses resentment and moral hatred of God.<sup>27</sup> Jean Hampton characterizes resentment as a way of fighting the humiliating message that is conveyed by the offense that one had suffered and, as such, as presupposing the resenting person’s self-esteem. She maintains that resentment is “an emotion whose object is the defiant reaffirmation of one’s rank and value in the face of treatment calling them into question in one’s own mind.”<sup>28</sup>

Unlike resentment, which is an emotional protest directed at defending the victim’s sense of self-worth, moral hatred is an emotional protest directed at defending a moral value that has been violated.<sup>29</sup> It does not presuppose victimhood. It is an “emotional protest against immoral treatment whose object is the defense of the value which . . . [an] action violated.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, one may morally hate wrongdoers without resenting them. One may feel moral repugnance at what wrongdoers have done without feeling humiliated by them.

Seeking to protect his own self-worth as well as the principles of justice from the demeaning symbolic message that is conveyed by the divine assault, Job expresses both resentment and moral hatred toward God. Job’s resentment is expressed throughout the book, in utterances, such as: “Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked?” (Job 10:3); and “Know that God has wronged me and drawn his net around me. Though I cry, ‘Violence!’ I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice” (Job 19:6–7). Job’s moral hatred is most clearly manifest in his later discourses, when he is concerned with divine injustice in general, with the fate of the virtuous and

<sup>27</sup> See Verbin, *Divinely Abused*, 22–46.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Hampton, “Forgiveness, Resentment and Hatred,” in *Forgiveness and Mercy* (ed. Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 59–60.

<sup>29</sup> The distinction that I here employ between resentment and moral hatred is based on Hampton’s account of these emotions; see Hampton, “Forgiveness, Resentment and Hatred,” 35–87.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

the wicked, in exclamations such as: “Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?” (Job 21:7).<sup>31</sup>

Living in an absurd incomprehensible world, governed by an incomprehensible God, who defies his most fundamental expectations, and presupposing his own innocence or “reasonable culpability,” Job protests. He rebels against the infringement of his rights, against injustice, affirming his value and self-worth in the face of treatment that calls them into question.

Having a first-person experience of God through God’s revelations does not resolve the absurd for him. On the contrary, it enhances it. The divine revelations do not address the content of Job’s moral complaints and accusations; they do not provide an answer that dissolves the contradiction. As such, they do not provide him with an escape from the absurd. Rather, they consist of a display of unbound and unreasonable power that enhances the contradiction. As James G. Williams puts it: “What kind of universe must Job now live in? A meaningless universe mismanaged by a chaotic, capricious, jealous Tyrant.”<sup>32</sup>

God’s revelations seem to be directed at eradicating Job’s moral protest, his resentment, and his moral hatred by means of frightening him into silence: “Who then is able to stand against me? Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me” (Job 41:10–11). Thus, as Marvin H. Pope, the Anchor Bible commentator, states, God’s answer to Job is “something of a surprise and . . . a disappointment. The issue, as Job had posed it, is completely ignored. No explanation or excuse is offered for Job’s suffering. . . . Job had already expressed his awe and wonder at God’s power. . . . He had questioned not divine omnipotence but justice and mercy.”<sup>33</sup> Williams is harsher: “[God] has come on like a Divine Blowhard, a God-Almighty Wind, never really dealing with the questions,

<sup>31</sup> For more on Job’s resentment and moral hatred, see Verbin, *Divinely Abused*, 22–46, 84–115.

<sup>32</sup> James G. Williams, “‘You have not spoken Truth of Me’: Mystery and Irony in Job,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 83 (1971) 247.

<sup>33</sup> Marvin H. Pope, *The Anchor Bible: Job* (3rd ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1973) lxxx. The Anchor Bible’s interpretation of the meaning of the divine revelations is shared by many others. See, e.g., Mattitia Tsevat, “The Meaning of the Book of Job,” *HUCA* 37 (1966) 73–106; Israel Knohl, “From Fear to Love,” in *Job in the Bible: Thought and Art* (ed. L. Mazor; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995) 89–103 (Hebrew). Fox proposes a different interpretative framework for the divine revelations’ meaning and their bearing on the meaning of the book’s ending. Fox maintains that the display of divine power is not intended for “bullying Job into submission.” He argues that the book’s teaching is essentially pietistic, placing faith as the prime virtue (Michael V. Fox, “Job the Pious,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117 [2005] 351–52). Stump maintains that the divine speeches suggest that “God’s relationship to all his creatures is personal, intimate and parental.” Having a first-person experience of God, Job is able to see God’s love, and, in seeing God’s love, he is given a “second-personal kind of explanation” (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 177–226, esp. 191). Although I side with the former readings, I do not wish to deny the appeal of the latter. As I pointed out, I believe that there can be several different plausible and enlightening interpretations of narratives; see n. 26.

and parading his cosmic power apparatus in a way that fulfills Job's predictions. And God does not even know that he has been exposed."<sup>34</sup>

The divine revelations, however, bring about a deeper understanding of God. Job comes to realize that there are no boundaries, either moral or nonmoral to God's power and God's manner of using it. After the second revelation ends, Job explicitly refers to that realization: "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). In so doing, Job declares that he understands the divine revelations as directed at demonstrating, primarily, the infinite scope of God's power.<sup>35</sup>

The incommensurability between the moral charge that is voiced against God and the divine response to it in terms of divine power is poignantly represented in the *piyyut Ele Ezkera* ("These shall I recall"), recited during the Day of Atonement. The *piyyut* recalls the horrendous fate of the Ten Martyrs, the ten sages of the mishnaic period who were put to death by the Romans, placing them together in a single scene. The cry of protest, which expresses the "experience of the absurd," is placed in the mouth of the angels: "The celestial Seraphim cried out bitterly, 'Is this the Torah and this its reward—O God Who cloaks Himself in light as with a garment?' . . . A voice from Heaven responded, 'If I hear another sound, I will transform the universe to water, I will turn the earth to astonishing emptiness—this is a decree from My Presence; accept it.'"<sup>36</sup> The divine response to the angels' complaint concerning the lack of divine justice, "Is this the Torah and this its reward," resembles the divine response to Job. It stresses God's power: "If I hear another sound, I will transform the universe to water, I will turn the earth to astonishing emptiness." Such a divine response can silence the speaker or speakers; it cannot, however, silence the content of their protest. Divine injustice is not annulled when the victims and those that side with them are annulled, nor are the victims' pleas for understanding (and, thereby, the victims' feeling of absurdity) annulled by means of it. The divine response to the angels' cry for understanding emphasizes the irrational, the incomprehensible; it emphasizes the "antinomy of the human condition."

The absurd is not undone either for Job or for the angels. There is no reason to suppose that either Job or the celestial Seraphim withdraw the content of their accusations against God. Job, like the celestial Seraphim, merely refrains from voicing his moral protest, realizing that there is no point in doing so.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, "You have not spoken Truth of Me," 247.

<sup>35</sup> Mooney persuasively argues for a different framework for understanding the ending of the book of Job, employing Kierkegaard's *Repetition* and Kierkegaard's early Job discourse, "The Lord Gave, and the Lord Took Away; Blessed Be the Name of the Lord," in EUD. Pointing out that God does not address the content of Job's accusations, Mooney argues that "the storm changes Job by altering his world, by transforming his vision of it through the poetry of the Whirlwind's Voice. . . . Misery no longer floods his consciousness. In this, the blessing earlier conveyed to the Lord is now returned. Job gets back the world" (Mooney, "Kierkegaard's Job Discourse," 157; italics in original).

<sup>36</sup> *The Complete Artscroll Machzor Yom Kippur: Nusach Ashkenaz* (trans. Rabbi Nossan Scherman; Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1986).

The “music” of Job’s second response to the second divine revelation, however, particularly when compared to his first response, conveys a transformation in Job’s relation to God.<sup>37</sup>

Then Job answered the LORD: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; Therefore I renounce and relent, for [I am] dust and ashes.” (Job 42:1–6)<sup>38</sup>

How may we understand Job’s response? I maintain that it may be understood in terms of Job’s forgiving God, while refusing to be reconciled with him.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Job’s first response to the first divine revelation is silence, which is a mode of protest in this context. Dissatisfied with Job’s silence, God demands a reply: “The Lord said in reply to Job” (Job 40:1), i.e., in reply to Job’s silence. Being ordered to reply, Job now speaks his silent protest in words: “See, I am of small worth” (Job 40:4–5). Job’s statement concerning his insignificance is ironic in this context. Job hands God God’s own depiction of Job’s insignificance, thereby revealing God’s incoherent conception of Job’s significance. Indeed, had Job been insignificant, God would not have revealed himself to Job. Had he been insignificant, God would not have asked for his reply. Job’s silence and Job’s words point to the fact that the mocker, inadvertently, mocks himself, asking the creature that he himself has characterized as “speaking without knowledge” to speak. I, therefore, take Job’s response to God’s first revelation as an extension of his previous bitter verbal protest. God himself does not seem to take Job’s reply as the withdrawal of protest. The very existence of a subsequent second revelation testifies to that.

<sup>38</sup> I am here using the NRSV for Job 42:1–5 since it is closer to the original Hebrew than the NIV; I am using the ArtScroll Stone edition for v. 6, removing some of its explicit interpretative additions, which appear in brackets, in order to preserve the ambiguity of the Hebrew text. Job 42:6, translated by the ArtScroll Stone as “Therefore, I renounce [my words] and relent, for [I am but] dust and ashes,” is ambiguous. אָמַט lacks an object. It is not clear whether it applies to Job’s previous protesting speech and describes his recanting his previous accusations, or whether it means “loath” and expresses Job’s continuous disgust over his state. נִחַמְתִּי, too, is ambiguous. The verb sometimes appears in the sense of הִתְנַחַמְתִּי, i.e., in the sense of feeling consoled; on other occasions, it appears in the sense of taking back what one has said or done. It is also unclear whether “dust and ashes” refers to Job’s frail nature as a human being or whether it refers to his immediate physical state of mourning, to his sitting in dust and ashes. Philological considerations do not provide a resolution to these ambiguities. I propose that we read Job 42:6 as describing Job’s recanting his protest (the speech–act of protest but not its content), declaring that he shall not continue to protest, and as describing Job’s relenting, feeling, to some extent, consoled. I also take it that Job’s relenting is an expression of his forgiveness of God. For more on the meaning of Job 42:1–6, see Verbin, *Divinely Abused*, 116–46.

<sup>39</sup> I have extensively argued for that interpretation of the book of Job’s ending in Verbin, *Divinely Abused* 116–46. What makes this interpretation possible are two constituents of the biblical narrative: 1) The absence of a morally relevant reason or justification for Job’s suffering. While the book’s commentators disagree in their understanding of the meaning of the divine revelations, there is wide agreement that no morally valid reason or justification for Job’s suffering is provided in them. The book’s redactor or redactors, too, do not present a morally valid reason that justifies the harm that was inflicted on Job. Satan’s challenge, which has set the scene for Job’s ordeal, does not amount to a morally valid reason for the assault. It is a constitutive part of the moral scandal that the book of Job represents rather than a way of mitigating it. 2) Job’s response to the second divine revelation,

I have elsewhere defended a unilateral and narrow conception of forgiveness in terms of the overcoming of resentment.<sup>40</sup> I have argued that victims who forgive their assailants conduct a dialogue with the humiliating message that is conveyed by their assault and reject it; they thereby reacquire their sense of self-worth and transcend their resentment. Thus, forgiveness is always an achievement for victims, since it liberates them from their humiliation, releasing them from psychological victimhood.

Forgiveness does not necessarily involve the acquisition of a more favorable view or attitude toward the assailants, of love or empathy toward them, nor does it necessarily involve a willingness to be reconciled with them. Forgiving victims may morally hate their assailants and wish to keep away from them. Indeed, other normative members of the victims' community, who were not injured by the assailants, may view the assailants unfavorably, as morally corrupt or dangerous. They may morally hate the assailants and wish to keep away from them. It is, indeed, implausible to expect forgiving victims to be more favorably disposed toward their assailants than other members of their community are.<sup>41</sup>

God's revelations, in and of themselves, may have helped Job to reacquire his sense of self-worth, to overcome his resentment and forgive God. They may have facilitated his forgiveness in two related manners. First, they have inadvertently conveyed a reassuring message concerning Job's self-worth. Although God emphasized Job's insignificance ("Who is this who darkens counsel, speaking without knowledge?" [Job 38:2]), God himself revealed himself to Job, conversed with him, asked for his response, and reappeared to him a second time. The mere attention that Job had received from God testifies to Job's significance. Second, God's revelations have also inadvertently asserted Job's power. Job came to realize that, despite his frailty, nothing and no one can undo the validity of his moral claim against God; nothing and no one can transform him into an evildoer or extract his love or his forgiveness by force. By emphasizing Job's inferiority in terms of mere crude force, God himself had revealed the boundaries of such power.

Job could thereby transcend his resentment and forgive God. Overcoming his resentment, Job declares: "I renounce and relent, for [I am] dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Overcoming his resentment in forgiveness, he overcomes the psychological harm that he has suffered, that is, his sense of diminishment, while reaffirming his commitment to justice in moral hatred.<sup>42</sup>

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particularly Job 42:6, is notoriously ambiguous and susceptible to multiple interpretations. When considering these two constituents of the narrative, together with the divine revelations' (inadvertent) emphasis on Job's significance, together with Job's silence after 42:6, and particularly together with the repetitious references to God's attempts to compensate Job for his losses, this interpretation of Job 42:6 in terms of forgiveness without reconciliation becomes both possible and plausible.

<sup>40</sup> See particularly, N. Verbin, "Forgiveness and Hatred," *Ethical Perspectives*, 17 (2010) 603–25.

<sup>41</sup> For more on my conception of forgiveness and on the distinction between "forgiveness" and "reconciliation" as it pertains to Job, see Verbin, *Divinely Abused*, 84–146.

<sup>42</sup> If this is plausible, then there is no need to view Job's transformation in Job 42:1–6 as an

Thus, I do not believe that we are to read Job 42:6 as an expression of Job's retracting the content of his accusations, namely, his belief that he had suffered an injustice by the hand of God. He merely retracted the speech act of accusation. Realizing that God's primary mode of engaging with him is in terms of power, he came to believe that there is no point in continuing to demand justice; therefore, he ceased to protest. His moral hatred, however, subsisted. Thus, while Job was able to forgive God, he was unwilling to be reconciled with him. Indeed, Job remains silent after 42:6, no longer addressing God directly. We may see that as an indication that his loving intimacy with God has ended. In other words, Job does not cease to be a metaphysical rebel, in Camus's sense, after the divine revelations too. Job's experience of the absurd persists until the very ending of the book. He is indeed, up to the very end, a "knight of protest."<sup>43</sup>

The repetitious references to God's attempts to compensate Job for his losses strongly support such a conclusion. We read that God "gave him twice what he had before," God "restored Job's fortunes," and God "blessed the latter years of his life" (42:10–12). These repetitious attempts at compensation and appeasement testify to their own failure. If the first attempt at compensation were successful, there would be no need for a second and a third attempt. Like other victims of bad intimacy, seeing no signs of repentance, Job was seeking to maintain a safe distance from God. He refused to be reconciled with God and to resume his past intimacy with him. Although he overcame his resentment and forgave God, he did not give up on his moral anger at God. His silence is the silence of the absurd religious rebel.

Despite the brokenness of the relationship between Job and God, despite the seeming absurdity of God and his world to Job, Job, like Camus's Sisyphus, embraces life with all its absurdity and leaves this world "old and sated with days" (Job 42:17), which is the Hebrew Bible's manner of referring to a happy life.<sup>44</sup> Camus views Oedipus's remark, "I conclude that all is well," as the key for living well with the absurd: "That remark is sacred. . . . It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter" (Camus 1979, 110). Job, like Oedipus and Sisyphus, as Camus understands them, refuses the false exits from the absurd: God, suicide, or hope. The absurd remains together with God, and Job embraces it. Like Oedipus and Sisyphus, Job owns up to his life.

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"inexplicable transformation," amounting to a tactical maneuver, as Williams does: "Job 'repents,' of course, but this is clever of him in the circumstances; it is the only way to deal with one who is rather easily threatened and who does not observe covenants" (Williams, "You Have Not Spoken Truth of Me," 247).

<sup>43</sup> See Verbin, "Three Knights of Faith."

<sup>44</sup> I am here using the Chabad translation of the text, since it captures more accurately the meaning of the Hebrew original.

Referring to Sisyphus, Camus states:

His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. . . . The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny. . . . For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. (Camus 1979, 110)

Job's fate, too, belongs to him. Camus continues: "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 1979, 111). Despite the brokenness of the relationship with God, despite his unyielding silence, we must imagine Job happy, concluding with Oedipus and Sisyphus that "all is well."

Notwithstanding the marked differences between the "reminders" that I have collected, they inhabit the same "logical space"; they are members of the same "family." When contemplated together, we can indeed perceive their "family resemblance" to one another: they live and breathe the absurd, lose their way in it, bring God to bear upon it, defeat it, and find happiness, albeit in very different ways, in the midst of it. The disharmonious, rebellious, and broken voices among them are not to be banished out of the life of faith. As the Kotzker Rabbi says, there is nothing so whole as a broken heart.