

Gutiérrez and Negri on Job: Between Theology and Materialism

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For those of us who have been following the burgeoning trend of radical philosophical readings of the Bible, Negri's *Labor of Job* (Negri 2009) may represent something of a breath of fresh air, not least because a major philosopher has finally chosen to focus on something other than the letters of Paul. More significant from my perspective, however, is the fact that Negri brings a voice into this dialogue that has often been neglected by recent philosophical interpreters: liberation theology.

This difference may stem simply from the fact that Negri was writing in the early 1980s—that is, before it became fashionable to embrace the smug truism that liberation theology was dead. Writing at a time when the Reagan administration's infamous "Santa Fe Document" had declared the destruction of Latin American liberation theology a major foreign policy goal, a radical leftist like Negri could hardly ignore the voices of those who had already done so much to demonstrate the links between the Bible and radical politics. At the same time, however, Negri makes few direct references to actual Latin American writings, focusing instead on Ernst Bloch as his primary representative of the "theology of liberation."

This omission was puzzling to me, particularly his failure to engage with Gustavo Gutiérrez's *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*—that is, until I realized that, perhaps surprisingly, Negri's work was begun several years before Gutiérrez's was published (Gutiérrez 1987). By his own account, Negri began writing *The Labor of Job* in prison in 1982-1983, and it was ultimately published in 1988, after Negri had fled to France. Meanwhile, Gutiérrez's book was only published in Spanish in 1986 and was not translated into French until the following year—hence it seems likely to me that Negri either did not know of Gutiérrez's work or else did not have a chance to engage with it significantly before finalizing his own study of Job.

Such a near-miss is surely frustrating. Accordingly, I would like to devote this paper to bringing these star-crossed interpreters of Job together at last. My goal here will not, however, be simply to puzzle out what Negri might have said about Gutiérrez or how Gutiérrez may have responded. Instead, I would like to use this dialogue as an opportunity to explore the relationship between a certain type of theology and a certain type of materialist philosophy. I will of course begin with the question of biblical interpretation, but it is clear that no interpretation of the book of Job can be "merely" a piece of biblical exegesis—perhaps uniquely among biblical texts, Job absolutely *demand*s that one move into the realm of theological reflection.

First, let us look at their respective approaches to the text. Neither author is primarily a biblical scholar, and so neither explicitly stakes out a position in the ever-raging methodological disputes in that discipline. Indeed, both are remarkably respectful of the existing biblical scholarship and take careful note of its conclusions about the history of the text. Both are aware of the notion that the hymn to Wisdom in chapter 28 and the speeches of Elihu represent later additions, for instance, and Negri in particular devotes significant space to the various "layers" of additions that scholars have hypothesized.

What's remarkable about all this attention to biblical scholarship, however, is how ultimately unimportant it is to their readings. This is because both authors are determined to view the actually existing text as a coherent whole. To the extent that they put weight on the question of "later additions," their emphasis is on their perception that the person adding these elements *knew what he or she was doing*. For both of them, for instance, the speech of Elihu is not merely an attempt to cushion the blow between Job's final demand to make his case before God and the dramatic

entrance of God himself onto the scene—instead, it represents a significant theological development, the most compelling attempt to save the theology of retribution. In this regard, Gutiérrez’s book places somewhat more emphasis on the literary unity of the book. For example, he claims that the speeches of Job’s three friends are not repetitive due to sloppiness or aesthetic misjudgment on the part of the author, but instead convey at once the friends’ growing impatience with Job and their utter lack of new ideas. Yet for both Negri and Gutiérrez, the guiding principle of their interpretation is the conceptual coherence of the book—a conceptual coherence that Negri terms philosophical and Gutiérrez terms theological.

At the same time, the two authors come to very similar conclusions on detailed philological issues, most notably on the interpretation of Job’s final response to God. The last line of this response is typically translated as something like “I retract and repent in dust and ashes.” Believing that Job has nothing to repent of, Gutiérrez makes a grammatical argument, claiming that the meaning of the Hebrew is closer to “I repudiate and abandon (change my mind about) dust and ashes,” where “dust and ashes” refers to his attitude of dejection and mourning (Gutiérrez 1987, 86), which he replaces with an active and creative quest for justice. For his part, Negri—apparently innocent of any knowledge of Hebrew—also insists that we cannot view Job as repenting in the traditional sense of confessing and repudiating his sin. Here he relies on the authority of the biblical scholar Samuel Terrien, but his ultimate objection to the traditional reading of Job’s response is a conceptual one. For Negri, redemption is a fundamentally creative or constructive act and therefore *cannot* include the confession of sin as a negative moment that is then dialectically taken up. Instead, his apparent repentance indicates a turning away from his passive suffering toward creative activity.

Yet this similarity in Negri’s and Gutiérrez’s interpretations of Job’s response only highlights their significant difference of opinion on what Job is responding to: God’s speech “from the whirlwind.” It is unsurprising that they should come to different conclusions on this point, as interpreters have always struggled to make sense of God’s bombastic and apparently irrelevant declarations. Yet this difference comes amid significant similarities. Both of course refuse the traditional “pious” interpretation that would have Job simply submit to the Lord’s superior power. Both also view Job as somehow being satisfied by the speech, which is to say that they believe the speech does, despite initial appearances, respond to Job’s situation in a meaningful way—and we have already seen that both view Job as responding to the speech by turning away from his attitude of dejection and embracing creative activity.

Nevertheless, their views of what “triggers” this change in attitude are diametrically opposed. For Negri, Job is responding to the bare fact that God is defending himself at all—after all, as Negri points out, God’s speech ultimately adds very little beyond what Elihu has already said (Negri 2009, 100). If the content is so similar, why should the response be so different, unless it is form rather than content that is at issue here, which is to say, unless it is God’s appearance in itself that changes the response? Negri rejects the pious interpretation that “refers Job’s ability to see the divinity to the reflection of his own intuited wretchedness” (Negri 2009, 96). Indeed, the result of God’s speech is just the opposite. Negri paraphrases Job’s response as follows: “I have seen God, thus God *is* torn from the absolute transcendence that constitutes the idea of him. God justifies himself, thus God is dead” (Negri 2009, 96). Far from intuiting his own wretchedness, then, Job intuits the wretchedness of God—and the reversal also holds for his self-perception: “He saw God, hence Job can speak of him, and he—Job himself—can in turn participate in divinity, in the function of redemption that man constructs within life—the instrument of the death of God that is human constitution and the creation of the world” (Negri 2009, 86-97). That is to say, to the recognition of God’s wretchedness corresponds the recognition of *his own*—and therefore humanity’s own—divine power to redeem the world.

The image is of Job patiently waiting for God to exhaust himself with his bombastic sarcasm, content in the knowledge that he has already won the instant God puts in his appearance. This is the culmination of an interpretation that has highlighted the antagonism between Job and God, as when he says that “God is not judge, *God is the adversary*” (Negri 2009, 45). Gutiérrez will not admit such an antagonism, however, as he reads Job’s faith in God as utterly unshakeable. For Gutiérrez, Job certainly rejects a particular theology, namely the theology of retribution (and all the subtle variations thereon put forth by his companions)—yet he never rejects his trust in God, even if he cannot put a new theology in place of what his experience has taught him to be false.

In this view, God’s speech represents the final, crushing blow against the theology of retribution and its replacement with a theology of freedom or gratuity. Where many interpreters, including Negri, have detected a kind of embattled pride, Gutiérrez argues that the “passages on the animals breathe out an air of freedom, vigor, and independence,” highlighting the fact that “God is pleased with creation” (Gutiérrez 1987, 75). Further, it shows that “utility is not the primary reason for God’s action; the creative breath of God is inspired by beauty and joy” (Gutiérrez 1987, 75). This creative gratuity of God calls forth a similar response from humanity, in the person of Job: “When human freedom meets the divine freedom it also penetrates to the depths of itself” (Gutiérrez 1987, 80). This is because, apparently paradoxically, the very power and freedom of God demonstrated in his speeches on the marvels of nature necessarily implies a dependence on human action and human freedom in carrying out his plans. God’s delight in creation entails a respect for its autonomy, so that his struggle to control the monstrous sea creatures corresponds to his patience with the wickedness of humanity—neither the Leviathan nor the wicked man can simply be destroyed. Gutiérrez claims that Job shows his understanding of this theology when he declares that he has seen “marvels that are beyond my grasp” (42:3): “The ‘marvels’ refer both to the works the mighty God has done in the world and to those of the ‘weak’ God who is needful of human freedom and its historical rhythm” (Gutiérrez, 1987, 79).

This differing view of the role of God’s speech corresponds to a differing view of the nature of the “redeemer” Job expects to vindicate him. For Negri, this “redeemer” or “messiah” is initially regarded as a third party who takes his side against God. Though the argument is, as Roland Boer points out in his excellent “commentary” on Negri’s book, very difficult to tease out (Boer/Negri 2009, 109, n.1), my sense is that Job eventually becomes his own messiah when he embraces the redemptive, divine, and creative power to which the death of God gives him access—and insofar as Job represents all of humanity for Negri, humanity as such becomes its own redeemer. Gutiérrez, by contrast, insists that Job trusts that God himself will somehow prove to be his advocate and connects this to Christian redemption, which of course includes the human agency that Negri emphasizes, but also correlates it with divine action. Just as with Negri, however, the emphasis is on the redemptive and divine power to which Job’s vision ultimately gives all of humanity access.

It is curious that such opposite interpretations can have such similar consequences. God is either dead or proves himself to be more trustworthy than ever—and the result in either case is that Job puts his attitude of dejection behind him and commits to a path of creative and redemptive action that ultimately implicates all humankind. One author slips perhaps too easily into a kind of atheist humanism while the other may be over-eager to reinscribe the book of Job into traditional Christian theology—and yet the values to be pursued as a result are presumably more or less identical. How can we make sense of this?

Another way to put this question: how can this signifier “God” make so much and yet simultaneously so little difference? I say it makes so much difference because we naturally interpret Negri and Gutiérrez’s respective positions on God as an unbridgeable gap—yet I believe it would be relatively easy to translate both arguments into a similar formal language. Both affirm the agency and power of the oppressed, and both affirm that there is some source of power beyond what is expressed in the current situation. Negri would not embrace language of transcendence to describe

this source, but I don't think we should understand Gutiérrez as affirming a transcendent God in the full traditional sense—God is after all both strong and weak, and he needs human action and cooperation. Coming at it from the other direction, Gutiérrez may be uncomfortable with Negri's postulation of a pure immanence that doesn't grant an independent existence for this source of power, but one could interpret Negri as pointing toward some kind of potentiality or virtuality that is intimately tied to the current situation while not being completely determined by it or reducible to it.

Whether we call this source of power God or the unactualized power of humanity, then, it seems to function in a similar way in both arguments. What changes, it seems to me, is the affect of the argument. On Negri's side, the insistence on the death of God, with no possibility of a resurrection, seems to me to carry with it a certain bitterness and resentment. This kind of bitterness is a common feature of protest atheism and is of course fully justified at a certain level—and yet how does this fit into an interpretation of Job that insists that he repents only of his attitude of dejection and despair? One would need to go further and claim that he repents of his faith in God as well, a reading of the text of Job that does not seem convincing to me.

Gutiérrez's contention that Job arrives at a new concept of God seems better-grounded in the text—but at the same time, isn't there a bit of defensiveness in his account, particularly in his rush to claim that Christ is the ultimate answer to Job? In attempting to square his revolutionary reinterpretation of Job with some version of traditional Christian orthodoxy, might he not be guilty of repeating the gesture of Job's interlocutors, albeit at a much more sophisticated level? This defensiveness is all the more problematic insofar as it threatens to obscure one of the major advantages that Gutiérrez's account offers over Negri's in my view: his positive embrace of the divine delight in all creation serves to displace the anthropocentrism that characterizes Negri's account.

Both the liberation theologian and the materialist philosopher, it seems, insist a little too much on God—whether positively or negatively. Given that they are interpreting the same text, according to the same basic methodology, and with broadly similar political commitments, we may be able to say that this positive or negative insistence represents a kind of minimal difference between these two discourses, seemingly the only factor driving them toward significantly different conclusions. At the same time, this insistence seems to introduce what we might call a swerve or a distortion into their arguments, holding them back in some way from the full consequences of the radical conclusions they are drawing from Job's encounter with God.

If the same factor is simultaneously keeping the two interpreters apart and somehow holding each of them back, then it seems to me that we must remove it—in place of an insistence on God, whether positively in the case of theology or negatively in the case of materialism, we should introduce a studied *indifference* toward God, producing what we could call a materialist theology.

On the level of the interpretation of biblical or theological texts, its goal would be neither to reject nor to vindicate the claims of any institution that claims scriptural legitimation, but rather to study the ways in which God functions in the overall economy of a given text. This fits broadly with the holistic method of reading practiced by both Negri and Gutiérrez. On a constructive level, a materialist theology would seek to experiment with ways that God could function differently—or, in the terms given to us by the book of Job, to get beyond the defensive pride of Job's theologian friends while simultaneously repenting of the “dust and ashes” of a bitter atheism.

This proposal should be taken not simply as calling for a new research program, but also as a way of recognizing existing work that might fall under the rubric of materialist theology. A significant portion of the contemporary philosophical work on religion in the continental European tradition reflects the indifference toward God that I am calling for. I would say that Derrida and Agamben are particularly exemplary in this regard, both in their readings of theological texts and in their creative

use of theological concepts. The Latin American liberation theologian Enrique Dussel has also followed a trajectory toward something like a materialist theology, moving from explicitly theological work toward a more general political theory—yet without rejecting or turning his back on theology.

It seems clear, however, that this type of indifference is more difficult to maintain for those coming out of a primarily theological background. Those who carry it out tend to be on the margins of the theological establishment, either voluntarily or involuntarily. In the context of the United States, for example, women, racial minorities, and sexual minorities, for instance, may find it easier to practice materialist theology because their marginal position in most church-related settings inoculates them, as it were, against the kind of over-identification with existing church institutions that leads most white straight male theologians to practice a backward-looking and defensive form of theology. Those white straight males who do choose to undertake materialist theological work almost invariably find themselves alienated from the mainstream of theological discourse.

This marginalization is unfortunate, but understandable, as established religious authorities find the indifference of the materialist theologian more puzzling and disturbing than the outright opposition of a staunch atheist. In those cases where defensive traditionalist theologians do directly confront their materialist counterparts, the latter would do well to imitate the approach of Job: tirelessly challenging the worn-out answers of the traditionalist until a surprising vindication arrives.

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