

CONSOLATION, REJECTION, AND REPENTANCE IN JOB 42:6

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Job 42:6 contains the final words of Job's response to Yahweh's speech(es):¹

'al-kēn 'em'as wēñhamtī 'al 'āpār wā'ēper

At present, there is no real consensus among modern scholars as to what the proper translation for this verse should be.² The aim of this study is to present a perspective on 42:6 that will offer an explanation for a number of different translations that at first glance seem irreconcilable with one another.

From a philological viewpoint, I suggest that all three of the following translations can claim to be correct renderings of the MT with its present pointing:

1. Wherefore I retract (*or* I submit) and I repent on
(*or* on account of) dust and ashes.³

¹ Many critics adopt the view that the Joban response (40:3-5, 42:2-6) originally followed one Yahweh speech. See H. H. Rowley, *From Moses to Qumran* (London: Lutterworth, 1963) 166; and G. Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob* (KAT; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963) 37-39. However, the argument in this study is not materially affected whether one adopts a critical reconstruction such as Fohrer's or holds to the traditional two.

² A mooted point is whether the verse's language actually allows the notion of repentance (e.g., RSV). For recent contrary opinions, see M. Buitenvliet, *The Book of Job* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1922) 292; P. A. H. de Boer "Haalt Job bakzeil? Job xlii 6," *NedTTs* 31 (1977) 181-94; J. B. Curtis, "On Job's Response to Yahweh," *JBL* 98 (1979) 499-501; D. Patrick, "The Translation of Job XLII 6," *VT* 26 (1976) 370; S. Terrien, *Job* (CAT; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1963) 269-70; A. de Wilde, *Das Buch Hiob* (OTS; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 402. For a full review of past scholarship and translations of 42:6, see the excellent survey by de Wilde (*Hiob*, 398-400).

³ See Fohrer, *Hiob*, 532; L. J. Kuyper, "The Repentance of Job," *VT* 9 (1959) 94; M. H. Pope, *Job* (AB; 3d ed.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973) 347. For the variants in parentheses: in v 6a see E. Dhorme, *Job* (London: Nelson, 1967) 646; in v 6b see JPSV. I realize that what I call translation (1) is really a group of related translations. In listing possible variants within translation (1), it is my opinion that not enough philological evidence exists to make a decisive choice between them.

2. Wherefore I reject *it* (implied object in v 5),⁴ and I am consoled for dust and ashes.
3. Wherefore I reject and forswear dust and ashes.⁵

These divergent views underline the difficulties in translating 42:6: the identification of an implicit object for *'m's* is not obvious (another interpretation of the verb may also be in order); the translation of *nhmty* is open to question; and, finally, the referent of *'pr w'pr* is also problematic. In addition, the translations just cited raise two further questions. Are these translation difficulties really soluble? Is it necessary to select one of these opinions as correct and dismiss the insights of the others?

It will be the thesis of this paper that these varying interpretations can be best explained by positing an ambiguity that has been deliberately structured into 42:6 by the Joban author. Fundamental to this discussion is the observation that each clause constituent in 42:6 is capable of (at least) two interpretations. Although perhaps not all equally likely, neither can any of them be ruled out unequivocally. These possibilities will be briefly stated before turning to a detailed analysis of the translations cited above. In the conclusion, the ambiguities of 42:6 will be related to the wider context of the Joban response. It is to be noted that the choice of translation in 42:6 appears to be governed as much by larger thematic assumptions as by strict philological criteria.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to consider a significant text-critical problem in v 6. Although Vg., Syr., and Tg. Ket. witness to the MT, the situation seems less sure in the case of the LXX and 11QtgJob. The LXX reads:

Therefore, I despise myself and I melt, and I consider (*hēgeomai*) myself dirt and ashes (*gē kai spodos*).

11QtgJob has:

Therefore, I am poured out and dissolved (*'tnsk w'tmh*); I am become dust and ashes.⁶

Not only are these texts longer than the MT, but their sense is similar enough to suggest that they reflect a common parent text.⁷ However, both

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, the translations of texts in this paper are my own.

⁵ Patrick, "Job XLII 6," 369.

⁶ Translations of 11QtgJob follow those in J. A. Fitzmyer and D. J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts* (BibOr; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978) 11–47.

⁷ So argued by de Wilde, who emends the text to read *'l kn nm's 'm's wnhšbty 'l 'pr w'pr* (*Hiob*, 396–400). In his opinion, LXX and 11QtgJob witness to two verbs in v 6aa, which he restores as the *niphal* infinitive absolute and imperfect of *m's* I ("to reject"). He restores v 6aβb on the basis of the LXX and suggests the translation "Deswegen erkenne ich meine Nichtigkeit an, und halte mich für Erde und Staub." See also E. G. Clarke, "Reflections on some Obscure Hebrew Words in the Biblical Job in the Light of XI Q Tg Job," in *Studies in Philology in*

versions can be credibly related to the MT's consonantal text. The agreement of the LXX and 11QtgJob may be confined to the level of translation technique.

In the case of the LXX, double translations for single Hebrew lexemes in Job are well documented.⁸ The double translation for 'm's may be attributed to the translator's desire to recognize both roots suggested by the Hebrew homograph.⁹ The final clause is not a translation of v 6aßb at all; rather it ought to be regarded as a gloss derived from Job 30:19, in which the same phrase 'pr w'pr occurs in Hebrew. In the LXX, Job 30:19 is translated:

But you consider (*hēgeomai*) me equal to dust, my lot is in dirt and ashes (*gē kai spodos*).

The confluence of *hēgeomai* and *gē kai spodos* in this verse and in the LXX of Job 42:6 is noteworthy. Apparently the LXX translator wanted to highlight Job's reconciliation with God by having Job echo what he earlier described as the divine opinion concerning him.

11QtgJob also makes use of double translations. In the following examples of hendiadys, the Aramaic uses two lexemes to render the Hebrew original:

- col. 16:4 (*ṭḇty wrbwty* (my prosperity and my honor)
= Job 30:15 *ndbty* (my honor)
- col. 33:2 *'ymh wdhlh* (terror and fear)
= Job 39:20 *'ymh* (fear)
- col. 33:2 *wyrwt wyhd'* (he runs and delights)
= Job 39:21 *wyšys* (he exalts)
- col. 34:6 *whdr wyqr* (honor and glory)
= Job 40:10 *whdr* (honor)
- col. 37:4 *tqp whkmh* (power and wisdom)
= Job 42:2 *mzmh* (plan)

I suggest that the verbal coordination in col. 37:8 (= Job 42:6) is also a hendiadys which simply translates 'm's and, like those listed above, does not depend on a longer parent text than the MT.

Besides the translation technique just identified, the recensional character of 11QtgJob at this point must also be taken into consideration. It is apparent that its translation of v 6aα is under the influence of Ps 22:15.¹⁰ The detailed description of the pains of the righteous sufferer in Ps 22:15 could have inspired the emphatic double translation in col. 37:8, especially if the

Honour of Ronald James Williams (ed. G. E. Kadish and G. E. Freeman; Toronto: Benben, 1982) 19–20.

⁸ Dhorme, *Job*, cxviii.

⁹ Ibid., 646; Pope, *Job*, 348.

¹⁰ E. W. Tuinstra, *Hermeneutische Aspecten van de Targum van Job uit Grot xi van Qumran* (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit, 1970) 44, 108.

targumist was already prone to such a technique. The final clause in col. 37:8–9 may be explained as a gloss on the MT (v 6a β b) based on Ps 22:16.¹¹

The discussion that follows means to account for *m's* as it is now pointed in the MT. Support for interpreting the verb as a *niphal* form is addressed below. As it stands, *'em'as* is most easily analyzed as the first person common singular imperfect *qal* form of the root *m's* I ("to despise, reject"). This verb is normally transitive in the *qal* in biblical Hebrew (hereafter: BH). With four exceptions (Job 7:16; 34:33; 36:5; 42:6), the object is always indicated (sixty-six times).

J. B. Curtis has attempted to account for the usage in 42:6 by proposing an explanation that encompasses all four texts in Job where *m's* I appears with no explicit object. In his opinion, this usage has an intransitive connotation—"to feel loathing contempt." According to this view, in 7:16, Job reacts to the afflictions which he attributes to divine agency with an expression of contempt toward God, an expression to which Elihu refers in 34:33. In 36:5, Job is told that this is not the feeling that God has toward him. Finally, in 42:6, Curtis suggests that *m's* be understood as Job's final contemptuous reaction to the speech(es) of Yahweh. That is: the God who has revealed himself is utterly disgusting to Job.¹² Curtis's thesis is weakened by the observation that *m's* I usually appears in Job governing a direct object (Job 5:17; 8:20; 9:21; 10:3; 19:18; 30:1; 31:13). These texts suggest that *m's* I was normally understood by the Joban author as a transitive verb. Moreover, 7:16, 34:33, and 36:5 all bristle with difficulties and have frequently been the objects of debate and emendation. It is quite possible that both 34:33 and 36:5 have suffered during the transmission of the text. Neither text appears to be established sufficiently to offer the support that Curtis's thesis demands.¹³ Consequently, it must remain uncertain whether *m's* I is used in 34:33 and 36:5 transitively or not. This observation makes Curtis's interpretation of 7:16 rather tendentious. I prefer to follow Dhorme and understand the verb in 7:16 as a form of *m's* II meaning "to melt," in the absence of any significant evidence to back up Curtis's suggestion.¹⁴

¹¹ Glossing of difficulties in 42:2–6 is frequent in the versions. Other examples include 11QtgJob 37:5, which glossed 42:3 by 40:5 (Tuinstra, *Hermeneutische Aspecten*, 108); Syr., which glossed *m's* in v 6a by *štwq* "I am silent" (also from 40:5); and Tg. Ket., which glossed v 6a α as "Wherefore I despise my wealth."

¹² Curtis, "On Job's Response," 504–5.

¹³ Job 34:33 and 36:5 are famous *crucies* that have been subjected to numerous emendations and reconstructions; see the surveys of past scholarship for both passages by R. Gordis, *The Book of Job* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1978) 394, 412–13. Gordis emends 36:5; 34:33 he describes as "extraordinarily difficult" with "massive problems."

¹⁴ Attempts to explain 7:16 also differ; see Kuyper, "The Repentance of Job," 92. He favors the view that Job rejects the impulse to suicide and treats *m'sty* in 7:16 as a transitive verb with the implied object "death" in v 15, that is, "I reject it." However, this explanation seems a bit forced since v 15 suggests that Job in fact would rather die than continue to suffer; all he wishes is that God would leave him alone (v 16). Difficulties in deriving the verb *m'sty*

It is best to assume, therefore, that *m's* demands an implicit object, if it be from the root meaning "despise, reject." The translations in question identify their respective candidates in vv 3, 5, and 6. In the analysis below, it will be shown that these choices are governed by larger syntactic considerations that are themselves ambiguous.

It is also possible to relate this vocable to the root *m's* II, "melt, flow." In this case, "melting" likely serves as a metaphor for capitulation or retreat (cf. Ps 58:8)—hence the translation "I submit." It is debatable, however, whether this identification can be made without also repointing the text to the *niphal*. In favor of the *niphal* pointing are the two certain attestations of the verb (Ps 58:8; Job 7:5). The reflexive nuances of "I despise myself" (LXX) and *'tnsk* (11QtgJob) also suggest that these versions construed *m's* in the *niphal*. I hesitate, however, to repoint the text on this basis. The major reason is that I find other instances of wordplay and syntactic ambivalence in the Joban response (e.g., v 3b; see below). I suspect that at best a pun on the two roots *m's* may be intended here and that for that reason the reading tradition of the MT should be retained. In support of the MT, one may adduce certain evidence which suggests that a *qal* pointing of *m's* II is not impossible. As stated above, there is a case for identifying one instance of *m's* II in the *qal* (Job 7:16). Moreover, one may argue from analogy that cognate verbs do occur in the G-stem with related meanings in BH (*mss*), middle Hebrew (*msh*), and in Jewish Aramaic (*msy*, *mss*).¹⁵ By retaining the *qal* pointing in v 6a, I would suggest that the Joban author may have deliberately set up a double entendre based on the rare verb *m's* II and the more common *m's* I.

Although it is possible to construe *wnhmty* as pointed either in the *niphal* or the *piel*, the meanings of the *piel* ("comfort, console") do not appear to fit the context. In the *niphal*, most occurrences of *nhm* can be readily explained with reference to the connotations "to be consoled, to comfort oneself." With this meaning, it is common for *'l* to denote the object of sorrow for which one is comforted (e.g., 2 Sam 13:39; Jer 31:15; Ezek 14:22). A derivative of this idiom is used to connote the retraction of a previously declared action (e.g., Exod 32:12; 2 Sam 24:16; Jer 18:8, 10;

from *m's* I have led Fohrer (*Hiob*, 164) and Pope (*Job*, 62) to delete it as a gloss. However, as glosses are usually inserted to clarify texts, not to make them more difficult, the explanation of *m'sty* as a gloss is also problematic. Dhorme has the easiest solution (*Job*, 107). He connects the verb with the root of *m's* II meaning "to melt." See also Terrien (*Job*, 87). This solution can claim support from Vg. It also has the merit of connecting *m'sty* with the rest of the thought of v 16a.

¹⁵ Other verbs are also attested with common meanings in the *qal* and *niphal* in BH (e.g., *hlh*, *kšl*). Moreover, although the cognate verb *mss* occurs almost exclusively in BH in the *niphal* (eighteen times), one instance is recorded in the *qal* with a related meaning (Isa 10:18; cf. Ps 22:15). A *qal* pointing of *m's* as from *m's* II in 42:6 was previously suggested by Dhorme (*Job*, 107).

26: 13, 19; Jonah 3:10).¹⁶ It is conceivable, therefore, that in 42:6, Job may either console himself for, or leave off (see translation [3]), "dust and ashes," depending on the likely nuances of this latter phrase. By the same token, the concept of "repentance" may also be implied in 42:6 as an extension of the use of *n̄hm* to denote the retraction of a previous action. It is clear that *n̄hm* can be used absolutely in contexts that call for the idea of decision reversal (e.g., Exod 13:17; 1 Sam 15:29; Jonah 3:9). In a context in which other indications of penitence are found, the appropriate nuance of decision reversal connoted by *n̄hm* would be repentance (e.g., Jer 31:19).¹⁷

The phrase *'pr w'pr* is rare in BH and in postbiblical literature. It occurs only in Gen 18:27; Job 30:19; 42:6; Sir 10:9; 40:3; and 1QH 10:5. In these texts, the phrase appears to have two connotations, either of which may be applicable to 42:6. On the other hand, it signifies human creatureliness or mortality before the divine.¹⁸ This characterization is implied by the question in Sir 10:9:

How can he who is dust and ashes be proud (*m̄h yġ'h 'pr w'pr*)?
For even in life his bowels decay (RSV).

A similar vein is suggested by Abraham's use of this phrase in his petition before Yahweh in Gen 18:27. 1QH 10:5 later echoed this as a confession of human insignificance *coram Deo*. Sir 40:3 and Job 30:19 point to another possible interpretation. According to Sir 40:3, the lot of humanity is trouble, ". . . from him who sits on a throne in pride, to him who is clothed in dust

¹⁶ H. Van Dyke Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of NHM," *Bib* 56 (1975) 520–21.

¹⁷ My analysis of *n̄hm* at this point is opposed to that of Parunak, with whom I am otherwise in substantial agreement. Along with 42:6, Parunak holds that *n̄hm* denotes an experience of emotional pain in Gen 6:6, 7; Exod 13:17; Judg 21:6, 15; 1 Sam 15:11, 35; and Jer 31:19 ("NHM," 519). However, every one of these latter cases occurs in a context of decision reversal! This includes Jer 31:19, where Parunak (and Curtis; see "On Job's Response," 500), in my opinion, confuses the verse's syntactic parallelism with semantic parallelism. In Jer 31:19, the former need not imply the latter; here I would argue for the priority of the connection of *šwb* and *n̄hm* (cf. Jonah 3:9–10) over that proposed by him for *n̄hm* and the expression of sorrow in Jer 31:19b. Even if one grants Parunak's thesis, it must be admitted that the emotional pain these contexts might imply is to be closely associated with the feelings of "regret" or "remorse" which can accompany or cause a change of mind. In this case *n̄hm* may still connote repentance in 42:6 as a metonymy for the entire penitential process.

On these same grounds, I find myself opposed to Curtis's translation of 42:6: "Therefore I feel loathing contempt and revulsion / toward you, O God; and I am sorry for frail man" ("On Job's Response," 499–505). A form of Curtis's translation of v 6a can be defended by assuming that the implicit object of *'m's* is the same as the pronominal suffix on the verbs in v 5 (i.e., "Wherefore I reject *you* . . ."). However, I am unable to convince myself that *n̄hm* 'I could mean "to feel sorry for" without also implying the retraction of a previously declared intention regarding the prepositional object. How is Job in a position to do so with regard to "frail man"? If Curtis's idea regarding v 6aα could be convincingly connected with that of decision reversal in v 6aβb, the result would yield an intriguing fourth possible translation for 42:6.

¹⁸ De Wilde, *Htob*, 400; Curtis, "On Job's Response," 501.

and ashes.”¹⁹ Here *‘pr w’pr* does not represent “the human condition,” but the condition of some humans. It is an expression that connotes “social degradation,” a base condition possible for persons, but one to be contrasted with their status at the pinnacle of wealth and power. So also in Job 30:19, *‘pr w’pr* does not represent Job’s natural condition *sub specie aeternitatis*, but that which he accuses God of having horribly and vengefully thrust upon him: “He has cast me into the mire, and I have come to resemble dust and ashes!”²⁰ This complaint ought properly to be contrasted with Job’s description of his former felicity in Job 29.

- (1) Wherefore I retract (*or* I submit) and I repent on (*or* on account of) dust and ashes.

Each of the translations being surveyed here has its strength and weakness. The major strength of translation (1) is its treatment of v 6aα. Since I regard the variant “I submit” as a possible wordplay on *‘m’s*, I see this option as one of two that can be equated with the possibility of repentance in v 6aβb. However, a good case can also be made for equating *‘m’s* in v 6 with *m’s* I and deriving from it a notion of retraction or recantation, which is also compatible with the concept of repentance.

Although L. J. Kuyper was by no means the first to identify the implied object of *‘m’s* with Job’s former speeches, his article is an able exposition of a solution that has been adopted by several major commentators and translations.²¹ According to Kuyper, v 3b implies that Job’s encounter with Yahweh has left him painfully aware of the inadequacy of his arguments and the retribution theory on which they were based. In v 6, therefore, Job rejects that which he acknowledges he uttered in ignorance (v 3).²² In this regard, it is necessary to emphasize that translations such as

¹⁹ Following the marginal reading and restoring *lbwš* for the text’s *šwb*; see R. H. Charles, *APOT* 1. 460. Unfortunately, this passage is missing in the Masada MS; see Y. Yadin, *The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1965) 12–13. However, restoration of the reading *lywšb* following the Syriac would result in the unusual double preposition *‘d l*, seldom attested in BH and not apparent elsewhere in the extant Hebrew portions of Ben Sira.

²⁰ Dhorme, *Job*, 442.

²¹ E.g., S. R. Driver and G. B. Gray, *The Book of Job* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921) 1. 373. M. Tsevat, “The Meaning of the Book of Job,” *HUCA* 37 (1966) 91; Fohrer, *Hioib*, 531; Pope, *Job*, 349; NAB, JB, JPSV.

²² Kuyper, “The Repentance of Job,” 94. Although I agree that *npl’t* in 42:3 may refer to Job’s former arguments, it must be emphasized that there would be no need for Job to reject them simply because the subject matter was too difficult or “too wonderful” for him. *Npl’t* ought to have a sense of worthlessness about it, if Kuyper is correct in his judgment that the penitent Job rejects his arguments as such in the light of the theophany. This is more difficult to defend than often realized since there is little evidence that *npl’t* denotes something negative in BH. However, this usage does obtain in Dan 11:36, where the inference is plainly one of “arrogant boasting” or “blasphemies.” I suggest that a similar nuance is required to make sense of Job’s rejection of the *npl’t* in 42:6. It is the *npl’t* not as “things too wonderful”

"I retract" are really paraphrases of the transitive use of the verb, since there is no proof that *m's* I was used intransitively. In supplying implicit objects for transitive verbs, one must understand an implicit pronominal object in the context. If the antecedent of the implied object in v 6 is in v 3, then the object must be the *nīplā ʾōt*, for it is this which Job acknowledges he spoke. Consequently, Job must say literally "Wherefore, I reject *them* . . ." in v 6.

Although I subscribe to the feasibility of Kuyper's grammatical analysis, it needs to be emphasized here that his is not the only case for discovering an implied object of 'm's. Advocates of the idea that Job retracts do not appear to recognize how much their case rests on one interpretation of an ambiguous construction. It is evident that 42:2-6 can be divided into two parallel structures, vv 2-3 and 4-6.²³ In each case, a stated perception (vv 2-3aα; vv 4-5) is followed by a conclusion (vv 3aβb; v 6). If Job rejects his former words, the conclusion in v 6 must be regarded as a paraphrase of the conclusion in v 3. According to this view, no element in vv 4-5 can provide an implicit object for the verb in v 6aα. In favor of such a reading is the formal parallelism of v 3aβb and v 6. Indeed, the very vagueness of v 6aα can be used as a reason for interpreting the verse in the light of the context as a whole.²⁴ However, the perception-conclusion relationship here is ambiguous at best. It is equally possible that vv 5-6 are to be associated quite closely and that vv 2-3 and vv 4-6 form two distinct units within the response. It may seem rather far to discern the antecedent of the implied object of v 6aα in v 3b. One could equally expect to find the implied object in v 5—a possibility that will be explored further when translation (2) is analyzed.

Whether one wishes to interpret the verb 'm's as an expression of retraction or submission, advocates of the thesis that Job does dramatically capitulate to God must also defend the view that Job repents "on ashes and dust." This is by far the weakest aspect of translation (1). Detractors of this translation point out the unlikelihood that 'l 'pr w'pr may be construed as a locative phrase.²⁵ In the idiom *nḥm* 'l elsewhere in BH, 'l always signifies the object that has affected the sufferer, and it is difficult to remove the instance in 42:6 from this pattern. The locative nuance would be more easily defended if the preposition had been *bē*. Nevertheless, this translation cannot be ruled out. One may defend translation (1) beginning with the observation that at the heart of the translation difficulties in 42:6 is a set

for Job, but as wrong speech against God, which Job can reject as he repents in the presence of Yahweh.

²³ Many scholars question the presence of vv 3aα and 4 and delete them as glosses. The analysis of the structure of vv 2-6 presented here will not be substantially affected whether these passages are excised or retained.

²⁴ C. Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 126.

²⁵ Patrick, "Job XLII 6," 370; Curtis, "On Job's Response," 500-501; de Wilde, *Hiob*, 400-401.

of conflicting verbal signals. There is a tension between likely meanings of 'm's and the apparent presence of the idiom *nḥm* 'l. The coordination of 'm's and *wnḥmti*, reinforced as it is by the accentuation of the verse, suggests that the two verbs connote closely related ideas in this context. However, it is difficult to advocate a close association between the notion of Job's consolation for, or his repudiation of, a matter of dust and ashes and those expressions of submission or retraction of wrong speech suggested by v 6aα. In 42:6, therefore, the reader must decide whether the indications of Job's capitulation are strong enough to warrant overriding the usual meanings of the idiom *nḥm* 'l or not (see translation (2) and (3)). Since the meaning of words in no small way depends on their context, a sufficiently strong perception of the necessity of Job's capitulation would argue in favor of translation (1). Despite the philological difficulties, the acceptance of some variety of translation (1) ultimately rests on the opinion (widely held) that such a response is appropriate on Job's part when he is faced with the reality of the divine disclosure.²⁶

Following the understanding of v 6a as an expression of submission or retraction, the verb *wnḥmti* in 42:6 must be viewed as used absolutely, a situation similar to Jer 31:19, also in a context of penitence. In 42:6, the decision reversal motif may be interpreted figuratively as a metonymy for the entire process of repentance. Moreover, the semantic range of 'pr w'pr does not finally exclude some identification with the ash heap of 2:8.²⁷ Certainly this would be a position of social degradation. In this case, 'l 'pr w'pr could be an elliptical indication on Job's part that he continues in a debased condition even as he does capitulate before Yahweh. This pregnant construction could be paraphrased ". . . and I repent—albeit I remain in a state of degradation (i.e., on dust and ashes)." By the same token, once free from the necessity of reading the idiom *nḥm* 'l in 42:6, there is no reason thereby to limit the prepositional phrase to a locative nuance. It is also possible to argue that 'l be understood causally, in effect giving the grounds for Job's capitulation before Yahweh: that is, the realization of his own mortality in the presence of God.²⁸

²⁶ See, e.g., R. Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) 133; Dhorme, *Job*, cl; Fohrer, *Hiob*, 535–36; Rowley, *Moses to Qumran*, 170.

²⁷ Advocates of the view that v 6b refers to the "ash heap" of 2:8 include Dhorme (*Job*, 646–47), Fohrer (*Hiob*, 536), Pope (*Job*, 349), and Tsevat ("The Meaning of Job," 92). This position assumes some kind of organic relationship between the dialogue and the prologue. In its support see Y. Hoffman, "The Relation between the Prologue and the Speech Cycles in Job," *VT* 31 (1981) 160–70.

²⁸ See JPSV (1980): "Therefore I recant and relent / Being but dust and ashes." My only substantial objection to this translation is the use of "relent" as opposed to "repent" for *wnḥmti*. This choice appears to be motivated by a desire to have Job retract his words but not to admit to wrongdoing thereby. I consider this unlikely, given the observation that Job's retraction may be best explained as the rejection of blasphemous speech (see n. 22). At this point, the older JPSV (1917) is preferable.

- (2) Wherefore I reject *it* (object in v 5) and I am consoled for dust and ashes.

As stated above, it is possible to suggest that the syntax of v 5 can be used to identify an implicit object of *'m's*. Within v 5, the conjunction *w'th* may be viewed as creating a strong contrast between v 5a and 5b: past knowledge is being distinguished from present experience. A similar nuance may be detected in Jacob's prayer in Gen 32:10b. In this text, the patriarch contrasts his previous insignificance with his present status:

. . . with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now (*w'th*) I have become two companies (RSV).

The conjunction is used also in Job 30:1 for a similar purpose. It signals the complete contrast between the descriptions of Job's former standing (Job 29) and his present degradation (Job 30).

In v 5, Job's former knowledge is denoted by the phrase *šēma' ōzen*. Though this is traditionally translated "the hearing of the ear," it is clear from other contexts that *šm' 'zn* is better understood as "rumor" or "mere report." The idiom appears elsewhere in BH only in Ps 18:45 (= 2 Sam 22:45). There the nations proffer their obeisance to Israel's king at the *šm' 'zn* concerning him. According to the psalmist, "mere report" or "rumor" of his might was enough to secure their fealty. The idiom occurs also in Sir 43:24 in the form *šm' 'wznnw*. We follow the RSV in interpreting this phrase as an objective genitive, that is, "the report which our ears hear." According to the RSV:

Those who sail the sea tell of its dangers, and we marvel at what we hear (*lšm' 'wznnw*).

The phrase *šm' 'zn*, therefore, appears as a strengthened form of the word *šēma'*, meaning "report," apparently emphasizing the fact that the hearers have no direct experience of what is reported. It is to be noted that *šēma'* itself always refers to a message with content in BH, not merely the act of hearing (e.g., Num 14:15; Deut 2:25; Isa 23:5; Jer 37:5; Job 28:22). By nature, the *šēma'* is second-hand information, reported by some party to an audience that would not otherwise be privy to it. Finally, the *šēma'* may not necessarily be true. This is implied in Exod 23:1 and also in the quest of the Queen of Sheba to verify the *šēma'* concerning Solomon (1 Kgs 10:1).

Job 42:5 can be translated:

Through (mere) report I had heard of you but now (*w'th*) my eye has seen you.

One may take the expression *šm' 'zn* in v 5, therefore, as a reference to Job's former, second-hand knowledge of God, which he now contrasts with his present awareness gained through the Yahweh speech(es).²⁹ As such, it is

²⁹ Kuyper, "The Repentance of Job," 94; Terrien, *Job*, 269.

likely an elliptical reference to the wisdom theology of retribution heard from the lips of Job's comforters and which he himself shared—a view of God's relationship to the world that is ultimately dismissed as a falsification of reality.³⁰ Consequently, the phrase *šm'zn* is an appropriate candidate for the antecedent of the implicit pronominal object of *'m's* in v 6, and it is this which Job can reject on the basis of his perception in v 5.

The translation “. . . I am consoled for dust and ashes” is based on the idiom *nħm 'l* as attested in passages such as 2 Sam 13:39; Jer 31:15; and Ezek 14:22; 32:31.³¹ Provided that one can be satisfied that “dust and ashes” provides a suitable referent, it is well within the semantic range possible for *nħm* in 42:6. In fact, either nuance we have described may fit. The vision that Job discerns may provide him with consolation for the human condition in general terms or his own personal situation. It is more likely, however, that the phrase refers to Job's personal situation. My opinion is swayed by the possibility of a literary allusion in 42:6 to 30:19. Lest this appear remote, it should be noted that the LXX gloss on the clause in question is likely derived from 30:19. Moreover, both 30:19 and 42:6 contain the same rare phrase *'pr w'pr*. It is clear in the Hebrew text of 30:19 that *'pr w'pr* is a description of Job's humiliating debasement. The identity between the phrase *'pr w'pr* and social humiliation might well suggest Job's wretched sufferings to a contemporary reader of 42:6 who was familiar with the complaints of Job in Job 29–31. This would be especially true if the book originally appeared without the intervening Elihu speeches.

The major difficulty with translation (2) appears in v 6aa. To my knowledge no other exegete has suggested that the implied object of *'m's* appears in v 5. However, as far as I can see, there is no philological or syntactic indicator that decisively tips the scales in favor of an implied object for *'m's* either in v 3 or v 5. Both are possible. As it stands, translation (2) is a rather reserved statement in which Job acknowledges that the divine reality is different from his own conceptions, and one in which he finds consolation for his suffering. Job does not, however, admit to wrongdoing thereby. In fact, translation (2) partially shifts the focus from Job himself to the rejected wisdom doctrine of retribution and suggests that it is that which Yahweh ultimately opposes and not Job. As such, I find translation (2) commensurate with a view of the Yahweh speech(es) that sees them not as a divine self-revelation but more simply as the refutation of a false theology of human suffering.³²

(3) Wherefore I reject and forswear dust and ashes.

³⁰ Tsevat, “The Meaning of Job,” 91–92, 100. Fohrer, *Hiob*, 534–35.

³¹ Buitendijk, *Job*, 292.

³² See E. M. Good, “Job and the Literary Task,” *Soundings* 56 (1973) 481; Tsevat, “The Meaning of Job,” 104–5.

Dale Patrick has suggested that "dust and ashes," although appearing only in the prepositional phrase in 42:6b, is also the implied object of 'm's in v 6aα. Such a construction is possible in BH (e.g., Ps 89:39). The nuance of rejection of "dust and ashes" in v 6aβb is based on the use of the idiom *nḥm 'l* to connote a retraction of a previously declared action. In 42:6, the two verbs would therefore be describing the same action. Together they would be predicating Job's intention to remove himself from the physical setting associated with mourning and lamentation and cease what he has been doing since 2:8.³³

Patrick's thesis has been criticized because of his desire to connect "dust and ashes" with the physical locale in which Job has been for the duration of the dialogue.³⁴ In his favor, one observes that "dust" and "ashes" do serve as signs of physical and social abasement often adopted by mourners in the Bible.³⁵ This is true even if it is acknowledged that the usual figure for mourning attire is *śq w'pr* (e.g., Isa 58:5; Esth 4:1, 3; Dan 9:3). It is conceivable here that Job in 42:6 is seen as having adopted a posture of humiliation as part of his grief and suffering, a posture he now renounces and forswears in order to adopt an attitude of praise.

Although Patrick's proposal is a creative approach to 42:6 and its context, it must be noted that it also rests on ambiguous factors. The indicators of praise in Job's response are by no means unequivocal. In v 3b, Patrick would translate the phrase *npl't mmny* as "wonders beyond me," interpreting *npl't* as denoting God's saving deeds.³⁶ In Patrick's defense, it should be noted that the verb *ngd* often appears in the context of praise (e.g., Ps 19:2; 22:32; 51:7; 71:17), a usage that would reinforce the interpretation of the *npl't* in v 3 as *magnalia Dei*. However, the verse's signals are not entirely consistent, and it remains debatable whether the accompanying emphasis on Job's lack of comprehension is compatible with an identification with God's known attributes (his saving deeds) as opposed to his unknown character. Other exegetes have followed the signals implied by incomprehension (as opposed to *ngd*, Patrick's major signal) and have interpreted the *npl't* as divine mysteries.³⁷ A third interpretation suggests itself from the observation that the idiom *npl'mn* often appears in the *niphāl* in the sense "to be too difficult for someone" (e.g., Gen 18:14; Deut 17:8; 30:11; Jer 32:17, 27). In this respect Prov 30:18 and Ps 131:1 seem particularly close

³³ Patrick, "Job XLII 6," 369–70.

³⁴ De Wilde, *Hiob*, 400–401. De Wilde considers it erroneous to connect the phrase 'pr w'pr with the more familiar *śq w'pr*; however, this verbal association is easy to make, and both phrases have in common the idea of some kind of humiliation. It seems to be the kind of word-play the Joban poet might delight in given other examples of double entendre in this dialogue.

³⁵ Dhorme, *Job*, 19, 22.

³⁶ Patrick, "Job XLII 6," 371.

³⁷ See Dhorme, *Job*, 646; de Wilde, *Hiob*, 397.

to the nuance of Job 42:3aβb. The verse can therefore also be translated in a manner quite compatible with translation (2):

Therefore I uttered—without realizing—things too difficult for me—
without comprehending.

In this case, there is no indication of praise or acknowledgment of divine sublimity on Job's part. My point is that this translation for v 3aβb and Patrick's are not mutually exclusive. There is apparently an ambiguity in the verse—and I suggest quite a deliberate one—from which spring alternate interpretations possible for this Joban response. Praise is conceivable; however, a more restrained reaction to Yahweh's revelation can also be defended. In v 6, as in v 3, it will ultimately be the exegete's opinion concerning whether praise is the appropriate response of Job to the Yahweh speech(es) that will influence his translation of an ambiguous verse. Objections to Patrick's translation will likely follow those made by de Wilde: that is, the interpretation of "dust and ashes" may be a bit forced. However, there is certainly not enough evidence to rule it out.

From the discussion above, it will be clear that no translation of 42:6 is without difficulty or free from ambiguity. This feature is in itself significant. Rather than seek *the* translation, or some textual emendation that will cut through this Gordian knot, perhaps it is time to seek a model for understanding 42:6 that takes these ambiguities seriously. Job 42:6 is difficult because its language is vague—and I suggest, deliberately vague. The writer has constructed the verse in such a way as to make it ring with several nuances, differences that are captured in the various translations we have been considering. The observation that points in this direction—decisively, in my opinion—is that no translation of the verse can succeed without forcing the text at some point or another. It is a remarkably plastic composition, vague to the point that exegetical concerns must override philological or contextual difficulties for the purposes of translation—which, in fact, they do in all three cases. It is for this reason that I continue to hold out the possibility that translation (1) is also justified. Job 42:6 is a polysemous construction, which even its original readers would have heard differently, depending on their evaluation of the meaning of Yahweh's address to Job.

A corollary of this conclusion is the observation that the interpretation of 42:2–6 as a whole is linked closely to individual understandings of the Yahweh speech(es). And just as the words of Job's response can be understood in conformity with any of the three translation options approved of here, the Joban response as a whole can be understood, it seems, in conformity with a number of views of the Yahweh speech(es). In fact, this is a regular feature of Joban exegesis.³⁸ From one viewpoint, the interaction

³⁸ E.g., Gordis (*Book of God and Man*, 305), Fohrer (*Hiob*, 531), and Tsevat ("The Meaning of Job," 91) all would support versions of translation (1) in this paper; however, they differ

between Job and Yahweh is such that Job's response ought to be one that admits of wrongdoing and self-abnegation.³⁹ However, it is also open to question whether such a response really satisfies the needs of the dialogue or the actual content of Yahweh's revelation. A different evaluation of Job's speech can ensue from a different conception of Yahweh's appearance to Job, as Patrick proves.⁴⁰ In addition to the commentators dealt with hitherto, such variant interpretations as those of D. Robertson or A. Brenner might also be cited. In each case, it is possible to observe the exegete interpreting the words of Job's answer in the light of the divine reality he or she claims Job discerned.⁴¹

These varying positions may all claim some justification from the text, because the words of Job's response have a number of nuances that allow for more than one interpretation. Besides v 6 itself, this study has pointed out such ambiguity in the overall structure of vv 2-6 and in v 3aßb. In my opinion, the best explanation for these contradictory or ambiguous signals in the Joban response is that which is posited for 42:6 also. The author has used language in such a way as to allow the reader's understanding of Yahweh's revelation to interpret Job's response. Different signals may be emphasized depending on the reader's reaction. The view that Job ends in self-abasement thus flows logically from a certain understanding of the Joban response. However, the emphasis on other signals may lead the exegete to prefer a much more elated or restrained interpretation of Job's final words, one that eschews the concept of repentance while allowing Job some sort of reconciliation with his own predicament.

One result of this state of affairs is that 42:2-6, and especially v 6, is practically incapable of full translation into English and related languages. For the translator must necessarily choose to highlight one from a number of associated themes in his or her treatment of Job's response. However, it is a choice of emphasis which the author of Job has seen fit not to make explicit for his readers. It is possible to understand the divine address as an indictment of Job's challenge of God (42:3aα, 4), the refutation of a false theology or world view (42:5), or a revelation of the reality of divine power (42:2, 5). Perhaps any comprehensive view of the divine address must include all three aspects—but which one deserves to be stressed? My argument has been that each of these emphases can interpret the Joban response

among themselves as to what the significance of Yahweh's speech has for the Joban response. See the discussion in Tsevat, "The Meaning of Job," 94-100. Quite a different view of the same speech is achieved by Curtis, who has little difficulty in interpreting 42:2-5 in the light of his own presuppositions about the meaning of the Yahweh speech and the translation of 42:6 ("On Job's Response," 497-98, 505, 508-10).

³⁹ A. Cooper, "Narrative Theory and the Book of Job," *SR* 11 (1982) 43.

⁴⁰ D. Patrick, "Job's Address to God," *ZAW* 91 (1979) 277-81.

⁴¹ See D. Robertson, "The Book of Job: A Literary Study," *Soundings* 56 (1973) 466; and A. Brenner, "God's Answer to Job," *VT* 31 (1981) 135-36.

as a whole and 42:6 in particular—in fact, translations (1), (2), and (3) complement each of these different emphases respectively. This observation in itself has important hermeneutical implications. It suggests strongly that the poet himself intended no explicit resolution to the tension that exists in the Yahweh speech(es) between the very fact of Yahweh's presence and the actual contents of the divine address. Rather, he created a situation that can be interpreted in several ways according to the theological inclinations of the reader. The vague and ambiguous language of 42:6 is a reflection of this intention.⁴²

⁴² Portions of this paper were originally presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies in June 1983. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor P. E. Dion, Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Toronto, for his many suggestions and advice during the preparation of this paper. Naturally, the responsibility for the opinions expressed herein is solely mine.

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