

When More Leads to Less: Overstatement, *Incrementum*, and the Question in Job 4:17a

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In Job 4–5 Eliphaz tries to convince Job that he has done something wrong and that his suffering is divine punishment for that wrongdoing. In the course of doing that, he asks the following question in Job 4:17a:¹

הַאֲנוֹשׁ מֵאֱלוֹהִים יִצְדָּק

Can a human being be righteous מִן God?

There are three main interpretations of the preposition מִן in this question. First, the preposition is thought to mean “more than.” Thus, “Can a human being be more righteous than God?” (hereafter the greater-than rhetorical question).² Second, the preposition is thought to mean “before, in the presence of.” Thus, “Can a human being be righteous before/in the presence of God?”³ Third, the preposition is

¹ There is a parallel question in 4:17b (אִם מַעֲשֵׂהוּ יִטְהַר־גִּבֹּר), “Can a human being be pure מִן his Maker?”. For ease of presentation, I will discuss only the question in v. 17a. Everything said about it applies also to the parallel question in v. 17b.

² E.g., Robert L. Alden, *Job* (NAC 11; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 87–88; Gerald H. Wilson, *Job* (NIBCOT 10; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 47.

³ E.g., A. S. Peake, *Job: Introduction, Revised Version with Notes and Index* (Century Bible; Edinburgh: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1904), 81; E. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (trans. Harold Knight; London: Nelson, 1967), 52; H. H. Rowley, *Job* (NCB; London: Nelson, 1970), 55; Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (3rd ed.; AB 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 35, 37; Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 114; Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 113, 116; David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC 17; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 107, 112, 132.

thought to mean “in relation to/in comparison with.” Thus, “Can a human being be righteous in relation to/in comparison with God?”⁴

Although it is sometimes acknowledged that the greater-than meaning is the more usual or ordinary sense of the construction,⁵ most scholars reject the first interpretation in favor of the second or third. They do this for the following reason. Since God is the standard of righteousness, it is obviously impossible for a human being to be more righteous than God, and Job never suggested, claimed, or considered that it *was* possible or true, for himself or for any other human being. Since Job does not then actually believe that a human being can exceed the righteousness of God, there is no need for Eliphaz to address this matter through his question. Consequently, the preposition מִן must mean something other than “more than,” and the question must be something other than a greater-than rhetorical question.⁶

In arguing against the greater-than interpretation of the question in Job 4:17a, scholars have assumed that the only way to understand the greater-than rhetorical question is as a statement/refutation of an actually held belief. And since there is no such belief, there can be no such question.

It is possible, however, to understand the greater-than rhetorical question not as a statement/refutation of an actual belief but as a rhetorical ploy that makes use of hyperbole or overstatement. That is, Eliphaz and Job both know that a human being cannot be more righteous than God, and Eliphaz knows that Job knows this. However, Eliphaz asks Job whether this obviously impossible thing *is* possible because asking the question achieves a certain rhetorical purpose. Assuming, then, for the moment that the question is a rhetorical ploy that uses hyperbole or overstatement, what would the ploy be?⁷

In order to answer this question, note first the context in which the question appears. Eliphaz's goal is to persuade Job that, despite his essential righteousness (4:6), he is flawed and has done something wrong. To do this, Eliphaz creates a contrast between God and human beings (4:18–19). God is held up as the stan-

⁴ E.g., Samuel Terrien, “Job: Exegesis,” *IB* 3:939–40; Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 140; Katherine J. Dell, “Job,” *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (ed. James D. G. Dunn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 344–45; Samuel E. Balentine, *Job* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary 10; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 110–12, and Sidebar “The Syntax of Job 4:17” on CD-ROM.

⁵ Walter L. Michel, *Job in the Light of Northwest Semitic* (BibOr 42; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1987), 1:94–95; Terrien, *Job*, 939; Dhorme, *Commentary*, 52; Pope, *Job*, 37; Andersen, *Job*, 114; Habel, *Book of Job*, 116; Clines, *Job* 1–20, 112, 132.

⁶ Peake, *Job*, 81; Terrien, *Job*, 939–40; Dhorme, *Commentary*, 52; Rowley, *Job*, 55; Andersen, *Job*, 114; Clines, *Job* 1–20, 132; Balentine, *Job*, 111.

⁷ My argument in support of the greater-than interpretation is based on the rhetorical function of the question, something that even those who support this interpretation do not consider. I will not also investigate here the arguments made in support of the second and third interpretations.

dard of righteousness, and human beings are described as falling short of that measure (the arrow indicates both textual order and a descending scale of righteousness):

4:18	God	↓	<i>God's Righteousness</i>
4:19	Human Beings	↓	<i>Less than God's Righteousness</i>

Between God and human beings Eliphaz interposed angels, indicating that they reach a level of righteousness that is less than that of God, and that human beings reach a level of righteousness that is less than that of angels. Thus, Eliphaz formed the following graded series of items, or *incrementum* (i.e., a series of items that moves from the lesser to the greater or vice versa), in Job 4:18–19:

4:18	God	↓	<i>God's Righteousness</i>
4:18	Angels	↓	<i>Less than God's Righteousness</i>
4:19	Human Beings	↓	<i>Less than Angelic Righteousness</i>

One rhetorical effect of a graded series of items is to push the end items in such a series into opposition with each other or to bring the gap between them into greater relief by illustrating and enumerating the expanse that separates them with the intervening items in the series.⁸ Thus, in order to draw Job's attention to the fact that, as a human being, he does not match the righteousness of God, Eliphaz formed a graded series of items to create a sense of the moral distance that exists between God and a human being. This, then, is the rhetorical context of the question found in Job 4:17a.

As seen in the following diagram, the greater-than rhetorical question extended the graded series to a hyperbolic fourth level:

4:17a	Human Being	↓	<i>Can a human being be more righteous than God?</i>
4:18	God	↓	<i>God's Righteousness</i>
4:18	Angels	↓	<i>Less than God's Righteousness</i>
4:19	Human Beings	↓	<i>Less than Angelic Righteousness</i>

⁸ Jeanne Fahnestock, "Series Reasoning in Scientific Argument: *Incrementum* and *Gradatio* and the Case of Darwin," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 26 (1996): 15–18. For an analysis of the rhetorical function of progressions elsewhere in the Israelite textual record, see Yairah Amit, "Progression as a Rhetorical Device in Biblical Literature," *JSOT* 28 (2003): 3–32; Richard Whitekettle, "Forensic Zoology: Animal Taxonomy and Rhetorical Persuasion in Psalm Fifty," *VT* 58 (2008): 404–19.

Scholars have found that one rhetorical function of a hyperbole or overstatement is to elicit a “corrective response” from an audience.⁹ That is, a person who recognizes something as an overstatement will mentally correct the overstated idea down to the proper level.

Neither Job nor Eliphaz believed that a human being could be more righteous than God. Thus, when Job was asked whether this *was* possible in 4:17a, he would have recognized that it was a hyperbolic impossibility. He would, therefore, have responded by making the following downward correction in his mind: “No, a human being cannot be more righteous than God; a human being’s level of righteousness is not that high.” Having been compelled by the greater-than rhetorical question to move a human being in a downward direction on a scale of righteousness, Job would have been primed to continue this downward trend via the graded series of items in vv. 18–19. In the course of that series, Job was led to see that, in Eliphaz’s thinking at least, a human being belonged down past God, down past the angels, at a level of righteousness that was dramatically described as being amid the dust and moths (v. 19).

Thus, the greater-than comparative question in v. 17a, as an intentionally hyperbolic question, would have strengthened Eliphaz’s efforts to generate in Job a keen sense of the moral distance between God and himself. It did this by drawing Job into the measuring and mapping of that distance, and by slanting his thinking about where a human being should be located on that map in a downward direction. This downward orientation disposed him then to follow along over the course of vv. 18–19 with the descent of a human being to a very low level of righteousness.

In conclusion, note the following. First, a greater-than/hyperbolic rhetorical question would make a clear and strong contribution to Eliphaz’s goal of getting Job to acknowledge that a human being such as himself falls short of the righteousness of God. Second, since it adds a fourth level to the series, a greater-than/hyperbolic rhetorical question would fit the rhetorical context of a graded series of items perfectly. Third, as is often noted, a meaning of “more than” for the preposition מִן would be the more usual or ordinary sense of the construction. Together, these three things make a strong case for reading the rhetorical question in Job 4:17a as a greater-than rhetorical question: “Can a human being be more righteous than God?”

⁹ Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics 4; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 217–20; Robert J. Fogelin, *Figuratively Speaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 13, 16; Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 391–94; Herbert L. Colston, “I’ve Never Seen Anything Like It’: Overstatement, Understatement, and Irony,” *Metaphor and Symbol* 12 (1997): 44–45.

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