CAUTION: RHETORICAL QUESTIONS!

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Shall we receive good from the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? (Job 2.10)
Should I not spare Niniveh, that great city? (Jonah 4.11)

These two verses are widely translated and understood as rhetorical questions. Instead of expressing doubt, ignorance or mere curiosity like ordinary interrogations, rhetorical questions have the striking singularities, first to convey such a powerful persuasion that their obvious answer is seldom stated and secondly to deny what they affirm or to affirm what they deny[1]. God's question to Jonah is itself the very end of the book. Job's query to his wife is followed by the affirmation of his innocence. Yet everyone agree that we should receive good and evil from the hand of God and that God is quite right to spare repentant Niniveh. Does the existence of such a rhetorical device in European languages imply its existence in Biblical Hebrew? Only a detailed linguistic analysis would provide a definite answer. We shall only ask another question: are we actually dealing with questions? In fact, both Hebrew phrases read as negations:

Job 2.10 גם את־הטוב נקבל מאת האלהים ואת־הרע לא נקבל

Although we receive the good from God, the evil we shall not receive!

Jon. 4.11 ואני לא אחוס על־נינוה העיר הגדלה

But I will not spare Niniveh the great city!

Is it legitimate to introduce an interrogative turn in spite of the absence of interrogative ה? This question is all the more pressing as 'the very extensive use of the interrogative form is a stylistic trait peculiar to Hebrew[2]'. If Hebrew tends to use interrogative ה even when no question is implicit (*Heh* of surprise, exclamatory nuance) can the opposite be also true, can there be instances of questions without any interrogative particle? According to Joüon, 'a question, even when genuine, can be indicated, as in our languages, merely by the rising intonation[3]'. This paper will not question the existence of such device in Biblical Hebrew. It will question the validity of its use in Job 2 and Jon. 4.

The rhetorical questions in Jonah and Job result from a double process: two negative propositions *We shall not receive* and *I will not spare* are first turned into 'hidden' questions, questions devoid of explicit written interrogative particle and of explicit answer. Then, these implicit questions are turned into 'false' questions, questions that really are affirmations,

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[1] P. Fontanier, *Les figures du discours*, Paris, 1977, pp. 368-369.

[2] P. Joüon, T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 161*a b*.

[3] *Ibid.* Joüon adds: 'The omission of the interrogative ה is common after ו introducing an opposition: Job 2.10; Judg. 14.16; 11.23; 2 Sam. 11.11; Isa. 37.11; Jer. 25.29; 45.5; 49.12; Ezek. 20.31'. Note that in Judg. 14, Samson did eventually inform his wife; that in Isa. 37 Jerusalem was delivered from the Assyrians and that in Jer. and Ezek. the interrogative turn is confirmed by an immediate answer. Judg. 11.23 and 2 Sam. 11.11 would be the only examples where an implicit question is required and no reply is stated.

asserting precisely what the Hebrew denied. A diabolical trick indeed, but a diabolic encounter in the book of Job is no surprise.

Job 2.10

The second session of the Heavenly Council decreed that Job's health should be sacrificed. Naked[4] on his ash-heap, Job scraps his ulcers. He has to face his wife's suggestion: bless God and die! This instance of the verb *to bless* בָּרַךְ, the fourth since the beginning of the book (1.5.21; 2.5.9), is widely recognised as euphemism for *cursing*[5]. Thus the translation of בָּרַךְ by *to curse* according to the 'standard euphemism theory' discussed in details by Tod Linafelt[6]. Remembering that this verse is situated in the immediate vicinity of a "hidden-false question' and that we are dealing with a most formidable foe, we should be alert and recall that state-of-the-art translating practice would require to apply the same rule to all four instances of the root בָּרַךְ and to translate it consistently as either euphemism for קָלַל *to curse* or as straightforward *to bless*[7]. It would render the following:

	Euphemism (E)	Regular (R)
1.5	And it was so, when the days of feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them (his children), he rose up early in the morning and offered burned offerings according to the number of them all, for Job said: 'It may be that my sons have sinned and **cursed** God in their hearts'. Thus did Job continually.	'... It may be that my sons have sinned and **blessed** God in their hearts'....
1.10	(*The satan to God*): '...You have **cursed** the work of his hand and his possessions spread in the land'.	'...You have **blessed** the work of his hand ...'
1.11	(*The satan to God*): 'But put forth your hand and touch all that he has and he will **curse** you in your face'.	'...touch all that he has and he will **bless** you in your face'.
1.21	(*Job to himself*): 'Naked came I out of my mother's womb but naked will I return there: the Lord gave but the Lord has taken away; **cursed** be the name of the Lord'.	'... the Lord gave but the Lord has taken away; **blessed** be the name of the Lord'.
2.5	(*The satan to God*): 'But put forth your hand and touch his bone and his flesh and he will **curse** you in your face'.	'...touch his bone and his flesh and he will **bless** you in your face'.
2.9	(*Job's wife to Job*): 'You still persist in your integrity, **curse** God and die!'	'You still persist in your integrity, **bless** God and die!'

The consistent regular translation falls apart in 1.5: how can Job's children sin by blessing God in their hearts, when they enjoy such wealth and harmony? Consistent euphemism is

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[4] 'Job le nudiste ou la genèse de la sagesse', *Biblische Notizen* 88 (1997), 19-26.

[5] See M.H. Pope, 'Euphemism and Dysphemism in the Bible' in M.H. Pope, *Probative Pontificating in Ugaritic and Biblical Literature*, Mark Smith (ed.), Ugaritisch-biblische Literatur 10, Münster, 1994, 279-291.

[6] T. Linafelt 'The undecidability of בָּרַךְ in the prologue to Job and beyond", *Biblical Interpretation* IV,2 (1996), pp. 154-172. He has clearly demonstrated that this theory is not as standart as it seems (159-162). The clearest case is 1 Kgs 21.13 where it can be ironic: the sons of Belial while accusing Naboth of cursing God, testify at the same time that he really blessed God by refusing to give away the inheritance of his fathers (160). 1 Sam. 3.13 does not hesitate to write כִּמְקַלְלִים אֱלֹהִים (with Tiq. soph לָהֶם) cf. M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 67 and J.Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1976, 2.43.

[7] 'Translating *B-r-k in two opposite ways in the same passage is just an evasion of the problem', A. Cooper, 'Reading and Misreading the Prologue to Job', *JSOT* 46 (1990), pp. 67-79 (77).

equally unsatisfactory in 1.10: how could Job's fortune grow if God is not blessing it? Otherwise euphemism makes sense in the other verses taken individually. Even 1.21 is not totally unthinkable: Job curses the name of the God who gives and then takes away for no humanly apparent reason whatsoever. Apart from a professional Stoic philosopher, is it acceptable for a honest, hardworking and pious man to return to the grave as naked as he came out of his mother's womb? Abraham, born as naked as anyone else, returned to the place of all flesh, full of years[8] and surrounded with a plentiful offspring. A grave problem of logic remains however: if Job has actually cursed the Lord in 1.21, as the satan had foretold in 1.11, there is no point to carry on pressing him to make him curse God again (2.5)[9].

Therefore, one may suspect, as most translators do, that the use of euphemism does not apply to all instances of the root ברך and that the context needs to be consulted in each case in order to decide whether cursing or blessing applies. The consensus chose the Euphemism-Regular-Euphemism-Regular-Euphemism-Euphemism combination (EREREE). For reasons of logic we will accept that 1.5 has to be euphemistic[10] and that 1.10 has to be regular (all R----- and all EE---- combinations excluded), otherwise the basic meanings of blessing and cursing would have to be reconsidered altogether. But the other combinations should be weighed in all four other cases. A number of combinations can also be rejected: E (or R) both in 1.11 and 1.21 because if Job says in 1.21 what the satan expected him to say in 1.11 there is no more to say (all EREE-- and ERRR-- excluded), the same meaning in 1.21 and in 2.5 for the satan must want a second round in order to have Job say what he didn't say in 1.21 (all ER-EE- and ER-RR- excluded), E (or R) in 1.21 and 2.9 (all ER-E-E and ER-R-R excluded) as the wife challenges Job to change his mind, rather than to repeat what he said in 1.21. Apart from the consensus EREREE, only the following is still possible: ERRERR. This sequence draws the following picture:

Having lost his wealth, Job rightly curses the name of the God who gives and then takes away without reason (the friends will attempt to prove that there must be at least one reason)[11]. The satan has lost the first round and then bets that with the loss of his health, Job will bless God and this is what his wife also suggests. The satan is bent on having Job bless God in his face, which, after the combined loss of wealth and health would admittedly be quite farcical and would constitute a clear case of blasphemy if we accept that Job's cursing of the name of God in 1.21 proved his integrity and forced the satan to request his health in order to make him fall. Ruined, Job is able to reject a unfair God by cursing him. But when it comes to something as intimate as his health, skin for skin, he may loose his superb pride and be willing to bless God in order to plead with him and try to recover physically or at least to die and put an end to his misery. But Job's integrity will have no dealing with an unfair God, be it to ask for death. Uncompromising Job prefers to scrap his sores and so reveal the iniquity of the heavenly decrees. This is what he explains to his wife in the so-called rhetorical question of verse 10:

כדבר אחת הנבלות

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[8] Gen. 25.8 and also Job 42,16-17.

[9] At the end of its extensive plus (5 verses) the LXX renders the ברך of 2.9 in a very neutral way: ἀλλὰ εἰπόν τι ῥῆμα εἰς κύριον καὶ τελεύτα (2.9e) *but say some word to the Lord and finish!* The translators managed not to choose between blessing or cursing.

[10] Linafelt's attempt to read it regularly is unconvincing *op. cit.*, pp. 162-164. It is based on a suggestion by E. Good, *In turns of tempest: a reading of Job*, Stanford, 1990, p. 51: חטא and ברך function as a hendiadys meaning 'blessed God sinfully'.

[11] Job faith expresses itself in the prologue and the poems by consistently cursing God. See D. Penchansky, *The betrayal of God: ideological conflict in the book of* Job, Louisville, 1990, p. 86 and J. Wilcox, *The bitterness of Job: a philosophical reading*, Ann Arbor, 1989, p. 70 both cited by Linafelt 'Undecidability', p. 169.

תדברי גם את־הטוב נקבל מאת האלהים ואת־הרע לא נקבל

Most translators resort to a rhetorical question: *What, shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?*[12].

There is no trace of interrogative particle. גַם can acquire an adversative force *yet, but*, or (conceding a fact) *although*[13]. וְאֶת can also be understood adversatively. The overall meaning being a refusal to accept God as the source of both good and evil:

We certainly receive good from the hand of God, but the evil we shan't receive from Him.

This difficult reading could express what Job refuses to admit. He puts those offensive words into his wife's mouth in order to reject them vehemently:

You spoke like the speech of the foolish women (who say):
'though we receive the good from the God, the evil we will not receive'.

But nowhere in the next forty chapters do we find such a refutation. Job fights against God and friends, not against his wife. The *we* of נקבל can include Job. The foolish women's speech does not refer to this phrase but to Mrs Job's suggestion to bless God for the evil that befell them (verse 9). This is clearly indicated by the sequence of the verb *to speak*: first כדבר *like the speaking* (infinitive) referring to the previous verse, then the imperfect form תדברי *you will speak*, reinforced by גַם with an adversative meaning *rather*[14].

Speech[15] of a foolish woman! You should rather speak so:
'the good we will receive from the God, but the evil we shall not receive from him'.

The end of verse 10 then clearly affirms the innocence of Job, in all this, *Job did not sin with his lips*, in order to reject the paragon of philosophical piety, the receiving, with equal thankfulness, both good and evil[16]. This statement of agreement echoes 1.22:

ולא־נתן תפלה לאלהים *and he didn't give any unseemliness to God.*

Notice that the word תִפְלָה is rare. It is only clearly attested in Jer. 23.13 and Job 24.12. Its root is unclear. But the word תְפִלָה from the root פלל *to pray* is extremely common. Only the Masoretic vowels make the difference. Before the sixth century AD, both readings were possible. Therefore, after realising that he was going to return to dust as naked as he was born, Job added:

Yhwh gave but Yhwh took away; cursed be the name of Yhwh.
In all this, Job did not sin, he didn't give praise to God.

Job ascribes to God the sole responsibility for his stripping. He doesn't know of a devil who would allow God to wash his hands from any responsibility for evil. By cursing the name of Yhwh, Job refuses to accept his fate and to praise God for it. In this he remains upright and the satan asks for his health in order to make him bless God. But Job is not Adam. He resists even his wife and explains that from God, the fountain of all good[17], we receive every good. But not so with evil. Does this imply that we need an other source for evil? Job does not deal directly with this question, but the presence of the satan in the first chapters is a first step in that

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[12] King James'.

[13] As in Pss 95.9; 129.2; Jer. 6.15 = 8.2; Ezek. 20.23; Eccl. 4.8.16; 5.18; Neh. 6.1, BDB.

[14] Providing we don't follow the Masoretes' accentuation .

[15] Literally: *as a speech of one of the fools*. One would expect a perfect form of the root *to speak*, דברת to finish off this first part of the phrase before turning to תדברי.

[16] See Phil. 4.12.

[17] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.II.1.

direction. However, Job clearly rejects the idea that God could be the source of evil. For this very reason, God is to be blessed for the blessings, not for the curses. This portrait of Job conforms to the rest of the book. Job of the prologue may not be as naïvely pious as translators make him out[18] and the translation of ברך may be more 'decidable' than Linafelt claimed.

This proposal is clearly more difficult than the standart solution. But its mere possibility questions the validity of the rhetorical question of Job 2.10. While there might be no answer in the face of evil, translations should not remove the reader's ultimate responsability to decide between blessing and cursing.

Jonah 4.11

The last verse of Jonah, the prophets' *enfant terrible* reads:

ואני לא אחוס על־נינוה העיר הגדלה אשר יש־בה

משתים־עשרה רבו רבו אדם אשר לא־ידע בין־ימינו לשמאלו ובהמה רבה

But I, I will not spare Niniveh the great city in which are more than a hundred and twenty
thousand persons that cannot discern their right hand to their left and much cattle.

Once again the device of rhetorical question has been used to transform God's solemn announcement of the destruction of Niniveh into it's exact opposite. Yet, a few verse before, the same God had not hesitated to grow a *qiqayon* overnight and to kill it the night after[19]. In spite of the fact that anyone, Judean of the sixth century BCE or European of the twentieth century CE, could go and check for himself the aftermath of the passage of Nabopolassar in Niniveh in 612 BCE, our Bibles consistently turn God into a liar by suggesting that God is too squeamish to stomach the destruction of a megalopolis, people, cattle and all. Poor Jonah, you are crying over a plant, wait until the Babylonians come!

And yet, this straightforward reading is systematically refused. One facinating exemple comes from an excellent article dealing with Biblical accounts of the fall of Niniveh[20]. After examining Isaiah, Nahum and Zephaniah, Machinist turns to Jonah, translitterates Jon. 4.11, translates it with a question[21] without ever questioning the question and affirms that Jonah and Nahum are the only two prophetic books to end with a question. The conclusion is that Jonah represents an aberration in its attitude towards Assyria while a straightforward reading of Jon. 4.11 would have simply put Jonah's attitude towards Assyria in line with the other Biblical books. But Machinist goes on to point out that Tobit 14.4 corrects the Assyriophile reading of Jonah. The dying father entreats his son Tobias to run away from Niniveh: "I fully believe what Jonah the prophet said about Niniveh, that it will be overthrown". Interestingly, this reading of Alexandrinus and Vaticanus desagrees with the Sinaiticus which attributes the prophecy of the destruction of Niniveh to Nahum instead of Jonah. This disagreement reveals that the difficulty to accept the straightforward reading of Jon 4.11 dates back to the Greek translators. But it also proves that Jon.4 was still read by the oldest Greek tradition[22] as an oracle of doom. There would have been no point to ask Tobias to leave Niniveh if God was going to spare the great city.

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[18] *Pace* A. Brenner, 'Job the Pious?', *JSOT* 43 (1989), pp. 37-52.

[19] See T.M. Bolin, *Freedom beyond forgiveness*, Sheffield, 1997, pp. 162-164.

[20] P. Machinist, "The fall of Assyria in comparative ancient perspective", in *Assyria 1995,* S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting (eds.), Helsinki, 1997, pp. 179-196.

[21] P. Machinist, "The fall of Assyria", p. 185.

[22] Alexandrinus and Vaticanus are considered older than Sinaiticus: H. Gross, *Tobit, Judit,* Echter Verlag, Würzburg, 1987, pp. 7-8.

Of course, one can argue that Jon. 4 has to be read in the light of Chapter 3 that presents the repentance of the Ninivites and the affirmation that God repented from the evil he had planned against Niniveh. But when Jonah and Tobit were written, Niniveh had met its fate, alongside Babylon. Even Zion, the mountain of the Lord had been utterly destroyed. Could the writers of those books be so naïve as to pretend that God had spared Niniveh? If it is read as it is written, the fourth chapter of Jonah is in line with the rest of the book. The offering of Yhwh's caring forgiveness to the nations (sailors and imperialists) is put into the wider perspective of 'historical' processes with a clear warning: the welcome repentance of individuals, be they humans or beasts (3.7-8) has not and will not prevent the destruction of one Empire by its successor. After deriding the prophets' eagerness to preach judgement and fire over the nations, the book of Jonah turns against its own bleating gentleness. Judgement is brought back in to prevent the disintegration of grace and forgiveness into sentimentalism. Yhwh saved the Phœnician sailors but he was not fooled by the Assyrian's overdone piety. Nor will he reverse the course of events when a few sheep put on sack-cloth.

Conclusion

Translating those two passages with rhetorical questions is a grave treachery for the unfortunate readers who can't check the text by themselves. It is also an illegitimate dogmatic correction if the change is not duly discussed by its author.

On the basis of Jon. 4.11 and Job 2.10, the common resort to a rhetorical question in phrases devoid of a clear interrogative particle appears to be a translator's subterfuge to escape the theological questions resulting from a straightforward translation of the phrase. In such instances, a question eludes bigger questions and prevents the exploration of some possible meanings of the text. Other instances of ambiguous rhetorical questions may exist, suggestions are welcomed: Philippe.Guillaume@theologie.unige.ch