Device of Progression in the Prologue to Job

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In her 2003 article, Yairah Amit demonstrates the usage of progression as a rhetorical device in biblical literature. She has given the device of progression a definition as follows:

"Progression ... is a rhetorical technique ... that organises the data for the author in a multi-phased, hierarchical structure, wherein the elements are arranged in an ascending or descending order: from the general to the particular, or vice versa; from minor to major, or the reverse; from the expected to the unexpected; the impersonal to the personal, and so on. Often the final step in the progression is the climactic one, while each of the preceding steps plays its part in expanding or narrowing the sequence, and thereby shedding more light on the subject".¹

She reaches the conclusion that "[t]he progressive structure serves not only to make order in the data sequence, but also to organise it so that, as well as having an aesthetic value, the text is given added meaning."²

The Book of Job is one of many examples quoted in Amit's work. She takes a macro perspective on how the device of progression is generally employed in this book as a whole.³ However, she does not delve deeply into analysis Job 1-2. Inspired by Amit's article, this study intends to take a micro view on how such a device is extensively and deliberately used in the Prologue to Job.

I contend that in the Prologue Job's piety, prosperity, calamities and his reactions to the sufferings are vividly illustrated using the device of progresssion. Apart from these, the most crucial motif of $\neg \neg$ surfaces repeatedly (six occurrences in the Prologue) in a progressive sense too. This gradualist technique not only impacts the story world of the Job narrative, but also subtly influences the system of signals upon the reader.⁴

- Amit, Progression 9.
- ² Amit, Progression 28.
- ³ Amit, Progression 17-8.
- ⁴ Amit, Progression 6.

1) Completeness of Job's Piety

The information that Job is a righteous man, is the fundamental data indispensable for the book as a whole.⁵ In the Prologue Job's character is first introduced by the narrator, and then it is twice confirmed by God. In fact, both the narrator's and God's comments on Job echo each other. It is not difficult to discover the trace of progression in the text, which is examined in this section.

A. Narrator's Comment

At the very beginning of the prose narration (1:1) Job is depicted as a man, who is blameless (תם), upright (ישר), fearing God (ירא אלהים) and shunning evil (סר מרע). The narrator uses the above four expressions to generally describe Job's perfect piety. At the end of this section (1:5) he illustrates Job's character by giving a specific example. Job 1:5 vividly highlights Job's scrupulous fear of sin. He continually brings and offers sacrifices for each of his children lest they might have sinned and "bless / curse" (ברך)⁶ God in their hearts. Job 1:1 and 1:5 thus form an inclusio, providing the significant backdrop of Job's absolute righteousness. Moving from the general to particular depiction, the narrator skilfully shows his audience both Job's and his children's complete innocence.

Clines rightly points out that the narration here moves away from the "actionless beginning" (1:1) to the "repeated action" (1:5). And Job's habitual thought is brought out by an interior speech (1:5).⁷ The progression from actionless exposition to repetitive action, and then to speech-act gradually sets the story in motion. After a short expository "telling" by the narrator, the audience have their first taste of dramatic "showing" of Job's story.⁸ Bringing the speech-act into foreground serves to give the audience a sense of "immediacy".⁹ The tempo and flow of the story will be geared up

⁵ Clines, Job 1-20, 8.

⁶ Concerning the meaning and rendering of the Hebrew verb ____, see my analysis later in this paper.

⁷ Clines, Job 1-20, 7. Weiss points out that the *yiqtol* form (יעשה) in 1:5b expresses a repetitive action. Offering sacrifices for the children becomes Job's regular habit. See Weiss, Story 31.

⁸ Sternberg, Poetic 122. Sternberg points out that the Bible's free recourse to exegetical telling does not preclude a mastery of the art of dramatic showing.

⁹ Alter, Art 67. According to Alter, the use of speech-act gives the audience not only a sense of immediacy, but also a certain complicating ambiguity.

to move forward when the dramatic telling is gradually shifted to the dramatic showing.

B. God's Boasts

God's first boast of Job in 1:8b is exactly the same as the narrator's comment in 1:1b – blameless (הידא אלהים), upright (ישר), fearing God (ידא אלהים) and shunning evil (מרש מר). However, His praise of Job is even more hyperbolic than the narrator's. Job is not merely "the greatest of all the people of the east" as the narrator claims (1:3). God even considers Job as "My servant" and declares that "there is none like him in the earth" (1:8a).¹⁰ Such comment from God makes Job's character even more impressive to the reader.

In His second boast concerning Job, God once again regards Job as "My servant" and also claims that "there is none like him in the earth" (2:3a). He also repeated Job's four traits (1:1; 1:8) – blameless (תור), upright (ישר), fearing God (ישר) and shunning evil (ישר). (כר מרט), Upright (ישר) and shunning evil (ישר) (כר מרט) other than these, God adds one more comment, stating that Job still holds fast to his integrity (2:3c). After the first test God further affirms Job's integrity (המר) – his genuine piety – before the satan. Fokkelman rightly states that Hebrew Bible writers "developed a sophisticated technique of varied repetition" so as to expand the richness of meanings and keep all the surprises for us.¹¹ The varied repetition brings forth progression. Therefore the varied nuances in God's two boasts of Job have deepened our impression over Job's perfect character.

The evaluations of the narrator and God are trustworthy in the Bible. Bar-Efrat points out, "These expressions of direct characterisation are uttered by the narrator, who is the supreme authority, and by God, who is above authority."¹² Therefore the new nuances in God's two boasts gradually added to the narrator's comment on Job serve to further convince the audience about Job's complete innocence. The reader follows this step-by-step process and notes all the epithets by which the narrator and God designate Job.

¹⁰ Newsom, Book 349; and Clines, Job 1-20 24.

¹¹ Fokkelman, Narrative 112.

¹² Bar-Efrat, Narrative 88; and Lo, Job 28 41.

2) Completeness of Job's Blessings

In addition to Job's perfect character, the author also intends his prosperity to stand out. Both the narrator and the satan mention about Job's perfect blessings, where the technique of progression can be detected.

A. Narrator's Descriptions

Job 1:2-4 underscores Job's perfect blessings – his children and property. His family and wealth are described in round numbers symbolising complete abundance (3+7; 5+5) – seven sons and three daughters (1:2), seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels; five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred female donkeys; and a very large household (1:3). The order is arranged from the closest to the distant – children, livestock and servants. The sons and daughters are mentioned first because having offspring is the greatest thing among all Job's blessings and it is the most essential one.¹³

Despite the exceeding affluence being highlighted, Job's blessing from God has not reached its climax until the narrator proceeds to pinpoint the family's perfect happiness and affection, which is fully expressed in the constant round of banquets held by the children (1:4). When his sons hold feasts in one another's houses in turn, they invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. The reader thus has a clear glimpse of Job's perfect family in a more specific way. Job 1:2 and 1:4 thus echo each other, illustrating things from the general to the particular perspective. To sum up, all the blessings in Job 1:2-4 are arranged in an increasingly progressive way, making a remarkable crescendo in the text, which will effectively capture the reader's attention.

B. Satan's Descriptions

In response to God's boast of Job, the satan points out that it is God's blessing itself that casts doubt on the very possibility of disinterested piety (1:9-10). He claims that God has put a hedge (שוך) around Job (1:10). In the satan's speech, God's protection is depicted in a three-part sequence, proceeding from the most intimate to the most distant – Job himself, his house (i.e. family) and his possessions (1:10).¹⁴ The degree of significance is reflected in the descending order, which highlights the full coverage of God's blessings and protection over Job. Echoing with the narrator's words in Job 1:2-4, the structured sequence here cautiously and gradually heighted the reader's familiarity over the subject.

¹³ Weiss, Story 54.

¹⁴ Newsom, Book 349.

3) Completeness of Job's Destruction

A. Job's First Test

In Job 1:2-3 Job's blessings are listed in the sequence of -1) sons and daughters, 2) herds of sheep and camels, 3) oxen and asses, and then 4) servants. In the first test of Job the satan suggests God to remove His hedge over all that Job has (1:11). Regarding the messengers' reports of disasters (1:13-19), the above sequence is almost in a reverse order. With the destruction of the servants being reported throughout the four incidents, the disasters are announced in this order -1) oxen and asses, 2) sheep, 3) camels and 4) children.¹⁵ The progression proceeds from the most distant to the most intimate. The severity of calamity increases one after another and reaches its peak when Job is utterly bereft of all his children.¹⁶ The cumulative force of the four successive disasters in a single day thus "heightens the impress-sion of the suddenness and completeness of the calamity."¹⁷

B. Job's Second Test

After taking away all Job's possessions, Job still holds fast to his integrity (2:3).

Then the satan suggests another harsher test in order to defeat Job (2:5). With God's permission, Job is smitten with severe sore boils ("שרין") that afflict his whole body, "from the soles of his feet to the top of his head" (a totality of affliction; 2:7). Resembling the first group of calamities, Job's second affliction also shows a strong sense of suddenness and completeness.¹⁸ The total loss of all possessions is shortly followed by the total affliction of skin disease. It also reveals an increasing degree of suffering, which effect-tively prompts the reader to worry what Job's reaction will be.

The ancient tradition sees Job's wife as the satan's assistant (Augustine, Chrysostom, Calvin, Aquinas). Habel considers her challenge as Job's ultimate test. He claims that "the narrator has Job's wife serve as the earthly mouthpiece for the hidden Satan."¹⁹ Eisemann thinks that Job's agony is to be total because his wife's suggestion is just like rubbing salt into Job's wounds. He further points out that "no man is ever completely forsaken as long as a loving and supportive wife is at his side."²⁰ The question whether

¹⁵ Newsom, Book 351.

¹⁶ Driver and Gray, Commentary 15.

¹⁷ Driver and Gray, Commentary, 14.

¹⁸ Newsom, Book 355; and Clines, Job 1-20 47.

¹⁹ Habel, Book 96.

²⁰ Eisemann, Job 25.

Job's wife is another harsher blow to him still remains controversial due to her ambiguous role in the story.²¹ But I concur with Segal that Job's test does not end in the Prologue, but continues throughout the book until he finally encounters God. His test becomes even greater when he faces his friends' harshest confrontation and accusations later in the story.²² In other words, the progression of Job's tests extends far beyond the Prologue.

4) Job's Responses to His Tests

The technique of progression can also be traced when we compare Job's two responses to his tests (1:20-22; 2:10). In order to highlight the differences, the two scriptures are listed side by side as follows:

1:21b-22	2:10
The Lord gave,	Shall we receive good from God,
and the Lord has taken away;	and shall we not receive evil?

bless be the name of the Lord

In all this Job did not sin In all this Job did not sin with his or charge God with wrong.

Firstly, after his former trial, Job speaks and calls upon God by addressing His personal name "the Lord" (יהוה) for three times (1:21).²³ Job's acknowledgement of God's sovereignty is expressed with the strongest conviction.²⁴ Responding to his wife's remarks, Job talks about God (כיהוה); 2:10a), but not talk to "the Lord" (יהוה). Here he makes only a single reference to אלהים and his words sound much less personal. Therefore the first comparison indicates that Job's relationship with God gradually becomes more distant and impersonal.²⁵

Secondly, in 1:20-21 Job worships and blesses God, while in 2:10 he does not utter a blessing to God.²⁶ Job acknowledges God's sovereignty of

²¹ Clines, Job 1-20 50-51. For the function of Job's wife in the Book of Job, see Sasson, Literary.

²² Concerning "the test" as the central motif linking the whole Book of Job, see Segal, Introduction 646-651 [Hebrew]. As regards the absence of the term "test" and the perception of it as a seemingly hidden polemic in the Book of Job, see Amit, Test 241-249. In another article Amit points out that "the story of Job leads us to view the tests to which Job is put as a rising scale." See Amit, Progression 17.

²³ Janzen, Job 53-54; and Hartley, Book 78.

²⁴ Hartley, Job 78.

²⁵ Newsom, Job 356; and van Wolde, Text-Semantic 34.

²⁶ Newsom, Job 356; and van Wolde, Text-Semantic 34.

giving and taking back in 1:21, but he states that God is the source of both good and evil things in 2:10. At this moment Job is still willing to accept all that God dispenses, whether good or evil, and he does not probe the motive for this evil yet. However, the author has already left a hint here, which serves to foreshadow Job's questioning about God later in the story.²⁷

Thirdly, the narrator in 1:21 comments that "Job did not sin," whereas in 2:10 he adds the phrase "with his lips." This phrase may carry two contradictory meanings. It could mean that Job controlled himself from the inside out. Alternatively, it could also suggest that Job did not sin with his lips, but he did in his heart (Talmud Bab., Targum, Baba Batra 16b, Rashi).²⁸ Although at this point Job had not sinned with his lips, we see a hint anticipating that he was about to do so. Clines rightly points out that "[t]he narrative remark about Job's lips leaves him in the clear morally at this point; but it foreshadows the very different turn the narrative will take when Job opens his mouth again."²⁹

Lastly, van Wolde insightfully notes that in 1:21 Job speaks from the perspective of God – "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away." However, in 2:10 he speaks from the human perspective – "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?"³⁰ Such a shift from the heavenly to earthly horizon implicitly indicates that Job's attitude gradually moves from god-centredness to man-centredness.

In sum, the above four striking differences between Job's responses to his two tests have added a certain ambiguity to Job's character. Although Job's pious speech may be genuine enough, "the full truth about his reaction to his calamity is not yet revealed."³¹

This raises the level of narrative tension, which has to be resolved later in the story. Nevertheless, the above comparisons have given us some hints about his gradual alienation from God. At least, Job's curse of the day of his birth in chapter 3 will not appear to be a total surprise to the reader.

- ³⁰ Van Wolde, Text-Semantic 34.
- ³¹ Clines, Job 1-20 55.

²⁷ Van Wolde, Text-Semantic 34.

²⁸ Clines, Job 1-20 55; Newsom, Job 356-357; van Wolde, Text-Semantic 34; and Weiss, Story 71-3.

²⁹ Clines, Job 1-20 55.

5) Theme of ברך

The root \Box appears six times in the Prologue (1:5, 10, 11; 1:21; 2:5, 9).³² The English reader often misses the peculiar sense of the Hebrew text. Despite its primary meaning of "to bless", the verb \Box in 1:5, 11 and 2:5, 9 is widely translated in a diametrically opposite sense of "to curse / blaspheme" (cf. 1Kgs 21:10, 13). The "standard euphemism theory" is commonly accepted as the reason for such treatment of \Box .³³ This theory suggests that $\Box \Box$ may be used as an euphemistic substitute for blasphemy when God is the object of a verb meaning "to curse" (\neg \Box).³⁴ I agree with Linafelt that the conflicted meaning of \Box other than the euphemistic purpose, the use of Job as a whole.³⁵ Other than the euphemistic purpose, the use of \Box may also be a part of the narrative artistry. Most importantly, the six occurrences of \Box in the Prologue have created a progressive sense of ambiguity and irony, which requires the reader to negotiate its meaning.³⁶ The recurrences of the \Box motif in the Prologue have demonstrated a deliberate use of progressive structure in the text.

A. Job 1:5

כי אמר איוב אולי חטאו בני וברכו אלהים בלבבם Job 1:5

Job's inner thought in this verse is often euphemistically translated as "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts" (ESV). Alternatively, there is another possible rendering for it: "Perhaps my children have missed something (\square)": meaning "missing the mark"), but have blessed God in their hearts." It means his children may have committed some minor transgression, but they continue to "bless" (\square)" God in their hearts.³⁷ The conflicted rendering in 1:5 alerts the reader to the ambi-

³² There are nine occurrences of the root and in the Book of Job. It appears six times in the Prologue. Seven of them are in piel stem – 1:5, 10, 11; 2:5, 9; 31:20; 42:12. The one in 1:21 is a pual, while the one in 29:13 is a noun. See Linafelt, and a set of the set of

³³ Linafelt borrows the term from Pope's "standard scribal euphemism" in his commentary, Pope, Job 8. For the details of the "standard euphemism theory", see Linafelt, Undecidability 156-158; Mitchell, Meaning 161-64; and also Dhorme, Commentary 4-5.

³⁴ Contra Blank, Mitchell points out that ארר is not an antonym of ברך. For further details, see Mitchell, Meaning 161; and Blank, Curse 83.

³⁵ Linafelt, Undecidability 158.

³⁶ Newsom, Job346; and Linafelt, Undecidability 160.

³⁷ Linafelt, Undecidability 163.

guous but intriguing meanings of ברך, and prompts them to "make sense" of the text.

In addition to its ambiguity in meaning, this verse also serves as a pioneer in the $\neg \neg \neg$ theme to bring out a sense of irony. Job's making sacrifices for his children, as mentioned above, is a sign of his exemplary piety and scrupulous belief. But ironically, "it is precisely Job's righteousness that will set in motion events leading to the deaths of his children."³⁸ Does Job's pious act really bring blessings to him? In the following sections, this work proceeds to demonstrate how each of the six occurrences of $\neg \neg \neg$ echoes each other and cumulatively deepens the richness of its intriguing meanings.

B. Job 1:10-11

Job 1:10 הלא־את שכת בעדו ובעד־ביתו ובעד כל־אשר־לו מסביב מעשה ידיו ברכת ומקנהו פרץ בארץ : סטשה ידיו ברכת ומקנהו פרץ בארץ : Job 1:11 ואולם שלח־נא ידך וגע בכל־אשר-לו אם־לא על־פניך יברכך :

The satan uses the verb $\Box \Box \Box$ twice in 1:10-11. Firstly, he expresses that God has always "blessed" ($\Box \Box \Box$) and protected Job (1:10). The satan questions Job's motive for fearing God, and at the same time accuses God of "having made it worth Job's while to behave in an ethically credible manner."³⁹ Therefore, the verb $\Box \Box \Box \Box$ ironically brings out a double challenge – both Job's and God's integrity.⁴⁰

In 1:11 the satan uses $\neg \neg \neg$ in the opposite meaning, expecting Job "to curse" God. The clause beginning with $\varkappa \neg \neg \varkappa$ is an oath formula.⁴¹ Thus the satan's statement can be rendered as: "Stretch out your hand and strike all that he has, and I will be cursed if he does not curse you to your face!" Two contradictory meanings of the same verb $\neg \neg \neg$ (in v.10 & v.11) are juxtaposed together in one sentence. The peculiarity of the Hebrew text thus serves to engage the reader to negotiate with the meaning of $\neg \neg$. Job offers sacrifices on his children's behalf because he fears that they may have cursed God *in their hearts* (in a hidden way; 1:5), whereas the satan challenges God to strike all that Job has to see whether he will curse God *to His face* (in public

³⁸ Newsom, Job 346.

³⁹ Brown, Deformation 52.

⁴⁰ Lo, Job 28 40.

⁴¹ Normally the full form of self-curse contains both a protasis ("if" statement) and an apodosis ("then" statement). The shortened form of the self-curse, without the apodosis, commonly functions as an exclamation, and occasionally it serves the same function as its full form. See Walke and O'Connor, Introduction 679; Newsom, Job 349; Good, Turns 194-195.

utterance; 1:11). The echo between Job 1:5 and 1:11 has increasingly heightened the ironic sense of ברך.

Job 1:11 ואולםאָם־לא על־פּניך יברכך : אולם יהוה מברך : Job 1:21

The occurrence of "blessed" (מברך) in 1:21 reminds the reader of the real issue in the Prologue – whether Job will curse God. The two possibilities of ברך are open to Job, and he chooses to "bless" the name of the Lord. Ironically, "the satan's prediction comes true in a literal sense but not in the intended sense."⁴² Therefore, ברך in 1:21 echoes its precedent in 1:11 and adds to its ironic sense.

D. Job 2:5

על פניך יברכך	אם לא	בכל אשר לו	שלח נא ידך וגע	ואולם	Job 1:11
אל פניך יברכך	אם לא	אל עצמו ואל בשרו	שלח נא ידך וגע	אולם	Job 2:5

E. Job 2:9

: ותאמר לו אשתו ערך מחזיק בתמתך ברך אלהים ומת Job 2:9

The irony and ambiguity of the meaning of ברך reach the highest point in 2:9, where Job's wife urges Job to ברך God and die. Ironically, the first half of her speech echoes the words of Yahweh (ועדנו מחזיק בתמתו); 2:3), while the second half echoes the words of the satan (ברך; 1:11; 2:5). The new element added in her speech is "to die" (מותו). She strongly affirms Job's integrity and at the same time, she urgently challenges Job to ברך God and die. Here both meanings of ברך function side by side.

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⁴² Habel, Job 93. See also Clines, Job 1-20 36; Newsom, Job 352-353; and Weiss, Story 61.

The verb $\neg \neg \neg$ here may have an euphemistic meaning: "Are you still holding fast to your integrity? Curse God and die." The urgency of her appeal is expressed by the two imperatives "curse and die". Job's cursing God would hasten his certain death, and thus alleviate his suffering.⁴³ Cursing God is supposed to be such a severe sin of wrongdoing that Job so much worries about his children. However, it is noteworthy that Job's reaction to his wife is unexpectedly mild.⁴⁴ This may arouse the reader's attention to seek a better sense of $\neg \neg$.

Most probably, ברך may be taken to mean "to bless" in an ironical sense. When the previous disasters had befallen Job, he blessed God: "Blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). However, this blessing was in turn rewarded by the sore boils (שרין). If Job continues to maintain his integrity and again bless God, his next reward will be "death". In other words, Job's wife is warning him "not to bless" God again.⁴⁵

Concerning the double meanings of $\neg \neg \neg$, its sense of ambiguity and irony has accumulated to the fullest expression when the story proceeds to 2:9. An open text like this invites the reader to negotiate and re-negotiate the meaning of $\neg \neg \neg$ so as to make sense of the text. The six occurrences of $\neg \neg \neg$ in the Prologue to Job are not coincidental. It raises the question of what it really means to be "blessed" by God. "Blessing, for Job, is bound up with curse."⁴⁶ Linafelt rightly points out that "the prologue sets up the tension of what constitutes blessing or curse by means of the semantic undecidability of $\neg \neg \neg$, which the rest of the book then functions to explore."⁴⁷ The structured sequence of the $\neg \neg \neg$ theme gradually catches the reader's attention to the major issue of the book. Again the device of progression is embedded in the development of this motif throughout the Prologue.

Summary

The above analysis has closely examined how the device of progression is employed in the Prologue to Job. It sheds added light on the protagonists (Job, God and the satan) and on the thematically crucial word _____. In a gradual way the reader is engaged to wrestle with Job over the issue of innocent suffering. Such artistry effectively draws us to ponder the depth and richness of the text.

- ⁴⁶ Linafelt, Undecidability 169.
- ⁴⁷ Linafelt, Undecidability 169.

⁴³ Hartley, Job 83-4; Driver and Gray, Book 25; Weiss, Story 69-70.

⁴⁴ Clines, Job 1-20 53; and O'Connor, God 55.

⁴⁵ Malbim suggests this interpretation. See Eisemann, Job 25; and Pfeffer 62, n. 9. O'Connor also holds similar viewpoint. For further details, see O'Connor, God.

Zusammenfassung

In der oben durchgeführten Analyse wurde genau überprüft, wie im Prolog zu Ijob das Konzept für eine Weiterentwicklung angelegt ist. Dieses wirft zusätzliches Licht auf die Protagonisten (Ijob, Gott und Satan) und auf das thematisch entscheidende Wort ברך In stufenweiser Form wird der Leser dazu geführt, gemeinsam mit Ijob um das Problem des unschuldigen Leidens zu ringen. Der Kunstgriff bewirkt nachdrücklich, dass wir über das Gewicht und den Reichtum des Textes nachsinnen.

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