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Job of Suburbia? *A Serious Man* and Viewer Perceptions of the Biblical

Abstract

In the short period since its release in 2009, the notion that *A Serious Man* represents a retelling of the Book of Job has gained great currency. This is the case despite the film's makers, Joel and Ethan Coen, denying that the biblical tale was their inspiration. This article considers the relationship between Job and *A Serious Man* and the motivations that may lie behind the assertion of parallels between the two. It is ultimately suggested that the relationship between film and text is more substantial if we look beyond the partial plot similarities to the theme of theological absurdity that both explore.

Since its release in 2009, assertions that Joel and Ethan Coen's *A Serious Man* amounts to a retelling of the Book of Job have abounded among media commentators and academics alike. Writing in the *Journal of Religion and Film* Carol Linnitt referred to the film as a "modern day Job story"; in the journal *Multicultural Perspectives* Bernard Beck suggested it had been "[m]odeled on the Book of Job"; and in *The New York Times* A. O. Scott described *A Serious Man* as "the new movie version" of the biblical tale.¹

The reasons for linking the film with Job are not difficult to discern. Larry Gopnik, the central character of the Coen brothers' creation, is first introduced to viewers as a man living out a broadly successful life in a 1960s Midwestern suburb and exhibiting no major character faults or reasons to deserve the suffering about to befall him. But befall him it most certainly does: Larry's wife leaves him for another man in their Jewish community; the dysfunctional nature of his other family relationships becomes increasingly apparent; Larry's stable progress through an academic career begins to look decidedly precarious; his financial situation deteriorates rapidly due to a sequence of unexpected developments; and he is finally shown facing the threat of major illness. Like the biblical Job, Larry's life collapses with no moral justification apparent to him. And where Job's plight is made no better by the theological speculations of his three friends Eliphaz,

Bildad and Zophar, *A Serious Man* is in part structured around Larry's vain attempts to find comfort in the three rabbis from whom he seeks advice. As if to cement the parallel, with the final scenes comes the appearance of a tornado tearing up the suburban landscape – a destructive image of nature reminiscent of the whirlwind out of which God speaks to Job at the climax of the biblical story.

Stated in such terms the case for viewing *A Serious Man* as a retelling of the Book of Job appears a strong one. But there are two significant problems. The first is that Joel and Ethan Coen do not seem to have intended such a parallel. In an interview contained on the website of Working Title (one of the production companies behind *A Serious Man*) they make clear their lack of intentions in this regard:

Is *A Serious Man* based on a novel, i.e. The Book of Job?

Ethan: That's funny, we hadn't thought of it in that way. That does have the tornado, like we do, but we weren't thinking of that.

Joel: [...] we weren't thinking this was like The Book of Job. We were just making our movie. We understand the reference, but it wasn't in our minds.²

A second difficulty is that while the plot of *A Serious Man* possesses some major continuities with Job, it also possesses some noticeable discontinuities. In chapters 1-2 of the biblical story, the reader is granted access to scenes of dialogue between God and Satan in which Job's fate is decided. No clear parallel

with these scenes in heaven are present in the Coen brothers' film. It should also be noted that links between the tornado in *A Serious Man* and the divine whirlwind of Job 38-42 are distinctly limited. While in the biblical tale the whirlwind is a medium through which God is able to speak in rich poetic imagery, the cinematic tornado is just a tornado (i.e. it does not speak, it merely tears up the asphalt and roofs of a modern American suburb). Finally, and rather importantly, in the Coen brothers' film there is no restoration akin to Job's in the biblical book's final chapter. Whereas 'the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before' (42:10), Larry is granted no respite. Indeed, the last time we see him in *A Serious Man* he is being ominously called to see his doctor following the results of a medical test. The parallels between Job and this film are thus compelling, but not completely compelling.

In response to these two problems with aligning Job with *A Serious Man* there are two counter-points that should be raised. The first is that even if the Coen brothers have explicitly stated that they did not have Job in mind when creating their film, there is good reason to treat such comments with caution. For as a number of commentators have noted, their public statements should not necessarily be taken at face value. Georg Seesslen notes that "[t]he Coens' interviews and press conferences are full of false trails and more or less incomprehensible jokes" while Edward Schulbyte laments their habit of inventing

non-existent individuals in their film credits.³ Thus even if Joel and Ethan Coen say that the Book of Job did not influence their thinking when writing and making *A Serious Man*, there remains room to doubt this.

The second and more substantial caveat deserving of mention is the idea that it does not in any case wholly matter whether the Coen brothers meant their film to be a retelling of Job. For to a significant extent it is each viewer who themselves possesses the authority to decide how a film should be perceived. As Margaret Miles reflects, “film does not contain and determine its own meaning; meaning is negotiated between the spectator and the film.”⁴ We might thus conclude that if a viewer comes to understand *A Serious Man* as a retelling of Job, that is their rightful prerogative quite regardless of the intentions of its creators.

However, it is worth considering in greater depth why viewers may wish to identify *A Serious Man* as a retelling of Job in the first place. For merely observing the continuities and discontinuities between the text and the film does not itself get to the heart of why the partial plot parallels have been so enthusiastically highlighted. The motivations behind identifying the Job-like aspects of the Coen brothers’ film relate, I suspect, to the nature of *A Serious Man* as an absurdist comedy that disrupts viewer’s expectations regarding narrative conventions.

In his 2003 book *Film as Religion*, John Lyden suggests that one of the ways in which cinema can function religiously is by providing a model of the universe that is at its heart coherent and meaningful. He further notes that “if films do diverge from this convention, audiences may find themselves annoyed and even upset.” Lyden gives the example of showing Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) to a group of students, reporting that “[t]hey were incensed that Allen should make a film showing the wicked going unpunished.”⁵ The reason that his students were upset was that the film did not conform to the kind of reassuringly coherent worldview they were used to engaging with on the film screen. From my own experiences of showing *A Serious Man* to undergraduates I can report that it produces a similar outcome. Some students were simply irritated by the film’s absences of closure, predictability and discernible narrative development. For it is not only the character Larry who is faced with the anxiety of experiencing a world without meaning, it is the viewer as well.

Returning to the issue of why people might want to see *A Serious Man* as a retelling of Job, my proposal is that such a parallel is attractive because it provides viewers with a way of absorbing and ultimately negating the disruptive nature of the film. To watch this Coen brothers’ film is to be initially left with as little comfort as the story’s central protagonist in facing a universe that is absurd, random and disturbing. But to then ‘discover’ that it is a retelling of a classic

religious tale provides a greater sense of understanding. If *A Serious Man* is viewed as simply the Book of Job in 1960s suburbia, the elements of the narrative that were at first unnerving, unpredictable and strange can then be situated in a familiar religious and cultural context. The film may have seemed unsettling at first, but by bringing Job into the picture it can be ‘understood’.

As I have argued, seeing *A Serious Man* as a retelling of the Book of Job is a legitimate choice that each viewer can take. The Coen brothers do not appear to have intended the film to be such and there are several significant disjunctions between their story and the biblical narrative. But these need not be decisive objections against the common practice of aligning Larry Gopnik with Job. Nonetheless there remains another more fruitful route. This is to consider *A Serious Man* not as a ‘retelling’ of the Book of Job, but instead as an addition to the same genre: the disruptive religious absurdity tale.

Seen amidst the entirety of the Coen brothers’ films it is apparent that notions of absurdity are hardly unique to *A Serious Man*. Time and again, elaborate schemes based on the idea that the universe is predictable and coherent are shown to go desperately awry. As R. Barton Palmer reflects, the hopes of many characters in these movies “for some salvation from troubles familial, financial, psychological, come to nothing.”⁶ Discussing the *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001), for example, Palmer notes that “[t]he film’s main character,

frustrated by his plans to make it big, comes to see life as a series of sudden, inexplicable, and irretrievable losses.”⁷ It is a similarly troubling and absurd cosmos inhabited by Larry Gopnik in *A Serious Man*. It is a worldview, furthermore, that the Coen brothers have themselves suggested is more realistic than the more orderly moral universe of mainstream Hollywood productions. Discussing in an interview the way in which the plans of certain characters in *Fargo* (1996) are shown to dramatically fall away in the face of random occurrences, Ethan Coen proposes that “our film draws more on life itself than on the conventions of the cinema and film genres.”⁸ Seen in the context of their earlier work, *A Serious Man* can be understood as merely the religious variation of a long running theme of absurdity laying waste to human ambitions.

For numerous readers absurdity seems to similarly lie at the heart of the Book of Job. It is worth stressing immediately that this perception certainly does not encompass all readers. Across its lengthy and rich reception history there are many who have found in Job a cohesive and valuable message about the relationships between God, humanity and undeserved suffering.⁹ However, the sheer variety of the messages uncovered across this reception history points to the reality that Job is in actuality a rather disruptive text. Indeed, as long ago as the fourth century CE Jerome complained that the book was as slippery as an eel.¹⁰

More recently biblical scholars such as Carol Newsom and David Clines have put forward detailed analyses of Job as a text rife with inner-tensions.¹¹

This present article is not the place to review in full all of the various explorations of Job's internal dissonance within biblical studies. However, it is worth briefly highlighting just two aspects that can prove troublesome. The first difficulty relates to whether the cosmos is one in which the good are rewarded and the guilty punished. Such a scheme is for the most part denied by the Book of Job. The main protagonist suffers despite being explicitly described as innocent (e.g. 1:1, 1:8, 2:3), and the friends who tell him that only the unrighteous suffer (e.g. 4:7-8) are ultimately condemned by God for speaking incorrectly (42:7). However, the book's finale, in which Job seemingly repents for questioning God (42:1-6) and is then apparently rewarded for doing so (42:7-17), undermines such a critique of retributive theology. As Clines observes, "[w]hat the book has been doing its best to demolish, the doctrine of retribution, is on its last page triumphantly affirmed."¹² Another cause of tensions is the depiction of God in the Book of Job. After the divine speeches from the whirlwind that close the story, those readers distracted by the beauty of its poetic imagery are liable to take from the tale the message that God's ways are beyond human understanding. Such a view is indeed taken by Job himself in his final speech ("I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me," 42:3). However, the character Job's

perspective is not the same as the reader's, for they are given access in chapters 1-2 to the true reason for Job's suffering – a wager between God and Satan over whether the seemingly righteous Job will crack under pressure. At the end of the tale God could have given Job a relatively straightforward explanation regarding the origins of his plight, but this not the path the story takes. Thus the divine speeches from the whirlwind, however beautiful and evocative, do not provide narrative closure.

Such queries regarding the Book of Job's narrative coherence should not be construed as criticisms. On the contrary, as Newsom and others have noted, Job's multi-voiced qualities have historically helped to give it relevance for all manner of theological and ideological contexts.¹³ But the overarching point to draw from this extremely brief introduction to just a couple of the text's inner-tensions is that, like *A Serious Man*, the Book of Job is a story over which hangs an air of absurdity. In both cases, when the curtain unsatisfactorily falls, there are ultimately far more questions than answers. As Dermot Cox reflects regarding the biblical tale, its “[e]pilogue (42:7-17) solves nothing and offers no answer of the author's.”¹⁴

A key difference though between *A Serious Man* and the Book of Job is that one is much older than the other, and therefore far more deeply rooted in cultural history. This is why, despite the comparable absurdities of each, there is

something comforting in concluding from the partial plot similarities that the Coen brothers' film is a retelling of Job. For many people, the tale of Job is more familiar, and the sharp edges of its inner-tensions more dulled by its established place in religious literature, than is possible for a film released in 2009. Thus faced with the disruptive qualities of the Coen brothers' take on innocent suffering and religion, the offer of seeing it as the remake of a familiar classic is a tempting one.

However, my suggestion here is that the more substantial connection between *A Serious Man* and the Book of Job – the connection that reaches deeper – is their similarly absurd presentations of the human struggle with anguish and the divine. By this view, the Coen brothers' film is not so much a remake of Job, but rather a parallel and independent response to the same basic quandaries of the human condition.

¹ Carol Linnitt, "Film Review: A Serious Man," *Journal of Religion and Film*, 13, 1 (2009); Bernard Beck, "The Awful Truth: Unflattering Portraits in A Serious Man and Precious," *Multicultural Perspectives*, 12, 3 (2010) 154; A. O. Scott, "Calls to God: Always a Busy Signal," *The New York Times*, 2 October 2009.

² "Q&A with Joel and Ethan Coen," *Working Title*, <http://www.workingtitlefilms.com/features/qanda/id/7/q-a-with-joel-and-ethan-coen> (accessed 9 May 2011).

³ Georg Seesslen, "Games. Rules. Violations. Looking for a Trail in Coen Country," in Peter Körte and Georg Seesslen (eds.), *Joel and Ethan Coen* (London: Titan, 1998), 209-210; Edward Schulby, "Laughter in the Dark," in Ronald Bergen, *The Coen Brothers* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 223.

⁴ Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 11.

⁵ John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003), 45.

⁶ R. Barton Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 39.

⁷ Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen*, 39.

⁸ Ethan Coen in “The Coen Brothers Interviewed,” in Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen*, 192.

⁹ For a comprehensive overview of Job’s reception history, see the three volumes of Stephen J. Vicchio, *The Image of the Biblical Job: A History* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006).

¹⁰ In the preface to his Vulgate translation of Job, Jerome remarks that “[a]n indirectness and a slipperiness is attached to the whole book [...] while it says one thing, it does another – just as if you close your hand to hold an eel or a small fish, the more you squeeze it, the sooner it escapes.” Translated from *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969), 731.

¹¹ Carol A Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); David Clines, “Deconstructing the Book of Job,” in Martin Warner(ed.) *The Bible as Rhetoric: Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility* (London: Routledge, 1990), 65-80.

¹² Clines, “Deconstructing,” 71.

¹³ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 3.

¹⁴ Dermot Cox, *Man’s Anger and God’s Silence: The Book of Job* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1990), 16.