

WHEN YHWH TESTS PEOPLE:
GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND PARTICULAR
OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE BOOKS
OF CHRONICLES AND JOB

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The King said to the appointed commissar¹ for examining the loyalty of his servants, “Where have you come from?” The commissar answered the King, “From touring and walking about your kingdom in official business.” The King said to the commissar, “Did you notice my servant Job? There is no one like him on my kingdom, a blameless and upright man who is fully loyal to me and turns away from treason.” Then the commissar answered the King, “Is Job loyal to you for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.”

This paraphrase of Job 1:7–11 explicitly brings to the forefront the image of a meeting of a royal court in which matters concerning the loyalty of servants to the king are part of the agenda.² This image recalls a well attested way by which ancient communities used to imagine or attempted to understand the heavenly kingdom, namely by using representations of earthly kingdoms. Such an approach, however, carried substantial discursive and ideological consequences, because some of the systemic attributes of earthly kingdoms became discursive matrices for the construction of understandings of the heavenly one or its attributes.

The present study does not deal with all possible images, but with the ideological topos of divine testing. The preceding text from the book of Job suggests that at a very basic level the image of divine testing was shaped around, or based on that of the search by earthly kings for (secret)

1. Gordis used the term “prosecutor attorney.” See R. Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 70.

2. See L. K. Handy, “The Authorization of Divine Power and the Guilt of God in the Book of Job: Useful Ugaritic Parallels,” *JSOT* 60 (1993): 107–18. Cf. *idem*, *Among the Host of Heaven* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 121–22.

information about the trustworthiness of their servants. If this is the case, one is to expect that: (a) at least some of the considerations that apply to the way in which kings either deal or are imagined to deal with these matters informed to some extent the shaping of images of divine testing, and (b) the influence of these considerations on portrayals of YHWH in literary texts be present across different genres or narrowly defined ideological viewpoints within the accepted discourse(s) of the relevant readers, because these considerations are grounded on basic trends within these discourses, and not on singularities of genre or ideological approach.

For obvious systemic reasons, centers of power were concerned with assessing whether its powerful and seemingly loyal servants were indeed trustworthy.³ Although the allegiance of all inhabitants within the realm to the king was certainly an ideological requirement, that of people in positions of power was considered essential for maintaining and effectively exercising the king's rule. These people included high-level representatives of the king, governors, high military officers, as well as individuals of renown who were influential in society.

YHWH was similarly construed as one for whom the loyalty and love of its subjects⁴ is of paramount importance. But just as in the case of earthly kings, not all subjects were equal good candidates for YHWH's testing. To begin with, just as in the earthly realm, there was no conceivable need for a probe into the degree of loyalty of those who evidently rejected the deity and its rules. Their lack of allegiance was known and deserved no further comment, though it may, within these discourses, have merited action. Thus one does not find in the Hebrew Bible, for instance, a report about YHWH's testing of Athaliah's loyalty and devotion to the deity. In fact, it is anticipated that the more a personage seemed to embody the values of loyalty and commitment to YHWH, the more likely candidate she or he will be to stand as the main object of a tradition of a divine test. To be pious or seemingly pious was, however, not the only feature associated with characters who were good candidates for a divine test. The correlation between images of the earthly and heavenly king raised additional criteria. For instance, high-level representatives of the king, regents, governors, high military officers, as well as individuals of renown who were influential in society were far more likely to be tested than ancient counterparts of contemporaries Jane or Joe Doe. As a result, the set of candidates for assessment was likely to consist of characters constructed within the discourse of the community as

3. Cf. queries # 150–74, 274–75, 293, 299–305 in I. Starr, *Queries to the Sungod: Divination and Politics in Sargonid Assyria* (SAA IV; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1990), 161–82, 254–55, 276–77, 282–86.

4. All subjects were considered “servants” of the king. No significant distinction between the two terms is made here.

loyal and effective regents of YHWH on earth, those who either led or seemed to have led society to a greater level of fulfillment of YHWH's laws and the associated blessings, or who by their influential, exemplary role served both as ideological role models, and as attestations of the goodness that comes from accepting YHWH's yoke fully. To be sure, if these characters were to embody, in some way, the mentioned goodness, they were likely to be portrayed as rich, materially or otherwise. But this being so, they became discursive candidates for the suspicion of loving more the good things they received from YHWH than the deity itself. Just as in the case of earthly individuals who were recipients of the goodness of the monarch, the logic of the discourse suggested that if their love was mainly for the goods provided to them by the king than the king himself, they will be prone to cease to be loyal to the monarch if these goods are taken away, or when some alternative monarch promises them even more goods. In other words, if they fall into this category, they cannot be trusted. Thus, within this type of ideological discourse, as opposed to actual realia,⁵ these characters become good candidates for a test that involves the withdrawal of divinely endowed goods.

These general considerations are consistent with the inclusion of characters such as the following within the category of recipients of YHWH's test: (a) Abraham, after he has been endowed with a particular son; (b) Job who has been blessed continuously with progeny and wealth; (c) kings such as David, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah in Chronicles, all of whom were tested after receiving substantial blessings of one sort or another; (d) Israel or any Israelite who within certain ancient Israelite worldviews come to assume at least partially the role usually associated with the king in the ancient Near East, after they are given blessings such as divine precepts to live by and the land; and perhaps even (e) Adam and Eve, who are also characterized as regents of the deity on earth.⁶

These didactical stories about divine tests communicated multiple meanings. To be sure, their intended and primary readers (hereafter, for the sake

5. For obvious and systemic reasons, in the socio-political reality kings did not go about systematically depriving their best leaders of their possessions, just to check on them.

6. See Gen 3; 22; Deut 8:2; 13:2–4; Judg 2:21–22; 3:1–5; the book of Job; 1 Chron 21:1–30; 2 Chron 14:8–14; 16:1–10; 20:1–30; 32:1–23, 31; 35:20–25; cf. Pss 17:3; 26:2. Exod 15:25, at the very least, connoted a sense of divine test of Moses. The story about Joseph and Potiphar's wife in Gen 39 can also be seen as a test story. Significantly, here Joseph passes the test but as a result is thrown into jail rather than being rewarded. To be sure, from the perspective of the target readership, Joseph's time in jail is necessary for the advancement of YHWH's plan concerning Joseph's future and Israel's future, though the character Joseph is not construed as aware of these divine plans as he is sent to jail for his pious deed.

of simplicity only, “the readers”) were certainly supposed to learn from them about YHWH and the manner in which YHWH governs the world. To some extent, the readers were supposed to identify with the deity and its concerns about the degree of reliability or loyalty of its representatives on earth, as well as, on questions about whether the actions of these representatives enhanced or diminished the deity’s honor in the sight of other human beings. It is worth stressing that these considerations suggest an image of YHWH as one who is lacking crucial information about some of the deity’s most notable servants. For instance, was YHWH portrayed in Gen 22 as fully cognizant of Abraham’s actual willingness to go ahead and sacrifice Isaac, before the actual test? The language of Gen 22:12 clearly suggests that this was not the case.⁷ Similarly, it is likely that the readers of Chronicles were not urged to imagine YHWH as a deity that has sure foreknowledge about how the pious kings being tested in Chronicles were to perform under the stress of the divine test.

These stories also asked their readers to identify with pious heroes of the past such as Abraham, Job, David, Hezekiah, and Josiah. But once matters were seen from this perspective, the discursive and ideological topos of the divine test served to explain a set of troubling issues, namely: Why does pious behavior lead and why has it actually led at times to misfortune for the pious? How should dutiful people conceptually approach and what should they should actually do, if or when they face this type of circumstance? In other words, these reports about divine test served to explain a world that was construed as reflecting a divinely ordained cosmos of law and order, but still one in which pious people and particularly, though not necessarily, leaders not only may not be rewarded for their actions, or even one in which calamity befalls them, but a world in which, from the perspective of the readers, there seems to be a direct relation between dutiful attitude and deeds towards YHWH and being the target of YHWH’s calamity, contrary to common expectations. In fact, these stories construe YHWH as free, and to some extent expected to test YHWH’s best servants,⁸ and by doing so, to bring misfortune to them.

7. Gen 22:12 reads: *כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־יִרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךְ אֶת־יִחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי* (“for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me,” NRSV).

8. Of course, if testing is conducted in the opposite direction, namely humans testing YHWH, then it is construed as a rebellious attitude that significantly would make the testers liable to be disqualified as objects of the only legitimate source of testing. Thus, divine testing is one among a set of ideological and discursive concepts that served to shape and communicate a strongly asymmetrical relationship between YHWH and human beings, including the most pious. For another example of this set of concepts, when a person in the Hebrew Bible is portrayed as “knowing YHWH,” at the core of that concept is that she or he acknowledges at the very least the rule or power of YHWH (cf. M. Malul,

Significantly, the accounts of these tests seem to imply the presence of a rhetorical shade: that of a “cynical” reader who may wonder about the practical difference between being thrown into a similar severe misfortune as punishment for sins or as a test reserved only for the pious. Many of these didactic texts were deeply involved in persuading their readers that similar or even identical manifestations may be grounded in opposite reasons and behaviors and may be conceptually different. This is, of course, a central point in the book of Job, but it is also clearly present in Chronicles, in which, for instance, a foreign invasion of Judah may reflect either divine punishment of a sinful monarch (e.g. Joash in his later years) or divine testing of a pious one (e.g. Hezekiah).⁹ A crucial interpretative question in these cases is, of course: Which is which?

The potential instability of meaning that results from this situation is confronted at the level of the readers but also reflected in the situation of the main characters within the world of the narrative. In the books of Chronicles and Job, this instability is certainly and emphatically erased at the level of the textually inscribed narrators and authorial voices because these voices unequivocally disambiguate the ideological situation. But the same readers were still urged to identify themselves with those being tested, and through their experiences to partake vicariously in the personages’ experience of a potentially ambiguous world.¹⁰

It is well beyond the scope of a single essay to provide a comprehensive study of the many facets of these ideological and rhetorical images of divine testing and their various uses as conduits to address central discursive matters in ancient Israel/Persian Yehud, and above all to make sense of the world as manifested to them, in their constructions of their past, as well as in their conceptualization of their own present and future hopes. This type of study can be carried out only in a monograph fully devoted to these matters, or perhaps in a Ph.D. thesis. But within the scope of the present study it is still possible to show how these general observations hold true across boundaries of literary genres and are relevant to the understanding of books

Knowledge, Control and Sex: Studies in Biblical Thought, Culture and Worldview [Tel Aviv–Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publication, 2002], *passim*), but when YHWH knows a person, this certainly does not mean that YHWH acknowledges his or her rule over YHWH’s (see, for instance, 2 Sam 7:20; Nah 1:7; 1 Chron 17:18).

9. There is widespread agreement that these and similar invasions represent as a test for the king. See S. Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought* (BEATAJ 9; 2d ed.; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997), 191–98.

10. The character Job strongly attempts to disambiguate it as he consistently proclaims his personal innocence from a wrongdoing that is proportional to the calamity. His repeated claims on the matter are to reflect the “objective” ambiguity of his situation.

as diverse as Chronicles and Job.¹¹ This observation, in turn, bears significant implications, which will be addressed later.

The following examples from Chronicles suffice to confirm that the main conceptual framework for divine testing described above is at work in Chronicles. The readers of 2 Chron 14:1–4 learned that Asa was a very pious king. Not only did he lead a purge of improper cults and cultic objects (e.g. high places, foreign altars, pillars, *asherim*, *hammanim*), but also commanded Judah to seek YHWH and observe the *torah* and the commandments. Further, the readers learn that their evaluation of Asa at this point is shared by YHWH, for the deity blessed Asa (and his kingdom) with tranquility and peace. Moreover, they noticed that Asa built cities and fortified the kingdom, which are actions that in Chronicles point at divine blessing (2 Chron 14:5–7). But as the narrative seems to reach the climax of the positive description of Asa, the readers are told that Zerah, the Cushite, invaded the land with a million man army. The same YHWH who till now given peace and prosperity because of Asa’s behavior, is here behind the removal of these blessings, by means of an invasion of the land by the most powerful army within the world of the book, even when Asa’s behavior has not changed at all.¹² The poignant paradox is explicitly and strongly underscored by the literary proximity between the climax of the positive characterization of Asa and the account of the invasion, and the explicit reversal motif (i.e. from peace and tranquility to war). As they continue reading, the readers

11. For instance, the book of Job includes a large core of poetry; Chronicles is a narrative work. Job is a piece of wisdom literature; Chronicles is a historiographical work. The book of Job, as a whole, centers on a particular test and the actions and words of two main protagonists, Job and YHWH. (The words of Job’s “friends” serve to enhance the characterization of Job and his predicament, and that of readers who identify with him.) Chronicles, on the other hand, is clearly not a book about one divine test, but a history, in which there appear numerous human characters. Unlike Job who is a wealthy leader of much influence in his time, but not a king, the main human, individual characters in Chronicles are kings, and those are the most likely to be tested, if they are pious. Since Job is not a monarch, the main deeds of piety one expect the text to associate with him are personal and relate to him and his family. In the case of the kings who populate the narrative in Chronicles, similar acts of piety would likely involve, among other things, purges of improper cultic behavior, establishment or re-establishment of the proper worship, the leading (back) of Judah/Israel to YHWH and to the observance of the YHWH’s *torah*, and the like. Whereas the blessings of an individual such as Job are expressed in terms of progeny, material wealth, and honor among his peers, a king’s blessing (although it may include all these things) is likely to incorporate peace and tranquility as a major component.

12. From the perspective of the discourse shared by the implied author of Chronicles and the readership, the invasion is not independent of, but rather is a manifestation of YHWH’s will. Normally, YHWH grants peace and tranquility to those who are loyal, but devastating enemy invasions to those who are disloyal.

learned that Asa did not fail this test and was rewarded with victory. Significantly, the account of Asa in Chronicles then enters into a literary and ideological loop. A new beginning is marked by a call for repentance issued by a prophet and includes a report about a new reform, followed by a new period of peace (2 Chron 15:1–18). Although there is no change in Asa's behavior or that of Judah, the period of peace is again suddenly again by an invasion, which represents a new test for Asa. The readers learned that this time he failed and was punished with wars (16:9), that is the absence of peace, and to series of events that within the discourse of the book directly led to his death (16:10–12).

The readers of Chronicles were informed that Jehoshaphat successfully fulfilled a prophetic role as he was indefatigably traveling back and forth among the people within his entire kingdom to bring them back to YHWH (19:4).¹³ Further, they learned that he established judges in all the fortified cities, and reminded them that they judge for YHWH and that the fear of YHWH should be upon them (19:5–7). Thus, these reports served to construe an image of Jehoshaphat not only as fulfilling the role of a prophet, but also the meaning—as understood by the Chronicler—of the laws in Deut 16:18–20. In addition, the text narrates that Jehoshaphat established a central court in Jerusalem (19:8–11). The account of his work as a voice calling for repentance and as judicial reformer is crafted so as to conclude with a quotation of the king's words, וַיְהִי יְהוָה עִמָּהֶם טוֹב (“May YHWH be with those who do good”). As the readers completed reading about his great deeds and final words, and reasonably expected YHWH to be with Jehoshaphat, they were immediately told that a great army invaded Judah's territory (20:1–2). The literary proximity along with the explicit וַיְהִי אַחֲרָיוֹ (“and it happened after this”) urged the readers to relate the two accounts. Jehoshaphat passed the divine test and was given victory (20:3–18), and following it, stable peace (20:29–30) and honor among the nations who now dreaded YHWH (20:29).

Similarly, the account of Hezekiah's reforms (2 Chron 29:3–31:20a), which is highly and explicitly praised in Chronicles (see 31:20b–21), is immediately followed by that of Senacherib's invasion (32:1–23). Literary proximity and the explicit opening of the account of the invasion with, אַחֲרַי הַדְּבָרִים וְהַאֲמַת הָאֵלֶּה (“after these events and the acts of faithfulness”) again relate the two events.¹⁴ Hezekiah did not fail this test, and therefore was

13. This is a clear prophetic role in Chronicles. See 2 Chron 24:19. The language used here for prophets is exactly that used for Jehoshaphat in 2 Chron 19:4

14. The replacement of the note dating the invasion to the fourteenth year of Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 18:13 (//Isa 36:1) with אַחֲרַי הַדְּבָרִים וְהַאֲמַת הָאֵלֶּה is in itself consistent with this tendency to emphasize the association between the reforms, which began in the first month of the first year, and Sennacherib's campaign.

given victory (32:1–21), then peace¹⁵ and honor among the nations ensued (32:22–23).

The readers were told that Josiah conducted a major and comprehensive purge of improper cults and cultic places and artifacts associated with them, that he reinforced the temple, found the book of the YHWH's instruction by the hand of Moses, and celebrated a passover that served as an example for future generations. As the readers learned that such passover was not celebrated in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel, and they are reminded that it was in his eighteenth year, that is the year of most of the reforms, they are told, אַחֲרַי כָּל־זֹאת אֲשֶׁר הֵכִין יֵאֱשָׁהוּ אֶת־הַבַּיִת עָלָה נָכוּ מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם (“after all this, when Josiah has set up the temple, Neco, the king of Egypt went up [to wage war]”) and thus set up the divine test (2 Chron 35:18–20). Again, literary proximity and the explicit comment in the text create a sense of discursive proximity and relation between the events.¹⁶ Significantly, the fact that the test was constructed as easier than the others mentioned above,¹⁷ only made starker the failure of the pious Josiah in the test. This failure directly led to his death.

These examples from Chronicles and the book of Job not only share the topos of the pious being tested, but of the test as following the most heightened level of pious activity that the readers can imagine. In all these cases, as the piety of the person reaches its climax, severe misfortune is suddenly brought about against the individual. The catastrophe involves the removal of the blessings that the person enjoyed (wealth and children in the

15. Cf. S. Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 991–92.

16. To be sure, the reference to the eighteenth year of Josiah as the date of the celebration of the passover in 2 Chron 35:19 creates a temporal gap between this event and the campaign of Neco which must be in Josiah's thirty-first year (2 Chron 34:1). Both dates were most likely among the core facts that the Chronicler could not change (on this matter see E. Ben Zvi, “Shifting the Gaze: Historiographic Constraints in Chronicles and Their Implications,” in M. Patrick Graham and J. Andrew Dearman [eds.], *The Land that I Will Show You: Essays on the History and Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honor of J. Maxwell Miller* [JSOTSup 343; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2001], 38–60). The first date refers to the year of the finding of the book, which is the central event that leads to the passover and because of the role of written books in the worldview shaped and reflected by Chronicles. The second date points to the length of a reign (see E. Ben Zvi, “About Time: Observations About the Construction of Time in the Book of Chronicles,” *HBT* 22 [2000]: 17–31). Although the Chronicler cannot change either date, the Chronicler can create a strong sense of literary and discursive proximity between the events—a literary feature that masks the temporal gap. This is achieved by reporting absolutely nothing about events from year eighteenth to the campaign of Neco in year 31.

17. The campaign was not aimed at Judah and Neco explicitly warned Josiah of provoking YHWH to destroy him (2 Chron 35:20–22).

case of Job, peace and tranquility in the case of the kings) and threatens the very existence of the household/kingdom of the individual being tested. These catastrophes are presented as identical to those that may befall sinners. To be sure, Job claims his innocence and is explicitly supported by the narrator and the character YHWH in the book, and the readers of Chronicles are told unequivocally that the kings mentioned above were innocent of wrongdoing, at the very least at the beginning of the test, but the point cannot be clearer: actions that can be associated with divine punishment may befall the pious and in fact the most righteousness among the pious. The deity is accordingly construed as one who may choose and is expected to choose freely between blessing and catastrophe to the same person, and to alternate them in a manner that is not dependent on the person's actions. These ideological and discursive positions reflect and communicate a worldview in which the immediate future is unpredictable, and in which no certain conclusions can be reached from the calamity that befall individuals. But at the same time, this is a worldview in which it is certain what a person should do whether she or he enjoys the blessings of YHWH or whether the same blessings are suddenly withdrawn for no apparent reason: instead of attempting to understand and therefore having at least some degree of discursive control over YHWH's actions,¹⁸ such a person should think and behave as a loyal servant of YHWH, and thus fulfill YHWH's ways. Significantly, this is also a world in which Job's blessings were eventually restored to him when he passed the test, one in which the people are returned to the land in Chronicles even if the text does not claim that they passed the test, and one in which most kings who pass the test may again enjoy peace, though if they remain pious they may still be tested again, for unpredictability still rules.

The fact that Job and Chronicles both share and communicate the main features of a shared discourse, despite all its differences, points at the ubiquity of this type of concerns, of an ideological world populated with images of those who were or may be subjects to a divine test, and by the ideological concepts and images about the divine that were discussed above. To be sure, at the end of the day these texts reinforce "orthodox" positions, as one would expect of authoritative books that were accepted as such in a Jerusalemite center in Persian Yehud; however, significantly, they achieve this reinforcement at the expense of maintaining anxiety, and by means of a clear undermining of any claims that the literati may have entertained about their ability to predict the future. As works written by these literati, they represent a tendency to posit themselves and their explanatory powers in

18. In the book of Job such an attempt is not considered sinful per se, but quite the opposite. Still, it is construed as a futile endeavor. The kings of Chronicles do not even attempt to deal with these matters.

proportion, which in itself is another ubiquitous feature in post-monarchic literature, one that is necessary for keeping the basic ideological tenets alive in a world that was constructed as both cosmically ordered and unpredictable.¹⁹

19. See Ehud Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (JSOTS 367; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/Continuum, 2003), esp. pp. 99–115.