

Emily O. Gravett  
University of Virginia  
SBL PAPER DRAFT

**God as a Necessary Authority in Didactic Wisdom Literature:  
A Critique of Carol Newsom's "Polyphonic" Reading of the Book of Job**

In 2003, Carol A. Newsom's text *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* encouraged readers to study the book of Job from a different angle, using Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic literary theory as a guide. Bakhtin's theory envisages texts that contain "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices"<sup>1</sup>—a polyphony that Newsom would like us to find in the book of Job. The first chapter of Newsom's piece not only admits flaws but invites criticism,<sup>2</sup> and it is this invitation that I wish to take up here. It will not be a comprehensive critique, but rather one focusing on particular issues that arise from a close reading of Newsom's text and the Hebrew Bible, in light of Bakhtin's notion of polyphony.

Following a brief discussion of wisdom literature and some of its most salient attributes (using the book of Proverbs as a primary example), we will move on to the Hebrew Bible and the book of Job specifically, presenting Newsom's application of Bakhtin's ideas, with help from another literary critic, Erich Auerbach, of *Mimesis* fame. It is through this examination of Newsom's text that we will discover what does not work and what is lost through this kind of interpretation, compelling as it may be. Important to wisdom literature is its didactic nature and its ability to be safely transmitted down the

---

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Carol A. Newsom. *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 30-31.

generations, to inculcate future descendants with the same knowledge that has proven successful for their predecessors. One important aspect of didacticism then is an authoritative voice to lend weight and unity to this wisdom, which in the context of the book of Job is very clearly God's. By allowing multiple genres and perspectives to intermingle in a "polyphonic" way, Newsom's interpretation loses this authoritative voice that is both necessary and present not only in didactic wisdom literature, but throughout much of the Hebrew Bible in general.

Wisdom literature is difficult to define, which is why so many scholars are hesitant to do so, instead referring to wisdom "influence," "tradition," or "worldview." Yet, many still believe that wisdom literature has several qualities in common. James Crenshaw attempts to define "wisdom" in *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*: "the reasoned search for specific ways to ensure personal well-being in everyday life, to make sense of extreme adversity and vexing anomalies, and to transmit this hard-earned knowledge so that successive generations will embody it."<sup>3</sup> In order to conduct a "reasoned search" or to "make sense of extreme adversity," one must have some sort of concrete and thoughtful understanding of the world, specifically an understanding that has proven successful for one's precursors and has been transmitted down "successive generations." For these reasons, didacticism is one of the most important aspects of wisdom literature. Indeed, it is the first of several forms of wisdom that Crenshaw lists in his introduction: "advice, often from parents to children, in brief sayings and longer instructions."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to state that "the goal of all wisdom was the formation of

---

<sup>3</sup> James L. Crenshaw. *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Crenshaw, 3.

character” and then explains how this goal is achieved through instruction, primarily in the home, with parents calling upon wisdom and its teachings to educate their children.<sup>5</sup>

Crenshaw classifies five books as part of the wisdom corpus: Proverbs, Job, Qohelet, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon.<sup>6</sup> Proverbs, a wisdom text often accused of being fragmentary, still prizes didacticism and sets about to teach a strangely coherent set of wisdom. The importance of instruction is obvious in Proverbs, from the beginning stories of a father instructing his son—“Listen, children, to a father’s instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight” (Proverbs 4:1)—to Wisdom herself calling out to the people—“Hear instruction and be wise” (Proverbs 8:33)—to the myriad individual proverbs of chapters 9-30.<sup>7</sup> Instruction and wisdom are intertwined in this section especially; language of learning and understanding is abundant, in proverbs such as “Here, my child, and be wise, and direct your mind in the way” (Proverbs 23:19) or “then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction” (Proverbs 24:32). These proverbs illustrate the importance of didacticism in one exemplary wisdom book.

Despite its lack of a singular, overarching theme and despite the specificity and seeming randomness of the individual proverbs, Proverbs still contains certain tropes, teachings, and *mashalim* consistent with other examples from the wisdom genre. As Crenshaw claims, “Wisdom expresses itself with remarkable thematic coherence,”<sup>8</sup> or, at least, it should. For example, Proverbs deems “fear of the Lord” as foundational to wisdom, as in, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). Crenshaw confirms this theme as one ubiquitous in all wisdom literature: “fear of the

---

<sup>5</sup> Crenshaw, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Crenshaw, 4.

<sup>7</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>8</sup> Crenshaw, 10.

Lord thus stood at the beginning of all knowledge, and perhaps served as the crowning achievement in wisdom as well.”<sup>9</sup> Other proverbs speak of self-restraint, caution around women, silence during arguments, humility, and so forth. Combined with the appropriate authoritative voice (in the case of Proverbs, it is often the father or Wisdom herself), this wisdom can be taken seriously and appropriately applied throughout generations.

This coherency and consistency among the wisdom teachings is necessary. If we believe what biblical scholar James Kugel says, that wisdom is “an altogether static thing: whatever a person might come to know belonged to a *defined* corpus of things; it was this finite body that ‘wisdom’ designated,”<sup>10</sup> then it must be in this form (definite, finite, static) that wisdom is transmitted. For how can a slippery, amorphous, random selection of insight, which may even contradict itself, be successfully and helpfully passed down the generations? It would not adhere together, would not stay unified as a whole. Pieces (of wisdom) would be lost. Understanding would be arbitrary and uninformed, at best.

Much of didacticism then, even by Newsom’s own standards, necessitates an authoritative, controlling, and unifying perspective. Newsom discusses this very requirement in her second chapter on Job’s *inclusio* narrative, but we may apply her comments to didacticism in general. She explains that “didactic stories are instruments of persuasion that directly attempt to form their readers by recruiting them to certain beliefs and shaping their attitudes and behaviors,”<sup>11</sup> a goal that sounds similar to that of wisdom literature itself. Moreover, “within the world of didactic narrative, truth is neither plural

---

<sup>9</sup> Crenshaw, 12.

<sup>10</sup> James Kugel. “Wisdom and the Anthological Temper.” *Prooftexts* 17.1 (January 1997): 10.

<sup>11</sup> Newsom, 42.

nor elusive nor contestable but is unitary, unambiguous, and absolute.”<sup>12</sup> Yet these notions are at odds with truth in a polyphonic paradigm, as we will see.

Attempting to maintain the integrity and unity of the book of Job (perhaps in implicit acknowledgement of coherency’s importance in wisdom literature), Newsom encourages us to imagine that the book of Job is a unified text written by one author that presents a variety of voices—a distinctly “polyphonic” reading. She writes, “The heuristic fiction I wish to employ is that a single author wrote the book of Job.”<sup>13</sup> This is not the end of the story for Newsom, however. Her fictional author “wrote it by juxtaposing and intercutting certain genres and distinctly stylized voices, providing sufficient interconnection among the different parts to establish the sense of the ‘same’ story but leaving the different parts sharply marked and sometimes overtly disjunctive.”<sup>14</sup> This approach allows Newsom to simultaneously preserve the differences in genre and perspective evident in the text itself while also reaffirming an overarching unity to the controlling point of view and the biblical book, a key element of didacticism.

As dialogic and polyphonic, Newsom’s book of Job presents a variety of unmerged voices, with each offering a different perspective and often using a different genre. She imagines Job’s author setting up “voice against voice, requiring the reader to become much more active in judging the validity of the characters’ claims.”<sup>15</sup> She divides her book into chapters that roughly correspond to the different genres and character/perspectives. She discusses the narrative prose tale with its third person, omniscient narrator (chapter two), the wisdom dialogue among Job’s “friends” (chapter

---

<sup>12</sup> Newsom, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Newsom, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Newsom, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Newsom, 18.

four), Job's own speeches (chapters five and seven), the wisdom poem (chapter six), Elihu's perspective (chapter eight), and God's theophany (chapter nine). Taken in this way, as Erich Auerbach phrases it, "we are given not merely one person whose consciousness (that is, the impressions it receives) is rendered, but many persons, with frequent shifts from one to the other...The multiplicity of persons suggests that we are here after all confronted with an endeavor to investigate an objective reality."<sup>16</sup> This reality may appear all the more realistic and "objective" because it allows for multiple (and often contradictory or confusing) points of view and genres, just as real life so often does.<sup>17</sup>

Both Auerbach and Newsom contrast their idea of a polyphonic technique with one that is more univocal. Auerbach characterizes the "unipersonal subjectivism which allows only a single and generally a very unusual person to make himself heard and admits only that one person's way of looking at reality."<sup>18</sup> Auerbach seems to condemn this type of interpretation—one that only offers the perspective of a single "very unusual person"—instead valorizing multiple ways of looking at the world. In the same way, Newsom notes, "In most books composed by a single author, even books with many characters, the composition is structured so that a single perspective predominates....Readers may resist it or reject it, but that privileged perspective is the one that the book and its implied author encourage the reader to adopt, the voice of

---

<sup>16</sup> Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953. 536.

<sup>17</sup> This quotation appears in the final chapter of Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which chronologically traces the development of literature. Though the two scholars' ideas seem similar, inherent in Auerbach's work is a critique of Newsom's. By situating polyphony in this chapter, Auerbach suggests that the multi-perspective technique is a relatively recent and modern phenomenon. In this respect, Newsom may be inappropriately imposing a modern mode of writing onto the biblical authors and readers, which could not have been present at that time.

<sup>18</sup> Auerbach, 536.

‘truth’ within the narrative world.”<sup>19</sup> Newsom’s quotation marks around the word “truth” indicate her view of this “privileged perspective”: that a single, privileged perspective is one that cannot expound the whole, real truth, a truth that can only be seen through multiple, interactive points of view. Through this lens, monological technique does seem flat and narrow-minded. And in a contemporary literary context, which as of late has been quite taken with realistic portrayals of the daily nitty-gritty (one only need to look at the memoirs of David Sedaris, for example), this technique is understandably lauded.

But the Hebrew Bible was not written in a contemporary context. The biblical authors may not have valued realism as much as our contemporary environment does. At the very least, it is not an assumption we can make. Indeed, in *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction*, Barbara Green must initially ask, “To what extent is it legitimate to appropriate [Bakhtin’s] ideas so rooted in nineteenth-century Russian novels for ancient Hebrew prose?”<sup>20</sup> As negative as Auerbach, and particularly Newsom, make “unipersonal subjectivism” or “monological truth” sound, it does seem much more appropriate for a text that involves God (one whose viewpoint is intended to be ultimate) and a body of wisdom (with certain themes and instructions) that is passed down. The God of the Hebrew Bible actually seems to fit Auerbach’s profile of “unipersonal subjectivism”—that is, “a very unusual person”—perfectly.

Indeed, the biblical text itself undermines Newsom’s argument here. Although we do receive multiple perspectives throughout the Hebrew Bible, not all of them are created equal. One of the main (and most powerful) voices is God’s. This is the God whose mere word spoke the world into creation (Genesis 1:1-31). This is the God who evicts Adam

---

<sup>19</sup> Newsom, 17-18.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Green. *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000. 27.

and Eve from Eden for attempting to achieve divine omniscience (Genesis 2:9-3:24).

This is the God who destroys the Tower of Babel and scatters the language of the humans because of their attempt to reach the heavens, God's dwelling-place (Genesis 11:1-9).

This is the God who creates a list of ten commandments, the first of which is "I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:1-3 and Deuteronomy 5:6-7), clarifying his position of authority and primacy to his people. There seems to be a very clear attempt, in many of the books of the Hebrew Bible, to delineate between human and divine, and to establish a hierarchical relationship between the two.

This disparity appears in the book of Job as well, throughout the various genres, as Newsom herself even admits. In the book's prose introduction, the narrative reveals that "one day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord" (Job 1:6). Though implicitly, this verse reveals God as the most eminent of "all heavenly beings," such that they have to "present themselves before" him, as subjects before a ruler. The prose then tells us that Satan challenges God regarding Job, and God replies, "All that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him" (Job 1:12). God is able to relegate power to Satan because he originally possesses it all. The command issued in the second part of the quotation subtly underscores God's power to control and direct all heavenly (and arguably earthly) action by his word. Throughout the middle of the book, Job's friends also emphasize God's omnipotence. For example, Eliphaz claims that "by the breath of God [those who plow iniquity] perish" (Job 4:8) and Bildad asks, "Does God pervert justice?" (Job 8:3). Clearly, the friends' opinion of God is high, as they attribute him with the power to destroy as he sees fit or expect him to *always* judge fairly. Much later, Job himself says, "O that I were as in the months of old,/ as in the days

when God watched over me;/ when his lamp shone over my head, and by his light I walked through darkness” (Job 29:2-3). Not only does God parentally watch over Job, but “his light” shines “over” and above Job, forcing Job into a position of inferiority. As such, both the narrator of the prose tale and the other characters within the book of Job affirm the uneven relationship between God and humans.

God’s own voice also intercedes to reinforce this hierarchy. One of the first questions God puts to Job from the whirlwind is, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (Job 38:4), implying, of course, that Job did not yet exist and could never come to possess the sort of power that God has. To borrow Newsom’s own words, “If one thinks of speech in actual social situations, how someone talks tells me who they think they are, who they think I am, and what sort of relationship exists between us.”<sup>21</sup> This is precisely what God (and others on behalf of God) attempt to do in this book and throughout the Hebrew Bible—clarify the hierarchical relationship between divine and human through speech.

God continues his line of questioning, presenting Job with a series of rhetorical questions, clearly intended to magnify the difference between divine and human power. God asks, “Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?” (Job 40:9). This question is even more indicative than the first because God asserts that his thundering “voice” cannot be compared to Job’s. Here, God makes a distinction not only between human and divine strength, but also between human and divine *voice*. Certainly, this heavenly thundering sounds like the authoritative voice that Bakhtin characterizes in *The Dialogic Imagination*: “the authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to

---

<sup>21</sup> Newsom, 33-34.

persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, in all genres and all sections of the book of Job, the hierarchy of the world, with God and his voice at the top, is reaffirmed. With this background in mind, it is difficult to read interacting voices in Job, with significant dialogue by a “character” named God, and not feel as if we are supposed to understand God’s voice as binding and “authoritative.”

Newsom herself admits such a reading of Job (although she ultimately tries to argue against it). She frequently discusses the “radical distinction between the divine and the human”<sup>23</sup> throughout her chapters,<sup>24</sup> and she even writes about God as “that great authority figure.”<sup>25</sup> The fact is, as Newsom’s own text indicates, that in the Hebrew Bible, and in the ancient Israelite ideal of monotheism, God’s voice is supposed to be the ultimate authority. As we have seen in this paper, time and again, God speaks and gets his way. It is unlikely, then, that the biblical authors or readers believed (or that contemporary readers should understand) the divine voice to be on par with the human, participating in an equal, polyphonic dialogue, like the sort Newsom tries to see in the book of Job. It is difficult to imagine such a lack of priority in this ancient world. Indeed, textual evidence and commonsensical intuition points to the primacy of God’s perspective, in Job and in other biblical books.

Newsom attempts to address the problematic element of God’s authoritative speech in light of her polyphonic reading, most specifically in her penultimate chapter—“The Voice from the Whirlwind.” But she fails to engage the real issue (the effect of God’s authority in the context of didactic wisdom literature on her polyphonic argument).

---

<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist, Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. 342.

<sup>23</sup> Newsom, 142.

<sup>24</sup> On Newsom 145 and 218, for example.

<sup>25</sup> Newsom, 18.

She quickly passes over “the power of God and the comparative impotence of humans,” ultimately arriving at a conclusion that honors and privileges all voices, without attending to the, what she herself calls “obvious,” unequal perspectives in the book of Job.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, when Newsom chooses to emphasize or even exalt the polyphonic nature of the biblical text, she is forced to sacrifice the sense of a controlling and instructive voice of authority, one that, if left intact, could be used to impart a unified truth, to pass down coherent body of wisdom. As Newsom clearly states, “Read as a polyphonic work, the purpose of the book is not to advance a particular view”<sup>27</sup> because “dialogic truth is...always open.”<sup>28</sup> While this openness is certainly commendable, the perspective nevertheless seems at odds not only with wisdom’s didactic agenda, but also with evidence from the Hebrew Bible and the book of Job specifically. If all perspectives mingle and interact equally, no singular voice can stand out as the one to listen to, emulate, or pass on. As part of the biblical wisdom tradition especially, Job must include some didactic elements. If there is no main point of view, no authoritative perspective, then who can we turn to for guidance in the book of Job?

After our examination of Newsom’s attempt to merge Bakhtin’s literary theory with the biblical book of Job, it would seem that polyphony and didacticism might exist at opposite ends of a continuum. The more polyphonic a text is, the more a text values all voices equally, the less successful its didactic elements (necessarily accompanied by an authoritative voice) may be. This is not to say that a polyphonic reading of such a text cannot be informative or compelling (Newsom’s *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* proves otherwise) or that we cannot successfully apply Bakhtin’s theories

---

<sup>26</sup> Newsom, 252.

<sup>27</sup> Newsom, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Newsom, 23.

to other biblical books (as Green does with the category of “reported speech” in 1 Samuel 17:55-20:42<sup>29</sup>), but it is perhaps more suitable in the context of secular literature, which lacks the voice of God for which we must account in the biblical, didactic, and wise book of Job.

---

<sup>29</sup> Green, 67-134.