

David L. Thompson
Yet Another Try on Job 42:6¹

Abstract

This paper examines the final statement of Job in response to Yhwh’s speech, which is often translated as “Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” This paper argues that there are problems with the translation, with the Hebrew for “relent” being used, and not the word for “repent.” It also argues from other uses of the expression “dust and ashes” that this may be a phrase used to refer to Job’s humanity. In this sense, Job agrees that he has spoken beyond his competence with Yhwh and relents regarding the weakness of his humanity, which is not a sin, or something for which repentance is necessary.

Keywords: Job, dust and ashes, repentance, human nature

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Introduction

In most English versions Job 42:6 reads: “Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” These are Job’s last words in the book of Job, the final lines of his response to Yhwh’s second speech (42:1-6). These are the words for which the readers have been waiting for forty chapters. They contain the conclusion Job draws (“therefore”/על־כן) to everything that has preceded it in this magisterial work, and they appear to present a thoroughgoing repudiation of himself and presumably also his claims throughout the book. He assumes his speeches have morally offended the Almighty. For this and no doubt more he repents, groveling in the ashes he has inhabited since Yhwh’s attack on his body in chapter 2. In spite of God’s barrage of questions, he has not really answered Job and does not plan to. Some such interpretation commonly flows from this reading of the verse.

Three or four major interpretive decisions have to be made to get to this or any other rendering of the text.

- First, one has to discern the meaning of **מאס** in 6a. What does the writer claim Job is or does? If he commits an action, to whom does he do it?
- Second, what does **נחמתי** mean here? “I Repent?” “I Relent,” or something else?
- Third, what about the prepositional phrase? How does **על** qualify **נחמתי**? And what does “dust and ashes”/עפר ואפר mean?

Problems with the Traditional Translation

The construal expressed in this translation (“I repent in dust and ashes.”) has had wide currency. Among English versions the ESV, RSV, NRSV, KJV, NKJV, NIV all have “I despise myself” or the like, as does the Vulgate and the LXX (with additional material). Translating “I repent...” are the Vulgate, KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, NAB, RSV, NRSV, NIV, and REB (cf. NLT). The same versions understand the prepositional phrase as indicating the place where or perhaps the mode in which Job repents—“in dust and ashes.” This same rendering appears in a recent *Biblia Santa*. The new Korean Revised Version, goes a slightly different path in 6a, but translates 6b, “I repent in dust and ashes.”

But “I repent in dust and ashes” is an unfortunate translation of **על־עפר ואפר נחמתי**. How this reading has been preserved as the majority reading in the English tradition I do not really understand. Two critical difficulties with this translation strike one immediately. First, so far as I can tell, **על נחמתי** cannot mean,

“I repent in X.” The Niphal of נחם does not mean “repent” in the sense of “turning away from a breach of moral law,” “turning away from sin.” That would be שׁוּב. Rather, in the Niphal, נחם means “to change one’s mind.” Sometimes this carries with it a degree of regret for the action one relents from doing (as in Gen 6:6). But just as often, as in Jonah 3:10, נחם carries no overtone of regret. Here, “having seen how the Ninevites “turned” (שׁוּב) from their wicked ways, Yhwh “relented”(נחם). That is, he changed his mind regarding the judgment he had planned to do and did not do it. In this case it appears Yhwh was happy to change his mind, happy to turn from judgment to mercy, which he had desired all along to show to Nineveh. The term נחם here involved no regret.

But what does “relent regarding dust and ashes” mean? (This puzzle may be the reason the traditional translation, which seems to be obvious and clear, has persisted.) We deal here with a set expression, not a string of discrete terms. By themselves each of the terms is clear enough. The term עִפָּר means “dust” or “dirt” of the ground, and אֶפֶר means “the residue from burning something.” Together “dust and ashes”—עִפָּר וְאֶפֶר—in that order, *could* refer to the stuff they would designate separately. Thus Ben Sira 40:3 has a man humbled “in dust and ashes.” Sadly, we do not have a Hebrew *vorlage* for this line in Ben Sira, so we do not know whether it carried a preposition or not, and if it did, what it was.

Finding Traction on a Solution

In the OT the phrase עִפָּר וְאֶפֶר occurs three times: once in Genesis (18:27), twice in Job. The Genesis occurrence is informative. Here Yhwh and Abraham stand face to face in conversation (negotiation?) regarding the justice of God’s destroying the righteous along with the wicked of Sodom. Abraham shows proper deference to Yhwh, recognizing him as Judge of All the Earth whom one can surely assume will do right. Still, at each stage of the conversation it is Abraham who has taken the initiative and the higher moral ground in suggesting a course of action to Yhwh. He says he has taken it upon himself to speak as he has, *even though* he is “dust and ashes”/ עִפָּר וְאֶפֶר. Here Abraham acknowledges his own profound distance from Yhwh in terms of status and credentials for giving moral guidance to the Judge of All the Earth. He lives in fewer and less cosmic dimensions than does the Judge of All the Earth. He acknowledges his humanity in all its finitude and limitations. Even so, Abraham has Yhwh’s respect as one to whom he has made far reaching promises and with whom he shares accountability for the actualization of those promises (Gen 18:19, 25, 27). We recall the famous *Tiqune Soferim* (one of eighteen prescribed scribal corrections) had Yhwh *standing before Abraham* in 18:22. Abraham’s constitution and status as עִפָּר וְאֶפֶר here is clearly nothing for which to

express regret or guilt. It may actually provide part of the resources that allow Abraham to speak as he has. Even though he observes proper etiquette in his speaking to a superior, he nevertheless proceeds to speak with confidence that he will survive the encounter.

In Job 30:19, Job says “God has cast me in the mire, and I have become like עָפָר וָאֵפֶר.” Job has become like one whose human frailty and finitude are painfully obvious to all who see him. Here עָפָר וָאֵפֶר names a state of dishonor and community disdain. There was a time, however, when it was not so. There was a time when he apparently was not so obviously עָפָר וָאֵפֶר. But the radical change from Job chapter 29 to Job 30 is laid out. There was a time when Job lived like a king among his troops, one who comforted others (29:25). But now, the text emphasizes the change, he is mocked by people his junior, men whose fathers would not even have run with Job’s sheepdogs (30:1). One assessment of this new, inferior social status is that “[God] has thrown [him] into the mud. [He is] nothing more than dust and ashes.” Our text, Job 42:6, has the only other occurrence of עָפָר וָאֵפֶר. It may help us to consider briefly other aspects of Yhwh’s speeches that bear on our verse.

First, the writer introduces these speeches as “responses” to Job, using the same rubric as seen before to introduce the speeches of Job and his friends. Ordinarily these “answers” contained a brief, opening direct answer to the preceding speaker and then more extended presentation of less directly related themes. The writer apparently thinks these speeches of Yhwh do respond to Job in some way, no matter how modern critics may complain. Job has repeatedly asked that he might argue his case directly to God, and that God would respond to him face to face, bringing a clear indictment and explaining exactly what Job has done that has produced the assault God has leveled at Job.

To this request/challenge Yhwh responds with two primary accusations. According to Yhwh, Job has spoken beyond his competence, bringing more confusion than clarity to the dialogues (38:2). In addition, and more seriously, Job has maligned God in an attempt to justify his own behavior (40:2, 8). Job agrees with Yhwh’s charge that Job has spoken beyond his competence: “I’m nothing—how could I ever find the answers,” (40:4 NLT) and “I was talking about things about which I knew nothing” (42:3, NLT). Beyond these two items Yhwh ignores the specific content of Job’s speeches. This leaves open the charge that he has slandered God in the process of justifying himself.

Yhwh’s directions to Job are enlightening. Before both speeches Yhwh says he is going to interrogate Job, and he challenges Job to enlighten him (38:3; 40:7). He says Job should prepare for this interrogation by “girding up [his] loins like a real man (a *geber*).” HALOT, 28, takes this expression, “Gird up the loins,”

to mean preparation for battle, including preparation for metaphorical battle; i.e., a debate. In Jer 1:17, in a situation similar to our Job setting, Yhwh tells Jeremiah to “gird up [his] loins” in order to speak boldly in the face of the recalcitrant and hostile audience in Judah. He is to rise to the challenge of his vocation. He is not to be overcome by his fear.

In Job 38:3 and 40:7 Yhwh tells Job to gird up loins in preparation for a situation where Yahweh will interrogate and Job will need to inform the Almighty. Job has called repeatedly for just such a hearing (finally and directly in 31:35-37; cf 27:11). Yhwh here responds to his demand. This is now a legal contest in which the two are engaged, in which Job will need to speak to a legal adversary and respond well. Yhwh urges Job to respond as a *geber* to the direct and indirect accusations of Yhwh and to the claims implicit in the questions. He does not have to respond as one of the creatures who entered the heavenly court to stand before Yhwh in chapter 1 (1:6-12). Nor need he answer as the Satan or as one of the בני־האלהים. Instead he is to answer as a *geber*, the vigorous man that he is.

It is not expected that he will explain matters obviously beyond his control or beyond his competence as a *geber*. It is a foregone conclusion that he will not be able to answer any of the questions he is asked. Yhwh does direct him, however, to respond adequately as a *geber*. This he apparently does, for in the end he remains, by Yhwh’s word, Yhwh’s servant (42:8), just as in 1:8. Yhwh’s declaration about Job’s speech should be determinative of the reader’s opinion within the world of the book of Job. Yhwh declares that, unlike the friends, Job has in the end spoken things of Yhwh that can be considered “right,” in the sense of “established,” “sure” (*HALOT*, 464). This makes explicit what is implicit in the book’s deafening omission. Nowhere, before, during, or after Job’s speeches does Yhwh indict Job in such a way as to expect Job to repent and pray for forgiveness and acceptance. Nowhere does Yhwh list Job’s sins in such a fashion as to validate Yhwh’s action against Job in chapters 1 and 2 .

Contrary to what one might think, however, this absence of divine indictment of Job is not because the topic of Job’s possible sin has not entered the discussion beyond the accusations of his friends. We recall the assessment of Job’s character from the introduction. By the narrator’s assessment and by Yhwh’s word as well, Job was “perfect and upright, and one who feared God, and who turned from evil” (1:1 and 8). The writer extends this by telling us Job was so morally sensitive that he offered sacrifice for his children covering the possibility that they might have “cursed God in their hearts” (1:5).

In the parallel accounts in chapters 1 and 2 of Job’s responses to the attacks of Satan on Job we note an intriguing development. At the conclusion of

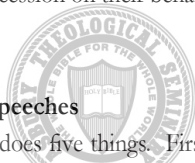
the first round of attacks on Job he offers a poetic assessment of the situation: “Blessed I came from my mother’s womb // and naked I shall return there. Yhwh has given, and Yhwh has taken away. // Blessed be the name of Yhwh.” Then comes the narrator’s assessment: “In all this Job did not sin, // nor did he cause offense to God” (1:21-22).

Then at the conclusion of the second round of assaults upon Job, after his wife’s not so encouraging words—“Curse God and die!”—Job again offers a poetic response: “Will we receive good from God // and not also accept evil [from him]?” (2:10). Then the narrator offers this assessment. “In all this Job did not sin”—just as he had in 1:22. But then he continues: “. . .with his lips” (2:10). Job did not sin with his lips! Given the fact that the first half of a possible bicolon creates a space inviting the reader to finish it, and given the fact that the narrator has stressed the possibility of sinning “with the heart” and Job’s own keen awareness of that sort of sin, we may not be surprised then when the Targum actually does finish the bicolon with the words, “But he did mutter words in his heart” (thoughts) ברם ברעיוניה הרהיר. Just what is being implied in the MT is not entirely clear. Is it hinting that Job at his best was still not flawless? Was Eliphaz’ claim actually true, that if God wished, he could find fault even with his angels (4:17-19)? If so, it simply adds to the book the insight that whatever fault God *could* have found in his servant Job, it was not, contrary to the insistence of the friends, a factor in Job’s suffering. He was not suffering because of his sin, whether blatant and public or hidden in his heart. His moral deficiencies, if indeed he had any worth reckoning, were not related at all in this story to his suffering as the narrative runs. Indeed, if anything, Job suffered *because* of his righteousness, in so far as anything about Job led toward his pain.

And, Yhwh did not mention anything about Job’s muttering words in his heart, either in his speeches to Job or in his comments in the epilogue. And apparently the accusations Yhwh does level against Job—that he spoke beyond his competence, and that he maligned God in the course of seeking to justify his responses to his friends and his strident remarks about and to God—apparently these two main accusations of Yhwh against Job are not to be thought of as sins for which Job should repent or which disqualify him as one to whom Yhwh can send the chastened friends for intercession on their behalf (42:8). All of this we bring to our reading of 42:1-6.

Job’s Response to Yhwh’s Speeches

In our passage Job does five things. First, (42:2) he responds (*laken*) to the majority content of Yhwh’s interrogatory tour de force. Yhwh said he would



ask questions; this he has certainly done. Job's response is the claim, not necessarily a new insight, but certainly true, that "Yhwh can do whatever he chooses. No one can thwart his plans." Repeatedly Job's speeches implied this—as did God's questions.

Second, he referenced God's accusation (38:2) that his repeated speech beyond competence (beyond his knowledge) had brought more confusion than clarity to the long and painful debate. This he admitted to be true. He had indeed spoken far beyond his competence (40:4; 42:3).

Third, and just as he had demanded in his misguided speeches, now Job says he has not only heard God but in this encounter with the whirlwind he has somehow "seen" God (42:5). Surely this should elevate the value of the words he is about to speak. Because of our focus we cannot pursue this, in spite of its import. Here Job knows his new "insights" have come from Yhwh himself, from a revelation from beyond himself, from Yhwh who has *allowed* himself to be seen.

Fourth, and as a response to the preceding, Job "recants" what he has said. Especially, I would think, he recants where he spoke far beyond his competence as a *geber*, as Yhwh has rightly claimed. Here I am agreeing with those interpreters who make the syntactical observation that **מאס** takes a direct object, not a reflexive. The lexeme **מאס** in this instance therefore means Job "recanted" of an object we must supply (e.g., probably Job's words at certain points). He did not loath himself. If we have been correct to this point, Job has nothing for which to loathe himself beyond the situation in which Yhwh has placed him.

Fifth he **נחם** / "relents" concerning **עפר ואפר**. But what, to return to our first questions, do we make of his "relenting concerning dust and ashes?"

1. Did he repent of sin in dust and ashes? No. Neither the text nor the context really will allow this, in spite of the well-known translation tradition.
2. Did he repent of his finitude and frailty itself as though the **עפר ואפר** condition were itself a sin? Surely not. Our word pair, **עפר ואפר** is not sin, neither in Job nor anywhere else in the Bible.
3. Nor, did he recant and relent because he *was* **עפר ואפר**, not because this condition is sin, but simply because it is responsible for his predicament. Thus, "I recant and relent, *being but dust and ashes*" (TNK, italics added). Commenting on v. 6 TNK notes, "As translated, the second half [of the line] reflects Job's basic creature hood, the fact that unlike God, he is a mere mortal, *dust and ashes*. The preposition that opens this section is

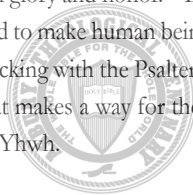
more naturally translated ‘on,’ however, and thus this phrase may be a prosaic notice that Job feels this way while he is mourning on a dust-heap.” Perhaps, but I think there is much more to the story than simply the lamentable nature of the human condition. And, more seriously, if we go back to translating נחמתי על־עפר ואפר as though it located Job *on* dust and ashes, we adopt as solution the rendering we thought to be impossible at the beginning.

4. Did Job repent or perhaps relent of being עפר ואפר with an attitude? Is his “confession” really a final act of defiance? “I’m sorry I’m human, God. But you can take this life and...” I doubt it for two reasons. First one must read against the grain of the story as we have it in order to get there. The epilogue does not treat Job as a defiant hero. Second, this sounds more twenty-first century “AD-ish” than Iron Age “BC-ish.”
5. Did Job relent or change his mind regarding the appropriateness of remaining with עפר ואפר? Was he “foreswearing” the symbols of mourning (Habel, 1985:575-576)? Perhaps, especially if we had either one word or the other and not the whole expression עפר ואפר. It cannot be reduced to either of the nouns alone. We have instead an expression of abasement and dishonor more than mourning (chs 29-30). And one wonders whether such a final conclusion rises to the import of its place in the book.
6. Was Job simply disclosing that he was “comforted concerning the human condition” (Perdue). Perhaps so. This is a possible translation. But one wonders if “comfort” is what one should expect as the result of the sort of confrontation with the Whirlwind that Job has just had and whether or not we should expect not simply comfort but also some sort of correction or redirection.
7. Perhaps, having retracted his previous words, Job has a reconception [i.e., “change of mind”] of the human condition in which, in Carol Newsom’s words, “the vulnerability of the human existence can be understood, not in terms of divine enmity, but in terms of a creation within which the chaotic is restrained but never fully eliminated” (NIB, IV, 29). This rests on a suitable translation and makes

- progress I think, especially if one does not leave Yhwh at the mercy of the chaotic. But I think further progress is possible.
8. I propose that Job retracts his incompetent pontifications and then confesses a profound change of mind regarding עפר ואפר, that is, regarding the human condition. For all its dignity and bestowed genius it yet remains essentially other than the Judge of All the Earth. It remains continually subject to the frailty and finitude that also mark humankind. Job's life-changing discovery in the hearing and seeing of Yhwh was the discovery that human beings as עפר ואפר do not in themselves have sufficient knowledge or experience from which to understand what is happening to them, to unravel history—much less to explain the doings of the divine. We recall that none of the terra firma characters knew why Job was suffering, whether there was purpose in it or not. All of them were mistaken, their confidence notwithstanding.

We learn of the dignity and bestowed genius of human beings as עפר ואפר, especially in Abraham's standing with Yhwh. This sounds like the life of Ps 8:4-5: "What is mankind / אָנוֹשׁ that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" This was the sort of עפר ואפר Job experienced before the frightful days into which Yhwh plunged him. This was the time of his chapter 29 years when his frailty and finitude were not so obvious. This was the time when one might actually be tempted to think עפר ואפר was indeed sufficiently competent that human beings, though "dust and ashes," could nevertheless go toe to toe with the Almighty.

Job's immersion in suffering and social upheaval threw all that into question. His new vision of Shaddai demolished that naïvete. Only God can explain God, he learned, and God does not produce explanations on demand. Job became a critical realist regarding his existence as עפר ואפר. This reassessment of the עפר ואפר condition reminds one of the inter-textual pairing of Pss 8:5 with 9:20. There on the one hand in Ps 8, the psalmist marvels at the glory with which the Creator has crowned human beings (אָנוֹשׁ / *'enosh*). "You have made him little less than God; you crown him with glory and honor." But then, in Ps 9:20, the psalmist asks Yhwh to restrain *'enosh* and to make human beings, who tend toward arrogance, to know they are just *'enosh*. Sticking with the Psalter for a moment, it is Job's critical realism regarding עפר ואפר, that makes a way for the so-called songs of lament and their candid confrontation of Yhwh.



Returning to Job and its place in the canon, Job asks implicitly for the Incarnation of the Son of God in order to respond adequately to questions raised by the book. Job also paves the way for the Incarnation with its critical realism regarding the human experience as עפר ואפר. Can there be incarnation if עפר ואפר is in itself a cause for repentance? Surely not, if the claims of 1 John 1:1-4 and 4:2 are true? On the other hand, can incarnation be adequately appreciated if the frailty and finitude of עפר ואפר is forgotten? I doubt it.

End Notes

¹I am delighted to be included among those invited to submit writings in honor of Professor John Oswalt, himself a model of careful and edifying publication in the service of the church. He has lead the way in fearless writing for the academy, the Church and the world. Praise the Lord.

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