INTEGRITY AND FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: JOB, AND THE PRICE OF INTEGRITY

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Abstract: Freedom of conscience is as basic to humanity as the right to life itself. This is not because an outside human agent grants it, but because it is an integral part of what it means to be a human being, a whole person. Without such freedom of conscience, one cannot function as integer, as a whole, or as truthful to oneself. The Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) speaks of integrity as wholeness, and within this created reality, a man such as Job was able to exercise his freedom of conscience and cling to his integrity even in the Creator's court of law, let alone before his well-meaning yet misguided friends. However, fallen man's conscience needs training by revelation: in Job's case, via direct action by God; and, after the completion of the biblical canon – as in our case - via the inspired Scriptures, so that man may be complete, enabled to act rightly.

Keywords: *Integrity, Conscience, Freedom of Conscience, Job's integrity, Blamelessness, Wholesomeness*

According to a news report in January 2015, Mr. Mian Raza Rabbani, a Pakistani senator, cast a vote in support of his party's position, yet it was against his own conscience; his action brought him to tears and shame, as he explained: "I have been in the Senate for more than 12 years, but have never been as ashamed as I am today and I cast my vote against my conscience."[1] Why is it that humans feel bound to act as their conscience dictates? And if they do go against conscience, why do they experience shame, anguish and remorse, as if something 'broke' inside, as if something was

1 Raza Rabbani in tears: 'Ashamed to vote against conscience', https://www.dawn.com/news/1155293 (Accessed on 08/08/2020).

not whole any longer?! We submit that it is because something is indeed no longer whole; and, yes, something does break inside. Did the senator not have freedom of conscience? He did not claim not to have had it. Did someone coerce him to go against conscience? No, not physically, for sure; yet the pressure to vote in line with the expressed position of his party's leadership prevailed. But choosing political expediency over his own conviction caused the senator anguish; and going against his conscience brought him tears of remorse. This case only exemplifies the general truth that human suffer if they act against conscience. Why? Because, we submit, freedom of conscience is integral to being human; and, when one goes against his convictions which are approved by his conscience, the grief and sense of loss one experiences is a reflection of man's spiritual reality: he is no longer *whole*, or integrity has been compromised or broken. As Martin Luther is said to have exclaimed over half a millennium ago before the emperor at the Diet of Worms, "it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience."[2] So, how far would one go in following his conscience? What price would one pay to maintain his integrity?

To proceed, we need to define human conscience, freedom of conscience, and integrity. As intimated above, *conscience* refers to that inner voice (or an inner moral compass) that both helps know right from wrong and that judges between right and wrong; *freedom of conscience*[3] is also called *freedom of thought*, and it points both to one's liberty to hold a view or a belief, and to his liberty to actually express and act based on such a view or belief; and *integrity* is one's quality and ability to act in conformity to one's convictions, or adhere to that which one's conscience deems to be right, thus maintaining a sense of wholeness.

Yet, defining such concepts ultimately make sense only within a biblical worldview. Indeed, the very attempt to speak cogently and coherently of human conscience and of one's moral integrity requires a moral universe in which we find not only a Creator, who is the ultimate Lawgiver and Judge, but also a Redeemer. It is not only that this inner judge which man finds at work within himself evaluating his actions in

2 Steven Ozment, The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 245.

3 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Key aspects of the Freedom of Conscience", in *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință - Supliment (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, Dragoș Mușat (eds.). (Editions IARSIC: Les Arsc, France: 2016), 30-37.

light of an inner law-code requires Someone ultimately responsible both for that law and for that never-tiring evaluating inner voice – and before Whom man instinctively knows he shall give an account for the way he related to that inner moral compass; but, if conscience and integrity are connected in the way which we already suggested, then there must also exist Someone able to resolve the conflict that arises when man trespasses against that law-code, when conscience is violated and integrity is broken, and bring restoration of the 'whole'. Thus, conscience and integrity make sense only in a world where man has truly been endowed by his Creator with certain unalienable rights – freedom of conscience, or the right to think and act according to one's convictions, being a crucial one,[4] and in world where God provided the means of restoration to wholeness. And to this biblical world we now turn – mainly to that of the Hebrew Scriptures – to examine the concept and the price of integrity in relationship to one's freedom of conscience.

The concept of *conscience* in the Scriptures is clearer in the New Testament, where the word συνείδησις (*syneidēsis*) appears thirty times. In contrast, the word appears only once in the Greek version of the Old Testament, in Ecl 10:20; and even there it carries the idea of *thoughts* or *consciousness*. Yet, in the Hebrew Bible, the function of man's conscience – that of a man's inner judge in his relation to the law inscribed within – is attributed to the heart, בֵּל (lēb). It is David's *heart* that 'smites' him after he counts the people (2 Sam 24:10); and, after having sinned with Batsheba, a conscience-stricken David repents and ask the Lord for a clean *heart* (Ps 51:10). We clearly see exemplified in these two events in David's life the connection between one's actions against that which he knew in his heart to be right, and the role of conscience in afflicting him afterward for trespassing that inner standard.[5]

The idea of *freedom of conscience* comes up every now and then, in contexts where such freedom was impeded. Thus, we could point to a few examples of this, when God's people were under the authority of pagans: Joseph in Genesis 39, the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1, Moses parents in Exodus 2, and some of the situations in which Daniel and his

4 For a more detailed discussion on this, see Daniel Istrate, „Vegetables, Conscience and the Christian Faith: What does religious liberty have to do with human dignity?" in Journal for Freedom of Conscience 7/2 / Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință 7/2 (Editura IARSIC: Les Arcs, France: 2019), 496-509.

5 Cf. H-C. Hahn, "Conscience," *NIDNT* 1:348-351.

three friends found themselves (Daniel 1, 3, and 6). However, given the fact that much of the Hebrew Bible is preoccupied with the people of God in a time when they were masters in their own land and supposed to have had the Law of God as their moral authority, the majority of the Israelites were usually not constrained to go against their conscience. When they did rebel against God and His law, as most of their recorded biblical history demonstrates to have been the case, they did so together with their leaders, not under constraint, but willingly; exceptions would include some of the righteous who remained faithful to the covenant, such as Elijah or Micaiah, son of Imlah (cf. 1 Kings 18-22), or other prophetic or righteous figures.

If the concepts of *conscience* or *freedom of conscience* are not as common in the Hebrew Bible, that of *integrity* abounds. The family of words that usually conveys this idea comes from the root תמם (*tmm*), which means *to complete*, or *to be completed*. The word and its derivative appear in the Hebrew Bible over 200 times, and their meanings all point to *completeness* and *blamelessness*; thus, the adjectives תָּם (*tām*) – *complete, blameless, pure*, and תְּמִים (*tāmîm*) – *whole, entire; intact; without blemish; blameless*), and the nouns תֹּם (*tōm*) – *perfection, completeness*), and תֻּמָּה (*tummâ*) – *integrity, uprightness*).[6] What are some contexts in which these words are used, and how?

The concept is often applied to animals considered for sacrifice. The rule was strict and repeated often: such an animal was to be תְּמִים (*tāmîm*), without blemish, whether it was the Paschal lamb (Exod 12:5), or any other animal brought on the altar of the LORD (cf. Exod 29:1; Lev 1:1, 3; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23; 5:15 …). Blemishes included blindness, mutilation, an open sore or a scab, bruised or crushed or torn or cut testicles, and the like; to bring any such unwholesome animal as a sacrifice to Yahweh was "an abomination" in His sight (Deut 17:1). Nothing that was less than integer or whole was fit for the God's presence.

The first occurrence of one of these terms characterizing a man is in Gen 6:9, where we are told that Noah was "a righteous man, *blameless* (תְּמִים) among those in his time."[7] Victor Hamilton notes that, when applied to humans, this word is best rendered 'wholesome', as *tāmîm*

6 Vezi J. P. J. Olivier, "תמם (tmm)," NIDOTTE 4: 306-308, and the same words in HALOT, 1745, 1748-1754.

7 Unless otherwise noted, translations belong to the author.

does not mean sinless; the word is also paralleled here with the adjective קִיְדַצ *(ṣaddîq)*, which points to someone who is habitually righteous, as Noah was in his walk with God.[8] The idea of habitual righteousness is strengthened by the application of the word *tāmîm* to Abram in Gen 17:1 coupled with the imperative form of the verb *to be*, in the context of walking this life's journey before God Almighty, in His presence: "Walk before Me, and be blameless (*tāmîm*), or be wholesome!" The people of Israel are also called to the same standard when contrasted with the nations they are about to dispossess in Canaan: they are to be *tāmîm*, which most modern versions render as *blameless*, the LXX and some of the older English versions translate with *perfect*, while the TANAKH[9] has *wholehearted*, carrying the idea of *wholeness* or *wholesomeness*. Though the same word (*tāmîm*) may imply the complete absence of sin (such as it applies to the LORD's way in 2 Sam 22:31, or even to Lucifer before he rebelled against God, cf. Ezek 28:15), its overall meaning of one's wholehearted devotion to God is also confirmed by its use in 2 Sam 22:24, where David states, "I was *blameless* before Him," and in 22:33 where He credits God for making his way or his walk *blameless*. A cursory reading of David's life proves abundantly that David's *blameless* life does not necessarily imply the absence of sin.[10] As Israel's king, there was never a compulsion on David to act against his conscience, and yet he did, which points to two things: first, this integrity refers to a practical righteousness, which is also a reason for his vindication before God especially when opposed or slandered by enemies (cf. Ps 7:8, 26:1, 41:11-12, where David appeals to his integrity, מת֫ [*tōm*], in the face of judgment and accusations); and, second, it shows that integrity was something that could be restored, and Psalm 51 with its prayer for a clean heart (or conscience, as noted above) exemplifies the way of restoration in David's life.

8 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis:* Chapters 1-17 (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 277.

9 TANAKH is the 1985 Jewish Publication Society English translation of The Holy Scriptures from the traditional Hebrew (Masoretic) text.

10 One should take into account that this psalm (2 Samuel 22) has perhaps larger implications, beyond the ethical approach to the life of David; as argued elsewhere, it perhaps celebrates what David stands for in light of the Davidic covenant, in the eyes of Yahweh, namely the man through whom King Messiah will come, and of whom such language shall be entirely true. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Daniel Istrate, "A Man After God's Own Heart? 2 Samuel 21-24 and the Deconstruction and Reconstruction of King David (Part 2)" *Timotheus* 4, no. 1 (2017): 83-94.

But it wasn't only a Hebrew king, such as David, or other revered figures in the messianic line, such as Noah and Abraham, that manifest integrity – the practice of walking and acting based on the dictates of one's conscience. In Gen 20:5-6 we witness a Philistine ruler, Abimelech, manifesting a similar trait in an interesting situation. When Abraham sojourns in Gerar, he presents Sarah as his sister, leading the local king, Abimelech, to believe that she is unmarried and thus eligible to be added to his harem. When he acts on this thought, God warns him in a dream that Sarah belongs to another man, and His punishment will come over the house of Abimelech for bringing her into his house (though he had not touched her yet). As a response, the king points out that both Abraham and Sarah stated that they were brother and sister, which he then follows with this plea: "In the integrity (*tōm*) of my heart and in the innocence of my hands I have done this." Yahweh acknowledges that Abimelech acted in innocence and did not go against conscience, and thus the threatened punishment for him and his people is averted. Had he had the correct information and still taken Sarah, then he would have gone against conscience, acting without integrity or wholesomeness.

If all the examples of integrity above include people under no compulsion to act against their conscience, Job is a more complex case, as he comes under fire for his claim to integrity, and is under heavy pressure to go against his conscience and deny the integrity that he claimed to possess. Was Job truly blameless? Was his integrity something real? And how far would he go to fight for it, and why?

Already from the first verse of the book Job is characterized as תָּם (*tām*), *blameless* or *complete*. This is the omniscient point of view of the author, so we must take it at face value. We have noted above that being wholesome does not mean the man never sinned. In fact, we find Job in this very context bringing sacrifices on behalf of his children in case they sinned against God, which shows that Job knew the way to restoration when he himself needed to be restored to wholeness or integrity, as rarely as that might have happened in his own life. According to Hartley, when *tām* "is used with a person it means personal integrity, not sinless perfection (Josh. 24:14; Judg. 9:16, 19). The blameless person is one who walks in close fellowship with God… He serves God wholeheartedly."[11]

11 John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 67. See also Koehler-Baumgartner, "תָּם," HALOT, 1742-1743.

But the reader is not given much time before he finds himself privy to a heavenly council where the sons of God – Satan among them – come together before Yahweh. Since Satan has just returned from his inspection of earth, his prized place of rule, Yahweh brings up Job as an example of a man living on earth yet not under Satan's servitude, but rather under God's: "Have you considered My servant Job? There is none like him on earth, a *blameless* (*tām*) and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"[12] Upon Satan's instigation that Job serves God only because of His abundant blessings on him, God allows Satan to take away Job's possessions; this, Satan does in the space of one day, taking the lives of Job's ten children and depriving Job of his vast possessions. Satan's expectation declared before the heavenly council was that Job would respond by cursing God; instead, Job's response was to worship and bless Yahweh as the Sovereign who gives and takes away as He pleases (1:20-21). The omniscient narrator concludes that Job's response was not sinful, and he did not rebel against God.

The following scene finds Job again as the subject of contention between God and Satan in the heavenly council. Yahweh characterizes Job using the same attributes as in 1:8 and 1:1 – "a blameless (*tām*) and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil" – and then adds: "He still holds firmly to his תֻּמָּתִי (*tummâ – integrity*), though you have incited me against him in order to destroy him without cause" (2:3). Is Job a man of integrity? God says so four times: by ascribing to Job the word תָּם (*tām – whole, blameless*) three times (1:1, 8 and 2:3), and once the word תֻּמָּתִי (*tummâ – integrity, uprightness*, or "completeness with regard to one's relationship with God; … piety, devotion"[13]) in 2:3. This time Satan is given permission to touch Job's body, yet not to take his life, and the awful disease Satan inflicts on Job is proverbial, as sores covered his whole body and he sits on ashes, scratching himself in pain and experiencing the deepest agony of loss. When his wife provokes him to renounce his תֻּמָּתִי (*tummâ – integrity*), to curse God and die, he calls such speech 'foolish', declaring again God's sovereignty: "Only what is good should we receive from God, and not also receive what is bad / evil?" (2:10); in the same verse, the voice of the omniscient narrator

12 Job 1:8; here Job receives the same words of commendation as in 1:1, with the only addition that Job is called by God: "My servant".

13 Koehler-Baumgartner, "תֻּמָּה," *HALOT*, 1745.

makes it clear that in all this Job did not sin with his lips. So far, so good, we might say. Yet, it is not that good for Job, though he has acted with integrity before these awful calamities overwhelmed him, knocking him down from the highest point to the lowest, and faster than any human has ever experienced.

But Job functions in a world where integrity means blessing – materially, and in every other area of life. It is not long before his three friends come, mourn with him for seven days without saying a word, and then start probing, stating the point, and very soon accusing Job to his face of having sinned, of having committed something awful which brough about such a drastic retribution from a just God. Did Job have a higher revelation than they did? Was he not also brought up with the same basic belief system?[14] Yet, why is he able to withstand speech after speech, accusation after accusation brought by his friends, blaming him for some hidden sin as the only possible explanation for his calamity?

His friends' accusation is so believable in a world ruled by a just God, and where humans need to make sense of life: "Will God reject *the blameless / the one who is wholesome* – תָּם (*tām*)?" The expected answer is 'Surely not!' (cf. 4:6-7). Yet, why does it appear that He has rejected Job, which, judging by Job's affliction, seems to be the logical conclusion given the premise of a world ruled by a just God? But though he does not understand, Job is convinced of his innocence and proclaims his integrity despite the pressures coming from his friends as well as from his own mind, pressures to admit that he must have done something to bring God's judgment this upon himself. Yet, to admit to something he knows not to be true would be to go against his conscience, and lose the only thing he had left: his integrity, or the ability to think and act based on the dictates of his conscience.

So, Job does not defend his integrity only before his wife and his friends, but he is willing to take his case into the very court of the Most High. However, as he ponders God's power and wisdom, he begins to realize that despite his claim to innocence, he will not be able to make a solid defense for his case: "though I am תָּם (*tām - blameless*), He would prove me perverse" (9:20). He proclaims his integrity, though deeply troubled: "I am *blameless* (*tām*); I regard not myself; I loathe my

14 Cf. Job 9:2, where Job agrees with his friends at least on principle that God does not reject the blameless, and He does not protect the wicked. Yet his experience seems contrary to this fact, and it is most disturbing to him.

life" (9:21); here, his "conviction of his own moral purity does not ease the deep sense of meaninglessness he feels from his anguish, fed by the lack of any sense of God's presence or any insight into His design."[15] In resignation, then, he states in the following verse what seems obvious when judging his miserable condition in light of his integrity: "It is all one; therefore I say, 'He destroys both the *blameless* (*tām*) and the wicked'" (9:22). Just as he already acknowledged that both good and evil come from the hand of God (2:10), here Job concludes that God does not necessarily make a distinction between the blameless and the wicked, as they are both subject to calamity; unexpectedly, he finds himself in the category of other innocent people who suffer, either from natural calamities brought about by God, through oppression that prevails on earth, or, in his own case, through unexplainable afflictions. In the span of three verses (9:20-22) Job proclaims his integrity three times, even if it means that He begins now to intimate that God's actions do not make sense; yet, Job is consistent in how he perceives reality: evil people receive good things from God, and, equally true, good people receive bad things.[16] He would like an explanation, yet he is also aware that if it came to it, he would not be able to stand on his own before the Almighty and demand one; for even if he got there, based on his current treatment at the hands of God, he is afraid, if not sure, sure that God will not acquit him, but rather find him deplorably filthy.

A ray of hope still comes through, even if Job cannot make sense of his current situation. For his sanity, he would like to ask God not to simply declare him guilty, but to rather to inform him first of His reasons for treating a man of integrity in such manner: "Inform me why You contend with me" (10:2). And, despite his despair, he clings to his integrity, which reveals that deep down he was hoping that good prevails, good is rewarded, integrity does pay off, and he will be vindicated. As he replies to his friends, at times in despair, at other times in disgust and disillusionment, somehow Job finds the strength to keep affirming his integrity despite the heavy pressures to confess otherwise. Though he has become a laughingstock for his friends, he claims in 12:4 that he is תִּמָּה (*tāmîm – whole, blameless*), and he does not abandon or his stray

15 Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 67.

16 Cf. Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction & Commentary* (TOTC; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), 149.

from his position before their continuous accusations: "Far be it from me to say that you are right; till I die I will not renounce my הְמָּתִ֑י (*tummâ – integrity*) / or set aside my integrity from me" (27:5);[17] and wishing God would finally agree to hear his case, he exclaims: "Let me be weighed in the scales of righteousness / according to righteous scales, and let God know / ascertain my הְמָּתִ֑י (*tummâ – integrity*)!" (31:6).

Why would Job persist in his pursuit of vindication, in upholding his integrity?[2] God Himself said a few times that Job was תָּם (*tām – whole, blameless*), a man of integrity – even though Job was not aware of this at the time; so, Job was not claiming something untrue.[18] And neither does Job repent of this – for that would have meant going against his own conscience, and in the end losing his integrity. What Job recants, or what he repents of in the end is of his claim that he needs to understand, that God somehow owes him an explanation as to how a terrible affliction of a righteous person squares off with a moral universe led by a just Sovereign.

Job's ability to persist in his claim to integrity is commendable both in the face of his own terrible predicament and in the light of the extraordinary pressures to which he was submitted to reconsider. The only possible grounds for such an extraordinary perseverance comes from the work of the Creator Himself, Who made man in His own image and likeness, Who inscribed His just moral law as an imprint unto man's heart, and Who set in man's mind that inner judge that accuses or excuses one's deeds in light of the law inscribed within by the same Creator (cf. Romans 1-2).[19] By virtue of creation, He graced man with freedom of conscience, and no one has the right to pressure man to believe or act in a way that goes against what God instructs. Yet, due to the presence of sin, all men act against conscience at times (all men sin), so all are in need of

17 This verse is part of an oath Job takes before God, which again emphasizes his entrenched stand that he is indeed a man of integrity: "As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter, 3 as long as my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, 4 my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit. 5 Far be it from me to say that you are right; till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. 6 I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days" (Job 27:2-6, ESV).

18 See also John E. Hartley, "The Theology of Job," in *NIDOTTE* 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids. Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 4:782. 0-796.

19 For a more detailed explanation of this, see Istrate, „Vegetables, Conscience and the Christian Faith."

being restored to integrity – Job demonstrated that he knew this, and it is implied that he availed himself to this means of restoration, just as he brought sacrifices for his children's restoration. But when disaster struck, Job's conscience was not struck by any guilt; and, based on the revelation he had, he ascertained that whatever the reason for his affliction, it must not be because he was guilty. He defended his integrity, for, to admit otherwise – despite heavy pressures to cave in – would have been to act against his conscience, which would have meant the loss of the very integrity he was defending. And he was willing to take his case all the way to the highest court of all, that of God Almighty Himself.

Freedom of conscience is a right everyone has by virtue of creation, and it is a powerful force – man is bound by it, and if he goes against it, he breaks; when tramples it under foot, something breaks inside, as in the case of Senator Rabbani, or that of King David, and thus integrity is lost. This renders man under judgment, with repentance as his only hope for restoration – available then through sacrifices, and now through the ultimate sacrifice for sin, that of Christ Jesus.

But, given man's sinfulness, not even conscience itself is always reliable,[20] being in need of instruction by means of God's revelation (in our case, by the Bible, or The Holy Scriptures;[21] in Job's situation, by natural law and direct revelation, as he was probably contemporary with the Old Testament patriarchs). Once a mind renewed and anchored in God's revelation ascertains the truth, he should have the freedom to act accordingly[22] – he should be allowed to exercise his freedom of conscience no matter what, or else function in an unwholesome way, break the unit that God put together, or lose integrity. For, as Luther boldly stated before the emperor who would soon decree his condemnation, to go against one's conscience "is neither safe nor right."

20 R. C. Sproul also notes, "the conscience is important, but not normative. It is capable of distortion and misguidance ... [it] can be seared and eroded, being desensitized by repeated sin" (*How Should I Live in This World: Crucial Questions* [Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 1999], 102-103).

21 Given man's fallenn status and rebellion against God, his conscience needs to be ionformed and anchored in the Scriptures, God's inspired Word. For, as the apostle taught long ago, „All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

22 As Sproul contends, "Though the conscience is not the highest tribunal of ethics, it is perilous to act against it" (*How Should I Live in This World*, 103).

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