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The Formation of the Book of Job: The Priority of Poetry, the Primacy of Prose

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There is something discomfiting about the biblical story of Job that begins (literally) “once upon a time.” The text proceeds to describe a series of life-shattering tragedies through which the pious protagonist remains steadfastly restrained and faithful to God and finally ends with (again, quite literally) “they all lived happily after.” This is the story of Job that casual readers seem to remember.

But to retell only the “story of Job” while leaving aside the gristly middle of the book is to misread Job, which in its final form is a much more problematic text. There are no disinterested or neutral readings—or writings—of biblical texts. One way to examine biases in ancient texts is ideological criticism. About the assumptions of ideological criticism, Tate writes that “texts are not value-neutral but, rather, reflect to different degrees the relations and structures of race, gender, and class, which empower some persons and disenfranchise others.”¹ Indeed, “the function of ideology... is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society; in the last analysis, the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class.”² Ideology proves to be a factor in not only the interpretation of biblical texts but in their composition as well, including the book of Job.

For Clines, ideology denotes a “relatively coherent set of ideas amounting to a worldview, ... a set of such ideas special to a particular social class or group.”³ In the book of Job, a central feature of that worldview is the doctrine of retribution, reflecting an ideology wherein one’s rewards or punishments correlate precisely to good or bad behavior. That such a worldview has its home primarily among the wealthy and powerful in ancient

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Israelite society indicates where in the community’s social strata the biblical texts originate. By championing such a worldview, these elites in ancient Israelite society intended to legitimate and preserve their position in society by a particular understanding of reality. According to Clines, ideology further connotes:

ideas that are shared with others; ideas serving the interests of a particular group, especially a dominant group; ideas that are wrongly passed off as natural, obvious or commonsensical; ideas that are assumed rather than argued for... ideas controlling or influencing actions... idealizing the ideal and scorning the actual.⁴

Ideology is not only about ideas and values, but also about *power*; the legitimizing of the primacy of the dominant social class. This legitimization of its own power occurs, Eagleton notes, when that social group or class engages in:

promoting beliefs or values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought,

1. W. Randolph Tate, “Ideology,” in *Interpreting the Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 174.

2. Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 5.

3. David J. Clines, “The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Interested Parties: The Theology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 10.

4. Clines, “Ideology,” 10–11.

perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself.⁵

The redactor responsible for the final form of the book of Job, who added the framing didactic narrative to an older poetic dialogue, sought to accomplish precisely these things.

Theories differ on the origins and formation of the book of Job. Contemporary “final form” interpreters of the book favor a more holistic (literary) approach that underscores unifying elements within the text as the product of a single, postexilic author. It is, nevertheless, customary to distinguish between several units differentiated by genre, such as the prose of the framing narrative, the poetic dialogue between Job and his friends, the Wisdom poem, Job’s final defense, the Elihu speeches, and the theophany speeches of God from the whirlwind. For example, Newsom draws on the work of the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin and reads Job as a “polyphonic text,” in which the book’s dialogical truth claims intersect and engage each other in an open-ended dialogue (a “contest of moral imaginations”) between a variety of voices, speaking through different genres.

According to Newsom (following Bakhtin), a polyphonic text contains three noteworthy features. First, such a text “embodies a dialogic sense of truth;” that is, no single voice in the text has a monopoly on truth claims. Second, “the author’s position, although represented in the text, is not privileged;” the author’s own perspective is marginalized in the creation of a genuine dialogue among several “consciousnesses.” Third, “the polyphonic text ends without finalizing closure;” that is, there is no definitive conclusion where the reader arrives at a sense of closure with all questions resolved.⁶ Readers are drawn into the task of making sense of the text for themselves, forming their own – albeit tentative – conclusions, or not.

This more holistic method has become a common way of reading Job, and there is much that is attractive in this approach. Nevertheless, as appealing as this approach may be, ultimately the argument that a polyphonic reading is the single best way to understand the “dynamic structure” of the book is unconvincing.⁷ Rather than being one part among many in the book of Job, in the end there *is* a voice in the text that is privileged and this voice is among the latest additions to the text. There *is* a voice that holds a place of honor, whose contribution to the book of Job intends to create a sense of closure by tying up loose ends and, following Eagleton, disparaging (while not eliminating) other views to promote a worldview that privileges the final redactor and his own community. This is the voice the reader meets in the didactic narrative that frames the book to establish the status of elites in the restoration community of Yehud.

This claim challenges those interpreters who argue for the greater antiquity of the text, suggesting that the opening and clos-

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ing narratives of the book of Job are part of an ancient (patriarchal) folktale. Some have even suggested—without good evidence—there are ancient Near Eastern analogues.⁸ None match well the structure or content of the book of Job.

Others have sought to make the case that careful analysis reveals that the language of the narrative framework is “Late Biblical Hebrew” (ordinarily dated to the post-exilic period) rather than a more archaic form of the language.⁹ For example, Hurvitz identified a number of what he calls “Persianisms” in the book from the sixth century and later. Among these are *ha-sātān* as a figure in the parallel heavenly court scenes in Job 1–2, as well as verb forms with peculiar prepositions, and the opening phrase translated (literally, reflecting the Hebrew syntax) “a man there was” (only in Job 1:1 and Esther 2:5) as opposed to the more common pre-exilic expression “and there was a man.”¹⁰

There are additional literary arguments for the relative lateness of the prose folktale of Job vis-a-vis the long poetic dialogue. In the final form of the book, Job 1–2 provides a setting for and introduces the poetry that follows. Comparable to this may be the secondary narrative superscriptions that introduce the books of the latter prophets (which are otherwise mostly poetic in genre) and shape the way later audiences understand the texts (for example, Amos 1:1). More interesting, and more compelling, is a comparison of the book of Job with the structure of the book of Proverbs. Fox is one of several scholars who identify the extended poems in chapters 1–9 as secondary additions to an earlier collection of proverbial sayings that serve “as the introduction to the proverb collections. . . Proverbs 1–9 *introduces and tells us how to read* the rest of the Book and so must be later.”¹¹ Fox goes on to identify these chapters as the “latest stratum” of the book, and guardedly suggests a date from the mid-fifth century into the Hellenistic period.¹²

8. Three Mesopotamian texts bear partial resemblance to the book of Job: 1) The Babylonian text, “I will Praise the Lord of Wisdom;” 2) *The Babylonian Theodicy*; and 3) “Man and His God.” See also *Kirta*, from the 2nd millennium archives of Ugarit.

9. Robert Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose* HSM 12 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976).

10. Arvi Hurvitz, “The Date of the Prose-Tale of Job Linguistically Reconsidered,” *HTR* 67 (1974), 18.

11. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* AB 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 6 (italics added).

12. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 48–49. Such dates, he admits, are possible

5. Eagleton, *Ideology*, 5–6.

6. Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 21.

7. *Ibid.*, 20.

This is precisely how best to understand the prose folktale in the book of Job: it is a secondary addition to the older poetic dialogue, set as a frame around the latter to shape the way audiences read and understand the poetry in the middle of the book. Contra Bakhtin (and Newsom), the multiplicity of voices in the book of Job are not value neutral. From the early history of interpretation of the book of Job (*TestJob* and James), the prose folktale dominated; the story of “Job the patient”—that biblical hero of great faith and endurance—that now frames the book was the best remembered part of the text.

Most readers of the book of Job begin reading, naturally, with the opening story (1:1–2:13). The beginning of any story is among the most important parts since it sets the stage for what follows. Among other things, this means that the prose of the opening narrative cannot help but shape readers’ understanding of the ensuing poetic dialogue between Job and his three friends. One cannot unring a bell!

But what difference does it make if the framing narrative is not the earliest but the latest part of the book, added after the poetic dialogue by an editor for the clear purpose of *reshaping* the way readers think about the middle portion of the book? Consider this proposal for a compositional process by which the book of Job reached its final form:

1. The earliest form of the book begins with Job’s daring and honest curse of the day of his birth, and the poetic dialogue (in 3 cycles) between himself and his three friends: 3:1–31:35.
2. At the conclusion of the dialogue section, God responds for a first time, briefly, in 40:1–2.¹³
3. Job answers God’s first response in 40:3–5.¹⁴
4. In 38:1–39:30; and 40:6–41:34, God responds a second time in what are customarily referred to as the “theophany speeches.” Numerous interpreters have identified a “problem of fit” where these verses are concerned, since God does not really respond to Job or about the status of the theology of retribution.
5. In 42:1–6, Job answers God a second and final time. In these enigmatic verses Job quotes the deity from God’s second response (38:2 in 42:3; and 38:3 in 42:4).
6. The preceding sketch of the older part of the text accounts for most of the poetry in the book of Job. The prose was added later, in distinct strata.
7. A redactor added the introductory narrative in Job 1:1–5, 13–22; and 2:9–10 to adapt the existing poetry for his own purposes: to provide a context not only for Job’s bold curse in

though unproven.

13. The divine name, YHWH, appears only in the editorial introduction to the divine response. The deity uses language of “God” (v. 2).

14. As in the second divine response and the theophany speeches, the divine name, YHWH, occurs in the editorial introduction only. In 40:4, Job speaks in direct address to the deity; cf. 42:2, 5.

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chapter 3, but also for the engaging dialogue with the three friends in the following chapters. This first edition of the narrative is limited to the story about Job’s property and family, includes the series of disasters by which he loses everything, and concludes with his wife’s “curse God, and die” and the narrator’s remark that “in all this Job did not sin with his lips.” (2:9–10)

8. Job 42:12–17 represents the original conclusion to the folktale. (The provenance and purpose of 42:11 concerning Job’s “brothers and sisters,” who appear nowhere else in the text, is uncertain.)
9. Shortly after the first edition of the didactic folktale was added to the poetry, a later redactor added the short scene introducing the three friends (2:11–13) to provide a segue into the poetic dialogues. Job 42:7–9, a secondary conclusion to the narrative that mentions the “fortunes” of these friends, would have been included at this time.
10. Lastly, the two scenes in heaven where *ha-sātān* appears, were added to the opening story (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–8). One can remove these passages from the tale without upsetting the narrative. Further evidence for the late date of these episodes is *ha-sātān*, who makes no other appearance in the book. And—with respect to Job 2:1–8—there is no other mention of Job’s physical ailments in the text.

In this reconstruction of the formation of the book of Job, while chronological priority goes to the poetry, primacy goes to the prose. That is, the framing narrative now holds the place of preeminence and exercises profound influence on the audience. *It* is what determines how the audience understands Job’s profound and daring curse, and the dialogue with his friends in the large middle section of the book. However, if one begins reading Job with chapter 3, the encounter with such an emotional outpouring of grief and anger, unencumbered by the prologue that now precedes it in the final form of the book, is a fundamentally different experience.

To objections that such an outcry requires some sort of explanation or *Sitz im Leben*, consider the psalms of lament which also provide no clear setting or occasion. While the psalmist routinely

complains about others/enemies, God, and the psalmist's own condition, everything is left altogether vague. Apart from the editorial superscriptions, most psalms do not relate to any clear historical event or period in Israel's history.¹⁵

Like the laments in the book of Psalms, Job's curse of the day of his birth in chapter 3 is sufficiently vague. While Job has experienced tremendous tragedy and suffered unprecedented misfortune, the details remain unspoken and ambiguous; in no way does Job's curse necessarily follow from the prose folktale in chapters 1–2. Indeed, there is very little in the whole of Job 3–41 that depends on the prologue. Neither does the poetic dialogue in any meaningful way respond to the didactic folktale. Though there are occasional echoes—common themes, ideas, or bits of vocabulary—none of these rises to the level of dependence, either from prose to poetry, or from poetry to prose.

To begin reading with Job 3 means that the reader meets someone who has suffered something fundamentally life-changing. Job has endured the loss of property, to be sure, and family and good health; but perhaps most especially status. (It is not until Job's final appeal in chapters 29–31 that the latter becomes clear.) While Job 3 does not specify an occasion, some event led the writer to compose this curse and set it at the head of a dialogue that thoroughly examines the time-honored doctrine of retribution.

One can imagine the collapse of Judah in the sixth century as the precipitating event that led to the formation of the poetic section of the book of Job in the exilic period. Job 3–41 clearly reflects a moment when the world was turned upside down, when nothing made sense any more. Other relatively late biblical literature takes up the traditional theme of retribution only either to contest it or overturn it completely.

Crüsemann investigates the third century book of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) and argues that Qoheleth reflects a development of ideas that appear chronologically a little earlier than the poetic dialogues of Job 3–31. According to Crüsemann, "the basic presupposition of Qoheleth's thinking is that there is no connection between what human beings do and how they fare. This means that the world and the God who acts in it are completely impenetrable, unpredictable, and unjust."¹⁶ This more hardened position in the book of Qoheleth is still subject to debate in the book of Job. Crüsemann continues:

[...] the loss of the experience of living in a justly ordered world is something that preceded Qoheleth and had already found expression in the Book of Job. Qoheleth brings Job to its logical conclusion. This radical difference from the older wisdom [reflected in Proverbs 10–29] ... has rightly been taken as marking a 'crisis of wisdom' and has been described as consisting in the lack of any

15. Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 23. The exception, of course, is Psalm 137.

16. Frank Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Qoheleth," in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible*, eds. Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 59–60.

While Scripture discourages gossiping and speech designed to damage the reputation of another, keeping a confidence "is not an absolute, especially when others are being harmed or may be hurt."

relationship between persons and either their actions or their fate. God thus becomes an opaque, impersonal power of destiny that nothing can influence.¹⁷

From Proverbs to Job to Qoheleth: here is the "crisis of wisdom." For Crüsemann, the third century was a time when "traditional faith and inherited ethics had come into conflict with the world of experience."¹⁸ In Qoheleth's day the world had become "inexplicable," and God was "experienced only as an incomprehensible force of destiny."¹⁹ The book of Job suggests that one can find essentially the same changed reality in a less stark form a few centuries earlier.

In his history of the religion of ancient Israel, Albertz examines the changing conditions in Israel in the wake of the destruction of Judah in 587 BCE, into the post-exilic period.²⁰ Of special interest is what he describes as the "ethical and religious split in the upper class." On the one hand, there were Israelites among the wealthy and powerful members of the restoration community who were more self-absorbed, interested mostly in their own economic, social, and political well-being (as loyalists to Persian authority) but who demonstrated little concern for others. On the other hand, there were those Israelites in the upper class who distinguished themselves by living in solidarity with others in the community: the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized, including the orphan and widow, the stranger and needy. Albertz refers to the former as the "wicked rich," and the latter as the "pious rich."²¹ Here in these two groups in the exilic period one finds those responsible for the two main parts of the book of Job. In the experience of the "pious rich" one sees those who first crafted the poetic section of the book, while those among the "wicked rich" subsequently affixed the didactic narrative in prose.

17. Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable World," 60–61.

18. *Ibid.*, 73.

19. *Ibid.*, 69.

20. Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period. Volume II: From the Exile to the Maccabees* OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

21. Albertz, *A History*, 497. David J. A. Clines ("Why is There a Book of Job, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009 {1995}], 125) agrees that the book of Job—all of it—reflects the perspective and interests of the wealthy: "this is a rich man's story—not only a story about a rich man but also by a rich man."

The Job of the poetry has acted in righteousness for the care of others. Job 29–31—Job’s final and most powerful statement of defense—details this way of life most clearly. Here is someone respected by young and old alike, by nobles and princes (29:8–10), precisely because of his care for the poor, the orphan, the widow, the blind, the lame, the needy, and the stranger (29:12–16; see also 31:13–34, where Job details his fair treatment of slaves, and provision for the naked). As a member of the upper class, among whom the doctrine of retribution held a prominent place, he shared the assumption that his conduct on behalf of others would result in good things for himself and his family.²² His commitment to retribution theology thus correlated well with his social class. It is a matter of privilege: the wealthy and powerful adhere to the worldview that they are entitled to the good that is theirs, while the suffering of others is due to their own failings.

Now, however, something dreadful had happened that led the author of the poetry to compose a dialogue that questioned the sufficiency of a rigid retribution theology, while at the same time creating space for “lament and protest,” so that survivors could work through their inexplicable suffering.²³ This effort of the “pious rich” was mostly lost, however, when the framing narrative was added to the book of Job. Once the didactic tale was attached, the authentic and profound search for understanding in the poetic dialogue took on new meaning. That is, the once pious lament and protest became—in the final form of the book of Job—something less virtuous and more suspect (hence, the friends’ arguments). It is a great loss, insofar as it now undermines the audience’s ability to be “authentic” in the midst of life’s uncertainty or most inexplicably tragic moments, leading readers to suppress or deny their profound experience of reality.

While chapters 29–31 underscore Job’s concern for others, Job 1–2 and 42 more narrowly focus on the protagonist’s personal wealth, property, and family, with little concern for the well-being of others. These enclosing chapters once more affirm without question the correlation between act and consequence. At the beginning and end of the story, the narrator underscores the personal benefits (including family) Job enjoys because he is “blameless and upright,” one who “fears God and turns away from evil.” In the end, Job “lives happily ever after.” By means of the didactic tale, the redactor sought to minimize and explain away the inexplicable suffering endured in the wake of the destruction of 587 BCE.

A final question remains: what did the final redactor of the book of Job hope to accomplish by framing the older poetic dialogue with the folktale? And who, ultimately, benefited from the final form of the book of Job, which privileges the patient, faithful hero who affirms, plays by, and is rewarded according to the rules of retribution theology?

22. See especially Robert Gordis, “The Social Background of Wisdom Literature,” *HUCA* 18 (1943–1944), 101–104. Crüsemann, “The Unchangeable World,” 61 similarly traces the origins of wisdom literature in ancient Israel to those in the “rich landed upper class.”

23. Albertz, *A History*, 515.

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First, the addition of the story of Job helps tie up loose ends. While the poetry leaves unidentified the event(s) that resulted in Job’s curse and contest with God, the didactic tale answers this question. In an even later edition of the narrative, the *ha-sātān* character was added to obfuscate divine liability. It is no longer God but *ha-sātān*, one of the “heavenly beings,” who bears responsibility for Job’s loss of livestock, children, and good health. In the final form of the book, this is what causes the great suffering Job endures and moves him to cry out, wishing he had never been born.

Second, the addition of the framing narrative fully restores the sufficiency of the theology of retribution. Indeed, it is difficult to interpret the relationship between the description of Job’s character in 1:1, and Job’s family and fortune in 1:2–3, in any other way (see also 42:10–17). The epilogue, in which Job’s family and wealth are fully restored (twofold!), further confirms the transactional character of humanity’s relationship with God.

Third, the secondary narrative functions to silence the Job of the poetry, set aside competing ideas of how the world works, and to obscure authentic experiences of reality. Readers now remember Job as the ideal, patient man; the faithful servant of YHWH (1:8; 2:3), who piously and stoically accepted his suffering as the will of God. This characterization of Job remains wildly popular. Many casual readers of the Bible may not get beyond the first chapters of the book and assume that the Job they meet in the opening narrative is a sufficient character study for understanding the figure in the rest of the book! More problematic is what Clines observes: “the portrait of Job in the first two chapters has determined how readers have read the later and quite different portrayal of Job in the rest of the book.”²⁴

Finally, the rebellious Job in the poetic dialogue, whose clenched fists wave angrily toward God, may offend readers who see such a noncompliant posture vis-à-vis the deity as sacrilegious. Regardless of which Joban figure better comports with a reader’s

24. Clines, “Why Is There A Book of Job,” 138.

While Newsom does not wish to privilege this narrative “voice” in her polyphonic reading of the book of Job, it is difficult to see that the text does *not* do just that. The narrator’s authoritative voice in the didactic tale exercises tremendous rhetorical power and influence over both the rest of the text and the reader.

own experience of life, audiences may have concluded that it is less risky to sit on the ash heap with the patient, faithful Job of the folktale than to stand alongside the suffering, protesting Job of the poetic dialogue—whom God still meets face to face.

Although much remains unknown about the Persian period, other biblical literature from this era provides insight into the struggle over political and religious leadership in Yehud after the exile.²⁵ Those aristocrats who wished to curry favor with the Persian authority likely used religion, with YHWH as supreme guardian of the cosmos, to restore obedience to local leaders. They would have sought to restore “law and order” in the restoration community, from the order of the cosmos on down. These well-placed residents in Jerusalem, who may have found it unbearable to live with life’s inherent ambiguity and sought to minimize uncertainty, benefited most from the addition of the framing narrative that functions at a moment of disorder to silence the recalcitrant Job and reassert familiar (traditional) values.

Finally, it is no accident that the later didactic folktale is *in narrative form*. Poetry invites multiple understandings, abounding in rich symbolism, metaphor, irony, ambiguity, nuance, and language that captures the imagination by appealing to the reader’s emotions. By contrast, narratives prefer prosaic language that is direct, factual, straightforward, and delivered in an authoritative voice; it does not traffic in nuance and eschews ambiguity.

In the context of post-exilic Yehud, for Newsom the prose of the didactic tale in Job 1–2, 42 created “a moral world of clear values and simple truths,” where one discovers a “‘ready-made truth,’ easily stated in propositional terms...the truth that this author wishes readers to endorse.”²⁶ Following Suleiman, she suggests that didactic literature assumes a “compliant reader, never a rebellious or even an indifferent one.”²⁷ More concerning is that this genre of literature not only assumes that sort of reader but

also serves to *create* just such a readership.

While Newsom does not wish to privilege this narrative “voice” in her polyphonic reading of the book of Job, it is difficult to see that the text does *not* do just that. The narrator’s authoritative voice in the didactic tale exercises tremendous rhetorical power and influence over both the rest of the text and the reader. Newsom argues that such narratives are “instruments of persuasion that directly attempt to form their readers by recruiting them to certain beliefs and shaping their attitudes and behaviors.” She continues:

Didactic narrative is also realist...in that it posits a congruency between the world of the text and the world of the reader. What is true in the text is true about reality. The world is often a confusing place, where it is difficult to perceive truth [as reflected in the poetic dialogue in Job 3–41]. In the story, however, truth is made accessible, and the saving knowledge of that truth can be taken back into the world as attitude and action.²⁸

With a straightforward, engaging narrative, the redactor sought to weaken the critical voice of the poetic text and reaffirm the ideological worldview of retribution theology. Given that the narrative prose now holds pride of place in the book (and in the casual reader), one is likely to agree that the redactor’s effort was an unqualified success. There is something discomfiting about that!

25. For example, Ezra-Nehemiah (see especially Nehemiah 5), as well as Haggai 1.

26. Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 18, 24.

27. *Ibid.*, 42.

28. *Ibid.* See also Clines, “Ideology,” 10–11.