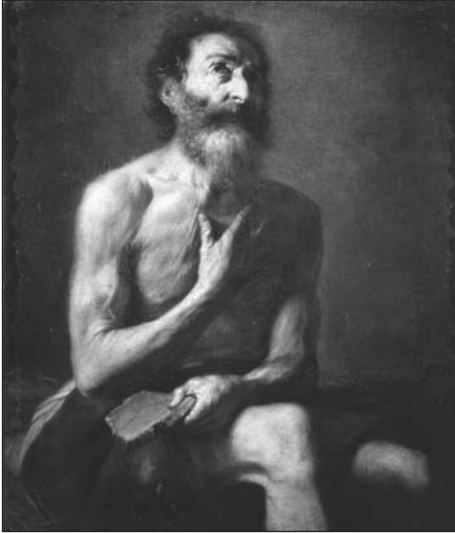


INTRODUCTION

“It is the greatest thing ever written with pen,” the Scottish essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) said of the book of Job. “There is nothing, I think, written in the Bible or out of it of equal merit.”¹ This is high praise indeed, especially when considered in the context of the regard most have for the Bible’s overall literary excellence. As John Gardner noted in an op-ed piece more than a century later, justifying why the Bible remains on his “recommended reading list,” “God is an extremely uneven writer, but when He’s good, no one can beat Him.”²

One of the reasons many consider Job to be the crown jewel of biblical literature is its claim to speak “what is right” about God. In the midst of so many words in this world about God—words inside the Bible and outside, from writers, artists, poets, musicians, and others across the breadth of every medium for creative expression—this book offers a truly astonishing declaration. Thus it begins, “There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job” (1:1). Forty-two chapters later, the story concludes by affirming that of all those in this book who talk about God—Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu—Job alone has spoken the truth. More remarkable still, this claim comes with God’s imprimatur, for it is God who twice dismisses all other contributors by saying, “You have not spoken about me what is right, as my servant Job has done” (42:7, 8). These last words have the ring of a divine commission, freighted perhaps with an imperative equal to that which Jesus gave his disciples (cf. Matt 28:18-20): “Go therefore” and do “as my servant Job has done.”

J. Hempel accents this claim and its summons by concluding that the book of Job is “the *struggle* for the *last truth* about God.”³ The word that defines the challenge for every reader of this book is “struggle.” It is not only that God’s assessment comes at the end of forty-two difficult chapters. Nor is it only because scholars cannot determine with certainty who wrote this book or when, where, how, or for what historical reasons it achieved its present form. The struggle results instead from the fact that whatever Job’s truth may be, he was neither the *first* nor the *last* to try to articulate it. The struggle for the truth about what it means to live in a world where order breaks down and chaos runs amok, where the innocent suffer and the wicked thrive, where cries for help go unanswered—by



Job

Giuseppe de Ribera (1591-1652). *Job*. Galleria Nazionale, Parma, Italy (Credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY)

powers divine or human—is universal and, as far as we can know in this world, ongoing. If the book of Job has something of import to say about the “*last truth about God*,” it does so by contributing its witness to an abiding, ever-vexing, existential conundrum. From the philosophical ruminations of David Hume (1711–1766), to the dramatization of the Joban story in *J.B.* (1956) by the playwright Archibald MacLeish, to the ruminations of Rabbi Harold Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981), the question that dogs human existence remains essentially unchanged: If God is just and good, why do the innocent suffer and the guilty thrive? As the British novelist Muriel Spark has observed, the Joban problem is “the only problem, in fact, worth discussing.”⁴ [*The Only Problem*] In short, the Joban drama is perhaps the longest-running

The Only Problem



The protagonist in *The Only Problem* is Harvey Gotham, who is writing a monograph on the book of Job. As the project proceeds, Harvey finds his own life turned upside down by unexpected calamities, which heighten his appreciation for the issues addressed in this biblical story. Muriel Spark introduces the plot with these words:

Harvey was a rich man; he was in his mid-thirties. He had started writing a monograph about the book of Job and the problems it deals with. For he could not face that a benevolent Creator, one whose charming and delicious light descended and spread over the world, and being powerful everywhere, could condone the unspeakable sufferings of the world; that God did permit all suffering and was therefore, by logic of his omnipotence, the actual author of it, he was at a loss how to square with the existence of God, given the premise that God is good.

“It is the only problem,” Harvey had always said. Now, Harvey believed in God, and this was what tormented him. “It’s the only problem, in fact, worth discussing.” (22)

Harvey’s friend, Edward Janzen, shared his long-standing interest in the book of Job, and so it did not

surprise him when Harvey retreated to his cottage to immerse himself in reflection upon its issues. But, like Job’s biblical friends, when Edward paid his friend a visit and saw the stress of the work written in his face, he was taken back. He reflected on a conversation they had once shared in their university days, which now seemed to say as much about Harvey as about Job:

“Did you know,” Edward remembered saying, “that when Job was finally restored to prosperity and family abundance, one of his daughters was called Box of Eye-Paint? Can we really imagine our tormented hero enjoying his actual reward?”

“No,” said Harvey. “He continued to suffer.”

“Not according to the Bible.”

“Still, I’m convinced he suffered on.

Perhaps more.”

“It seems odd, doesn’t it,” Edward had said, “after he sat on a dung-heap and suffered from skin sores and put up with his friends’ gloating, and lost his family and his cattle, that he should have to go on suffering.”

“It became a habit,” Harvey said, “for he not only argued the problem of suffering, *he suffered the problem of the argument*. And that is *incurable*.” (32, emphasis added)

Muriel Spark, *The Only Problem* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1984).

story in the history of human experience. The biblical Job is but one, even if one of the best, of a cast of characters who has played this role.

JOB BEFORE THE BIBLE

Whatever date we assign to the book of Job, we can be sure the biblical writer(s) did not create the story out of whole cloth. From the second millennium Sumerian composition known as “Man and His God” to the fragmentary Job manuscripts from Qumran (second–first century BCE: 2Q15, 4Q99, 4Q100, 4Q101; cf. two portions of an Aramaic Targum of Job: 4Q157; 11QtgJob), textual evidence confirms that innocent suffering, random disorder, divine injustice, and the futility of life were issues of major concern throughout ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syria-Palestine. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to find a corpus of texts from any place or time in ancient history where such issues are not present. By the time biblical writers penned this book, others had been exploring similar issues for more than 2,000 years.⁵

This wider context for encountering the Bible’s version of the story keeps us mindful that the Joban problem is no aberration; instead, it stands at the center of what it means to be human. For as long as men and women have walked this earth, they have shared the journey with someone, somewhere, named Job. [**“Job Is No Longer Man; He Is Humanity!”**] We cannot do justice to the full range of ancient Near Eastern texts that are pertinent to this discussion, but a sampling may be sufficient to show that the biblical Job’s arrival in the “land of Uz” (1:1) had been long anticipated.

“Job Is No Longer Man; He Is Humanity!”



Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869), a poet and outspoken statesman of French romanticism, read the book of Job as the words of a poet who spoke “from the depths of the centuries.”

In this epic poem of the soul . . . Job speaks in the tongue of the greatest poet who ever uttered human speech. His language is eloquence and poetry fused together all at once into all the cries of mankind. He narrates, discusses, listens, replies; he grows angry, challenges, apostrophizes, rants, and scolds; he cries out, sings, weeps, jeers, implores; he reflects, he judges himself, he repents, he grows calm, he worships, and soars on the wings of his religious enthusiasm far above his own anguish; from the depths of his despair he justifies God against his own self; he says: “It is good! “

And then, these words in conclusion: “Job is no longer man; he is humanity! A race which can feel, think, and speak in such a voice is truly worthy of a dialogue with the divine; it is worthy of conversing with its creator.”

Cours familier de littérature (Paris, 1956), II, 441; cited in N. Glatzer, ed., *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 42-43.

Sumerian Jobs

“The Sumerian Job,” properly known as “Man and His God,” is a second millennium (c. 1750 BCE) copy of a text that may be several centuries older.⁶ The composition records the lamentations of a righteous sufferer who has inexplicably lost his health, wealth, and respect. The burden of the lament is a god who appears indifferent to the sufferer’s plight:

My companion says not a true word to me,
 My friend gives the lie to my righteous word.
 The man of deceit has conspired against me,
 (And) you, my god, do not thwart him.
 You carry off my understanding,
 The wicked has conspired against me.
 Angered you, stormed about, planned evil. . . .
 I, the discerning, why am I counted among the ignorant? . . .
 On the day shares were allotted to all, my allotted share was suffering.
 (ll. 35-46)

This “Sumerian Job,” unlike his biblical counterpart, accepts the counsel of the sages, who instruct him to give up his lament for the truth of conventional wisdom: all suffering is the result of sin.

They say—the sages—a word righteous (and) straightforward:
 “Never has a sinless child been born to its mother,
 . . . a sinless workman has not existed from of old” . . .
 My god, now that you have shown me my sins, . . .
 I, the young man, would confess my sins before you. (ll. 101-104, 113)

The end of the text reports that when the sufferer confessed his sins, the god rewarded him for proper conduct and turned his “suffering into joy” (l. 125).

Mesopotamian Jobs

A number of Mesopotamian texts anticipate issues addressed in the book of Job. Of these, two may be singled out for special mention.

“I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom” (*Ludlul bel nemiqi*), sometimes referred to as the “Babylonian Job,” comprises four tablets from Ashurbanipal’s library in Nineveh. The texts date to the seventh century BCE, but they are likely copies of texts composed in the second millennium.⁷ The text records the monologue of a noble person who has undergone a reversal of fortunes and has become a social outcast. He asks why the god Marduk has allowed his servant to suffer, in the

process probing a number of Joban issues. For example, he complains that his fidelity counts for nothing because his gods have abandoned him:

My ill luck has increased, and I do not find the right.
 I called to my god, but he did not show his face,
 I prayed to my goddess, but she did not raise her head.
 The diviner with his inspection has not got to the root of the matter,
 Nor has the dream priest with his libation elucidated my case. . . .
 Like one who has not made libations to his god,
 Nor invoked his goddess at table,
 Does not engage in prostration, nor takes cognizance of bowing down;
 From whose mouth supplication and prayer is lacking,
 Who has done nothing on holy days, and despised sabbaths,
 Who in his negligence has despised the gods' rites,
 Has not taught his people reverence and worship,
 But has eaten his food without invoking his god,
 And abandoned his goddess by not bringing a flour offering,
 Like one who has grown torpid and forgotten his lord,
 Has frivolously sworn a solemn oath by his god,
 (like such an one) do I appear.
 For myself, I gave attention to supplication and prayer:
 To me prayer was discretion, sacrifice my rule.
 The day of reverencing the god was a joy to my heart;
 The day of the goddess's procession was profit and gain to me.
 (ii.3-7, 12-26)

Given his plight, the sufferer concludes that the will of the gods is simply inscrutable; divine justice is not comparable to human justice:

I wish I knew that these things were pleasing to one's god!
 What is proper to oneself is an offense to one's god,
 What in one's own heart seems despicable is proper to one's god.
 Who knows the will of the gods in heaven?
 Who understands the plans of the underworld gods?
 Where have mortals learnt the way of a god? (ii.33-38)

In a world full of misery, the only thing this sufferer can know with certainty is that the deity is part of the problem, even if the plaintiff is too fearful to make the accusation explicit: "His [i.e., Marduk's] hand was heavy upon me, I could not bear it. My dread of him was alarming" (iii.1-2). Only when Marduk's mercy replaces his wrath does the sufferer experience relief, whereupon praise replaces lament:

After the mind of my Lord had quietened
 And the heart of merciful Marduk was appeased, . . .
 The Lord took hold of me,
 The Lord set me on my feet,
 The Lord gave me life . . .
 Mortals, as many as there are, give praise to Marduk! (iii.50-51;
 iv. 2-4, 42)

Although the “blasphemous implications”⁸ in the Babylonian Job’s wonderments about innocent suffering are similar to those of his biblical counterpart, the poem’s dominant concern is the sufferer’s eventual restoration. There is no attempt to explain the problem or to offer a solution, other than to affirm that the deity makes all things right in the end. [CD: “The Babylonian Job ” or “The Babylonian Pilgrim’s Progress”?]

A second Mesopotamian text with strong similarities to Job is the “Babylonian Theodicy,” an acrostic poem of twenty-seven stanzas, eleven lines each, written c. 1000 BCE.⁹ The poem is cast as a dialogue between a sufferer and his companion. The sufferer complains that he was abandoned as an orphan at an early age and left vulnerable to all manner of oppression and affliction. The friend responds by assuring him that while suffering is the common lot of all, those who remain steadfast will ultimately be better off for the experience:

Respected friend, what you say is gloomy.
 You let your mind dwell on evil, my dear fellow. . . .
 When you consider mankind as a whole,
 . . . it is not . . . that has made the impoverished first-born rich. . . .
 He who waits on his god has a protecting angel,
 The humble man who fears his goddess accumulates wealth. (ll. 12-13,
 18-19, 21-22)

The sufferer counters by complaining that his friend has not understood. If he will but look around, he will see that nature itself offers proof that the wicked prosper at the expense of the righteous:

My friend, your mind is a river whose spring never fails, . . .
 Pay attention for a moment; hear my words. . . . (ll. 23, 26)

The onager, the wild ass, who filled itself with. . . [.]
 Did it pay attention to the giver of the assured divine oracle?
 The savage lion who devoured the choicest flesh,
 Did it bring its flour offering to appease the goddess’s anger?
 [. . .] the nouveau riche who has multiplied his wealth,
 Did he weigh out precious gold for the goddess Mami?
 [Have I] held back offerings? I have prayed to my god,

[I have] pronounced the blessing over the goddess's regular sacrifices,
(ll. 48-55)

The friend responds by citing a conventional maxim: the wisdom of the gods is simply incomprehensible to humans. In the end, the friend contends, the wicked always get their just reward:

O palm tree of wealth, my precious brother,
Endowed with all wisdom, jewel of [gold,]
You are as stable as the earth, but the plan of the gods is remote.
Look at the superb wild ass on the [plain;]
The arrow will follow the gorer who trampled down the fields.
Come, consider the lion that you mentioned, the enemy of cattle.
For the crime which the lion committed the pit awaits him.
The opulent nouveau riche who heaps goods
Will be burnt at the stake by the king before his time. (ll. 56-64)

The sufferer finds the friend's explanation unacceptable and insists that piety is truly meaningless; if anything, devotion makes the faithful even more vulnerable to the whims of the deity:

Your mind is a north wind, a pleasant breeze for the peoples.
Choice friend, your advice is fine.
Just one word would I put before you.
Those who neglect the god go the way of prosperity,
While those who pray to the goddess are impoverished and dispossessed.
In my youth I sought the will of my god;
With prostration and prayer I followed my goddess.
But I was bearing a profitless corvee as a yoke.
My god decreed instead of wealth destitution. (ll. 67-75)

And so the dialogue continues, through repeated exchanges. The sufferer asserts the inexplicable reality of his plight. The friend responds with disputation and counter-arguments. By the end of the poem, the two reach a resolution of sorts. The sufferer thanks his friend for his companionship and asks him to join in a petition to the gods for mercy:

You are kind, my friend; behold my grief.
Help me, look on my distress; know it. . . .
May the god who has thrown me off give help,
May the goddess who has [abandoned me] show mercy,
For the shepherd Samas guides the people like a god. (ll. 287-88, 295-97)

While there are clear parallels between the “Babylonian Theodicy” and Job, there are also notable differences.

- The “friend” in this Babylonian text maintains respect and sympathy for the sufferer to the very end. In their initial approach, Job’s friends are also kind and sympathetic (Job 4–14), but the more Job refuses their counsel, the more they stiffen their resolve to wrench a confession of guilt from him (Job 15–21). When this fails, they give up all pretense of listening to his side of the case. Acting as both judge and jury, the friends get the outcome they seek by simply pronouncing Job guilty (Job 22–27).
- The sufferer in the “Babylonian Theodicy” implies that the gods responsible for maintaining justice in the world have failed him, but he never directly challenges them. In the end, he is satisfied to air his grievances before his friend and to wait, in contrition, for the merciful return of the god who has abandoned him. Job, by contrast, becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the friends who will not listen to him and ever more determined to address his complaints and accusations directly to the God he holds responsible for his misfortune (e.g., 7:7–21; 10:1–17; 13:20–28; 30:20–31; 31:35–37). In the end, Job speaks of a change of heart (42:5–6), but as the commentary below will suggest, it is far from clear that his words express contrition.
- The “dialogue” in the “Babylonian Theodicy” is between the sufferer and his companion. The gods never speak, never intervene, never have more than a spoken-about presence in this debate about innocent suffering. By contrast, the *first* and *last* “character” to speak in the biblical Job’s story is God (1:7; 42:7). Moreover, although the dialogue between Job and his friends is extensive (Job 4–27), the dialogue on which the book turns is that between God (who, speaking with hurricane force, most clearly does intervene) and Job (Job 38–42).

Egyptian Jobs

Joban issues of innocent suffering and divine injustice, to the extent they were explored at all in ancient Egypt, were addressed somewhat differently. This may be so for a number of reasons. [Egyptian Wisdom Literature] Even so, two texts deserve mention when considering possible Egyptian models for the biblical Job.

“The Protests of the Eloquent Peasant” (20th–18th centuries BCE), records the story of a peasant who appeared before the court of justice to complain about being robbed by a corrupt official.¹⁰ His repeated

Egyptian Wisdom Literature

AQ Two explanations have been offered as to why Egyptian literature takes a somewhat different approach to Joban issues.

T. Jacobsen has suggested that Egyptians regarded justice as more a “favor” or “privilege” than a “right.” As most laws were by and large made by and for the king, who was considered divine, ordinary people did not have access to them and thus had no reason to expect that they were entitled to any justice other than that which they received at the king’s pleasure. A second reason may be connected to the Egyptian belief in the afterlife. When rewards and punishments were not forthcoming in this life, one might trust that the problem would be rectified in the future life.

Whatever buffers such explanations may have provided in ancient Egyptian culture, it is clear that Egyptians devoted much time and thought to the exploration of a wide range of justice issues conventionally associated with what we find in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. Broadly speaking, these explorations are found in two kinds of texts: “teachings” or “instructions” (e.g., “The Instruction of Amen-em-ope”), which essentially affirm traditional values, and “lamentations,” comprised of complaints, protests, satire, and other reflective forms, which submit established values to pessimistic scrutiny (e.g., “The Protests of the Eloquent Peasant”).

For further reading on the connections between Egyptian wisdom literature and the Old Testament, see R. J. Williams, “Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” vol. 2 of *ABD*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 395-99; G. E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel* (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell University Press, 1979).

T. Jacobsen, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 208.



Papyrus from “The Instruction of Amen-emo-pet”

Third Intermediate Period, 1000 bc. Lines from a poem which lacks a narrative framework; instead it is divided into thirty sections or maxims, each concerned with one topic.

British Museum, London, Great Britain. (Credit: HIP/Art Resource, NY)

appeals to the chief steward, who administers the judicial system on the king’s behalf, raise a number of social justice issues that resonate with those the biblical Job expects God to address (e.g., Job 21:7-26; 24:1-25; 30:9-15).

O Chief Steward, my Lord, greatest of the great. . . . Because thou art the father of the orphan, the husband of the widow, the brother of the

divorcee, and the apron of him that is motherless. Let me make thy name in this land according to every good law: a leader free from covetousness, a great man free from wrongdoing, one who destroys falsehood and brings justice into being, and who comes at the cry of him who gives voice. When I speak, mayest thou hear. Do justice, thou favored one whom the favored ones favor! Dispose of my burdens. Behold me, (how) burdened I am! Count me: behold I am lacking!

Do justice for the sake of the Lord of Justice, the justice of whose justice exists. Thou reed-pen, papyrus, and palette of Thoth, keep apart from doing evil!

Do not delay . . . Be not partial . . . Do not veil thy face against him whom thou knowest. Do not blind thy face against him who thou hast beheld. Do not rebuff him who petitions thee. (ll. 54-71, 305-306; B2: 105-107)

A second Egyptian text, “The Instruction of Amen-em-opet,” dating between the tenth and sixth centuries BCE, is cited primarily for its similarities to the biblical book of Proverbs, especially Proverbs 22:17–24:22. As is the case with many of the biblical proverbs, these instructions do not question but instead affirm traditional beliefs about the rewards of the moral life. Nonetheless, the advice concerning how the righteous should respond to suffering echoes the conventional wisdom Job’s friends urge him to accept:

Do not spend the night fearful of the morrow.
 At daybreak what is the morrow like?
 Man knows not what the morrow is like.
 God is (always) in his success,
 Whereupon man is in his failure;
 One thing are the words which men say,
 Another is that which the god does.
 Say not, “I have no wrongdoing,”
 Nor (yet) strain to seek quarreling.
 As for wrongdoing, it belongs to the god;
 It is sealed with his finger. (XIX, ll. 10-21)

The textual evidence from Sumeria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt does not prove that the biblical author of Job knew or was directly influenced by these prototypes. It does confirm, however, that the problem of righteous suffering did not emerge for the first time in Israelite thought. Whatever safeguards any society’s institutions—religious, political, or academic—may use to mute its threat to stability, no civilization can avoid addressing the Jobs in its midst. [CD: “A Shadowy Figure in the Stains on an Old Wall”]

JOB IN THE BIBLE

If the biblical writers did not *create* Job, they certainly did flinch at the problem he posed for their view of God and the world. Exactly when they produced a “book” bearing Job’s name is uncertain. Most would date the final composition between the seventh and fifth centuries BCE, that is, sometime within the exilic or early post-exilic period, when in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile, hard questions about the justice of God and innocent suffering were acute.¹¹ Whenever the biblical story of Job achieved its final form, it is clear that it is a composite, a collection of parts assembled through various stages into a whole. Concerning the “parts,” there is widespread agreement. How, when, where, and why the parts eventually became a “whole” remains much debated.¹² Although it may be unsettling to discover that the book of Job was not written by Job, or by any other single “author” for that matter, we need not conclude that it is only a hodgepodge that lacks structure and coherence. As G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) observed in his introduction to the book of Job, when we enter into any of the grand cathedrals of the world, each one constructed over many years by different artisans, we do not measure their beauty or their abiding witness to truth by the dates when their individual sections were completed. [“When You Deal with Any Ancient Artistic Creation, Do Not Suppose That It Is Anything Against It That It Grew Gradually.”]

The Frame and the Center

The *frame* of the book consists of a prose prologue (1:1–2:13) and epilogue (42:7-17) that utilize a combination of speech and action to tell

“When You Deal with Any Ancient Artistic Creation, Do Not Suppose That It Is Anything Against It That It Grew Gradually.”



When you deal with any ancient artistic creation, do not suppose that it is anything against it that it grew gradually. The book of Job may have grown gradually just as Westminster Abbey grew gradually. But the people who made the old folk poetry, like the people who made Westminster Abbey, did not attach that importance to the actual date and the actual author, that importance which is entirely the creation of the almost insane individualism of modern times. We may put aside the case of Job, as one complicated with religious difficulties, and take any other, say the case of the Iliad. Many people have maintained the characteristic formula of modern skepticism, that Homer was not written by Homer, but by another person of the same name. Just in the same way many have maintained that Moses was not Moses but another person called Moses. But the thing really to be remembered in the matter of the Iliad is that if other people did interpolate the passages, the thing did not create the same sense of shock as would be created by such proceedings in these individualistic times. The creation of the tribal epic was to some extent regarded as a tribal work, like the building of the tribal temple. Believe then, if you will, that the prologue of Job and the epilogue and the speech of Elihu are things inserted after the original work was composed. But do not suppose that such insertions have their obvious and spurious character which would belong to any insertions in a modern, individualistic book

Without going into questions of unity as understood by scholars, we may say of the scholarly riddle that the book has unity in the sense that all great traditional creations have unity; in the sense that Canterbury Cathedral has unity.

G. K. Chesterton, “Introduction to the Book of Job,” *G. K. Chesterton as M.C., A Collection of Thirty-Seven Introductions by G. K. Chesterton*, selected and edited by J. P. de Foneska (Freeport NY: Libraries Press, 1967), 34.

the story of a righteous man who patiently suffers horrendous misfortune “for no reason” (2:3) and in the end is doubly rewarded for his unflinching fidelity. Taken as a set piece, this story, which many regard as the oldest part of the book, reads like an ancient version of a nineteenth-century Brothers Grimm fairy tale: “Once upon a time” . . . “and they all lived happily ever after.” Its enduring appeal is perhaps best illustrated by the single reference to Job in the New Testament, which has long seeded the popular estimation of Job’s contribution to the faith community: “You have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (Jas 5:11, KJV).¹³

The *center* of the book consists of a lengthy series of dialogues between Job and his friends (chs. 3–31) and between Job and God (38:1–42:6), most likely from a later author who found the “all’s-well-that-ends-well” frame story unsatisfying. These dialogues are written in poetry, not prose, and are dominated by the speech of the characters, not their actions. Drawn primarily from the genres of disputation and lament, these speeches offer different profiles for the friends, Job, and God. The friends, who are silent and sympathetic in the prologue, become increasingly strident interlocutors; when they conclude their speeches, it is clear their primary objective is not to comfort Job but to condemn him. Job, whose prologue piety is undisturbed by either doubts or questions, fills the center of the book with curses, laments, and direct challenges to the moral order of the world and to the God who created it. And God, who is content to speak *about* Job’s fidelity in the prologue while delegating the day-to-day details, whatever they may entail, to the *satan*, speaks *directly to* Job; indeed, by inviting Job into a dialogue that is both frightening and compelling, God takes extraordinary measures to discuss with him the intricate details of creation’s day-to-day rhythms. Whether God’s objective is to minimize Job’s contribution to God’s hopes and expectations for the world or to enhance it remains a matter for debate, but there can be little question that the whirlwind speeches (38–41) constitute a dramatic exchange between Creator and creature.

The structural relationship between the frame and the center effectively creates a story within a story. From a rhetorical standpoint, this results in a debate or, more properly speaking, a dialogue between different ways of addressing a nexus of issues anchored to the principle of retribution, which, simply stated, affirms that God can be trusted to prosper the righteous and punish the wicked. Whereas the prologue/epilogue essentially confirms this principle, the dialogues between Job and his friends contest it. The contrasting perspectives of the frame and the center bring into view an important but typically

Judaism as a Levitical Religion



My use of the term “levitical religion” draws upon the work of William Scott Green, who has been an important conversation partner for me as I have tried to think through Job’s importance for Judaism. Green offers the following baseline assessment of Judaism:

Judaism is a levitical religion. It is grounded in a priestly vision of reality, as expressed in the Pentateuch, itself edited by priests. According to the Pentateuch, the central institution of covenant maintenance was the Temple cult. Levitical religion aims to create an order on earth—ethical, social, and physical—that is congenial to God’s presence. It supposes that because human beings must build that order, there will be breaks in it. Israel and Israelites will transgress against commandments, either deliberately or unintentionally. In addition, there are other ruptures, which are not classified as sin but as uncleanness or ritual impurity. . . . Through its cultic system, levitical religion provides concrete means through which Israel and Israelites can repair a breach in the covenant relationship.

Measured against this baseline, the book of Job, Green suggests, “. . . conforms neither neatly nor fully to the religious structure of Judaism. Rather, it stretches the levitical framework and sets it on altered footing.”

William S. Green, “Stretching the Covenant: Job and Judaism,” *RevExp* 99 (2002): 572, 573. See further Green’s “Levitical Religion,” *Judaism from Muhammed. An Interpretation: Turning Points and Focal Points*, ed. J. Neusner, A. J. Avery-Peck, W. S. Green (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

overlooked tension between “levitical religion,” with its cult and rituals, and the challenge posed by those who question its adequacy for everyday life experiences. [Judaism as a Levitical Religion] The prologue/epilogue profiles Job as a blameless and devout mediator who offers efficacious sacrifices for his family and friends, thereby securing their good standing with God (1:5; 42:8). Although the cultic imagery is oblique, N. Habel has rightly noted that Job “plays the part of the perfect priest.”¹⁴

By all accounts, Job’s reliance upon the sacrificial system works, at least until he is himself afflicted with “loathsome sores” (2:3, 7), which according to priestly perspectives render him unclean and needful of the rituals he has offered to others (Lev 13–14). In short, the dialogues turn the table. The “priest” who once ministered to family and friends now becomes the one who needs the rituals of ministry extended to him. Job’s condition, however, presents an enormous challenge to those who would be his priests, for by God’s own admission Job suffers “for no reason” (2:3). The presumptive causal connection between sin and misfortune does not apply in his case. How can the conventional cultic rituals “console and comfort” (2:11; 42:11) an innocent sufferer like Job?

Inside the frame story, the dialogues explore this question. The friends urge Job to stay inside the affirmations of their retribution theology. If Job suffers, he must be guilty of sin, in which case the cult promises restoration in exchange for his confession and repentance (e.g., 8:5-7; 11:13-20; 22:21-27). Job counters that he cannot repent of sin he has not committed (6:28-30; 9:21; 10:7; 16:17; 19:6-7; cf. especially Job’s oaths of innocence in ch. 31), which in turn threatens to

"Unless" and Other "Worry Words" in the Grammar of Faith

AΩ The Pulitzer Prize-winning author Carol Shields learned that she had stage 3 breast cancer just before Christmas 1998. On the other side of a mastectomy, followed by rounds of chemotherapy and radiation, she progressed to stage 4. As she looked squarely in the face of the death that stalked her, her publisher invited her to write something that might draw upon her life's journey. Shields responded by writing *Unless*, a fictional story published in 2002 some months before she died in July 2003. She begins on page 1 with the following words:

It happens that I am going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now. All my life I've heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I've never understood what they meant. To lose. To have lost. I believed these visitations of darkness lasted only a few minutes or hours and that these saddened people, in between bouts, were occupied, as we all were, with the useful monotony of happiness. But happiness is not what I thought. Happiness is the lucky pane of glass you carry in your head. It takes all your cunning just to hang on to it, and once it's smashed you have to move into a different sort of life.

These are the words Shields gives to the protagonist of her story, Rita Winter, an accomplished writer who shares "useful monotony of happiness" with her husband Tom and their three accomplished children, Natalie, Christine, and Norah. In the midst of her happiness, something unpre-

dictable and unforeseen happens. Her eldest daughter, Norah, nineteen years old, inexplicably drops out of college, moves out of her apartment, and opts out of life. She now sits on a Toronto street corner, blank-eyed and begging, wearing around her neck a handmade sign that says simply, of all things, "Goodness." Rita and Tom conduct weekly drive-bys, hoping to catch a glimpse of Norah's face. Sometimes they stop and sit on the sidewalk with her; when they leave they try to be unobtrusive in slipping her money or food or warm clothing. Norah never speaks, never responds, never acknowledges their presence.

When Rita tries to return to her writing, she finds that the only words she can produce say "My heart is broken" (44). She now knows that life is not one continuous, flowing narrative, unimpeded by distraction or disappointment. It is instead full of isolated, often random events. To construct a coherent narrative of the pieces, Rita must learn how to use "little chips of grammar" (208), mostly adverbs and prepositions that are hard to define, like the ones Shields uses so deftly in the chapter titles that tell Rita's story, words like "nearly," "nevertheless," "so," "otherwise," "insofar as," and "despite." Of all these little words, none is more important or more required for her life's grammar than the word that bears the freight of the book's title, "unless." As Rita puts it, "unless" is the "worry word of the English language" (149). We will all be happy, unless . . . We will all be safe, unless . . . We will all believe X, unless . . .

The book of Job is constructed from its own "little chips of grammar." In the prologue, the most important of these is the little phrase "for no reason" (2:3).

C. Shields, *Unless* (London/New York: Fourth Estate, 2002).

nullify his place in the cult, *unless* somehow its rituals can be stretched to embrace his complaints and challenges to the God it serves. ["Unless" and Other "Worry Words" in the Grammar of Faith] William S. Green sharply states the problem Job presents:

F]rom a cultic . . . perspective, there is nothing concrete Job can do to repair his relationship with God. Sacrifice, repentance, and religious behaviors that develop from them are nugatory under these circumstances. Job cannot atone for a transgression he did not commit. No offering, no change of heart, can appease divine caprice or undo an affliction that happens for no reason.¹⁵

Chapter 28: “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?”

At the end of the dialogues, chapter 28 introduces a lengthy meditation on the elusiveness of wisdom. Unlike the previous speeches, which typically begin by identifying the speaker, this poem is an anonymous soliloquy. It addresses no one directly, and it receives no response from the other speakers in the book. With a twice-repeated question, “Where then does wisdom come from?” (v. 28; cf. v. 12), the poem presents a typical reflection on a proverbial issue.¹⁶ On the one hand, it answers its own question in a conventional way: “mortals do not know” (v. 13), “God knows” (v. 23). On the other, its last verse serves rhetorically and structurally to return the story to its framing compass: “the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding” (v. 28). “Fearing God” and “turning away from evil” are the virtues that define Job’s prologue piety (1:1, 8; 2:3), *before* suffering silenced convictions he once had no reason to question.

Perhaps a later author, having considered Job’s complaints in the center of the book, concluded that he had transgressed the boundary between God’s inscrutable wisdom and human hubris. If so, then the rhetorical objective of this soliloquy may be to bring Job (and his readers) back full circle to original commitments. Because mortals cannot know what God knows, the better course of wisdom is simply to accept, without question or doubt, whatever God gives or takes away (1:21). As attractive as this counsel may be, its contribution to the book’s plotline effectively *increases* the tensions already present, for on the other side of chapter 28, Job takes up his discourse “again” (Job 29–31). Once again, he defends his integrity, protests his mistreatment, and demands that God respond to his quest for wisdom, however arrogant and inadequate it may be.

Chapters 32–37: The Speeches of Elihu

The dialogues with the three friends climax with a closing speech from Job in which he issues a formal challenge to God: “Let the Almighty answer me!” (31:35). When “The words of Job are ended” (31:40), the stage is fully set for God’s response to the challenge. When a fourth friend named Elihu, elsewhere unmentioned, preempts God’s appearance with his own lengthy discourse on the meaning of suffering, we may be reasonably certain that his words represent a still later addition to the book. The presence of the Elihu speeches in the Job manuscripts discovered at Qumran confirms that they had been added at least by the first century BCE. In terms of their linguistic characteristics and thematic focus, Elihu’s speeches likely provide “the first commentary” on what had become, in effect, the “book” of Job.¹⁷

Here too, however, the insertion of Elihu effectively *increases*, rather than *diminishes*, the preexistent tensions within the book. Both Elihu's authorial creator/narrator (32:1-5) and Elihu as a character in his own right (32:6-22 + Job 33-37) suggest that what this story needs is one who can definitively "answer" (vv. 1, 3, 5, 6, 12, 17, 20) Job's questions. According to the narrator, it is Elihu's anger at the friends' failure that compels him to step into this story (32:2, 3, 5). When the constructed Elihu speaks for himself, he claims that he is motivated not by *anger* but by *divine inspiration* (32:8, 18; cf. 33:4). Thus, when Elihu claims to have *the* answer to questions about the meaning of suffering (Job 33), Job, and we readers, must decide whether his *anger is righteous*, thus worthy of emulation, or simply *rage masquerading as a virtue* that we should avoid at all costs.

Given the tension between the frame and the center, it is little wonder that early tradents thought it necessary to splice in these additional parts. Whether the objective was to tilt the balance in favor of one view and away from another, to add a clarifying perspective, or simply to bridge gaps in the story deemed awkward or unacceptable, we cannot know with any certainty. Of one thing we can be reasonably sure. Once the story beginning with the question "Have you considered my servant Job?" (1:8) made its appearance in Israel's journey with God, there were multiple respondents who dared to answer "Yes," even if their contributions only added to the difficulty of deciding "what is right."

JOB BEYOND THE BIBLE

There is deep irony in the truth that Job lives on, well past the biblical text that conveys his story. A legendary character out of the hoary past, Job cursed the day he was born, expressed repeatedly the wish to die, and yet he seems to live forever in the minds and imaginations of his countless interpreters. As E. Wiesel has said, "through the problems he embodied and the trials he endured, he seems familiar—even contemporary."¹⁸ One does not have to look far to find the evidence of Job's perduring claim on us. Two twentieth-century works, both reflecting the struggle for meaning in the aftermath of war, suffice to make the case.

In *The Undying Fire* (1919), H. G. Wells recreates the Joban figure in order to address a regnant despair concerning the human capacity for good, which seemed forever buried in the meaningless destruction wrought by World War I. The hero of the story, Job Huss, addresses his

friend, Sir Eliphaz Burrows, with a twentieth-century version of the conundrum experienced by his biblical counterpart:

I have been forced to revise my faith, and to look more closely than I have ever done before into the meaning of my beliefs and into my springs of action. I have been wrenched away from that habitual confidence in the order of things which seemed the more natural state for a mind to be in. . . . Suddenly, swiftly, I have had misfortune following upon misfortune—without cause or justification. I am thrown now into the darkest doubt and dismay; the universe seems harsh and black to me; whereas formerly I believed that at the core of it and universally pervading it was the Will of a God of Light.

Many men and women have lived and died happy in that illusion of security. But this war has torn away the veil of illusion from millions of men. . . . Mankind is coming of age. We can see life at last for what it is and what it is not.¹⁹

Why turn to Job in the aftermath of experiences centuries removed from his biblical story? [*Turning to Job*"] Wells offers an answer with his version of the prologue's dialogue between God and Satan:

"There was a certain man in the land of Uz whose name was Job."

"We remember him."

"We had a wager of sorts," said Satan. "It was some time ago. . . ."

"Did I lose or win? The issue was obscured by discussion. How those men did talk! You intervened. There was no decision. . . ."

Satan rested his dark face on his hand, and looked down between his knees through the pellucid floor to that little eddying in the ether which makes our world. "Job," he said, "lives still."

Then after an interval: "The whole earth is now—Job."

"Turning to Job"



Gail Godwin recounts an experience in her parish that drove the community to the book of Job. A young couple's only child was diagnosed with a rare and fast-growing liver cancer a month before his second birthday. Tracking the child's journey through hospitalizations and rounds of chemotherapy, Godwin keeps returning to the question that defined her community of faith for more than two years: "God, where are you? What are you doing here?"

At the end of the journey, as she reflects on what she has learned, Godwin recalls a scene from her novel *Evensong* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999). A young seminarian, working in a New York hospital, is disheartened by the suffering she feels powerless to alleviate. She writes to an older priest who has been her mentor, "Where is God in all this?" He writes back,

Your question may be the only one that matters. Despite the convoluted guesswork by theologians ever since Job's friends hunched beside him on the dung heap, "Where is God in this?" (just the question alone, I mean) may be enough to keep us busy down here. Maybe the thing we're required to do is simply keep asking the question as Job did—asking it faithfully over and over—until God begins to reveal himself through the ways we are changed by the answering silence.

G. Godwin, "Turning to Job," *RevExp* 99 (2002): 520.

Then, these concurring words from God: “A thousand years in my sight are but as yesterday when it is past. I will grant what you seek to prove; that Job has become mankind.”²⁰

“Job has become mankind.” Almost forty years later, a different war triggers a similar assessment of Job’s ubiquitous presence in the modern world. Archibald MacLeish’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play *J.B.* (1956) prepares for the entrance of the Joban figure with a heavenly dialogue between Mr. Zuss, whose name evokes an association with the god Zeus, and Mr. Nickles, a popcorn vendor whose name is apparently a formalization of the traditional nickname for Satan, “Old Nick.” Together they view the empty stage on which they will soon reenact the Joban drama. But first they must decide whether there is sufficient interest in the old story to attract a modern audience. Zuss votes to go forward with the production, for as he says, “there’s always Someone playing Job.” Mr. Nickles agrees, although he wonders if he still has a role to play. The following exchange then occurs:

Nickles: There must be
Thousands . . .
Millions and millions of mankind
Burned, crushed, broken, mutilated,
Slaughtered, and for what? For thinking!
For walking around in the world in the wrong
Skin, the wrong-shaped noses, eyelids:
Sleeping the wrong night in the wrong city
London, Dresden, Hiroshima.
There never could have been so many
Suffered more for less. But where do
I come in?

Zuss: All we have to do is start.
Job will join us. Job will be there.

Nickles: I know. I know. I know. I’ve seen him.
Job is everywhere we go,
His children dead, his work for nothing,
Counting his losses, scraping his boils,
Discussing himself with his friends and physicians,
Questioning everything—the times, the stars,
His own soul, God’s providence.²¹

If “there’s always someone playing Job,” if, indeed, the whole world, all of humankind, has in effect become Job, then we should not be surprised that Job’s interpreters are also everywhere. At least since the early Middle Ages,²² the book of Job, perhaps more than any other biblical

text, has been the subject of an enormous number of “readings” by scholarly, usually ecclesiastical, “insiders” for whom it is sacred Scripture, and by “outsiders,” or to use Cynthia Ozick’s term, “common readers,”²³ for whom its existential issues are compelling, irrespective of scholarly puzzles and clerical commentary. [From *Biblical Scholars to Literary Critics*] The sheer quantity of the work “inspired” or “influenced” by the biblical story confirms its abiding importance for our world.²⁴ What is especially striking, however, is how different the assessments of Job’s contributions to our thinking may be, depending on the historical, cultural, and religious perspectives readers bring to the text. In significant ways, *all readers*, whatever their social location, have a chronic inclination to *read themselves into Job’s story*.

At the risk of over-simplifying the complexity of these matters, I venture the following generalizations about Jewish and Christian readings of Job, which may be instructive for the primary audience this commentary addresses.

Jewish Readings of Job

In view of the tensions within the biblical book, which portrays Job as both pious and uncomplaining and as raging and defiant, it should not be surprising to find that Judaism’s view of Job is not uniform. As Judith Baskin notes in an overview of rabbinic interpretation, “one could say that there are almost as many Jobs as rabbis who speak about him.”²⁵

On one hand, one may conclude, as Israel Ta-Sh’ma says in his entry on the book of Job in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, that “the book of Job is unrelated to Judaism—even though it contains nothing contrary to its

From Biblical Scholars to Literary Critics



R. Gordis, a noted Job scholar, observes that just as every actor “harbors a secret ambition to play Hamlet, so every biblical student nurtures the hope of some day writing about Job.”

Making the same point from a different perspective, M. Radzinoicz notes Job has become a fashionable topic in modern literary criticism. She suggests that the book of Job has four qualities that make it particularly amenable to literary deconstruction and reconstruction:

- (1) Indeterminacy: nobody wrote the book for any clearly ascertainable purpose, thus its meaning is indeterminate.
- (2) Generic disunity: the book is a pastiche of genres that by inclusion, exclusion, recombination, redaction, and edition have been forged into a canonical whole.
- (3) The book lends itself to political readings. Thus, a large readership has venerated the book, interpreted it, co-opted special parts of it, and “with respect to the Christian Bible used half of it to trivialize the other half in general and to over-interpret Job.”
- (4) Its witness to a mode of writing that is self-consciously subversive (e.g., Job’s protest and rebellion against God) models a way of transgressing and subverting the foundations of society.

R. Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), v.
M. Radzinoicz, “How and Why the Literary Establishment Caught Up with the Bible: Instancing the Book of Job,” *Chrlit* 39 (1989): 77-89.

teachings, consisting as it does of theoretical and general speculation on the problem of ‘the suffering righteous.’”²⁶ In reflecting on this comment, William S. Green confirms its essential merit: “Although Job is undeniably part of Judaism’s scripture, it has no place in the synagogue liturgy . . . is not part of the scriptural repertoire of regular worshippers and therefore is not an obvious touchstone for their religious imagination.”²⁷ On the other hand, as Ta-Sh’ma goes on to say, “the rabbis showed a great love for the book, studied it to a great extent, and extracted moral instruction from it in their usual manner.”²⁸ If we ask what “moral instruction” the rabbis extracted from Job’s innocent suffering, the answer is a mixed bag.²⁹ The talmudic-midrashic literature (primarily first century) devotes considerable attention to Job as a model of righteousness, but it generally defines this righteousness as forbearance, not as complaint or rebellion. As one Midrash puts it, if Job had not complained, his memory would have been revered, along with that of other ancestral heroes of faith; whenever people prayed, they would invoke the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, and God of Job ” (*Pesiq. Rab.* 47 [emphasis added]; see further [Job, the Righteous Gentile] and [Job and Abraham]).³⁰ At the same time, Judaism, both ancient and modern, has long regarded arguing with God as a time-honored, Scripture-sanctioned characteristic of the people of God.

[“From Inside His Community [a Jew] May Say Anything”] We need only consider Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (1937), Joseph Roth’s *Job: The Story of a Simple Man* (1974), and Elie Wiesel’s *The Trial of God* (1979) to confirm that the defiant Job who dominates the center of the biblical story has been an important template for modern Jewish fiction.

“From Inside His Community [a Jew] May Say Anything”



From inside his community [a Jew] may say anything. Let him step outside it, and he will be denied this right. The revolt of the believer is not that of the renegade; the two do not speak in the name of the same anguish.

E. Wiesel, *Souls on Fire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 111.

Christian Readings of Job

Christian interpreters also typically focus on the “patience of Job ” as exemplified in the prologue, which requires glossing over the impatience, anger, and rebellion that characterizes the Job who dominates the center of the biblical story. The precedent for this is no doubt the New Testament, which typically transforms the major characters of the Old Testament (historical or not) into timeless “moral exemplars (e.g., Jas 5:11; 1 Pet 3:6; 1 John 3:11-12).”³¹

A strong case can be made that what Job has most often exemplified for Christians is a Christ-like witness to the promise of resurrection for those who endure suffering faithfully. From third- and fourth-century Joban frescoes in the Roman catacombs to eighteenth-century Joban epitaphs on tombstones, vaults, and mausoleums, Christians who have

suffered persecution or affliction have clung to the hope that if they die with Job's faith in God's ultimate deliverance, they will be raised to life everlasting with Christ (see [CD: *Buried with Job, Raised Like Christ*]).³² This connection between Job and Christ has long been emphasized in Christian rites and liturgies for the dead, which couple Job's words in 19:25—"I know that my Redeemer lives"—to New Testament texts affirming the promise vouchsafed to the faithful in Christ's resurrection. The most enduring and influential exposition of this promise is no doubt Handel's *Messiah*, first performed in Dublin in 1742. The first part of the soprano aria takes as its text Job 19:25; the second part of the aria, sustained by the glorious Hallelujah Chorus, "exegetes" Job's hope for a redeemer by appealing directly to Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians 15:20: "For now Christ is risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep" (see further [CD: "*I Know That My Redeemer Liveth . . . For Now Christ Is Risen from the Dead*"]).

The rather singular focus on selective texts (19:25) and themes (patience) from Job in Christian liturgy may be contrasted with the larger, fictive, presence of this biblical character in the imaginations of those who work outside ecclesiastical orthodoxy. We need only consider the different Joban accents in Robert Frost's *A Masque of Reason* (1945), Carl Jung's *Answer to Job* (1954), Neil Simon's *God's Favorite* (1975), Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* (1980), and William Safire's, *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today's Politics* (1992) to see that outside the church it is Job's defiance of conventional religious maxims that often takes center stage.

The issue here may be framed by returning to the observations of Ta-Sh'ma and Green above. *Outside the synagogue rituals*, they suggest, Job receives frequent comment and reflection. *Inside the synagogue's liturgy*, however, the Job who is clearly part of Judaism's Scripture has little or no presence. A similar conclusion might be drawn with respect to Job's role in Christian faith and practice. *Inside the church's liturgy*, the patient Job of the prologue and the restored Job of the epilogue occupy a place of honor among the great heroes of faith; the Job at the center of the book who curses, complains, and rebels, however, is largely silent. *Outside the liturgy*, the Job who lives on in the fiction, poetry, and drama of everyday life speaks with far less restraint and models a quite different sort of heroism. The full scriptural testimony to Job, it seems, is in a real sense largely "unrelated" to what goes on inside the places for worship in both Judaism and Christianity. As P. Rouillard has noted, commenting on the reduction of Joban texts in the Roman liturgy of the Matins for the Dead after Vatican II, the "over-catechised Job is no longer the Job of the Bible."³³ [Matins for the Dead]

Matins for the Dead



From the 7th century until the middle of the 20th century, when Vatican II initiated significant changes in Roman liturgy, the Matins for the Dead appropriated nine readings from the book of Job, which were recited in this order: 7:16-21; 10:1-7; 10:8-12; 13:22-28; 14:1-6; 14:13-16; 17:1-3, 11-15; 19:20-27; 10:18-23. The sequence is noteworthy because it begins and ends with the same testimony to Job's abject despair: "I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone, for my days are but a breath" (7:16); "Why did you bring me forth from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me. . . . Are not the days of my life few? Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort" (10:18, 20). It is only in the penultimate reading from 19:20-27 that the liturgy recognizes Job's astonishing move toward the hope for a redeemer. Yet, having imagined that possibility, the liturgy returns to the world of Job's unrequited suffering. After Vatican II the Roman liturgy breaks with what had been a 1,000-year-old tradition. In the revised Liturgy for the Dead, the nine readings are reduced to one, Job 19:25-27. This text is in turn repositioned as a response to three readings from the Epistle to the Corinthians, each of which proclaims the resurrection of Christ.

A similar practice occurs in other confessional traditions, for example, in the Episcopal liturgy for the Burial of the Dead, which appropriates the following sequence of texts: John 11:25; Job 19:25-27; and Rom 14:7-8. (See further [CD: "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth . . . For Now Christ Is Risen from the Dead"].)

P. Rouillard, "The Figure of Job in the Liturgy: Indignation, Resignation or Silence," *Job and the Silence of God* (Concilium 169, 9/1983) ed. C. Duquoc, C. Floristan (New York: Seabury, 1983), 8-9.

We may press this last point a bit further. The biblical story holds in tension the Job who blesses God's goodness and the Job who curses God's injustice. Both Jobs are models for faith that has integrity. When this story is translated into the liturgy offered to those who gather for worship in synagogues and churches, the tension is removed, the possibilities for addressing God are reduced, and the definition of what constitutes authentic faith is thinned: one may praise but not lament, trust but not doubt, affirm but not question. If this generalization has merit, then our entry into the book of Job will likely require a serious rethinking of its message for the Jobs of this world. If they were to sit beside us on the pew, would the songs we sing, the creeds we recite, the prayers we pray, or the sermons we preach provide any more comfort for them than Job's biblical friends offered to him? As we consider the question, the sad image of Job sitting on the ash heap *outside our sanctuaries*, beyond the reach of orthodox certainties, hovers over the answers we must ponder.

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"Inside . . . an Archaic Rule; Outside the Facts of Life"



The narrator in Saul Bellow's short story, "Something to Remember Me By," is a "high-minded Jewish boy" who chafes under the orthodoxy imposed on him at home. He offers the following telling discernment about the gap between religious affirmations and the grim realities of life outside their sanctuary: "At home, inside the house, an archaic rule; outside, the facts of life. The facts of life were having their turn. Their first effect was ridicule."

S. Bellow, "Something to Remember Me By," *Saul Bellow: Collected Stories* (New York: Viking, 2001), 431.

reach of orthodox certainties, hovers over the answers we must ponder.

[**"Inside . . . an Archaic Rule; Outside, the Facts of Life"**]

ABIDING THEOLOGICAL ISSUES AND LINGERING JOBAN PERSPECTIVES

Surely one reason the book of Job continues to find readers is its connection to universal issues that have abiding importance. Three large matters may be singled out for special attention.

Cosmology and the “Grammars of Creation”

As E. Durkheim noted almost a century ago, “there is no religion that is not a cosmology.”³⁴ Ancient Israel is no exception. Three exemplars of Israel’s “grammars of creation” suffice to make the point.³⁵ (1) The opening credo in Genesis 1—“In the beginning God”—announces God’s creation of a “very good” world in which every creature, free from the random intrusion of evil, may attain and enjoy its fullest potential. Such an edenic world, this cosmology affirms, invokes, sustains, and rewards unceasing celebration. (2) On the heels of this account, Genesis 2–3 shifts the emphasis from the perfection of God’s creation to deficiencies in the garden of Eden that invite and require attention if the world is to fulfill God’s hopes and expectations.³⁶ Although God supplies what is necessary to overcome some of these deficiencies—the lack of vegetation, rain, and humans to cultivate the ground (Gen 2:5)—one limitation presents a much more complex challenge. In the midst of paradise, God plants the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil (*ṛāʿ*)” (Gen 2:9), then blocks access to it with a primordial prohibition that carries a severe penalty: “You shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). When humans succumb to the temptation to disregard this prohibition, they forfeit their place in the garden. The grammars of creation must now be enlarged by the word “sin,” which escalates from Cain and Abel to Noah, when “every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil (*raʿ*)” (Gen 6:5). A grieving God’s only recourse, according to this cosmology, is to subsume the world in a flood and start over again. [The Adamic Myth] While readers know that the temptation to transgress God’s limitations comes from the serpent, we also know that it was none other than God who created both the forbidden tree and the serpent. The possibility, however remotely conceived, that God is somehow implicated in the evil that undoes the world has now inched its way onto the radar. (3) The anonymous poet of Isaiah 40–55, addressing an audience submerged in a world fractured by Babylonian exile, offers hope by accenting God’s promise to “create” a new Eden, resplendent with trees (note the seven species listed in Isa 41:17–20) bearing fruits of “justice” and “righteousness” (Isa 45:8).³⁷ For all its promise, this

The Adamic Myth



Paul Ricoeur notes that, of all human experiences, evil is most clearly rooted in myths of creation. When life convulses with suffering, whatever its source, the universal existential response is “Why?” Creation myths, which convey explanations of the way the world works and therefore of how human beings may understand and order their lives, offer the first and most generative resource for addressing the question. As Ricoeur puts it, “The intention of the Adamic myth is to separate the origin of evil from that of the good, in other words, to posit the radical origin of evil distinct from the more primordial origin of the goodness of all created things; *man commences evil but does not commence creation.*”

P. Ricoeur, “Evil,” *ER*, vol. 5, ed. M. Eliade (New York: MacMillan, 1986), 203 (emphasis added).



God Reprimanding Adam and Eve

Bronze relief on doors. Cathedral St. Mary, Hildesheim, Germany. (Credit: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY)

new vision of Eden includes an unsettling affirmation that must now be factored into the grammars of creation. As “Creator of the ends of the earth” (Isa 40:28), God declares, “I form light and create darkness, I bring prosperity (*šalōm*) and create disaster/evil (*rāʿ*); I am the Lord who does all these things” (Isa 45:7). Whatever interpretive strategy we may employ to exegete these words, it is difficult to excise what appears to be their primary implication: God is ultimately responsible for whatever merits the label “evil.”³⁸ In Isaiah’s cosmology, the primordial summons to “tend and keep” God’s garden of possibilities (cf. Gen 2:15) still hovers over all, but the commission is much more freighted now. Who can faithfully till such a garden as this? It is little wonder that the ancient audience responded with incredulity: “Who can believe what we have heard?” (Isa 53:1).

The book of Job connects with each of these creational accounts, but none of them is fully adequate to explain the world in which Job lives. Like the six-day account of God’s creation of “the heavens and the earth” in Genesis 1, Job 1–2 describes Job’s life in the “garden of Uz” in a sequence of six scenes alternatively set in heaven and on earth (1:1–5; 1:6–12; 1:13–22; 2:1–7a; 2:7b–10; 2:11–13). At the outset (vv. 1–5), Job’s world is a seemingly perfect recapitulation of primordial Eden. There is no intrusion of evil anywhere. Even if there were, as the narrator reports and God confirms, Job always “turns away from evil (*rāʿ*)” (1:1, 8; 2:3). By the end of the prologue, Job’s seven sons and three daughters are dead, and it is painfully clear that “evil” (2:11: *rāʿ āh*; NRSV: “trouble”) has fallen upon his world. Through six scenes Job

steadfastly refuses to do anything other than bless the God who concedes to having been “provoked to destroy him for no reason” (2:3). When the curtain rises on the seventh scene, however, Job curses a world that is no longer “very good” (3:1-10). The language of praise and blessing is no longer adequate to express what he feels; he now turns, with no less passion, to the grammar of lament and protest (3:11-26).

As in Genesis 2–3, temptation also plays a role in Job’s world. Now, however, its source is not the serpent but one of God’s heavenly messengers named “the satan,” who serves God by investigating the claims of those who profess fidelity to God. God, not the satan, initiates the conversations that result in the temptations (1:7; 2:2). Twice God yields to the satan’s suggestion that Job’s world be turned upside down (1:12; 2:6). Unlike Adam, who chose his own course by deciding to eat the forbidden fruit, Job has no say in what is about to happen in his world. He is an unknowing chip in a high stakes poker game in which he holds no cards. The outcome of the temptation leaves Job in much the same situation as the primordial couple, only worse. Like them he is left to sit among the ashes, perhaps as the Septuagint suggests, outside the city, where society consigns the destitute and the rejected. Unlike them, Job is innocent of any wrongdoing. By God’s own admission, Job is “blameless and upright” (1:8; 2:3; cf. 1:1). What constitutes authentic faith for the blameless and upright who suffer the loss of everything precious in life “for no reason”? This is the question Job puts to his world, and more importantly, to his God.

Job’s story also connects with Isaiah’s insights concerning the enigma of evil. Addressing an audience whose faith in the goodness of God’s creation has been forcibly pruned by the horrors of exile, the prophet dares to affirm that God lends an extra pair of shoulders to the task of bearing the burden of evil, effectively claiming responsibility for “all these things” (Isa 45:7). Even this stretching of Israel’s creation theology, however, fails to address adequately the suffering that defines Job’s world. When God says, “I create evil,” there is no advance warning that the words “for no reason” are part of the equation. When Job looks on the dead bodies of his children, what comfort can he take from the knowledge that the fingerprints on the assault weapon belong to God?³⁹


Tuning himself to the ancient yet abiding dilemma of the Jobs in this world, G. Steiner introduces his exploration of the “grammars of creation” with this pained assessment: “We have no more beginnings.” As we embark on the twenty-first century, Steiner looks back on the corpse of centuries swallowed up in the hideous barbarity of warfare, disease, ethnic cleansing, and political murder, to name only a few of the head-

line evils that define the modern world. He concedes that we now limp through our days with a “core-tiredness,” a fatigue of dashed hopes that leaves us sitting at the bar after the last call for drinks, demanding yet another round that time refuses us: “Time, ladies and gents, time.” As he says, “Valediction in the air.”⁴⁰ And yet, Steiner cannot resign himself to valediction. Thus, he closes his search for the grammars of creation with these words: “We have long been, I believe we still are, guests of creation. We owe to our host the courtesy of questioning.”⁴¹ Though it may strain our imagination to think of Job’s thundering “Why?” questions as a “courtesy,” they remain nonetheless an essential part of the language of faith that is somehow folded into God’s assessment of “what is right” when “servants” like Job speak. [*Each of His Words Was Like a Splinter*]

Anthropology and Questions about Human Existence

What does it mean to be a human being in a world of suffering like Job’s? Job’s first words from the ash heap place the question of human identity and vocation at the forefront of his struggle. Why was he born if life promises nothing more than misery (cf. 3:11-12, 16, 20, 23)? Throughout the dialogues, Job’s friends use a variety of counter-questions to urge him toward answers they believe are mandatory. Eliphaz sets the agenda that Bildad and Zophar will follow: “Can mortals be righteous before God?” (4:17); “What are mortals that they can be clean?” (15:14); “Can a mortal be of any use to God?” (22:2; cf. Elihu in 33:12; 35:1-8). The only legitimate answer in each case, Eliphaz argues, is “No.” Simply put, “human beings are born to trouble” (5:7). No human being can claim to approach God with the integrity of innocence, as Job repeatedly insists he is doing, for every person is but a flawed and sinful image of the Creator. To believe otherwise risks a foolish and dangerous breach of the boundary that separates the divine and the human. When suffering comes, therefore, humans have but one option: “Agree with God, and be at peace; in this way, good will

“Each of His Words Was Like a Splinter”

 In “All That Glisters Isn’t Gold,” Doris Betts tells the story of a young girl whose faith is unsettled by the blasphemous pronouncements of Granville. Granville had gone off to university and learned that great chunks of the catechism he had parroted in his youth were vulnerable to critique. The girl knew she should be able to counter Granville’s arguments, yet she could not ignore the possibility that he knew something about the faith she professed that she had been unable to see. Betts describes the girl’s ruminations as follows:

Each of his words was like a splinter and each slid invisibly inside me. There was a sore spot wherever one penetrated; soon there were bruises all over my religion it was not safe to touch. I preferred the soreness of those splinters to the painful operation of having them removed.

D. Betts, “All That Glisters Isn’t Gold,” *The Astronomer and Other Stories* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 97.

come to you” (22:21). The *agreement* Eliphaz insists upon must be conveyed in words that praise the inscrutable wisdom of God (5:8-16). The afflicted should not despise their suffering but should instead wear it a badge of honor, for the God who disciplines by “wounding” and “striking” can be trusted to “bind up” and “heal” (5:17-18; cf. 8:6-7 [Bildad]; 11:15-19 [Zophar]; 33:19-22; 36:5-15 [Elihu]).

Job knows the language of praise that Eliphaz commends, but suffering pushes him to question its relevance. An untroubled psalmist may offer astonished praise to the God who creates human beings as near-equals of the Almighty, then elevates them to royalty with the commission to take responsibility for God’s world (Ps 8:4-5). In a world defined by suffering like Job’s, however, the psalmist’s words—“What are human beings that you [God] should be mindful of them?”—convey a doxology of sarcasm, not praise (Job 7:17-18; see further [CD: Psalm 8 and Job 7]). Why, Job wonders, would God exalt human beings as kings, then strip them of the very “glory” and “crown” (19:9) that signifies their God-given nobility? Can it be that God has only lifted him up in order to make him a better target for harassment? If, as his friends insist, all human beings are of little or no use to God, then why does God not just leave him alone (7:19)? Why has God “fashioned and made” him in the divine image, then turned on him with a sinister intent to “destroy” the very creature God has worked to bring into being (10:8)? Why has God fashioned him “like clay” only to return him to “dust” (10:9), like a potter’s vessel that is cast “into the mire” (30:19) because it is flawed beyond repair? Job can only conclude that to be created as “dust and ashes” in God’s world amounts to nothing more than consignment to a life of slavery (7:1-6) before a taskmaster who is both “cruel” and indifferent to those who cry out for relief (30:20-21).

And yet, it is God’s seemingly excessive preoccupation with him that causes Job to wonder if human beings have more significance in God’s world than either he or his friends have understood. Is it possible that Job has the potential of Yam and Tannin (7:12), primordial creatures whose power to impact the world God judges to be real and worthy of attention? Job does not believe this can be the case, and he quickly dismisses the possibility. Slaves may rebel against their masters, but they will not win. Servants of God may contend with their Creator, but they take their life into their hands in doing so (13:14-15). They must know before they risk the first challenge that God will not answer one in a thousand questions they may ask (9:3). Even so, Job insists on his right to complain. As he puts it, “I will speak, and let come on me what may” (13:13). God’s response to Job’s challenge is in many ways enig-

matic, leaving open the possibility that Job's worst fears about confronting the Almighty are right.

Still, there are hints in what God says from the whirlwind that the objective is neither to silence Job's complaints nor to condemn him for daring to express them. One clue is God's evocative summons to Job to put on the regalia of "majesty and dignity," like a king, and live fully into the "glory and splendor" that is his divine calling (40:10). The latter part of this summons is only a slight variation on the affirmation celebrated in Psalm 8:5: "You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." A second clue is God's commendation of Behemoth (40:15-24) and Leviathan (41:1-34 [MT: 40:25-41:26]). Both are models of creaturely courage and pride that may teach Job something about his identity and vocation in relation to God. In Behemoth, Job sees one whom God has made "just as I made you" (40:15). In Leviathan, he sees a creature that will not be domesticated by a "covenant" that requires "soft words" (41:3-4 [MT: 40:27-28]). Its power and dignity command recognition, not disregard, for it rules its world like "king" (41:34 [MT: 41:26]). What does God wish Job to learn from Behemoth and Leviathan? How should he respond when God repeats for a second time the imperative, "Declare to me" (38:3; 40:7; cf. 42:4)? [CD: "What Kind of Discussion Does a Man Expect to Have with His Creator?"] The answer comes in 42:6, which constitutes the crux of the book. In advance of the commentary that follows, we note simply that Job claims now to see something new about himself, something that invites and requires a reconsideration of what it means to be created as "dust and ashes" (cf. 30:19). [A Relationship of Defiance, Rejection, and Confrontation?]

Theology and Joban Perspectives on the Character of God

The multiple and divergent portrayals of Job (patient and defiant) and the friends (comforters and accusers) may be negotiated as little more than rhetorical teasers. The different portrayals of God, however, are more problematic.⁴² [CD: "I Read the Book of Job Last Night"] In the prologue, the *satan* "incites" a presumably sovereign God to afflict Job with unimaginable suffering "for no reason" (2:3), leaving us to wonder if God can be trusted. In the dialogues between Job and his friends, a presumably compassionate God remains distant and silent, leaving us to wonder if God genuinely cares about those who cry to the heavens for relief. In the whirlwind speeches, God speaks with such self-conscious pride and at such monopolizing length about so many things that seem, at least on first blush, to be irrelevant to Job's plight, we are left to wonder if mere creatures like Job matter at all to the Creator. In the

A Relationship of Defiance, Rejection, and Confrontation?



If one stands eye-to-eye with God, like Job does at the end of his long journey, what might the relationship on the other side of the encounter be like? When he says, “now my eye sees you” (42:5), what does Job see that is different than before? K. Paffenroth answers the question by comparing Job to the character of Ahab in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). At the outset of his quest to find the great sperm whale that has crippled him by biting off one of his legs, Ahab is “dismembered,” “stricken, blasted,” and “mutilated”; in short, he is an “ungodly, god-like man,” trying to claw his way back up to human dignity (109). In order to do so, he must confront the very thing that has harmed him. As he closes in on the elusive whale, which he calls “the grand god” (107), Ahab describes his obsession to confront his enemy, despite all risks and dangers, in sacramental terms. As Paffenroth notes, Ahab’s quest is an “act of worship, the deepest expression of the relationship he chooses to have with his God, a relationship of defiance, rejection, and confrontation” (110). To buttress his point, Paffenroth cites the following speech by Ahab, spoken in the aftermath of the typhoon that has left his ship a wreck:

Oh, thou clear spirit of fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e’en for hate thou cans’t but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool confronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whencesoe’er I came; wheresoe’er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. (110; from *Moby-Dick*, ch. 119, “The Candles,” emphasis added)

K. Paffenroth, “The Meaning of Suffering in Job and *Moby-Dick*,” *In Praise of Wisdom: Literary and Theological Reflections on Faith and Reason* (New York/London: Continuum, 2004), 101-33.

epilogue, the God who indicts the friends and restores Job seems more fickle than just, more arbitrary than predictable. If after all that has transpired, Job is indeed a faithful “servant” (1:8; 2:3) who has “spoken what is right” (42:7-8), then why must seven sons and three daughters die before God feels compelled to confirm what God seems already to know? Even if *Job has passed God’s test* for fidelity, we must wonder if *God has not failed Job’s test* for what is required for God to be God. [“Success Is Itself but a Form of Failure”] We may wince at the words Robert Frost gives to Job in his creation of an imaginary forty-third chapter to the book, but we cannot dismiss the ring of its disturbing authenticity. Having heard the explanation for why God has tortured him so—“I was just showing off to the Devil”—Frost’s Job says, “‘Twas human of You,” but “I expected more. . . .”⁴³

How should we piece together these separate snapshots of the God who so elusively and so ambiguously appears in the book of Job? To return to Hempel’s observation, if Job’s story is “the struggle for the *last* truth about God,” then what is this truth? We may construct an overarching umbrella out of the mystery of God’s providential wisdom, under which Job’s ultimate restoration provides all the assurance we need to sustain belief in *God’s inscrutable compassion*. As T. Fretheim argues, the negative portrayals of God as “lord, warrior, judge” in effect “stand in the service of a more positive point,” namely, “God’s responsiveness to Job in his suffering,” which “gives him a renewed vision of God.”⁴⁴ If,

“Success Is Itself but a Form of Failure”



When it comes to assessing great works of literature, ancient or modern, Joyce Carol Oates notes that writers, “perhaps more than most people, inhabit failure, degrees of failure and accommodation and compromise.” She makes the point as follows:

It seems reasonable to believe that failure may be a truth, or at any rate a negotiable fact, while success is a temporary illusion of some intoxicating sort, a bubble soon to be pricked, a flower whose petals will quickly drop From this pragmatic vantage point, “success” is but a form of “failure,” a compromise between what is desired and what is attained.

Muriel Sparks writes from another perspective but offers a similar assessment that applies specifically to the “happy” ending of the book of Job: “So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning.” Harvey, the character in Sparks’s novel who has now completed his monograph on Job, three hard years in the making, has lingering doubts about the ending of both the biblical story and his own book (see [*The Only Problem*]). “In real life,” Harvey asks himself, would Job “be satisfied with this plump reward?” Sparks provides her character with this conclusion: “His [Job’s] tragedy was that of the happy ending.”

Joyce Carol Oates, *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 52-53.
M. Sparks, *The Only Problem* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1984), 176.

however, we formulate the question as Jack Miles does—“What is it that makes God godlike? What is it that makes the protagonist of the Bible so weirdly compelling, so repellent and so attractive at once?”—we may be constrained to place the accent on *God’s capriciousness*, not God’s compassion.

The climax is a climax for God himself and not just for Job or for the reader. After Job, God knows his own ambiguity as he has never known it before. He now knows that. . . he has a fiend-susceptible side and that mankind’s conscience is finer than his. With Job’s assistance, his just, kind self has won out over his cruel capricious self just as it did after the flood. But the victory has come at an enormous price. . . . The world still seems more just than unjust, and God still seems more good than bad; yet the pervasive mood, as this extraordinary book ends, is one not of redemption but reprieve.⁴⁵

A third option is to follow J. L. Crenshaw and simply admit that “no one can bring together such vastly different perspectives”⁴⁶ on whatever may be the *last truth* about God.

The book reminds readers that every depiction of the deity is a literary construct. They may be drawn to the picture of God in the book, or repulsed by its coldness approaching the demonic, but readers need to be reminded that the portrayal is a human product, like all theological speculation. For some, the removal of human beings from center stage accords well with reality, as does the rejection of a moral force governing all things. Life is too complex, and events too random, to justify belief in a

deity who matches events with conduct. Justice concerns human society, and it will be established, if ever, by people of flesh and blood. The deity, if one can postulate such a being, is not bound by human notions of right and wrong. The theist may claim no more than that God is lord of life, which includes both good and evil. To the extent that mortals set limits and impose them on God, they have constructed an idol. The beauty of the book of Job is that the author excels as an iconoclast, breaking all forms of idolatry. Job's deity may not be lovable, but he is definitely no idol.⁴⁷

Given these multiple and divergent perspectives on the world, human existence, and God, we readers are left to ponder what we are to learn from this book. In the face of innocent suffering, Job asks "Why?" We wait with him for answers, but when all the dialogues end, whether between Job and his friends or between Job and his God, we may be more vexed than satisfied. No doubt the anxiety would be lessened if the book spoke with one clearly authoritative voice, not several that simultaneously vie for our attention. Even so, if the tradents of this book had settled for monologue rather than dialogue, then we would have to weigh the gain of certainty against the loss of debate. In fact, the only time the book yields to this temptation—in the speeches of Elihu (32–37), who claims to have *the* answer to the problem of suffering—the truth offered by way of monologue seems to violate the truth about the hard realities of life as Job and we readers know it.⁴⁸ When it comes to suffering "for no reason," this book seems intent on reminding us that questions about the world, human existence, and God necessarily remain open ended. To settle for anything less is to deny the pain that punctuates every faith assertion with a question mark. [CD "Who Can Contemplate Simultaneous, a-Billion-Times-Multiplied Pain?"] ["Seven Days of Silence"]

NOTES

¹ In *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841), cited in S. B. Freehof, *The Book of Job* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1958), 3. I am indebted to J. Levenson's masterful essay (*The Book of Job in Its Time and in the Twentieth Century* [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1972], 1) for calling this citation to my attention.

² J. Gardner, "Reading List," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 5 January 1996, A.10.

³ J. Hempel, "The Contents of the Literature," *Record and Revelation: Essays by the Members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, ed. H. Wheeler Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 73 (emphasis added). For reflections on Hempel's comment, see the essays by R. E. Murphy, J. L. Crenshaw, and J. Gerald Janzen in "Job," *RevExp* 99 (2002): 581-605.

⁴ M. Spark, *The Only Problem* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984), 22.

⁵ A. von Soden has convincingly argued that the social, cultural, and historical situations that gave rise to the questioning of divine justice, which emerged so sharply for Israel in the days of the exile (586–538 BCE), were already present in the ancient Near East as least as early as the second millennium (“Das Fragen nach der Gerechtigkeit Gottes im Alten Orient,” *MDOG* 96 [1965]: 41-49; cf. H. H. Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit* [Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966]).

⁶ For the English text and discussion, see S. N. Kramer, “Man and His God: A Sumerian Variation on the ‘Job’ Motif,” *VTS* 3 (1960): 170-82. Kramer’s translation, with abbreviated commentary, may also be consulted in *ANET*, 3rd ed. with supplement, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 589-91.

⁷ For the full text in English, with commentary, see W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 21-62; cf. Pritchard, *ANET*, 434-37.

⁸ Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 27.

⁹ For the full text in English, with commentary, see Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 63-91; cf. Pritchard, *ANET*, 601-604.

¹⁰ For the English text, see Pritchard, *ANET*, 407-10.

¹¹ Some have argued on linguistic grounds that both the prose and poetic sections contain a style of Hebrew that may be quite early, perhaps 10th century BCE. Whether this points to a genuinely archaic style or only to a deliberate imitation of this style remains unclear. See, for example, N. Sarna, “Epic Substratum in the Prose of Job,” *JBL* 76 (1957): 13-25; D. Robertson, *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry* (*SBLDS* 3; Missoula, Mont: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972), 153-156; A. Hurvitz, “The Date of the Prose Tale of Job Linguistically Reconsidered,” *HTR* (1974), 17-34. For a full discussion of the literary conventions, see Y. Hoffman, *A Blemished Perfection: The Book of Job in Context* (*JSOTSup* 213; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 46-83.

¹² There are many different hypotheses about the stages in the history of transmission. For a plausible account, see C. Newsom, “The Book of Job,” in vol. 4 of *NIB* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 320-25.

¹³ See, for example, S. Garrett, “The Patience of Job and the Patience of Jesus,” *Int* 53 (1999): 254-64.

¹⁴ N. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 88. Cf. J. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT; Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 69-70. Note, however, D. J. A. Clines’s cautionary caveat: “the story’s setting in place and time lies beyond the horizon of the priestly law” (*Job 1–20* [WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1989], 16).

¹⁵ William S. Green, “Stretching the Covenant: Job and Judaism,” *RevExp* 99 (2002): 574.

¹⁶ C. Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 135-38.

¹⁷ F. I. Anderson, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 50.

¹⁸ E. Wiesel, “Job: Our Contemporary,” *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Touchstone, 1976), 211.

¹⁹ H. G. Wells, *The Undying Fire: A Contemporary Novel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 103, 106.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9, 10.

²¹ A. MacLeish, *J.B.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956), 12-13.

²² E.g., L. Besserman, *The Legend of Job in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1979).

²³ C. Ozick, “The Impious Impatience of Job,” *Quarrel and Quandary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 59-73.

²⁴ The bibliography dealing with the history of Job's interpretation is far too massive to survey adequately. To date, the most extensive effort to catalogue this material is that of Clines, whose first of a projected three-volume commentary devotes no less than nine pages to works dealing with "Job and Its Influence," including, for example, "Job in Art," "Job in Music," "Job in Dance," and "Job in Film" (*Job 1–20*, civ-cxii). (In personal conversation, Clines has informed me that volumes 2 and 3, currently in press, will significantly expand these entries.) For an introduction to the history of Job interpretation, readers may find it helpful to consult the following: *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings*, ed. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 51-193; *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job*, ed. L. Perdue, W. Clark Gilpin (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 99-156; and C. A. Newsom, S. E. Schreiner, "Job, Book of," vol. A-J of *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. J. A. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 587-99.

²⁵ J. Baskin, "Rabbinic Interpretations of Job," *Voice from the Whirlwind*, 101. For a comprehensive study of the range of Jewish commentary on Job, see J. Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition* (BJS 47; Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

²⁶ Israel Ta-Sh'ma, "Job, The Book of, In the Aggadah," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 125. I am indebted to William S. Green, both for calling this citation to my attention and for his perceptive exploration of its implications ("Stretching the Covenant," 569).

²⁷ Green, "Stretching the Covenant," 570.

²⁸ Ta-Sh'ma, "Job," 125.

²⁹ Cf. D. Kraemer (*Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995]), who shows that the Talmud both condemns and praises Job.

³⁰ For an overview of Job in "Classical Judaic Interpretation," see Glatzer, *Dimensions of Job*, 16-24. For further discussion with extensive bibliography, see R. Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³¹ See, for example, G. Josipovici, *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1988), 274.

³² For discussion of the frescoes in the Roman catacombs, see S. Terrien, *The Iconography of Job through the Centuries: Artists as Biblical Interpreters* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 17-23. For Joban epitaphs on 18th-century tombstones, see J. Lamb, *The Rhetoric of Suffering: Reading the Book of Job in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), especially 274-300.

³³ P. Rouillard, "The Figure of Job in the Liturgy: Indignation, Resignation or Silence," *Job and the Silence of God* [Concilium 169, 9/1983] ed. C. Duquoc and C. Floristan (New York: Seabury, 1983), 10.

³⁴ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 21. For a concise summary of the importance of cosmology in biblical religion, see R. A. Oden, "Cosmogony, Cosmology," in vol. 1 of *ABD*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1162-71.

³⁵ I appropriate this term from G. Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). My comments here draw upon and receive further discussion in S. E. Balentine, "For No Reason," *Int* 57 (2003): 349-69.

³⁶ On the importance of deficiency and provision as defining themes in Gen 2–3, see T. Boomershine, "The Structure of Narrative Rhetoric in Genesis 2–3," *Semeia* 18 (1980): 113-29; W. P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 135-37.

³⁷ Commentators have long noted that creation language and creation imagery is important in Isa 50–55. Words for "create," "make," or "form" occur with frequency, e.g., *bārā'*

(17x), *yāṣar* (14x), *‘āśah* (24x), *pā‘al* (5x). The word for “chaos” (*tōhū*), which occurs for the first time in Gen 1:2, occurs in Isa 40–55 more frequently than in any other book. For further discussion, see, e.g., C. Stuhmüller, *Creative Redemption in Deutero-Isaiah* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970); B. C. Ollenburger, “Isaiah’s Creation Theology,” *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987): 54–71; R. Clifford, “The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language,” *CBQ* 55 (1993): 1–17.

³⁸ More than three decades have passed since C. Westermann noted, “It is hard to see why this verse does not bother commentators more than it seems to do” (*Isaiah 40–66* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969], 161). More recent work indicates that this verse has indeed vexed a number of commentators, some of whom have offered interpretations that effectively mute God’s responsibility for evil, especially in any ontological sense. T. Fretheim, for example, has stressed God’s use of specific and less than perfect human agents, in Isaiah’s case Babylon, to shape divine justice. See, for example, “Divine Dependence Upon the Human: An Old Testament Perspective,” *Ex Auditu* 13 (1997): 6–9; “Divine Judgment and the Warming of the World: An Old Testament Perspective,” *Word and Way*, Supplement Series 4 (2000): 25–27.

³⁹ As Brown notes (*Ethos of the Cosmos*, 319), Job’s world is “etched in the blood of a crime scene,” which means, from Job’s perspective, that it is a world “rife with moral outrage.”

⁴⁰ Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁴² For a cogent discussion of these matters, see T. Fretheim, “God in the Book of Job,” *CurTM* 26 (1999): 85–93.

⁴³ R. Frost, “A Masque of Reason,” *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. E. C. Lathem (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1969), 484–85.

⁴⁴ Fretheim, “God in the book of Job,” 89–90, 91.

⁴⁵ J. Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 327, 328.

⁴⁶ J. L. Crenshaw, “Some Reflections on the book of Job,” *RevExp* 99 (2002): 595.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 593. In *Defending God: Biblical Responses to Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Crenshaw reformulates his previous observation in a still more pointed way:

No one can bring together such vastly different perspectives as the heavenly and the earthly. We are capable of understanding the view from below, as it were; how can we possibly perceive things from above? Creating dialogue for the deity runs the risk of hubris; having that fictional character laud a human as perfect in every way is hubris in the extreme. *Neither Job nor his maker deserves such praise. Both are flawed beings.* That insight may be the permanent legacy of the ancient poet. (186–87) (Emphasis added)

⁴⁸ See C. Newsom (*The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* [Oxford: University Press, 2003]), who concedes that “like a latter day Elihu,” she began her commentary on Job with the assumption that she would be able to bring some resolution to the debate about innocent suffering. Immersing herself in the dialogue, she discovered that polyphony, not monologue, is the essence of the wisdom this book offers. As she puts it,

In the postmodern, multicultural world, one cannot escape the reality of the multiplicity of differently situated consciousnesses that continually engage one another over questions of meaning and value. There is no culture, no tradition, no society—indeed, no person—that is not itself composed of multiple voices, dialogically situated. (261)

Because the final form of the book of Job models the interaction of multiple speakers, she ends her quest for definitive answers with these words: “The only conclusion to a study of the dialogic structure of Job can be the advice to go and reread the book in the company of others who will contest your reading” (264).