

THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO JOB

by Laurel Hallman

Prairie Group
Pere Marquette State Park
Afton, Illinois

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Assignment: Focus on those parts of the book of Job (Job 1–2:8 and 38 – end) dealing with the relations between God and Job. Your paper should deal specifically with what the book says and does not say on this topic.

Consider the following questions: Did God answer Job? Did Job deserve a better answer? What is the underlying answer in the book? Is there a better answer?

You may also want to consider chapter 28. You are asked to relate your paper to work in the parish ministry.

Introduction

Any close reading of the book of Job must begin with two questions: *Who is God?* and *Who is Job?* While the answer to these questions may seem self-evident, I wish to make the point that there is more than one manifestation of *God* in the book and, as well, there is more than one manifestation of *Job*.

Who is Job? Chapter 1-2:8

Job in this portion of the book is *the Pious Job*.¹ The writer of this portion of Job goes to great lengths to make the point that Job is beyond reproach. He is ,

scrupulously moral, religious, one who avoided evil. (1:1)

He is wealthy in the standards of the day with thousands of animals, and, we are told, *a great many slaves*.²

Job has seven sons and three daughters who observe a cycle of feast days among themselves. Each son in turn hosts the others, including the sisters.³

¹ Samuel Terrien. *J.B. and Job from "The Christian Century"*, January 7, 1959, p. 9.

² Job 1:2 While the juxtaposition of the words *scrupulously moral* with the description of Job's many slaves may seem an oxymoron, we must not allow ourselves to be diverted from the point the scribe is attempting to make. The scribe is clearly saying that Job is a great person. Enumerating his wealth in the terms of the age is one way to describe his goodness. The point he is making is essential to the story itself. We must accept Job as good as revealed by his possessions.

³ Job. 1:4 This is apparently a rare reference to the inclusion of sisters in a cycle of feasts.

When the cycle is complete, Job sanctifies his children by offering sacrifices for each one. This is another example of Job's piety. Taking his examples to the extreme, the writer tells us that Job offers morning and evening sacrifices at the end of each cycle of feast days *just in case* his children have held some secret curse of God in their hearts. Not only is he *scrupulously moral, religious, one who avoid(s) evil* himself, he makes sure that his children are, as well, by his vicarious ritual practices.

By the end of the first section, (*Job 1:1-5*), we are convinced by all evidence that he is pious. The dual responsibilities of practicing religion and avoiding evil are established. This is the first Job of the pious section .

The second Job of the pious section is like the first, but with an important change in circumstances. On one of the days that his children are together eating and drinking four messengers come to Job in quick succession. They tell him that all his oxen and asses and servants have been killed by the sword, fire from the sky has burned other flocks and servants, and his camels and servants have been killed by the Chaldeans. Worst of all, the fourth messenger tells him that his children have all been killed by a great wind which knocked down the house in which they are having a feast. ⁴

The second Job is like the first in that he is still scrupulously moral, religious, and avoids evil. The important difference is that now this cannot be substantiated by the example of his possessions or by his faithful children because they are all gone. He responds to these calamitous events in traditional fashion by tearing his robe, shaving his head, and falling prostrate to the ground. ⁵

He says, in what Good calls a *rather conventionally pious*⁶ quatrain:

Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked shall I return there;
the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away;
blessed be the name of the Lord.⁷

The movement between these *two Jobs* in the prose text is quite elegant. The loss of his children and possessions allows us in addition to the first description, to see that he *has integrity*.⁸ We had been led to believe that he was upright, religious, moral and avoids evil because of the abundance of his possessions and his many faithful children. Now we must acknowledge that his faithfulness is deeper than we were originally led to believe. The cohesiveness of his faith and actions comes from a deeper source. He grieves in the manner of his time. He accepts his loss as the way things are in life. He recites a conventional quatrain that reveals a world-view that includes loss. God gives. God takes away.

⁴ Job 1:13-19

⁵ Job 1:20

⁶ In his translation Good says, "I have given this familiar quatrain a somewhat jiggy meter, because the verse feels to me rather conventionally pious." I believe the conventional translation in the RSV communicates what the scribe is intending. This Job is conventionally pious.

⁷ Job 2:21

⁸ Job 2:3 It is said through the voice of God to Satan that *he is still holding to his integrity* (Good tr.); *he persists in his integrity* (NRSV)

This Job continues to attribute all that happens, to God. This Job does not question God's dealings, even when they are profoundly quixotic.

The third Job in the *Pious Job* section is struck with sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. He is described as sitting in the middle of an ash heap scratching his sores with a pottery fragment.⁹

In response to his wife, we see the third (pious) Job's response.

Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad? (2:9)

This is translated by Steven Mitchell as: *We have accepted good fortune from God; surely we can accept bad fortune too.* It is translated *We receive good from Elohim and do not receive evil,* in Good's translation.

I will defer to the later paper on the tragic dimensions of Job. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on Job saying we are not to question God's purposes. He is remaining firmly in the Pious Job category, avoiding evil by not questioning or speaking against God in any way.

Who is God? Job 1-2:8

We are introduced to the *God of Pious Job* as one who is involved in human days and activities. We have already learned that he gives and he takes away, he is not to be questioned, and expects that even unknown utterances be vicariously removed through proscribed ritual.

As the scene is set by the writer, God/Elohim/The Lord¹⁰ is surrounded by a group of divine beings, including Satan¹¹, (also known as The Prosecutor¹² or The Accuser¹³.) This God is clearly involved in the particulars of individual lives and is the perfect complement to Job's piety. He takes pride in Job's perfection, notices his ritual practices and considers him morally impeccable. It is, in fact, this God's pleasure in Job's piety which gives rise to the original challenge of the Prosecutor. The Prosecutor, in his challenge to Job's God, also challenges the foundation of the theology on which Job's faith is based.

He says,

Is Job religious for nothing? Haven't you yourself hedged around him and his family and all he has, blessed anything his hands do, so that his possessions burst out over the earth? (Job 1:9-10)

This challenge to God appears to be based on the blessings Job receives, but the implicit challenge is to a God who is responsive to pious living. Job trusts God's motives. The Prosecutor begins to unravel this connection by challenging Job's blessings.

The second God is a God who is subtly redefined. This God additionally responds to character. God initially said to the Prosecutor,

⁹ Job 2:8

¹⁰ Good says, "Rather than translate the various terms for the deity, I transliterate them. Elohim is the most common Hebrew word for the deity." *God* is the name used in NRSV. Mitchell uses *The Lord*.

¹¹ NRSV, Job 1:6

¹² Good, p. 50.

¹³ Mitchell, Job 1:6

. . .(he is) a blameless and upright man who fears God
and turns away from evil. (2:3a)

This time, however, God adds:

He still persists in his integrity. . . (vs. 2:3b)

This small shift, parallel to the shift in Job, marks a significant movement in the relationship between Job and God, as well. God affirms in his words to the Prosecutor that his relationship with Job is based on being upright, following the ritual practices. *In addition* it is based on character. The evidence of the great man's relationship with God is no longer in the vastness of his possessions and strength of his family, but is found in his integrity.

In the third portion of this Pious Job section, the writer names this extraordinary movement in his understanding of the relationship between a human and God, by having the word *integrity* come from God's mouth. Then to underscore the point, he has Job's wife say,

Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die. (vs.2:9a RSV)

Who is Job? The Middle Chapters

By the 38th chapter of Job, he has thoroughly become the *impious Job*¹⁴. While my assignment specifically does not include chapters 3-38, I cannot skip these chapters as I parse the parallel movements and relationships of Job and God through the whole of the book. While the preceding paper will have covered this section fully, for the purposes of this paper I will summarize Job's movement in these chapters: from unbearable suffering, to cursing the day of his birth, to rising up in vexation and impatience, to speaking out of the anguish of his spirit, to loathing his life, to living in terror, to claiming his innocence, to calling for a chance to plead his case to God.

Even though he has become *impious* in his passionate poetic expression of defense, it is important to note that which carries forward from the earlier *pious* prose section. Where previously it was God declaring Job's integrity, Job is now *himself* claiming his integrity and righteousness. He says

*Until I die I will not put away my integrity from me.
I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go. (27:5b-6)*

We hear nothing of ritual behaviors in these chapters. Restraint, which was important in the earlier section, no longer is important. All that was of value to him in his living has been taken from him. In response Job, in all the middle chapters of reproach and calumny responds with a profound *I am*, naming and renaming who he is in all his despair, over and over again.

In perhaps the most succinct theological statement of this middle section, Job declares his trust in God and his own *I am*. He says,

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him:

¹⁴ Samuel Terrien. "J.B. and Job. *The Christian Century*, January 7, 1959, p. 9

but I will maintain mine own ways before him. (13:15 KJV)¹⁵

It is this juxtaposition of trust and self, and the power of both, that signals the fifth example of the various “Jobs” we encounter: (1) the pious Job, (2) the besieged Job of integrity, (3) the Job whose integrity is named by God, (4) the impious *I am* Job, (5) the *I am* Job of deep existential trust.

Job himself is aware of his own varied experiences of God. He says,
*Oh, that I were as in the months of old,
as in the days when God watched over me;
when his lamp shone over my head,
and by his light I walked through darkness;
when the friendship of God was upon my tent;
when the Almighty was still with me.*
(29:2-5a)

In his most impious moments he protests that God is not showing his face; will not declare himself. In this nostalgic moment he remembers a relationship with God that was full of blessing and friendship, when God cared about him. He longs for that friendship.

Who is God? The Middle Section

God is silent.

Resuming the portion of the paper assigned to me, I will now take into consideration *Who is Job? and Who is God?* as they are after the calumny of the friends has ceased and Job gets his wish that God declare himself.

Who is Job? Chapters 38 – 41

Job is silent except for three verses in Chapter 40 in which he says,
I lay my hand on my mouth. (40:4b RSV)

Who is God? Chapters 38-41

God is the *Voice from the Whirlwind*.
Good says,

*The disproportion of verbiage between the two speakers
is obvious. Never has Job been so terse,
whereas Yahweh compensates for his long silence
with a verbal flood.¹⁶*

Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* says,

¹⁵ This translation is from the King James Version. The Mitchell translation is, *He may kill me, but I won't stop; I will speak the truth, to his face.* The RSV says, *See, he will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face.*

In a small personal note: The words I learned as a child were from the King James Version. They spoke up out of my own unconscious memory during a particularly difficult time in my life. When I looked up the verse I found that at some point in my presumably earlier fundamentalist religious life I had put a question mark next to the second phrase in my *KJV Bible*. The second phrase would not have been fathomable to me at that time.

¹⁶ Edwin M. Good. *In Turns of Tempest*, p. 338.

(The 38th Chapter of Job) *may well rank among the most remarkable in the history of religion.*¹⁷

In deep poetry, God says,
*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know?
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (38:4-7)*

Otto presents this chapter of Job as an example *mysterium*, the wondrousness that transcends thought. It is presented, he says, in *its pure non-rational form.*¹⁸

Otto argues that the ‘problem’ of Job is resolved in this section. He says,
*Latent in the weird experience that Job underwent in the revelation of Elohim is at once an inward relaxing of his soul’s anguish and an appeasement, an appeasement which would alone and in itself perfectly suffice as the solution of the problem of the Book.*¹⁹

It is true, as noted above, that Job ceases his ‘impious’ soliloquy in the face of the Voice from the Whirlwind, and in the ‘absolute wondrousness’ of God’s answer. Job is silenced, as we are, in reading these profound passages. We can also agree with Otto that any comprehension of the God of the Whirlwind is beyond rational human teleology. He says:

*That of which we are conscious is rather an ‘intrinsic value’ in the incomprehensible—a value inexpressible, positive, and ‘fascinating.’ This is incommensurable with thoughts of rational human teleology and is not assimilated to them: it remains in all its mystery.*²⁰

It is more difficult, however, to agree with Otto’s claim that in this passage *Elohim* is justified and Job’s soul is brought to peace.

WHO IS JOB? Chapter 42:1-5

Within the first five verses of the 42nd chapter of Job, we do find a response which supports Otto’s premise. Job says,

*I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things to wonderful for me, which I did not know.*

. . .

¹⁷ Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 80.

¹⁸ Otto, p. 81

¹⁹ Otto, p. 80-81.

²⁰ Otto, p. 83

*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you. (42:2-3, 5)*

Job acknowledges *things to wonderful for (him), which (he) did not know*. He makes the intriguing distinction between what he has heard and what he now sees. While I would not make too much of this as an apparent epistemological distinction, this small phrase does point to a way of knowing God that is beyond Job's usual ways of knowing. He has moved from an inherited understanding about God to an experience of God which cannot be described. This is Job as a mystic, at once admitting his own limitations and the unlimited power of what he has perceived.

This passage alone would suffice to support Otto's conclusion that Job's God is numinous, remains mysterious and brings Job's soul to peace, if it were not followed by further verses that seem to refute the notion that Job is at peace.

Who is Job? Chapter 42:6-17

Unfortunately, the passage continues with a methodical return to the pious Job of the beginning of the book with an addition that is even more dramatic. Job says,

therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes. (42:6)

This passage of repentance stands in polar opposition to Job 13:15, in which Job declares his trust and his own "I am." It is in stark contrast to the maintenance of Job's integrity throughout his ordeal. It is opposite to his fierce determination to keep his own ways, no matter what would befall him.

He returns to ritual life as his friends offer up for themselves a burnt offering, and he, as instructed by God, prays for them.

Who is God? Chapter 42:7-17

God returns to being the God of Job's pious life. He judges Job's friends as not having spoken what is right, gives ritual instructions to them and to Job and then "accepts Job's prayer." We have come full circle it seems, with the addition of a Job that is humbled, repentant and self-denying.

God then restores the fortunes of Job by giving him twice as much as he had before, returning the reader to the original Job and the original God of the book.

While Job's friends in the middle portion of the book have not been within the purview of this assignment, in the end, even Job's friends' failure has been redeemed. They come to Job, sympathizing with him *for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him, each bringing him a piece of money and a gold ring. (vs. 42:11)*

THE PROBLEM OF CHAPTER 28: The Interlude

Before we can speak to the conclusions requested in the assignment, we must turn briefly to Chapter 28.

This chapter is strangely out of place, interrupting Job's defense of his integrity to Bildad. It seemingly has nothing to do with the general questions the book of Job raises, or even its general story line.

Good acknowledges that most Biblical scholars conclude that Chapter 28 was spurious matter introduced by neither the author of the early prose section nor the author of the longer poetic section. He goes on to say,

Having concluded that Chapter 28 was interpolated, (scholars) seldom ask why it was put there, unless it be to point out how inept the placement was. To say that it was not originally here is reason enough to say no more about its presence.

That seems to me a pseudo-historical answer to a historical question. . . They (should say) "this poem is now present in the Book of Job because. . ." ²¹

Chapter 28 is present in the Book of Job, especially at this interesting place, to underscore three self-evident but often overlooked truths. The first is that the book of Job is a patchwork of poetry and prose written by many writers over time. The second, which closely follows the first, is that Job is not a story with a beginning, middle and end. It is not written as a 'problem' which is 'resolved.' Chapter 28 is placed where it is to tell us the main theme of Job. It says,

*Where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding? (28:12-13)*

These words are repeated again, in case the reader missed it the first time, in vs. 28-29.

Chapter 28 is a summary, an accent, an inserted clarification in the patchwork images of the book. Its placement, which we must assume was intentional in the process of canonization, gives it special emphasis. If we take Chapter 28 seriously, we must assume that the question of Job is not about suffering *per se* nor is it about justice *per se*, but it is rather about where wisdom is found.

Chapter 28 begins with a geological metaphor about digging in deep darkness away from human and animal habitation.

Then the theme is stated. The question is asked,

*But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding? (28:12)*

Neither human nor animal habitation can provide the answer. It cannot be purchased for gold. It is hidden from the eyes of all living. Even Death can only speak rumors about wisdom.²²

²¹ Good, p. 184

²² This is an especially intriguing idea: Death only suggests where knowledge of God might be found. No conclusive evidence is found there.

Interestingly, this apparently out-of-place chapter places wisdom in the knowledge of God beyond knowing. In poetic form which is a prologue to Chapter 38, much of the chapter says that

*God understands the way to it,
and he knows its place.
For he looks to the ends of the earth,
and sees everything under the heavens.
When he gave to the wind its weight,
and apportioned out the waters by measure:*

*.....
Then he saw it and declared it;
he established it,
and searched it out. (28:23-27)*

Just as we find ourselves making a definitive statement about the theme of the book and are tempted to forge a clear description of the relationship between God and humankind, the chapter finishes with a statement which, once again, redefines the distance between God and humans:

*And he said to humankind,
'Truly, the fear of the Lord, that
is wisdom;
and to depart from evil is
understanding.' (28:28)*

This final statement in the chapter takes us back to another version of *pious Job's* early statements in the book, underscoring our suspicion that the book was never intended to be a chronological account of the faith development of Job, but is rather a series of images of various perceptions of God/human relationships and the varied distances between them.

CONCLUSION

In the book of Job we find several examples of relationships between God and Job:

GOD	JOB
God blesses Job	Job is scrupulously moral, religious, avoids evil for himself and his children.
God is challenged to redefine himself as more than the giver of blessings and ritual judge.	Job is still conventionally pious and demonstrates integrity in his changed circumstances.
God names Job's integrity	Job reaffirms that we are not to question God's purposes.
God is silent	The impious "I am" Job defends his righteousness.

(Chapter 28 interrupts Job's defense)
Wisdom is defined as *The Fear of God*
Understanding is defined as *Departing from Evil*.

(Job continues his defense)
Deep existential trust added to
Job's "I am".

The "I am" God who is the voice out
of the whirlwind

Job is silent

Job acknowledges the wonder of
God's purposes and power

God blesses Job

Job returns to piety, to ritual,
to fulfilling God's expectations
humbled, repentant, self-denying.

CONCLUSION:

I have reiterated the various relationships of God and Job to emphasize the point of this paper: Job is not a story which moves from a more primitive understanding of God to a more sophisticated one. We, who are steeped in a pattern of cause and effect, movement from lesser to greater, yearn for a story which poses a problem, and then resolves it. When we bring our own linear expectations to this book, it appears to be a story of suffering, justice, and the gradual understanding of the hapless sufferer as to the larger purposes of God. These purposes are not grounded in ritual or even in the expectation that God cares about us as individuals.

This reading of Job then leads us to the conundrum of the final chapter which is a puzzling and insensitive return of Job's original blessings tenfold as well as a return to the humble, ritual-fulfilling Job. (We want to ask, "What about his love for his original children? Does that not matter?")

If we remove our need to have "the problem" resolve, then the book becomes an array of descriptions which are all familiar to us, both in ourselves and in our perceptions of God. It becomes an array of descriptions of the varied distances from God we have experienced in our lives. It becomes an array of the many questions we find ourselves asking about God's purposes. It becomes an array of possible practices we might undertake in relation to the Holy. None of these descriptions or questions or practices is final or absolute. Each one is intruded upon by another. All of them are valid expressions of human experience.

The book of Job doesn't resolve itself. It doesn't satisfy in the end. We must assume this is not an accident of the canonizing process. If it is an example of various forces competing to canonize a definition, the 'winning' definition would take precedence and not allow the others their place in the text. We must

assume that the book of Job has come to us as the authors and then canonical bodies intended: as a sourcebook for various understandings and ritual practices in relationship to God.

This is not to preclude our valuing one understanding more than another. It is only to say that the varied perceptions of God and of Job throughout the book are not to be considered in a linear way. Nor are they to be taken as a chronology of events pointing toward one ultimate truth, unless that truth is the relativity of each description among the whole.

Bernard Meland, in *The Reality of Faith*, says:

What is thus beyond the judgment of reason. . . insofar as it is made expressive through human acts, must be recognized for what it is—an ambiguous bodying forth of reality within the living situation, bearing simultaneously the truth of faith as actuality and the dubious, even idolatrous claims of the finite persons bearing the witness.

The point that we need to grasp if we are to assume a constructive stance in this new imagery of thought is that relativity is itself a witness to ultimacy.²³

The many descriptions of God and of Job, and their varied relational distances, gives us an appreciation of the varieties and complexities of the possibilities between humans and God. In all their variety and complexity they become the witness to ultimacy.

PASTORAL APPLICATIONS

While I was writing this paper, I received the following letter:

I'm thrilled to be visiting your church this long! I work overnight most Saturday nights and walk to church (from about five miles away.)

I love coming. Except, while I'm thrilled to come across a church that accepts EVERYONE regardless of what she believes, I have a question which is driving me crazy. What is my relationship to God now? All throughout my life God has protected me. Too many instances in my experience demonstrate his or her existence. But now that I am not Catholic or Southern Baptist anymore, who is God to me? Confused, I am. Because I find myself walking through carandera shops and looking at various rosaries. They find new meaning to me now—but not religious. Free. I feel more free to be. But, along with this freedom to think however I want is a great fear that God won't be happy with me. I mean what do I do if all this freedom gets me in

²³ Bernard Meland. *The Reality of Faith*, p. 182-183.

*trouble? What I mean is what if God didn't really
want all this freedom for me to take part in?
Oh – do advise me on my big dilemma.
Thank you.*

Her question is not about suffering or justice. It is about freedom to claim the *I am* of her life in relation to the *I am* of God. The answer to her dilemma is not in telling her that God isn't personal, or that her experience of God's help is not valid. The answer to her dilemma is to assure her that there are many varied experiences of God, and that limiting those experiences to just one kind, or one type limits God. Her fear of God in the midst of her newfound freedom is a common one. Her view of rosaries with fresh vision is also appropriate. Her later experience does not discount the validity of the former one.

I will tell her to receive the God that is present (or perhaps silent) in this time, just as she lives her human relationships from day to day. I will tell her to take care of her part of the relationship with God as she is able. It may involve ritual and intention, it may not. She may be called to declare the *I am* of her life, in defiance. She may be called to silence. The most important part of her new way in religion is being fully present to it, fully available in it. Then her newfound freedom will take on depth and maturity.

Our pastoral prayer at the First Unitarian Church of Dallas begins every week with the call:

*God of many names,
and mystery beyond all our naming.*

The book of Job gives us a profound montage of the God of many names/and mystery beyond all our naming. It is forged over centuries. It invites us to the depth of our own experiences and calls us to the validity of even the most intractable silence we encounter and wordless wonder we feel. Taken as a whole, it is a call to freedom, a call to movement. It is a call to Life itself. END

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