

# Finding Wisdom in the Book of Job



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## **Multi-Church Study Guide Lent 2007**



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## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

Each session begins with a brief introduction to the portion of the text and the issues arising from it. Ideally, participants should read the Book of Job as a whole, using the outline on the next page. Then each week, they should read that week's introductory material, the relevant portion of Biblical text, and ponder the "Questions for Reflection" before coming to the group session. If they do not, leaders may decide to review key ideas from the introductory material with the group when it convenes, and/or use one or more of the "Questions for Reflection" as a way of opening the session.

The group session itself is designed as a series of questions related to a portion of the text of the Book of Job and mutual group discussion, following in the "discussion" format of the book itself. The Book of Job itself expects disagreements and controversy, so the exercises invite participants to consider selected portions of the text of the Book of Job, and then engage in discussion of their observations and reflections. To be faithful to this Book, it may not be necessary, perhaps not even desirable, to arrive at agreement among the participants.

The goals identified for each session are intended to provide focus, as leaders adapt the session outline for the needs and time limits of the group.

This study assumes that the Book of Job is a carefully structured whole in its present form, so it is awkward to leave out segments if comprehension of the whole is desired. This also means that it is difficult to divide this study into "five easy pieces." It is my experience that this text usually provokes considerable intense reflection and discussion. Should the group desire, the discussion/study sessions may be scheduled when it is convenient to spend more than an hour together for a single session, or the study can be expanded beyond five weeks.

The study is designed in sequential "steps," which usually follow the flow of the text, and the issues arising from it. These steps can be assigned to smaller groups working simultaneously, which then gather again for reporting and mutual discussion. Or you may choose to use the steps in large groups, depending on the size of your class and the time available.

**Note to Leaders:** In your preparation, some of the “steps” are marked with an asterisk (\*) indicating my sense that they are necessary for understanding the whole, but I assume that leaders are free to adapt use of the steps to the needs of the group and to the constraints of time. You could spend a few minutes at the beginning of each session to allow the group to select which steps they consider most important for them, given the goals of the session. It is not required, nor is it likely possible to complete every question.

Leaders need not be expected to explain these texts. Your task is more to assist the group to engage the texts and issues in serious discussion - that would be in keeping with the nature of this book.

**Suggestion:** You will find it helpful to have a variety of Bible versions available for use. It will enrich and enliven the discussion. Some versions handle the Hebrew poetry better than others. A useful variety might include: New Revised Standard Version, New International Version, New Jewish Publication Society Version, New King James, New Jerusalem Bible, Edwin Good’s translation in his *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job*, or Stephen Mitchell’s poetic version, *The Book of Job*.

In addition, study Bibles, such as *The Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV)*, provide an Introduction to each book which would be useful preparation. You will also find a useful brief introduction to the Book of Job (written by Edwin Good) in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, edited by J.L. Mays (1988), pp. 407-409. For a more extensive, yet accessible introduction, see that of Carol Newsom in the *New Interpreters Bible*, Vol IV (1996), pp. 319-341.

Further aids and resources are listed in the back of this guide.

## INTRODUCTION TO THIS STUDY

Lent has traditionally been a time for addressing the “dark side” of life. After 9/11, school shootings, hurricanes, earthquakes, and wars killing thousands of innocent civilians, what could be more timely than a Biblical book which questions our moral standards? Such is the Book of Job.

Bad things do happen to innocent people. Why? Do the familiar moral principles still hold? Can we raise our children to trust the traditional teachings? Should we be less accepting and more questioning? Yet, what are we to do when we are asked to explain the inexplicable?

This is where the Book of Job begins. It is filled with struggle, arguments, painful experiences and accusations, and a quest for justice and truth. In this book, not only does Job contend with God, but he draws us into the contest as well. Should people argue with God? Can Job really put God on trial? What kind of God is God?

We will explore these and other issues raised by this brilliant and profound biblical book.

### **What must we assume?**

To derive full value from this study, we must first acknowledge there has been a change in biblical interpretation in recent generations, and this change is especially important for our study of the Book of Job.

Traditionally, the Bible has been assumed to be a unified whole. Yes, it has different parts, and different kinds of writing - some stories, some poetry, some history, some prophetic denunciations of sinners, some letters, some hymns - but they all basically point in the same direction. Indeed, many people assume that the different books of the bible say pretty much the same thing, especially about God, and that where they differ, they can be harmonized.

More recently, more attention has been paid to what makes each book distinctive, and there is more recognition that there are different literary and theological traditions

within the bible. Many claim, and I agree, there is value in identifying and understanding these differences, for they enrich our understanding not only of God but also of the various cultural and historical circumstances within which the biblical books are at home.

Just as people can be united without being the same, and just as harmony does not require conformity, both require understanding differences. This is also true for biblical texts. So we will not assume that the Psalms say the same things as the historical texts, or that Paul's epistles and the Book of Revelation can be harmonized, or that the prophetic and wisdom books are of one mind - instead, we will look and see. Then, perhaps, we can decide.

### **What makes Job a wisdom book, and why does that matter?**

The Book of Job is widely regarded as one of the Biblical wisdom texts.

What are the Biblical wisdom texts? Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) and Wisdom of Solomon in the Intertestamental period (the "Apocrypha"), and James in the New Testament. There is also widespread agreement that Jesus' manner of teaching is consistent with the patterns of these earlier wisdom texts.

How are these texts different?

First, much that is familiar is missing. For example, there is not a single reference in the Old Testament portion of the wisdom books, to the Exodus, to Moses and the Patriarchs, the Covenant, the Ten Commandments or to any of the "mighty acts of God in history" which are so pervasive in the rest of the Old Testament. Wisdom texts tend to be more reflective than directive. Occasionally they tell us what to do, but more often they try to evoke the readers' own reflecting. They do this by offering provocative observations about human experience; by asking questions about the problems of life and how to live well; all the while seeking to make some larger sense of it all, or to find order and direction amid the wide variety of human experiences and cultures.

Second, these texts are more oriented to the creation and to the human struggle to cope with daily living in God's community on earth, and somewhat less centered upon

what might be called the saving or redemptive work of God or the “revealed words” of God.

Third, wisdom texts, and Job in particular, have an in-depth concern for the whole human condition. The Book of Job is intellectually honest in dealing with the puzzles and mysteries of human life and divine presence, even when that is painful. It is also emotionally passionate in trying to make sense of the pain, the incoherence, the sadness, the despair and the exuberant joy of human existence.

Fourth, wisdom texts are ecumenical in the broadest sense of that word. They pay attention to the rich and the poor, the religious and the non-religious, those who are up and those who are down. While these texts attend to Israelites, Jews and Christians, they also listen to (and even borrow from) Egyptians, Greeks, Sumerians, Babylonians, and others. They do not simply reject other cultures as barbarian or irreligious, but they assume that we can learn from each other about how to live in this world, a lesson we must continually learn anew. It is interesting that neither Job nor his “friends” (who occupy 36 of the 42 chapters in the book) are Israelites, yet their story and their thoughts are in Israel’s canon.

Lastly, wisdom texts (especially Job) are highly sensitive to the limits of the human understanding of God. While they offer absolutes, they also question absolutes. They require humility as a condition of learning to become wise - a willingness to ask questions for which you do not know the answers... and then listen and ponder.

### **What does this mean for our study time together?**

Because the Book of Job raises profound questions about the theological and ethical standards taken for granted in many other Biblical books, we will have to keep reminding ourselves not to try to make this book say what all the other Biblical books say. We must come to terms with this book on its own distinctive terms. In my experience, this is a path for enriching and deepening religious understanding.

The sages, who wrote these wisdom books, used the forms and content of their books to help evoke wisdom in their readers. They believe wisdom comes only as the

result of diligent searching, and yet they also confess wisdom is a gracious gift of God. These sages believe that God's miracles are not only what breaks out of the ordinary, but are also the ordinary itself. So one way to become more wise is to pay close attention to the ordinary, to what happens in our everyday lives - and in doing so, we may find that the ordinary is often very surprising.

To do that, we must gently allow our minds and hearts to be open to the full range of human experience, our own and that of others. We must also read attentively, in humility, listening carefully to these texts and to each other, without presuming we already know what they should mean. There will be surprises. In doing this we may find we are listening to our wise God in new ways.



## Outline of the Book of Job

Prologue (chapters 1-2) and Epilogue (42:7-17) are prose, all the rest is poetry

1-2: Opening scenes (*in prose*) in which Job who faithful, pious and wealthy loses his ten children his servants, and all his wealth, as a secret test to see if he loves God because God blesses him.  
 Characters: Job, his family, God (*Yahweh/Elohim*) and *ha-satan*.

3: Job's lament soliloquy (*poetry*)

4-27: Job's friends "counsel" him (each 3 times), and Job responds to each in turn, in three cycles:

Eliphaz - Job		Bildad - Job		Zophar - Job	
4-5	6-7	8	9-10	11	12-14
15	16-17	18	19	20	21
22	23-24	25	26:1-4	?	27:1-6(?)

There is some confusion about who is speaking in 26:5-14 (Bildad?) and 27:7-23 (Zophar?)? Though attributed to Job, they contradict his earlier statements and are more consistent with the "friends" views. The arguments seem to end in confusion.

28: *Poem* "Where is wisdom to be found?" (Who speaks this?)

29-31: Job laments the loss of the "good old days" (29), laments how far he has fallen since, and how unfair it all is (30), and takes a series of oaths of his innocence, and then files his lawsuit against God. (31)

32-37: Elihu speeches

38-40:2 *Yahweh* addresses Job out of whirlwind

40:3-5 Job's answer to *Yahweh*

40:6-41 *Yahweh* challenges Job again

42:1-6 Job "repents"

42:7-17: Epilogue (*in prose*)  
*Yahweh* condemns Job's three friends, then vindicates and restores Job to his brothers and sisters, his new family (7 sons, unnamed; 3 daughters, named individually), including four generations of "grandsons." (There is no mention of Elihu, *ha-satan* or Job's wife)

## SESSION 1: WHO IS JOB AND WHAT'S HIS PROBLEM?

### *Read before class:*

The Book of Job displays a genius which has stimulated readers for centuries. The long list of artistic works (novels, dramas, poetry, music, dance, painting, film) it has stimulated is tribute to its power and lasting appeal. (See some examples in the Booklist, last page of this guide.) It is a provocative and unsettling work, raising profound theological and ethical issues.

In the Book of Job we find a loose narrative frame, not about God's saving acts in history, but as a frame for poetic arguments about trust, human suffering, especially innocent sufferers, about God's power and justice, and about the moral significance of God's creation.

For centuries, Israel's faith both assumed and prescribed a pattern of beliefs in which God rewarded righteousness and punished evil persons and actions. Even today we assume and teach our children that good deeds deserve approval, and that rewards and bad deeds will (eventually, if not immediately) be punished. We believe, or hope, that bad things don't happen to innocent people for no good reason. That's not fair.

But over the centuries in Israel questions arose, perhaps especially following the captivities of Israelites by Assyria and Babylon. Today we face questions as we recall the Holocaust, terrorist attacks, and news of innocent people being tortured and killed. Still, we have difficulty connecting these questions with God's creation. The Book of Job artfully engages these questions in a profound and moving manner, paying particular attention to how humans cope with suffering. How can we make sense of it? How can we survive it? Can we grow through it? How does God relate to such suffering? This book has enticed and moved thoughtful readers all through the centuries

### **Some background:**

The literary features of the Book of Job are complex and controversial. Who wrote it and when? We don't know. It may have been written in parts, by more than one author, and later "edited." Or it may have been an adaptation of an older folk tale to which parts

were added. Probably its present form was written no later than the sixth or fifth centuries BCE, though the section about Elihu (chapters 32-37) may be as late as the third century BCE. (We will treat the book as it now is, not as it might have been in some earlier century.)

The structure of the book is simple. It begins (1-2) and ends (42:7-17) with a prose narrative which sets up and “resolves” the drama, and in between all is poetry and argument. The prose introduction introduces the story of Job’s afflictions, his loss of children, wealth, social standing and even his health. The poetic arguments debate why this happened and what should or could be done about it. In the prose epilogue, Job is restored to health, wealth and family and lives to a ripe old age with the blessing of God. That’s the simple version!

A narrator begins the prologue (Job 1:1-3), introducing Job (not a Jew, not living in Israel!) as a pious, wealthy, honorable man” Job is “blameless, upright, fears God, and shuns evil.” Thus he assures readers this is a truly good man, so scrupulously pious that he even offers sacrifices on behalf of his children, just in case they had unknowingly sinned during one of their parties (1:5).

As in any story, we are invited to set aside some of our everyday assumptions in order to take on the assumptions which underlie this story and enable it to “work.” First, we must recognize that many of us now come to the Book of Job with certain familiar phrases in our mind, such as, “the patience of Job.”(James 5:11 KJV) As you read past the second chapter, you will find that phrase hardly describes the whole of Job's character.

The second required new assumption is the very first sentence of the book: Job is "blameless" and "righteous", “feared God” and “shunned evil.” This is so important to the story that it is repeated by God in 1:8 and in 2:3, accepted as true by the adversary (*ha-satan*), and reiterated by the narrator twice more (1:22; 2:10). In other words, everything depends upon that premise, so we readers must, at least temporarily, set aside our belief that everyone has sinned, and temporarily, at least, accept that Job is innocent, in order to let the story work.

The scene then shifts from earth to heaven, where the “sons of God” are gathering for a meeting, and they are joined by two new characters: "The LORD," (Hebrew, *Yahweh*) and *ha-satan* (Heb.) (translators have merely transliterated the Hebrew letters here, and added a capital letter; but if they had translated that word into English, it would mean "the adversary" or the prosecutor, or he has been called “something like..the head of the heavenly FBI.”) This is not our Satan, the cosmic source of all evil, standing in opposition to God. First, “satan” here is preceded by a definite article, “the”, which is a sure sign that this is not a proper name. Second, *ha-satan* appears only two other times in the Old Testament and each time he is an emissary of God. Here, the adversary, whose task it is to keep an eye on what's happening on earth, has apparently not noticed Job until the LORD points him out (1:8).

When the LORD calls the adversary’s attention to “my servant Job” and “boasts” about him, the adversary asks a loaded question: “Of course Job is faithful to God – you’ve protected him; he’s got a great life! What would he do if all that is taken away? Then he’ll curse you!” So the LORD gives the adversary permission to do what he will to Job. (1:9-12) In other words, the adversary asks, “Does Job love God because it pays? Isn’t it in his self-interest to be pious? Can one love God only for God’s sake, for who God is?”

Thus we are invited to adopt a third assumption: Not only that is Job innocent, but also that God initiated and accepts responsibility for what follows. The character Job, everywhere, assumes this is so, the adversary does not deny it, Job’s wife apparently assumes it (2:9), and all speakers assume that God alone is the ultimate power, the Almighty. That the LORD is responsible is confirmed by the LORD (2:3), even as permission is given for more torture of Job (2:6).

The other characters play supporting roles: Job's children, servants and wife, even the adversary and the “sons of God” or “heavenly beings.” They are hardly characters, but more the means by which Job's plight is made credible to the reader. It is striking that while's Job's agony is later described in great detail, the suffering of Job's dead children, servants, and wife is not even mentioned.

However, an attentive reader may think to question the fate of these other characters. If Job is “blameless,” are they as well? Bildad will later raise this suggestion. But if **they** are being “punished” for sins, that turns the question away from **Job's** motives for being faithful. If a reader is to continue exploring the adversary's question (1:9-11), she must also assume, at least for now, that the guilt or innocence of Job's wife, children and servants is not an issue.

Indeed, to follow that line of thinking might lead to altering the Adversary's question (1:9) - away from Job's motives and toward God: “What kind of God gives permission to kill children, servants and cattle and torment a father and mother, just to answer an adversary's question? Doesn't God know how it will come out? If God is all-knowing, why allow the adversary to pursue it at the expense of these innocent people? What kind of God is this?”

Or does the text intend for us to gradually see that the adversary's question poses a double challenge: Are both Job and God are being tested?

By the end of the first two chapters, readers have surely begun to feel empathy for this tragic figure and to feel some conflict or tension - something serious is wrong here.

(a) “God rewards good and punishes evil,” conventional Jewish and Christian religion teaches. Wealth and social approval are signs of divine blessing, while suffering is a sign of divine disapproval (i.e., is punishment).

(b) Yet this story rests upon an empirical fact: Job is suffering, “for no good reason,” despite the fact that he has been a pillar of righteousness as far as any can see.

The author presumes that the reader-learner shares (a). (Most parents in most cultures teach this to their children. “It's only fair.”) The author underlines the second (b) by stressing Job's innocence five times (1:1, 8, 22; 2:3, 10).

Yet, if (a) is true, there is something wrong with (b). But if (b) is true, then (a) is suspect. This is the dramatic tension which pulls the reader-learner through the book looking for resolution. Which must give?

How are we, the readers, to respond? We are being invited to feel empathetic with Job, and to feel some wariness about “divine beings” who play around with human lives.

Should humans like Job be used as pawns in a heavenly contest for “bragging rights”? By allowing readers to “listen in” (as though secretly) to the dialogue between the LORD and the adversary, the author puts us in a privileged position - we know more than Job does about what is going on. We have been told repeatedly that Job is innocent; that God calls him “my servant,” that he is blameless and shuns evil, yet God permits him to be brutally attacked. Very subtly the narrator invites readers to turn toward Job and away from the other characters, out of a sense that “this isn’t fair.” By leading us to feel sympathetic toward “blameless” Job, we are being invited become accomplices in being suspicious of God who initiates and permits all this trouble!

All this raises a fourth familiar assumption which many readers bring with them: this is Bible, therefore it must be true, which means there must have been a Job and this really happened. This “narrator” offers readers descriptions of the characters, what they say and do and even what is going on in their minds. The first two chapters and the last, with their numerous stylized repetitions and the larger-than-life dialogues hardly sound like historical reporting. Does that mean it isn't true? Yet great literature can be profoundly true, even if it is fiction. Jesus' parables are good examples – they may not have “happened,” but they certainly “ring true” and they convey truth, and so does the Book of Job. In fact, at several points in the Book of Job, there are hints (in the original Hebrew) that Job himself and his sayings, could be seen as proverbial or parabolic. (27:1, 29:1, 30:19)

One of the values of great literature, in and out of the Bible, is that it leads us to look again at what we take for granted – the Book of Job surely does that!

### **Questions for reflection before coming to class:**

What do you know about Job before you begin reading this text?

What do you expect to hear or “get out of” this study of Job?

What feelings do you have about Job?

## SESSION 1: WHO IS JOB AND WHAT'S HIS PROBLEM?

### Goals for this session:

- To gain an initial overview of the Book of Job, its nature and structure.
- To begin to think about, understand and feel the dilemmas this book poses for both ancient and contemporary readers, by understanding what beliefs we must assume, if the book is to work as intended.
- To gain an preliminary understanding of who Job is, why he's in trouble, and how he responds. (That understanding might change later.)

### \*Step 1: Read the first three verses, and notice the repetitions.

What does this sound like? Is it more like a newspaper report (“What happened to who, where and when?”), or more like “Once upon a time...”? Or...? If this book is true, does that mean it really happened this way? Could it be true in another way? Are parables, novels, psalms or poems true? Discuss.

### \*Step 2: Read verses 1:4-12 - which provides the basic set-up of the whole. Note how Job's piety is stressed, and how often he is called “blameless.”

Who calls attention to Job?

What is the significance of the Adversary's challenge? (1:9-11) Have you ever asked similar questions? What gives rise to such questions today?

### \*Step 3: Read 1:5, 10, 11, 21 and 2:5, 9 - each uses the Hebrew word: *barak* - usually translated “bless,” (there is another word, *qalal*, translated “curse”), yet four of the six uses here are translated “curse.” Why? Have you heard the colloquial phrase, “She really blessed him out!” What might that mean?

Why do you think an author might create such ambiguity as the story begins? 1:21 is often quoted at funerals. How do you feel about that now?

### Step 4: Read chapter 2:1-10: We revisit the heavenly scene: more repetitions.

Does an “omniscient” God not know how it will come out?

If God does know, why permit it?

How do you feel about this portrayal of God?

### \*Step 5: Chapter 2:8-9

Do you empathize with “Mrs. Job”? Why or why not?

What do you think of Job's words? Is he calling his wife is “foolish”?

With which character do you feel the most empathy at this point? Why? Discuss.

**Next Week: The Debate between Job and his Friends begins**

## SESSION 2: THE DEBATE BETWEEN JOB AND HIS FRIENDS BEGINS: JOB 3-9

### *Read before class:*

As the scene shifts from heaven to earth, and while Job mourns the loss of his family, servants and wealth, Job is visited by three wealthy friends who have come a long way to console him. (Like Job, none are Israelites) On arriving, they sit in silence for seven days, honoring the custom that the mourner must speak first. Once Job speaks (chapter 3), they will be free to reply, and then the dialogue begins.

Chapter 3 is a **lament** (a form used often in Psalms). Job begins by cursing the day he was born (:3-10). (No ambiguity here: it is *qalal*, not *barak*!) Then turns to very intense personal lament (:11-16 and: 24-26), in which he uses “I,” “my,” and “me,” eleven times in nine verses. He pours out his raw emotional pain and horror at the events which have piled on him so relentlessly.

Job wishes for a backwards creation story - reversing all that God had done; turning light to dark, day to night, night to oblivion, birth to no birth, stars to nothing, not even a dawn allowed - until nothing is left but his groaning and roaring - no quiet, no rest, only trouble...

The “story line” of the first two chapters, have “pulled” us readers into two places at once - we are here and now reading a story and yet in chapter three we find ourselves simultaneously “inside” the central character of that story, feeling his anguish as well as his (and our) inability or unwillingness to comprehend what is happening. A story’s ability to pull a reader “inside” is a powerful device, and here it pulls us into a dilemma: Does God reward the faithful and punish the unfaithful - always? Could God punish the righteous and bless sinners?

As Job's friends reply, each starts with an obvious fact: Job is suffering, but each “sees” that fact through the lens of theological and ethical conviction. They reason: “Job is suffering, suffering is punishment, and therefore there must be a prior condition or a hidden premise which accounts for that suffering: Job must have sinned.” They appeal to traditional or conventional theology - “God wouldn’t do otherwise.” (8:3ff.) Or, “Who



are you to argue with God - God is the all-powerful one, who has a mind like his?"

Both Job and his friends use their respective expertise. Job's expertise is his own first-hand experience of catastrophic disaster, and his clear knowing he has done no sin large enough to deserve all that has happened to him.

On the other hand, Job's friends have studied God and how God works so thoroughly they know what Job needs, even without asking him. The friends represent tradition, social consensus and theological expertise, which could be a resource for Job. But their expertise seems to prevent them from hearing the impotent sufferer. They are puzzled by his "ignorance," and they refuse his reading of his experience. It is as though Job has gone to a physician who prescribed a treatment without engaging in any diagnosis. The friends never ask Job "What is the matter?" Their theological expertise has told them from the start that one diagnosis holds for all who suffer - and therefore the same remedy applies, "Repent and all will be well."

All together the four friends (including Elihu, later) ask Job 84 questions in 10 chapters, of which *only one* actually seeks an answer (4:2). Four are quotations of Job's questions. Seventy-nine are either rhetorical questions which seek no reply, for they are actually statements disguised as questions, or else they are "impossible questions" which humans cannot answer.

Still, the friends' counsel about God and morality are familiar and taken for granted by many: "God is powerful, who can contest with God?" Yet we, the readers, know too much from the prologue. Having overheard the heavenly dialogues, and feeling empathy for Job's suffering and his dilemma, we know from the moment the friends open their mouths, they are mistaken! We feel ourselves wanting to protest to the friends, "But you're not listening!"

Job's friends refuse to try to see the world from within his viewpoint, which makes it easier for them to criticize Job, yet they see that as "helping"! Job's friends operate mostly at the level of intellect. When they get emotional it is because Job has insulted the rightness of their ideas and arguments or refused to submit to their prescriptions (20:2-3) They fear that Job's passions are getting the better of his theology (8:2, 15:5, 12-13).

Job's friends present him with a rational and powerful God who is both fair and beyond our power to question. Job's speeches are passionate because his theology cannot be reduced to cool intellect - it rises from his experience with God and engages his whole being. Job's God is as close to him as the ache in his heart where his children used to be, and the pain he feels in his body. Yet he knows he has not sinned badly enough to deserve such, which compounds his suffering.

Theology is passionate because our passions show what we are most devoted to, what we "have a passion for." Our passions determine what we contemplate, how we spend our time and order our lives

Job's passion is God. Look at the body images in chapter 6 and 7: God is in the sores on Job's skin, God has poisoned his blood, God buzzes in his ears, God is in his bed and his dreams, in his breath, in his eyes, in the taste on his tongue, in his spit, in the marrow of his bones, in the bitterness of his soul. Is it any wonder he finds the instructions by his "friends" shallow and futile?

Being genuinely religious can be a profoundly intellectual challenge. And being genuinely religious is also profoundly and passionately emotional - and it is incarnate or embodied - it inhabits our thinking, our feeling, our doing and our very being.

Job's friends say to Job, in effect, "Our theology and tradition tells us what is real and true, and if your life and your viewpoints do not fit that, you are wrong. You need to make your experience fit this theology." This further encourages the reader to "take sides" with Job, but that also invites the reader to take a position against God! Meanwhile Job says in effect, "If your theology cannot account for my experience, perhaps your theology is inadequate."

Dialogue, with its intellectual vigor and emotional heat, is what communities of faith have been doing for centuries, as we struggle to understand God and ourselves in changing cultures. Differences and dialogue, while they can be tension-filled, are not thereby to be avoided, as often thought. Rather, they can encourage the emergence of new insights and renewed and deeper forms of faithful living. But for that to happen, such dialogues require not only passion, but candor and truth. Job pleads with his friends for

both in 6:14-30, as he pledges his willingness to learn and his refusal to lie.

**Questions for reflection before coming to class:**

Do you and your friends ever find yourselves in an argument about religious ideas or about how best to understand the Bible and/or God? If so, how do you proceed? Do you try to sort out truth from what is wrong? Or what it is right to do from what it is not?

Do you get emotional and personal? Do you have some “rules” for how to play fair in such a discussion?

Have you gathered some wisdom from your experiences of discussing differing religious notions with friends that might help you understand this discussion in Job?

**SESSION 2: THE DEBATE BETWEEN JOB  
AND HIS FRIENDS BEGINS: JOB 3-9  
CLASS SESSION**

**Goals for this session:**

- To comprehend the basic structure and some of the main lines of contention between Job and his three friends.
- To catch a glimpse of the intensity and depth of Job's laments and questions.

**\*Step 1: Read 2:11-13.**

What do you think of the friends' strategy of sitting in silence as a way of dealing with those recently bereaved? Why?

What do you make of 3:1? 1:22 and 2:10 claimed Job said nothing sinful, despite his wife's urging that he curse God and die. Does Job now curse God? The Hebrew word here is no longer *barak*, but *qalal* = "curse"! (See Session 1, Step 4)

**\*Step 2:** How would you characterize the "tone" of **chapter 3**? Is it theological, psychological, emotional, or...? What does it do to you as a reader? Is it wrong to lament? To whom is this lament directed? Is this prayer? Is it a sin to say "I wish I hadn't been born?" Is it wrong to protest what God does? Why?

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 offers another view. How candid should your prayer be? Why?

**\*Step 3:** The friends: Notice how gently Eliphaz begins his reply to Job: 4:2-6 To what does Eliphaz appeal as he offers counsel and advice to Job? See verses: 4:7-8, 12-17, 5:3ff; 5:8-9, 15-19, 27. How do you speak with those who are bereaved and in turmoil? What consoling thoughts can you offer? Have friends tried to comfort you with Bible verses? If so, how did it feel? Does such comfort sometimes feel like it is used to help speaker feel better, or to reinforce their own beliefs? What could silence do?

**\*Step 4: Read 6:2-4; 14-17, 21-30**

Why does Job speak with such anger to those who seek to console him? To whom is Job speaking in 7:12-21? How do you feel about his complaint?

**Step 5: Read and compare 7:17-21 and Psalm 8:4-5 and Psalm 39:8-13**

Is Job making a parody out of an affirmation of wonder? (Psalm 8) Does that seem appropriate?

Job asks five burning questions in four verses. The Psalmist in 39 asks only one, but makes many declarative statements, in the context of a prayer. Are these two Psalmists like Job or different? How?

**Step 6:** Job's friends reply: Bildad (Job 8:1-6, 20-21), and Zophar (11:1-7, 12-17)  
What is the emotional tone of these, or other, replies to Job? In what tone of voice would you read them? (Impatient? Angry? Detached? Empathetic?)  
Try reading out loud in several different "tones" to hear how they feel.  
How might you feel if these friends were speaking to you?  
Who would you listen to, Eliphaz or Zophar?

**Next Week: Job files a lawsuit against God.**

### SESSION 3: JOB FILES A LAWSUIT AGAINST GOD: JOB, Chapters 9; 13; 19; 23, 29-31

#### *Read before class:*

What frightens Job is not just that he can't understand why God is hurting him so, but also that God is not appeased by Job's obedience. God has both valued Job's faithfulness and integrity and yet continued to terrorize him. It even seems to Job (and his friends agree), that the longer he holds to his integrity, the worse his suffering becomes. Yet, ironically, if he were to let go of his integrity, to confess to sins he had not committed, then his lies would deserve punishment! What can he do? He has lamented, appealed, accused, even begged for answers, yet God is silent. The situation seems to call for desperate measures.

**Chapter 9:** Job is convinced that the conventional formula is bankrupt: he is innocent, yet he suffers. He has been faithful and yet is punished. God seems to be acting unjustly, for “no good reason” – so Job starts imagining that legal action is needed. (9:3, 14-16, 19-20, 24, 28-33). In that culture, if one files a legal claim and the other does not answer, one is presumed in the right. So filing a claim is a strong way to provoke a response. Yet, he worries, who is he to try to bring God Almighty to trial?

**Chapter 13:** Job finally concludes his friends are of no use because they are “quacks” (13:4), so he decides his only recourse is to file a lawsuit charging God with mismanagement of the universe. Job is clearly desperate, for he knows the tradition: no one can come face-to-face with God and live (Job 13:13-18). So Job pleads for two conditions: a) that God not terrorize him, while he is arguing his case (13:20-21); and b) that God let Job know what are the charges against him (13:22-23). He fills in the details of the case in later chapters.

Job expects the ‘terror’ of God to descend both on the friends for their speaking falsely for God, and upon himself when he decides to go to trial (13:10-11, 14-16).

**Chapter 19** - Job faced the God who was terrorizing him repeatedly (chapters 6, 9, 13-14, 16) in vigorous protest and in crying, pleading for relief, for explanation and for justice. After Bildad offers a graphic description of the terrors that await one as wicked as

Job (chapter protests, “How long will you grieve my spirit...crush me...humiliate me...abuse me... Yet know that God has wronged me ...” (19:2-6a). The term “wronged” here is the same Hebrew word Bildad used earlier (8:3) where he asks: “Will God pervert the right? Will the Almighty pervert justice?” Here Job’s accusations, both against his friends and against God reach into the depths of his pain - “God has perverted or abused me!”

Jewish scholar David Blumenthal, author of *Facing the Abusing God*, writes:

“Moments of abuse are characterized not only by deep human suffering but, most importantly, by the innocence of the victim. When a perpetrator acts abusively, the victim is innocent; when an abuser abuses, what happens to the victim is not in any way her or his fault. The victim usually has not wronged the perpetrator at all; however, even if the victim has wronged the abuser, the abuser’s reaction is out of all proportion to the wrong committed. *The innocence of the victim, not the depth of the suffering or the cruelty of the perpetrator, is what makes the abusive behavior “abusive.”* For this reason, we reject victimization of the victim.” (Italics in original)

Read 19:7, 13-22. Is this not a classic description of abuse, and the horrified responses of a family to the abused one who wishes to speak the truth aloud and in public? They prefer silence.

Job uses very strong, hostile language in addressing God. Job, like many of the Psalms, calls out for justice, protesting the abuse, calling to God against God! Even in the hoped-for absence there is a presence, where one might at least imagine an abusive god giving way to the presence of a loving and just god.

Remember, Job cannot put his hope into a resurrection or redemption after death in which these wrongs are righted. He has repeatedly affirmed there is only Sheol (where all the dead go) and no return. (See, for example, 7:7-10, 21) Yet, there is that verse about a “Redeemer” and “seeing God” (19:25-26). The Hebrew word here translated “Redeemer,” “living Defender,” or “Vindicator” is “*go’el*” which is another legal term, indicating a family member who either, a) avenges the murder of a member of his family with another murder, or b) who buys back family land or property lost by sale or death, or c) who buys back or “redeems” a family member sold as a slave.

The centuries of Christian interpretation of this “*go'el*” as Jesus, has made this one of the most controversial in scripture. It is notoriously difficult to translate.

Old Testament scholar Edwin Good comments:

This passage gives everyone fits... In 35 years of trying to perceive sense in these verses, I have found it only in the first line. I can read each of the words. Except for: 25a, I cannot with an acceptable degree of confidence construe the words in sensible sentences. Having declared myself opposed to rewriting to make the passage mean what I wish it meant, I leave the lines blank... Here, however, I present the best sense I can make out of these lines, with the proviso that I find them much less meaningful in Hebrew than they may seem:

“As for me, I know that my avenger lives,  
and afterward he rises upon dust.  
And after they have flayed my skin, this -  
and from my flesh I perceive Eloah (God),  
whom I perceive to me,  
and my eyes saw, and not a foreigner.  
My kidneys are ended in my bosom.”

How are we to make sense of that?

**Chapter 23:** Religious communities and individuals alike often find themselves under siege by hostile cultural forces. We ask, as Job did, "Am I (Are we) important to God? Does God care if we live or die, prosper or suffer?" Often what lies just below the surface is the fear that the "presence of God" is no longer clear; or the feeling of "absence" may be stronger than presence. Notice how often Job has altered his stance, tried different paths to understanding, yet he remains in a profound quandary.

Toward the end of the third cycle of dialogues, Job and his friends aren't even pretending to be civil. They increasingly talk past one another, until finally there is such confusion, we can't even tell who is speaking (chapters 26-27) or how to make sense of what they say. (Perhaps like the end of a too-long, too-hostile congregational meeting?)

**Chapters 29-31:** The climax for Job comes as he finalizes his legal brief. He begins reminiscing about "the good old days," when he and God were intimate and Job was honored and respected by others (chapter 29). He laments how far he has fallen and that God caused it for no reason (chapter 30). He concludes by fusing lament with accusation, saying he showed compassion to the needy and those who cried for help, yet when he



cried, not only was there was no answer, but God turned cruel, and will “bring me to death,”...“when I waited for light, darkness came.” (30:20-26) Job then rehearses his innocence in detail using a rigorous code of honor to affirm his integrity (31:1-28). He lists wrongs he could have done, and takes an oath for each, for example, “If I have not helped the poor or the orphan, let my arm be broken” (31:16-23). This shows his integrity, for if his arm does not break, he’s shown innocent. (Note the oath in: 9-12.)

Finally, acting as his own defense attorney, he outlines his defense (though he has not yet been formally charged), and signs his "legal brief" (31:29-37). Verse 31:35b,c can also be translated: “Here is my mark (signature); Let Shaddai (Almighty) answer me.” Job now leaves it up to God to declare him innocent. The narrator concludes, "The words of Job are ended." (31:40). He intends not to speak again.

In filing his legal brief, Job "explains" that his suffering came not because of his sin or the sin of his children, but because God has behaved unjustly, without cause. Job thus reaffirms his integrity, and implicitly challenges God to respond to the charge, since Biblical tradition claims that if the accused does not respond, that is an admission of guilt.

Ironically, making these charges, demonstrates that Job and his "friends" agree in their theological convictions, yet draw radically different conclusions. As we noted earlier, the Biblical principle being contested is:

***good --> reward; and sin/evil --> punishment*** (Note the direction of these arrows.)

The friends start by turning this around, arguing from an evident fact to a hidden premise:

***Job must have done sin/evil <--Job’s suffering = punishment***

In the same manner, Job also infers backward from a conclusion to a hidden premise:

***God must be unjust, guilty <-- I am suffering unjustly***

In John 9:1ff, Jesus’ disciples ask him “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” and Jesus replied “Neither”. In all three instances, the traditional teaching has been turned around backwards and used in a manner that has become quite familiar.

One thing that is being called into question in this book is the conventional or popular theological and ethical convictions of the Hebrew people. Israel had long believed

that God would protect Jerusalem forever, as King David said: “The LORD, the God of Israel, has given rest to his people; and he resides in Jerusalem forever.” (I Chronicles 23:25) Did the Babylonian captivity (and killings) and the destruction of the Temple show that God broke the promise? Yet the prophets claimed that God was just and the exile was a punishment for sin.

Such questions arise again in the wake of the Holocaust of World War II, where not only Jews (adults and children), but also homosexuals, the mentally and physically handicapped, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Communists were killed “for no good reason.”

In both historical instances, the children who died were the most obviously undeserving. Were they being punished? If so, why? People can't help but ask: “What kind of God would do that? Does God adhere to the same ethical standards God lays down for humans? Is God just or capricious?”

The author has faced readers with a vivid picture depicting a radical crisis for the whole Near Eastern understanding of world as coherent and just order. Covenant presumes the enduring faithfulness of the God who is the guarantor. Indeed, the very stability of creation requires the consistent maintenance of order by the creator.

This crisis is not confined to ancient history. All contemporary systems of justice assume that evil acts call for punishment or retribution, while good behavior should be affirmed. If God's actions are capricious and need not adhere to the principles of justice, what happens to the foundational principle for the covenant or any legal system?

Is there another view, a larger synthesis, which could reconcile this dilemma?

### **Questions for reflection before coming to class:**

Have you had moments when you wondered if what you learned about God in church still makes as much sense as it used to? If so, how do you handle such times?

Do you ever feel the need to argue with God? Do you do it? How does that feel?

Has our concern for being “polite” or “reverent” displaced “speaking the truth in love?”

**SESSION 3: JOB FILES A LAWSUIT AGAINST GOD:  
JOB 9; 13; 19; 23, 29-31  
CLASS SESSION**

**Goals for this session:**

- To observe the use of legal language in Job's speeches, and how he builds his case against God, while insisting on his innocence.
- To identify the charges Job brings against God.

**\*Step 1: Read Job 9:3-4, 15-16, 19-24, 33-35**

Identify words which are legal language. Job pleads his innocence.  
If the issue is injustice, is a legal action a natural way to seek justice?  
Does Job think it would work? Why or why not?

**\*Step 2: Read Chapter 13** (Again, notice the frequent use of legal language.)

What provokes Job in verse 13:3 to "insist on arguing with God"?  
What makes the friends "quacks" or "worthless physicians"? (v.4)  
What do 13:7-8 mean? Does this still happen? What might it look like today?  
Can you describe particular instances you have known?  
In 13:13-18 Job decides to file a lawsuit. What made him change his mind?

**\*Step 3: Read 19:2-10, 13-19** (Also see Background above, p. 22-23)

Job is a child of God. Does Job accuse God of child-abuse? Is that fair?

**\*Step 4: Read Job 19:25a. Compare translations.**

How well does the idea of a *go'el* fit the situation Job is in?  
Is this a foretelling of the coming of Jesus, the Redeemer? (Do you hear Handel?)  
Is the notion of a *go'el* (a), b), or c), a good fit or solution for the relation of God and Jesus? (See p. 23 above)  
What shall we do with this complex and confused text? Discuss.

**Step 5: In Job 31:35, Job signs and files his lawsuit.**

Has he gone too far?  
Do you think Job retains his integrity?  
If you were a jury member or a judge, how would you rule? Why? Discuss.

**Step 6: Do you now agree that good will be rewarded and evil punished?**

Does it make sense to infer backward from suffering to the presence of sin or evil to account for the suffering? Discuss.  
How might your answers affect how we treat those who suffer?

**Next Week: Where shall wisdom to be found?**

## SESSION 4: WHERE SHALL WISDOM BE FOUND?

*Read before class:*

### **28: Where shall Wisdom be found?**

There is much scholarly discussion about chapters 28 and 32-37. Some suggest they are later additions, or insertions which interrupt the flow. Some suggest they both function like the intermission of a play - giving the readers time to step back, pause, while maintaining the dramatic tension: "What will Job do? Will God answer?"

**Chapter 28** asks, reflectively, in three poetic refrains, "What is the nature of wisdom anyway? Where is it to be found?" God knows... but for humans, wisdom is "the fear of the Lord," (Heb. *Adonai*). The "fear of the Lord" is another way of saying, "to shun evil." A reader cannot help but ask, "How does that address Job's questions?"

### **32-37: Last debater - Elihu**

One scholar comments: "Whatever one expects to follow Job's oaths of innocence (in chapter 31), it is not Elihu." Elihu is the only character (apart from the LORD) who has a Hebrew name - one almost identical with that of Elijah. Unlike the others, his pedigree is given: his father's name means "God has blessed" and Ram is an ancestor of David, so his is royal line. The narrator calls him "angry" four times in five verses, and Elihu admits he is younger than the others, so he should be respectful, but they have failed to answer Job adequately - so it's his time. He has a belly-full and he feels he "must" give answers!(32:18-20) He claims to "bring my knowledge" to bear, yet like the others, he, too, does not know about the Lord's conversations with the adversary, so his knowledge also falls flat. Elihu does offer a little comic relief in the tense atmosphere of Job's accusations, and he speaks eagerly as a defender of God, anticipating the LORD's speeches which follow.

The comic irony is richest in Elihu's last warning to Job: "Therefore mortals fear him (the Almighty); he does not regard any who are wise in their own deceit." (37:24) The truth of this is shown in what follows, as the LORD ignores Elihu completely!

### **38-42:4 Yahweh speaks!**

Since the third chapter, God seems a silent spectator, observing the other actors

"on stage." In chapter 38, it is as though God can't stand it any longer and jumps on stage, addressing Job directly, vehemently, "out of a whirlwind!" Now there seems only one issue: It is as though the Lord says: "Are you powerful and wise enough to challenge God? Demonstrate your qualifications before we go on! If not, get off the stage." (Job 40:6-9)

Suddenly, the terms of the discussion have changed. Job's "friends" had insisted the issue had to be fairness – sin requires punishment, and good elicits reward, while Job had insisted the issue was the injustice of God. The LORD's language ignores both and asks about power versus impotence and knowledge or understanding versus ignorance. The LORD does not recite the mighty acts of saving history, never mentions the covenant or Commandments, but questions Job about stars, dawn, seas, snow, lightning, lions, mountain goats, the ostrich, horse, the hawk and especially about behemoth and leviathan. This magnifies Job's (human) ignorance and impotence. Clearly it also changes the question.

Job asked what kind of God we can believe in. The LORD, who earlier (2:3; and again later, 42:10) acknowledged responsibility for Job's plight, expresses no empathy or concern for Job's suffering nor does he mention Job's alleged sins. The reader-learner is bound to be at least perplexed: has the LORD missed the point? Terrien asks, "Why should he (Job) be forced to hear lessons in geology, astronomy, meteorology and zoology, while he is consumed by disease and unrequited love?"

Ironically, this response is just what Job had predicted: even if God appeared, he would not listen, but would crush Job with divine power despite the justice of his pleas (9:16-19).

What can we conclude, if anything, from the Lord's responses to Job?

Scholars have offered several possibilities:

1. Do these speeches, by ignoring Job's questions or changing the subject, suggest that Job's questions are somehow irrelevant? Perhaps reducing ethics to a formula, especially one that binds or controls God, is unacceptable. Retributive justice, or the relationship between guilt and punishment, works within a legal system, where rights and

wrongs are pre-defined and rewards and punishments can be given accordingly. Such systems work for humans, but is God to be confined within a human system of rules?

One might conclude that when the LORD throws out question after question: “Who is this...? Where were you when...? Do you know...? Have you an arm like God...?” the LORD is making clear the profound difference between humans and God. Job must learn more humility; to not expect to go beyond the limitations of being human.

2. Could it be that justice and legal proceedings are too narrow a scope for God? Jewish scholar Gordis suggests that even within the human realm, the order and harmony of the moral realm differs from that of the natural world, and even beauty cannot be assessed by the criteria of justice:

The poet's ultimate message is clear: Not only *Ignoramus*, "we do not know," but *Ignorabimus*, "we may never know." But the poet goes further. He calls upon us *Gaudeamus*, "let us rejoice," in the beauty of the world, though its pattern is only partially revealed to us. It is enough to know that the dark mystery encloses and in part discloses a bright and shining miracle. (*The Book of God and Man*, 133-134.)

Perhaps no one standard is the measure for all realms of human life. Perhaps a king or creator must be concerned about justice, but governing requires something more. How does one apply justice to a wild horse or to lightning?

Must readers even reconsider “order” when thinking about God and world?

3. Old Testament commentator Carol Newsom suggests the LORD’s speeches alter the earlier debates altogether. Job and his friends have framed their moral debate in language which reaches out from the family at the center to the larger civil society (the city gate) and out to the “margins” (where reside the poor, the orphans and widows), all arranged in a hierarchy of value. Job recalls these spheres graphically and poignantly in chapters 29-31. The LORD insists on beginning with creation: snow, ice, horses, ostriches, marvelous beasts, etc. None of these can be comprehended in the language of human relations. They are not set in any order or hierarchy, and justice seems hardly relevant. Yet the LORD finds them fascinating, delightful and worthy of contemplation. As Annie Dillard comments: “God loves pizzaz!” Newsom asks: Does this suggest a complete reframing of the moral imagination? (In “The Moral Sense of Nature: Ethics in

the Light of God's Speech to Job," Princeton Seminary Bulletin XV:1 (1994), 10-15.)

Could Job, being confronted by God and forced to contemplate the ostrich, for example, stumble upon an answer to the LORD's questions concerning Job's character and calling: "Who are you...?" If the author does suggest the need for a new kind of "moral order" with a different starting point, it is left to Job and us readers to construct it. If not making human relations, or rewards and punishments, or even sin and salvation, the focal point, might we start again with creation? It is striking how exclusively the LORD's speeches deal with the created order. The same is true of the Interlude in chapter 28, and again, in many of Job's speeches (see, for example, chapter 3; 6:5-7, 14-17; 9:5-10; 10:3-18; 12:7-9; 14:7-12.) Might we start again from the fact that the creation just is, and we are, which is itself a blessing, a grace-full gift, that precedes and underlies any possible "just desserts"?

Is wisdom to be found there? If so, what might it look like?

### **Questions for reflection before coming to class:**

Have you ever experienced God talking to you or talking back to you? How did that feel? What effect did it have on you?

Has a stranger tried to tell you what to think about God - or about how you ought to behave? How did that feel? Did you accept their advice? Why or why not?

Where do you look for wisdom? Are you becoming more wise?

## SESSION 4: WHERE SHALL WISDOM BE FOUND? CLASS SESSION

### Goals for this session:

- To reflect upon the significance of two “interruptions” in the flow - chapter 28 and Elihu.
- To reflect upon what kind of wisdom is being called for. Who has it? Where is it?
- To seek understanding about what the LORD’s speeches have to do with Job’s questions.

### \*Step 1: Job 28: Where shall wisdom be found?

Does this chapter presume wisdom is “something” that can be found by searching and locating “it”? What kind of “quest” would that require? If only God knows, where does that leave Job? Would 28:28 satisfy Job? The friends? Does it suggest there is one answer for God and another for humans? Does that satisfy you? Why or why not?

### Step 2: Job 32-37: Who is Elihu?

Do you find this “spokesman for God” attractive? Is that important? Does he contribute anything new? If so, what? Read 33:9-12: How does he know that Job is “not right”? Elihu claims God speaks in many ways (33:14, 29 - and gives illustrations (33:15-33). In your view, does this answer Job, or help him in some way?

### \*Step 3: Job 38-41 - The LORD’s speeches

Why does the LORD speak “out of the whirlwind”? (38:1) Is that a sign of absolute power? If so, does that help Job? If so, how? Here the LORD asks Job 74 questions in four chapters. What kinds of questions are these? Do they help Job? How? Are they a kind of wisdom? Does God show compassion for Job’s suffering? R.G. Williams claims God has “come on like a Divine Blowhard, a God-Almighty Wind, never really dealing with the questions, and parading his cosmic power apparatus in a way that fulfills Job's predictions.”(see 9:16-19) Is that a fair description? Chapters 3 and 39 both offer ways to see creation: Job’s way or God’s. Compare two ways of seeing the same things: *dark/light*: 3:2-5, 20, 23 and 38:12-15, 17-19; *sounds*: 3:7 and 38:7; *clouds*: 3:5 and 38:8-9; *doors/gates*: 3:10 and 38:8-11. What might such differing views suggest? On pp. 29-30 above three different lines of thought are offered about how the LORD's speeches might change Job's (and our) view. Which do you find most fruitful? Why? Can you suggest another way? Might such different ways of thinking alter how we console those who are grieving or suffering? If so, how? Discuss.

**Next week: Job’s reply to the LORD and the “resolution” (42:5-17)**



## SESSION 5: RESOLUTION? JOB 42

### *Read before class:*

Finally, given space and relief from the “whirlwind”, Job answers the LORD. He begins by acknowledging the LORD’s power - has he ever doubted that?

Then he twice quotes what he has heard (42:3a and 42:4), and responds directly to each. “I spoke without understanding, of things beyond me which I did not know.”(42:3bc) “I had heard you with my ears, but now I see you with my eyes.”(42:5)

Then Job “repents” in 42:6. What does that mean? Literally, “repent” means to turn around in another direction or to turn away from something and toward something else. From what does Job turn, and toward what? “Repent” usually takes a direct object - one “repents of something.” Of what does Job repent? The text does not say; Job does not elaborate. Again, readers are left with ambiguity. We must infer, use our imagination, and make our own sense of it, in light of the previous 41 chapters. And perhaps there are surprises yet to come.

Still, the fact that he “repents” suggests that Job's view is somehow deficient.

What would it mean to say he “repents of dust and ashes”?

Does this mean that Job has implicitly acknowledged that he'd gone too far? Does he acknowledge that he not only the center of the universe, to whom an explanation is owed, but that perhaps he could not understand an answer if given?

The phrase “dust and ashes” only occurs three times in the Old Testament, twice in Job (here and 30:19), and once in Genesis 18:27. Each time it has to do with coming to a realization about “who I am,” which implies also recognizing who I am not. Yet the Genesis use also points in another direction as well, for there Abraham catches himself actually arguing with God, pleading for a change of mind from destruction to mercy – and getting away with it, by seeing God repent – or “turn away” from his previous plans! Could the use of “dust and ashes” here resonate with Abraham’s protests, suggesting that Job stands in a tradition of dissent which God respects and to which God responds - and finally, for Abraham and Job alike, something like justice is done.

At this point the text suddenly returns to prose - the Job-LORD “dialogue” is over, and the LORD turns to Job’s friends. The previous chapters have questioned formulas by which good human behavior can control God’s responses or all suffering can be traced back to some previous sin. If God is transcendent, God cannot be confined to human standards - not even those of justice. That is a truly disturbing idea, but the LORD doesn’t deny it. Instead, he chastises the friends for not speaking “the truth about me” and Job overhears the LORD say “as did my servant Job” (42:7). This is especially disturbing if we cannot believe that God will always be just.

What are we to say to this?

(a) These thoughts are not Job’s (or the author’s) alone. They are present elsewhere in the biblical record and in testimonies of the faithful through the ages.

(b) It may seem incredibly trite, but is it possible that the only thing to say is that ultimately God is mystery? Has Job experienced the limits of human understanding? Is that a “cop-out”?

(c) We (and Job) also know that God is gracious. We know that from the faithful testimony of Job and many others through history whose testimony we trust. But we also know that we do not know all, even as we desire to do so. More to the point, perhaps, is to recognize that we live in this world more by trust than by knowledge.

But where does this leave us? Is this just another “wild goose chase?” A reader can hardly help feeling that nothing is as it appears - we have ideals and we have actualities, we have truth and fiction, we have humans and “sons of gods” and the LORD-God, and we have such different pictures of what is really the case that it seems impossible to decide what’s what.

Will the last eleven prose verses help? The narrator returns, and reports that the LORD declared (as we already knew) that the three friends had not spoken rightly of God, as Job had (42:7-8). Therefore, to avoid the LORD’s “wrath,” the friends were told to ask Job to pray for them and to offer sacrifices for them. But doesn’t this confirm the advice the friends had been urging on Job, “repent, turn to God, and all will be well?” Why does Job rightly reject this advice, yet God prescribes it for the friends?

Now we also note that Elihu is ignored, as is Job's wife and the adversary, *ha-satan*. No explanation is offered.

"When he had prayed for his friends," the LORD restored Job's fortunes - double! Job's extended family takes him back with gifts of money and rings; he again has ten children, including three beautiful daughters, who were given inheritances (contrary to custom). Not only that, but it is particularly intriguing that Job names these three daughters (but not the sons), stressing their beauty. Their names are, translated: "dove", "cinnamon", and "horn of eye-shadow" or "cosmetics box."

"The LORD blessed (*barak!*) the latter years of Job's life more than the former" (42:12), and Job lived another 140 years and four generations, double the usual life-span, as another sign of blessing (42:16). The book concludes: "So Job died old and contented." (42:17; NJPS)

Does that settle it? Or does that ending reawaken questions? Each of the characters in this story, including Job and God, seem to have been shown to be wrong in some way, yet for some that error has been overlooked or ignored (Job's wife, the adversary, Elihu), some have repented (the friends, Job, and God?), while Job has been restored and God retains ultimate power.

It might seem we are back where we started, yet what about Job's original sons and daughters? Is it really a happy ending when they're still dead and Job just gets new kids? What are we to make of this? Does the enigma remain an enigma?

### **Questions for reflection before coming to class:**

Does this book suggest there are questions we really shouldn't ask God?  
Or does it affirm that "speaking the truth" means "no holds barred" before God?

Does this book affirm that perhaps there are some questions: a) to which we cannot understand the answers? Or b) that there are no answers? Or, c) are there answers for which we have not asked or even imagined questions?

Does the book end with an answer or a tease? Is Job a parable?

## SESSION 5: RESOLUTION? JOB 42 CLASS SESSION

### Goals for this session:

- To try to understand Job's responses to the LORD, and the LORD's varied responses to the others.
- To wrestle again with the many ambiguities in this book, and what that means for our conception of God, God's justice and God's creation: Who is God? What does God want from us? What does God want for us?

### \*Step 1: Read and ponder 42:6.

Does Job repent? If so, of what do you think he repents (42:6)? What did he turn away from and what did he turn toward?

Translators and commentators have struggled with a variety of possibilities. Here are four different (equally valid) translations of that verse:

NRSV, NIV: "therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes.

NJPS: "Therefore I recant and relent,  
being but dust and ashes.

Habel: "Therefore I retract (i.e., my lawsuit)  
and repent of dust and ashes" (i.e. mourning)

Janzen: "Therefore I recant  
and change my mind concerning dust and ashes."  
(i.e. concerning the human condition)

Does one of these seem to fit best with your understanding of Job's intent?

**\*Step 2:** Why does God respond differently to the "friends" than to Job? (42:7-10)  
If it is because Job told the truth - what truth does God approve?

**Step 3:** In the prologue, Job's wife had a small but important role. Why is there no mention of Job's wife, or of "the satan", or of Elihu?

In the prologue, Job seemed focused on his sons. (1:4-5). Why are Job's new daughters named (42:14), yet his sons are not? Job seems especially attentive to their beauty - their names have to do with cosmetics. What might account for such a change? Does he see things differently now?

**\*Step 4: Read 42:10 and compare with Exodus 22:4, 7, 9.**

Does this help explain the meaning of the "payback" to Job? Is God apologizing?  
Does this mean that God was admitting doing wrong to Job?

**\*Step 5: Is the ending a continuing puzzle?**

Some have said that the happy ending undermines the book's message by reinstating the old principle: good --> reward, evil --> punishment.

Some have said the epilogue has been added to make the book "fit" with the rest of the Hebrew canon and the Deuteronomic formula (good-->rewarded; evil-->punished).

Some suggest while nothing seems to have changed, yet everything is different.

Was Job rewarded for his speaking the truth? Was God admitting guilt and therefore paying back double? If so, does that mean that *ha-satan* and traditional theory was right - piety results in blessing and wrong-doing requires punishment (two kinds of pay-back)?

Or was Job rewarded for honestly facing the conflict between his own experience and knowledge over-against traditional religious theory?

What Job did not do is give up on God, no matter what his experience, family, friends and their theories told him. What he did give up was a) his certainty that he knew what was what, and b) his insistence on receiving an explanation for the inexplicable.

Like Abraham, Job insisted that God cannot ignore those who suffer unjustly - historically as well as in our contemporary world. Injustice cannot be ignored if God is gracious, loving and good. God responded. (See the works of Elie Wiesel, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Bill McGibbon.)

Perhaps Job wasn't being rewarded, he just accepted being blessed, decided to stop mourning, and start living life again. Perhaps he resolved to trust both God and his own experience, to stop "striving" to explain and to control God and the world, thereby making room to enjoy his family, his sons and daughters, and the gifts of God's amazing and wonder-full creation.

Or are such "explanations" just too neat? Are they too quietist and anti-intellectual?

Have we readers been on a journey with Job and arrived back at the beginning, yet different for traveling and encountering the voice in the whirlwind?

Discuss. Do you have a preference among these? An alternative view?

### ***QUESTIONS TO CONTINUE THE DISCUSSION***

What did you expect to find in this book, but did not? What did you find that you did not expect?

What do you conclude about God from this Biblical book? What aspects of this picture of God do you approve, and which aspects do you find disturbing? Why?

Now how would you answer the question: “What is wisdom”? Where is it to be found?

Has your own wisdom increased? If so, how?

Does this book help you cope with suffering? With life? If so, how?

What will you do differently after traveling with Job?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Selected commentaries:** the best available in English, in order of importance (in my view): Each will offer a host of other resources.

Carol Newsom, *Job* (New Interpreter's Bible, 1996) - outstanding: thoughtful, thorough.

David Clines, *Job* (Word, 1989) - excellent, comprehensive, incisive insights, but only covers the first 20 chapters. Vol. II not yet published.

Edwin Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job* (1990) - sound original translation, and careful treatment of issues of translation and interpretation.

N. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Old Testament Library, 1985) - one of the best.

Robert Gordis, *Job* (1978) - Jewish classic, detailed, technical; based on Hebrew text; appendices on issues are especially helpful.

John Hartley, *Job* (NICOT, 1988) - thorough, balanced.

J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Interpretation Series, 1985) - makes existential and theological issues central.

### Other useful works:

Gordis, Robert, *The Book of God and Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. Essays on the central issues by an outstanding Jewish scholar - a classic. Accessible.

Gutierrez, G., *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Orbis, 1988. A thoughtful treatment by a Latin American liberation theologian.

Melchert, Charles .F., *Wise Teaching: Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998. Asks educational questions of the Bible's teachers as found in the wisdom texts.

Mitchell, Stephen, *The Book of Job*. North Point, 1987. A translation by a poet using poetic license to produce a powerful text.

Terrien, Samuel, *Job: The Poet of Existence*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957. An imaginative treatment of Job as poet, using other poetry.

Wolde, Ellen van, *Mr and Mrs Job*. London: SCM Press, 1997. A thoughtful, accessible work by a Dutch scholar.

**Selected creative works inspired by or linked with Job:**

Allen, Woody, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* 1989 (movie)

Beckett, Samuel, *Waiting for Godot* 1949 (play)

Blake, William, *William Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job* ed. D. Bindman, London: William Blake Trust, 1987 (engravings, originals in 1825)

Frost, Robert, "A Masque of Reason" 1945 (poem)

Goethe, *Faust* 1808, 1832 (novel)

Jung, Carl, *Answer to Job* 1969 (psychological treatise, speculative)

Kafka, Franz, *The Trial* 3rd ed. 1946, 1964 (novel)

Kierkegaard, Soren, *Repetition* 1843 (psychological novel)

MacLeish, Archibald, J.B.: *A Play in Verse* 1956 (play)

McKibben, Bill, *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation* (Eerdman's, 1994) (reflections on Job, ecology and economics)

Melville, *Moby Dick* 1851 (novel)

Milton, "Paradise Regained" 1671 (poem)

Safire, William, *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today's Politics* (1992)

Simon, Neil, *God's Favorite* 1975 (play)

Spark, Muriel, *The Only Problem* 1984 (novel)

Wiesel, Elie, *The Trial of God* (1979) (play)

Williams, Ralph Vaughn, *Job, A Masque for Dancing* 1930 (ballet)



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- 4) How would you evaluate the intellectual level of the study guide and discussions? Too high for the members? Not intellectually stimulating enough? Just right? (Please share comments that might improve the series in this area.)
  
- 5) What might we do to enhance this series for you and your fellow participants?
  
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- 7) *If you attended the Introductory Lecture:* what was your evaluation of the lecture and worship? Was it helpful to you?
  
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# Finding Wisdom in the Book of Job



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