

- 59 R.E. Murphy, Patristic and Medieval Exegesis—Help or Hindrance, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981) 505.
- 60 C. Clifton Black II, 'St. Thomas' Commentary on the Johannine Prologue, 693.
- 61 B. Smalley, *The Gospel in the Schools 1100–1280* (London, 1985) 261.
- 62 C. Clifton Black II, 'St. Thomas' Commentary on the Johannine Prologue,' 694–696.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 696–698.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 696.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 697.
- 66 D. Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (co-author with R.M. Grant; London, 1984) 187.
- 67 B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 101.
- 68 C. Spicq, 'Thomas d'Aquin, l'exégète,' 730.
- 69 Quodlibetum VII, art. 1 5 ad 3.
- 70 *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, art. 10.
- 71 *Ibid.*
- 72 B. Smalley, *The Gospels in the Schools c. 1100 –c. 1280*, 271.
- 73 *Ibid.*, 279.
- 74 *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 8–10.
- 75 C. Clifton Black II, 'St. Thomas' Commentary on the Johannine Prologue,' 688.
- 76 T.F. Torrance, 'Scientific Hermeneutics according to St. Thomas Aquinas' *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962) 264.
- 77 C. Clifton Black II, 'St. Thomas' Commentary on the Johannine Prologue,' 697–698.

## **Recasting a Classic: A Reconsideration of Meaning in the Book of Job**

Barbara Green OP

The goal of this article is to show how all parts of the Book of Job function coherently, co-operatively and brilliantly. Though commentators continue to assert<sup>1</sup> that the frame of the work (1–2, 42:7–17) is easily separable from the body of the work (3–42:6), that contention is simply not true. The prose prologue and epilogue pose the book's central and crucial issues, which are then partially, and slightly unrealistically, dealt with in the work's central, poetic dialogue section. The 'game' of understanding the work would be much easier to play if the frame—front and back—were not there. But it is there; and it is indispensable. The prologue raises the theological stakes of the dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

### Key Issues: Prologue

Five key issues are posed by the prologue, setting the agenda for the entire book. First, who is God? What sort of deity is God, according to information we receive in the prologue? Why is God employing an adversary (a satan) and what can an adversary do that assists God? What is God's motive in calling attention to Job? How can the wager between God and the adversary, apparently entered into so casually, be benign? What is God's presumption regarding the outcome of the wager made with the adversary?

Second, who is Job? Job is clearly and consistently identified as a man of integrity; what is the significance of that insistence?<sup>3</sup> As the book develops, a certain self-reference of Job (e.g., chapter 3) and the manner of address to him by God (chapters 38–41) suggest that Job may be seen as the primordial human being, as a sort of Everyman. If Job represents any or all of us, he is also ourselves at our best. What, then, might happen to the best of us?

Arising from these two issues comes a third issue, querying the relationship between God and Job (who represents human beings). The adversary questions any presumption that Job's goodness is gratuitous, and claims that it is not. What is at stake when Job's integrity is questioned on the basis of his disinterestedness? Is Job disinterested? Should he be? Disinterested in what? What is disinterest? The Hebrew substantive *hinnam* catches this issue clearly enough: does Job relate to God for no reason? prompted by no return? *gratis*? A related point: Is their relationship a matter of hedges: God provides good things to protect Job's well-being and Job returns sacrifices to recompense and reinforce God's generosity? Or, does God remove hedges and Job retaliate with curses? God gives and Job rewards God, who gives more? God traps Job who longs to escape? The hedge is thus potentially both a protection and a trap, a comfort and a goad.<sup>4</sup>

A fourth issue: What, according to the work, is good and what is evil? Are the material possessions rewards, and the afflictions punishments? Or ought the labels to be reconsidered, reapplied and reversed?

Finally, (how do we as human beings know what we know about any of these key issues? As readers, we are informed about this particular episode involving God, the adversary, and Job; but far from being reassured, we become unsettled. Do wagers like this one go on frequently, with ourselves as unwitting participants? Does some other audience watch while God and the adversary scrutinize us? The prologue presents these questions and presses them strongly.

Luis Alonso-Schökel offers the suggestion that the work must be viewed as a drama,<sup>5</sup> not so much because of its literary form as its

compositional arrangement. The attention shifts from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth, from those places to the audience's station, with all participants interrelating, whether consciously engaged or not. The fact that the wager is never seen or discovered by Job or the friends necessitates the role of the audience. We cannot *not* be there; we must be factored into the equation if it is to work sensibly. Whatever communication the book offers about the key issues must be considered from the point of view of all involved: God and the adversary, Job and his four interlocutors, and ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

### **Key Issues: The Friends' Dialogues**

As the work moves from the frame into the 'dialogues,' some relevant observations can be offered.

Job and the friends agree on some crucial points. Implicit in all that they say is the belief that God is the agent of Job's affliction. It never occurs to them to doubt that God has caused it. Given our reader's perspective, we ask whether their presumption is true. Yes, essentially; though God delegated the afflicting of Job to the adversary, it is certainly God's permission that is effective.<sup>7</sup> Though many moderns are left uncomfortable with the assertion, the affliction is seen here as emanating God.

Job and the friends also agree that the affliction is related in some way to moral choices, in fact to deficient moral choices (e.g., claims made by the friends at 5:1—2, 8:20, 11:20). The friends conclude that punishment is a clear sign of his guilt and suggest some plausible sins. Job's oft-repeated point (e.g., 9–10) is that the punishment has been mistakenly assigned; he never offers another reason for suffering, simply continues to assert that he has been wrongly tagged. When they discuss this sin/suffering equation, they quarrel over how bad Job has been, how deserving of punishment he is. Job and the friends agree that moral perfection is not the point; no human can claim that (e.g., friends at 11:6, 15:14–16, Job at 9:2–3). But the friends think Job must have been very bad; he says not so. Again, having witnessed the scene set by the prologue we ask whether they are correct in seeing affliction as related to deficient moral choices. Is the relationship between sin and suffering discernible? On the contrary, *we* know that the affliction is related to Job's *goodness*. The information we have reminds us that the conversation going on, urgent and tedious though it may seem, is fundamentally misconceived. Job is suffering because of his integrity.

Besides the calculation of the degree of Job's guilt—an irrelevance—what else divides Job and the friends? First, they disagree about God. The friends operate *a priori*, and since we can't know of their experience

beyond their own reference to it, we are left with the notion that they derive God's nature or behaviour primarily from 'the book,' or tradition. That is what tradition is and is for, of course. It offers experiences of the community which are considered as normative to shape our experience of God. Their error is in their rigidity.<sup>8</sup> They are too unbending on the formula that God is just and that, affliction reveals moral deficiency, and so the sufferer has to be in the wrong (e.g., Bildad's speech in chapter 8). Job, on the other hand, begins with his recent experience of God, which is affliction. Since he knows he has not sinned in any proportion to the affliction, he cannot conclude that God is just; quite the contrary (e.g., 7:11–21).

Other potentially shared points diverge, again on the matter of degree: the friends assert, and Job does not dispute, that suffering can instruct (e.g., 5:17–18), that God is mysterious (5:9), that sinners need to repent (11:13–15); but their agreement here is less significant than their disagreement. The friends assume that such explanations cover Job's situation; he considers them essentially extraneous to his case. And of course the reader, with the information given in the prologue, has to agree with Job, however apt the truisms may be at other times.

On the other hand, Job is not so right as he thinks he is either. He is going to learn from his affliction, as are the friends, as are God and the adversary, as are we. So, affliction will indeed provide a good deal of instruction. God is *not* quite mysterious to the reader, exactly, in that we saw with disconcerting clarity what happened in the wager. Yet, of course God's hidden purposes are quite germane by the time the drama of Job is complete. Repentance does not appeal to Job, since he cannot see his sin; yet before the end of the work, he *will* have repented twice, though not of sin.

What has happened by the end of the dialogues? God has listened, though silently, and without responding; we know that God has heard because of the content of the speeches<sup>9</sup> and the 'report card' issued at the end. God's listening has been attentive and critical, his hearing acute.

The adversary's attentiveness may also be assumed. It is impossible to know what this character has thought of the discussion, though we infer that he may have recognized some relation between a number of things said and the bias of his own position in the wager. If the adversary expects Job to curse God when possessions and self are afflicted, then he is disappointed. If the adversary dreads to see continued equanimity, then he is pleased.

Job has maintained his integrity, in that he has not sinned. Job's extreme interest—his growing obsession, has been to have a hearing with God.<sup>10</sup> Though we have observed the arena of the testing to be twofold

(first Job's possessions and then his corporeal self), we can see now that the true arena of the wager has been more: 'God can strike more inwardly than this: in the centre of existence deeply longing for God.'<sup>11</sup> Has Job been disinterested? Not at all. Job would rather hold God unjust rather than accept as just God's assessment of his deserts. Job does God the compliment of refusing to accept bad theology, preferring honest recognition of an unjust deity to an orthodox fiction. Job has displayed in addition to integrity his famous (James 5:11) patience (*hypomone*), critical discernment about essentials and steadfast endurance in those essentials.

The friends have done better than they often receive credit for. Some of their points are sensible, and if we are honest we will concede them, in fact admit that we sometimes embrace them. Sin can sow suffering; suffering can chasten; repentance is salutary for sinners; none of us is not sinful in some way: time can reverse the valuation of vicissitudes; God is mysterious but ultimately, essentially just. Commentators occasionally point out that the friends, perhaps Elihu most clearly, come close to saying what God will say in those speeches.<sup>12</sup> But the friends have projected their scheme of moral order from earth to heaven and then have maintained it as necessary.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, they seem to have lost their desire to console, intending rather to refute and so carry the day. They have turned into ideologues in order to be sure to win. They would rather win than listen, lest they be persuaded. They are right in their apprehension that Job's arguments will threaten their security. What can happen to one of us may happen to any of us. Job's experience, because he is in the midst of it, makes their tradition suspect.<sup>14</sup> Of course, his experience will itself become tradition and risk being misused in turn.

We have, in the company of God and the adversary, listened with two perspectives. We have evaluated the conversation Job and the friends have held, given the information they have. Their talk has been largely beside the points at issue: interesting, if ultimately tedious. The points offered are of significance to human living, but we are uneasy, since we know that were they to have our information, the conversation would proceed differently. But far from dismissing their ideas, we must take up the challenge of interpreting them in view of the greater knowledge we have taken on or been burdened with in the prologue.

By the time God breaks silence (38–41), everyone expects it. The diversity in expectation is over how God will respond: thunderbolt, explanation, compassion, intellectual solution, or consolation? In fact, God responds with none of these but with understanding.<sup>15</sup> God has *heard* Job as well as heard him out.<sup>16</sup> God's answer is not simply a massive assertion of authority, a thumping of the divine chest.<sup>17</sup> God's speech is important for its content, content which has been rehearsed already, if

inadequately and distortedly, by Job and the friends. But the familiar notes are transposed, as it were, to another mode, because God knows, like us, that the premise on which the debate rests is ill-founded. Thus, the obsession with deserved or undeserved suffering does not arise with God. Instead, God shows<sup>18</sup> Job the realm of non-human creation, tours him around the realms of sea, sky, and land, teaching by means of water (38:8–11, 34–38), ostriches (39:13–18), mammoth beasts (40:15–41:34). A segment of the tour is sufficiently instructive to show its relevance for the crucial issues under discussion: Water, with its tremendous power both to save life and destroy it, is created by God, held in check by God.<sup>19</sup> Though essentially hedged in, it can still rage beyond its bounds. A wild animal like the ostrich receives care from her creator yet acts foolishly despite it. Though assisted in reproduction by God, she is barely able to lay eggs successfully; yet ostriches are not extinct. The Leviathan and Behemoth, huge and dreaded creatures, are still present but with their malevolence tamed or limited by God, who relates to them as a child to toys or pets. God's massive and gentle power, constant yet detached care, and effective control are asserted but seem irrelevant to certain issues humans might pose, supposing they were to learn of such matters. In fact, these creatures recall the adversary: active, troublesome, yet to some extent checked.<sup>20</sup>

Job responds twice to God's words, at first (40:3–5) hardly stemming the divine flow but again at the end (42:1–6). Job's 'repentance' is freshly translated by Stephen Mitchell: "I had heard of you with my ears; but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust."<sup>21</sup> Job has no need now of his former lengthy speeches, which he too now sees as irrelevant. Job is not reduced to nothing. He has consented to be what he is: a creature in relation to his creator. Job's acquiescence is not mere submission but positive affirmation of his relationship and position vis-à-vis God.<sup>22</sup> And in that consent Job is comforted.<sup>23</sup> God's speeches and Job's little sentences of response have added considerably to the resolution of the issues under consideration.

### **Key Issues: Epilogue**

The ending of the book of Job, the second portion of its frame, is puzzling, even offensive to some. We might consider the following points:

God's commendations and recommendations are slightly more imprecise than might be desirable. Job is commended for speaking better of God than do the friends, though he, too, has been chastened clearly enough in God's speeches. Better than the friends does not tell us why or how or where better, so we must seek criteria. Job's most successful point

is his insistence that God should not remain aloof and silent. Against the friends, God validated Job's plea for divine involvement in his situation, a plea Job makes in his speeches with increasing insistence. Job has shown profound, even cold disregard for his possessions; he never mentions them, and he mentions his physical condition more by way of metaphor for his deeper suffering. Clearly they have not been the point. But Job has not shown disinterest in his relationship with God. Job is not at all in that relationship for nothing: he is in it because of his profound love for God, whether he is fully cognizant of that love before the wager or not, whether the wagers know it or not. There would not have been such a vast outrage for Job did he not love God. Of course, Job, like the friends, overvalues something: the significance of his innocence: 'It is not a bargaining counter; it is not a token he can hold up to God, saying, 'For this you owe me happiness.'<sup>24</sup> The hedge of goods or affliction is not the point; the relationship mediated by hedges is. That is what Job and God seem to agree on at the end.

God orders the friends to perform a sacrifice for themselves and says Job will intercede on their behalf. Coming from God, and reiterating one of Job's practices from his pre-affliction days, divine approval of sacrifice and intercession must be conceded by the readers of this work. Though moderns are quick to cite hypocrisy or empty formalism, there is no signal from the narrator here about that possibility. Ritual in worship is part of the embodied human condition; conventions perform as limits, and limit is a mighty Joban theme. Ritual need not be simply spiritual economics; ritual can specify and express, if perhaps imperfectly, a genuine relationship between human beings and God. Perhaps God is inviting the friends of Job—or the reader—to embark upon such a journey themselves.

The replacement of Job's wealth, blatantly and purposefully obscene, seems at first to undermine the whole point of the work.<sup>25</sup> And in a way it does, but so that the work can start again. A hedge is back in place, with its dual power to protect and to restrict. Far from feeling relieved, angry or smug when Job is loaded up again, we ought to be apprehensive. What has happened once can happen again. Job, who of course represents here as always more than his individual self, is positioned for new adventures, of one sort or another. We have returned to the equilibrium, the uneasy equilibrium, of the prologue; but now we know what may happen to the best of us. And now we may be less sure what is good and what evil about it. To be sure, the reckoning of children (or even workers and animals) as pawns is not appealing, but it is not unheard of even in our day. Job, it is to be noted, can no longer be accused of buying spiritual insurance for his offspring, but he has made out a new will, even including his daughters

this time.

The absence of the adversary ceases to puzzle now. The adversary is again on patrol, looking around for items for the next report. Since we inhabit the earth this satan patrols, we are all too aware of what he may find. Perhaps we, too, may be tempted to offer insurance policy sacrifices, or perhaps we have suddenly become more tolerant of Jobs.

The wager is a good one. God is more correct than the satan, but perhaps even God learns something about us. Job, representing us, surely learns something, and that experience is to the good. In fact, as the story is rewound and set for a new performance, maybe it will help us, but only if it is not frozen into ideology as the friends do with other viable parts of the tradition.

### Conclusion

Let us consider once again the five issues posed by the prologue and offer a final response to them. First, who is God, of what sort? Powerful, deeply concerned, imposing limits of various kinds, for various reasons, with various results. It is clearly no project of God's to ensure that our lives are never disturbed.<sup>26</sup>

Second, who is Job? Job is a creature who knows many things well, some things hardly at all, and who ultimately derives comfort in recognizing that he need not be responsible for or even critical of moral order in the universe. Job is vulnerable because he can forget priorities (chapters 3–37); he is wondrous because he can perceive God's revelation freshly, humbly, and clearly (chapters 3–42).

Third, how do God and Job relate to each other? Most of the time hedges are in place. God gives gifts, protects him; God backs Job into a corner, afflicts him. Job accepts gifts, worships God; Job chafes at God's powerful hand. Every so often the hedges seem to vanish: God speaks and Job is comforted if abashed. The hedges are reassuring, even necessary, but they are not idols. Job is disinterested, to some extent, in his service of God. He is not good simply to obtain wealth and health. But Job is tremendously interested in his communion with God, which, though, he must take on God's terms rather than on his own.

A fourth issue concerns the nature of good and evil: What is beneficent, what maleficent? Job has suffered terribly and has experienced God. The friends have not suffered and have not, apparently, experienced God. Who is better off? Is the experience of God, gained while suffering, an affliction? Job seems satisfied as he finishes his last words; often readers are not. Perhaps the readers have not had Job's experience, and he, fresh from superfluous advice, does not lecture us.

Finally, how do we know what we know of these matters which can

touch us so closely? Is the work of Job a video, so that we can play it and repent? The book is now part of the tradition, susceptible to the same rigidity and misuse that other and similar parts of the tradition suffered from the friends, perhaps even from Job. The work serves as an essay, a testing of our relationship with God. Does our worship of God match the God we worship? If God has acted in certain ways toward us in the past, how do we read our current experience? As we set our stories next to this one, what fresh insight might we receive?<sup>27</sup>

- 1 Robert Polzin, 'The Framework of the Book of Job,' *Interpretation* 28 (1974): 182–3.
- 2 Christopher R. Seitz, 'Job: Full-Structure, Movement, and Interpretation,' *Interpretation* 43 (1989): 9.
- 3 Not all scholars agree that the oft-repeated insistence of Job's goodness is to be taken at face value.
- 4 Hedge vocabulary and related imagery is present in a number of ways in the work (1:110, 3:23, 10:11, 27:18, 36:29, 38:8, 40), suggesting its importance as a complex and multivalent symbol of both help and hindrance.
- 5 Luis Alonso-Schökel, SJ, 'Toward A Dramatic Reading of the Book of Job,' trans. R. Polzin. *Semeia* 7 (1977): 46–8 suggests that Elihu is a member of the audience unable, eventually, to restrain himself further; God becomes a judge of audience as well as of characters. He concludes that when so considered, the work becomes intelligible and comprehensible; it recovers its expression and appeal.
- 6 I think for all practical purposes the family of Job is to be accounted as possessions, possibly excepting his wife, who is not a possession but not a character either. She is a motif.
- 7 J.T. Wilcox. *The Bitterness of Job. A Philosophical Reading* (Ann Arbor: Michigan, 1990) explores the issue in chapter 5, concluding that God is the agent of unfairness, beyond a doubt.
- 8 The point is stated succinctly by R.A.F. MacKenzie, S.J. and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., 'Job.' *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. .E. Brown, S.S., J.A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and R.E. Murphy, O. Carm. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990): 467: the friends spoil their point by exaggerating, by being unwilling to leave any margin of uncertainty, by resisting the admission of any limits to their own insight.
- 9 N.C. Habel, *The Book of Job. Commentary* (London: SCM, 1985) writes at length (517–74) on God's speeches, both maintaining (530, 33) and demonstrating (530–32) the close relationship of vocabulary, theme and topic between Job's points and the divine responses.
- 10 Alonso-Schökel comments that though Job does not know God is present and attentive, nor can he accept God to be absent (49).
- 11 Alonso-Schökel 50.
- 12 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 88.
- 13 Thomas G. Long, 'Job: Second Thoughts in the Land of Uz,' *Theology Today* 45 (1988): 17–19.
- 14 Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences. God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).
- 15 Alonso-Schökel 50–1.
- 16 See Habel as above.
- 17 Pace Long, 6, and many other commentators.
- 18 Long notes that God's speech is not simply rational but is vivid enough to be seen by

- Job (15–16).
- 19 Brenner, 'Answer,' 132.
  - 20 Seitz 15.
  - 21 Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (San Francisco: North Point, 1987). The translation is made on p. 88, with the accompanying note on p. 129: The crucial word, *nhm*, occurs nine other times in Job, always meaning 'comfort,' though it can in other contexts bear the notion of 'repentance' as well. Mitchell reminds readers that a similar combination of compassion and dust occurs in Ps. 103: 13–14, where God is said to have compassion on man, who is but dust.
  - 22 A private communication to the writer by Dani Newhouse.
  - 23 Long 19.
  - 24 MacKenzie and Murphy 467.
  - 25 Commentators seem too quick to assume that inevitably God is rewarding Job for piety. E.g., Polzin 185.
  - 28 Hauerwas 82.
  - 29 Hauerwas xiii, 34, 44.

## Reviews

**THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION: A THEOLOGICAL AND CANONICAL TREATISE**, by Andrew Cuschieri, *University Press of America*, London, 1992, pp.353. \$27.50.

This is an unexpected kind of book. It is made up of two parts not usually combined on such a scale these days : the first deals with the redemption of human beings, the second with the canon law of the sacrament of reconciliation.

It is surprising that the canons of both the Latin and the Eastern Churches are examined, and baffling that the author gives abundant references to early sources and yet virtually excludes recent writers. The work is also unusual in being a return to the method of casuistry, yet it can range biblically and metaphysically. An example of this jump occurs when the author suggests that two hours drive constitutes a valid reason for the use of *epikeia* (reduced to 20 miles if ordinary transportation is lacking), whilst a few pages earlier he writes that in the sacrament of reconciliation human consciousness reveals itself by exposing its inner pathos in trying to overcome its self-alienation and be absorbed in Christ.

Before the part on the sacrament of reconciliation, there is a theological treatment of divine grace operative outside the reality of that sacrament. The two parts will, of course, connect in various ways and it seems fair to say that the theological approach chosen is designed to make sense of the canon law. The first part deals with three topics: the human act, sin, and the virtue of justice. The human act is analysed into various components, familiar enough in the tradition and still needed. There follows an account of sin, both scriptural and theological. Cuschieri seems overemphatic in wanting sin to be the hinge of the whole study on