

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Stanley E. Porter

The Message of the Book of Job: Job 42:7b as Key to Interpretation?

Dr. Porter did postgraduate study in Greek verbal aspect at the University of Sheffield before moving to his present position as Assistant Professor of Greek at Biola University. Here he applies literary analysis to the problems of the Book of Job.

Introduction

The book of Job has always proved problematic for interpreters, and this for several reasons. First is the difficult nature of its Hebrew language, with an unparalleled number of words which occur only once in all of the Hebrew Scriptures. Second, and perhaps more importantly, is the difficult nature of the contents of the book. Whereas scholars from all ages and from all times have shown their awareness of these issues, some problematic verses remain unappreciated in their significance for larger interpretative issues. Such a verse is Job 42:7b. Virtually all modern translations render Job 42:7b in the same way: e.g. 'for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has' (RSV). The Hebrew text is not problematic, since it has no major textual variants, and the reading in the MT (Hebrew) is reflected directly in the LXX (Greek OT) showing that its translation at least was not open to serious dispute. The Jewish Jerusalem Bible has perhaps the most literal rendering: 'for you have not spoken of me the thing that is right, like my servant Iyyov.'¹ The only lexical item open for potential debate is the word translated 'the thing that is right' (Hebrew *n^ekônā*), which a few scholars have posited should be rendered 'sincerely', but that meaning is nowhere else attested for the word, and a parallel in 1 Sa. 23:23 confirms the standard rendering here (cf. Dt. 13:15; Ps. 5:10).²

These words appear straightforward and almost unquestionably clear in meaning, perhaps accounting for the relatively little

¹ *The Holy Scriptures*, ed. H. Fisch (Jerusalem, 1984), loc. cit.

² M. H. Pope, *Job* (Garden City, NY, 1973), 350.

mention of these verses in the standard reference tools, such as the Hebrew grammar of Gesenius and Kautzsch. But these words occupy a more important place in the argument of the book of Job than most scholars, including especially commentators, seem to recognize. First, the words appear not once but twice, the second occurrence in 42:8 a verbatim repetition of the first occurrence in 42:7. Second, the words are contained in the opening passage of the prose epilogue to the book of Job, both sets causally justifying the previous words of judgment upon Job's friends. In contrast to the harsh words for the friends, these words appear to be highlighting on the role of Job. Third, these words are final causal clauses to the only words of the Lord in the entire epilogue. Though God continues to function in the rest of the book by restoring Job's prosperity, he says nothing further after the words of vv. 7 and 8. These factors indicate that these words should be fully appreciated, to say nothing of clearly understood.

Literary Theory and Biblical Interpretation

The common understanding of the commentators who address remarks to this passage is reflected by F. I. Andersen, who says, 'Although [the friends] are condemned, God does not deal with them according to their folly. Job is clearly pronounced to have had the better of the debate.³ This interpretation posits that God is referring to Job's dialogue with his friends. But is this clearly the case? First, it is not self-evident that Job's speeches contain words that are universally to be commended, in light of especially 9:22–24 and 16:7–17. Why would God appear theophanically in chs. 38–41 if all Job has said was correct? Second, there are no anaphoric indicators in the words themselves to specify which specific words of Job are being referred to by God. So many things have been said by Job that it is difficult to believe that the words can refer undifferentiatedly to all that he has said in dialogue with his friends. Andersen's opinion, therefore, is not required by the words of God, but must be based on some other less obvious criterion.

Recent literary theory—in particular reader-response theory—has made biblical scholars acutely aware that reading is not so simple an act as it at first seems, and more importantly that a significant sentence or a significant word can affect an entire reading, because it establishes a set of expectations which are

³ F. I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (London, 1976), 293. See also J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, 1988), 539.

either frustrated or fulfilled by the text. The result is, as Stanley Fish says, a change in the entire interpretative strategy, from asking the question of 'what does this sentence mean?' to 'what does this sentence do?'⁴ Fish uses a particularly germane example to illustrate. Take the clause (from Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*), 'That Judas perished by hanging himself . . .'. How might that sentence be completed? The options are numerous, but several may prove helpful: 'That Judas perished by hanging himself, is (an example for us all)'; 'That Judas perished by hanging himself, *shows* (how conscious he was of the enormity of his sin)'; 'That Judas perished by hanging himself, *should* (give us pause).' The initial clause prepares the reader for any number of completive elements, each of which moves the sentence in a significantly different direction. The result, as Fish points out, is not that the argument clearly leads the reader through to a conclusion along a well-lighted path, but that the reader is now searching for that path itself as he reads, attempting to orient himself as he continues to read. The actual sentence which Fish cites reads: 'That Judas perished by hanging himself, there is no . . .'. 'No' what? 'Doubt'? No, 'certainty': 'That Judas perished by hanging himself, there is no certainty in Scripture.' Even so-called idioms or clichés have potential to frustrate the well-intentioned reader. Fish claims to conclude that 'there is no direct relationship between the meaning of a sentence (paragraph, novel, poem) and what its words mean. Or, to put the matter less provocatively the information an utterance gives, its message, is a constituent of, but certainly not to be identified with, its meaning.'⁵

Job 42:7b as a text has intriguing similarities with the example Fish cites above, since the commendation of Job has at least two different possible readings or interpretations. In the first reading, it would refer to Job's speeches with his friends, but this calls into question the relevance and necessity of God's speech to Job in chs. 38 and following, since Job's words were already commendable, and, logically, would not seem to require the kinds of comments made in chs. 38–41. In the second reading, it would refer to Job's response to God's words in chs. 38–41, contained in 40:4–5 and 42:2–6. But this then raises the question of what is to be made of the first 37 chapters of the book.

⁴ S. Fish, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', *Is There A Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980), 25. His article is reprinted from *New Literary History* 2, 1970, 123–62.

⁵ Fish, 'Literature', 32.

A second intriguing element of Job 42:7 and Fish's analysis is that, in the examples Fish cites, the reader is pushing forward, always attempting to disambiguate by moving chronologically toward some hoped-for goal, understanding. But Job 42:7-8 function in a different way, causing the reader not to look forward to a conclusion but to look back to beginnings. It is now clear that one's understanding of Job 42:7-8 has potential for determining one's understanding of the entire book of Job, by serving as a 'test' by which to categorize the various speeches. Some of Job's words are categorised as acceptable by God and some are categorized as unacceptable by God, but which are which? It is assumed here that these are the two alternatives, since the attitude and character of Job's question-filled speeches before ch. 38 appear to most scholars quite different from those in chs. 40 and 42 (see below for a view which disputes the discontinuity in Job's words). Also, the words of God to Job suggest displeasure with Job's argumentation, or at least frustration at the lack of complete understanding on Job's part, requiring a survey of divine activity reaching back to the foundation of the world.

Standard Interpretations of Job 42:7b

The difficulty of this verse, therefore, is not simply that the words are ambiguous, but that their ambiguity is potentially problematic for understanding the entire book. What have been the various resolutions suggested? There are several worth noting.

The first suggestion is that Job 42:7-8 are a clear indication of the origins of the book in the folk-tale, presenting Job as a pious and patient man throughout the book, but one who had to contend with a wife and friends who advised him to blaspheme God and die. This would account for the commendation of Job and the condemnation of the friends.⁶ As Samuel Terrien says, 'This clause ignores the hero's confession (42:1-6), a fact which may indicate a discrepancy of authorship'.⁷ But this kind of explanation has little hard evidence to offer for its acceptance. First, the original folk tale to which reference is made must have been a very different story of Job than the canonical one, since it would require radical recharacterizing of both Job and his friends. And the recharacterization points to sophisticated literary development in the canonical version. The Job of the folk tale

⁶ This view is summarized in Pope, *Job*, 350.

⁷ S. Terrien, 'Job', *The Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 3; New York, 1954), 1194.

would be a flat, static character, blithely accepting his fate in the face of incomprehensible adversity. The canonical Job is round and dynamic. Though his friends are not dynamic characters, surely they are more interesting than stock, stereotyped characters.⁸ Second, there is little apart from the alternation between prose in the prologue and epilogue, and poetry in the body of the text to suggest a previous redaction, especially if John Curtis's view of Job's response to God's theophany is accepted. Curtis argues that Job's response to God in 40:4-5 and 42:2-6 is of the same piece as his responses in the dialogue with his friends, laden with irony.⁹ But appeal to these differences will not help the case for a proto-Job, since the statement of the epilogue would have had to be contained within the folk tale to prove the supposed contrast. Thus this explanation which appeals to extra- or proto-textual hypotheses does not provide a solution to understanding Job 42:7b.

A second solution, already mentioned above, is to state that the words of Job which God refers to are Job's speeches in dialogue with his friends,¹⁰ although some scholars find the commendation out of all proportion to what is said by Job in the poem itself.¹¹ There are several variations on this position. In the first instance, most scholars who accept this proposal also recognize that the speeches in toto cannot be accepted, since they contend that there are apparent discrepancies in their content. And likewise not all of the statements by the friends of Job must be condemned. Consequently, scholars who adopt this position must narrow the words of Job which God is commending to a subset of all of Job's speeches in the body of the text. A sample of these responses may be given. For example, A. B. Davidson recognizes that the friends said many just and correct things, but believes that they are condemned for the false things they said specifically regarding God's providence and the meaning of affliction. Job on the other hand rightly perceived the nature of God's providence and the meaning of affliction.¹² George Noyes claims that the language of Job 42:7-8 is comparative, since Job has just been rebuked for his complaints, i.e. the friends had not spoken as well as Job had

⁸ See R. D. Moore, 'The Integrity of Job', *CBQ* 45, 1983, 18ff.

⁹ J. B. Curtis, 'On Job's Response to Yahweh', *JBL* 98, 1979, 505-10.

¹⁰ Besides those mentioned below, see S. B. Freehof, *Book of Job* (New York, 1959), 261.

¹¹ A. and M. Hanson, *The Book of Job* (London, 1953), 117.

¹² A. B. Davidson, *The Book of Job* (Cambridge, England, 1895), 288.

on the relation of guilt and misery.¹³ Samuel Cox notes that both Job and his friends had spoken in error, but that only the friends had claimed to speak *for* God, not *of* him as had Job.¹⁴ And Franz Delitzsch maintains that God approved of Job's maintaining his innocence and denying that sin is always punished with various afflictions, while God disapproved of the friends, whose tidy doctrinal stance could not admit Job's innocence.¹⁵

There are several problems with this position, however. First, as indicated above, there is nothing in the words of God himself in 42:7-8 to indicate such a distinction, no matter how it is differentiated. The words of God seem straightforward, and these are that Job is commended as being right and Eliphaz and his two friends are said to be not right and the object of his wrath, a wrath so severe that it can only be forgiven by offering up a sacrifice and going to Job and having him pray for them. This certainly does not sound like words of comparison or of compromise. Second, this position does not take seriously the movement of the narrative from the series of speeches between Job and his friends to the speech of God in chs. 38-41, to Job's response in 40:4-5 and 42:2-6. If there is much to be commended in Job's speeches, surely God's confrontation of Job with the great mysteries of the universe is out of place, an unnecessary hyperbole.¹⁶ The speech does not seem to be anything other than an attempt to put Job in his place, and the reaction it evokes from him seems to confirm this. Several scholars have commented upon the concept of OT theophanies, and in this revelation of himself, God appears in his full glory, revealing his power over creation, the physical world and the animal kingdom. André Lacocque notes several other features which point to the centrality of these four chapters, including the shift in divine names to Yahweh.¹⁷ Job in fact states in response, 'I have declared that which I did not understand' (42:3b). According to this interpretation, God would be required to be commending what Job

¹³ G. R. Noyes, *A New Translation of the Book of Job, with an Introduction, and Notes Chiefly Explanatory* (2d ed.; Boston, 1838), 211. See also Hartley, *Job*, 539 n. 2.

¹⁴ S. Cox, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (3d ed.; London, 1894), 545-46.

¹⁵ F. Delitzsch, *The Book of Job* (trans. F. Bolton; Edinburgh, 1876), loc. cit. See also Terrien, 'Job', 902.

¹⁶ On various interpretations of God's answer to Job, see D. E. Gowan, 'God's Answer to Job: How Is It An Answer?', *Horizons in Biblical Theology: An International Dialogue* 8, 1986, esp. 87-89.

¹⁷ A. Lacocque, 'Job or the Impotence of Religion and Philosophy', *Semeia* 19, 1981, 35ff., esp. 37-39.

himself admits was a reflection of his limited understanding. Is it not more logical that God would commend a fuller and more complete understanding?

Two other, less likely versions of this view—that the commended words of Job are his speeches—have been put forward. Marvin Pope does not attempt to justify Job's words as correct, but instead states:

If this verse refers to the arguments of the Dialogue, it is as magnificent a vindication as Job could have hoped for, proving that God values the integrity of the impatient protester and abhors pious hypocrites who would heap accusations on a tormented soul to uphold their theological position.¹⁸

This interpretation perhaps best reflects the period in which this commentary was first written, the mid 1960s, but it does little to provide a satisfactory reading of the text, especially one that at the outset is all too preoccupied with justice and truth. For example, Job is introduced in 1:1 as one who was 'blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil'. That is also the way that he is commended by God (1:8, 2:3). The book itself begins from the premise of seeking after a good and true person, and it therefore is highly unlikely that in the final analysis God commends Job simply for having integrity, no matter how right or wrong.

The last variation on the position that Job's words in his speeches are commended by God attempts to solve the problem by eliminating it. Gleason Archer posits that Job's repentance on the basis of his admission and words in 42:6 'was so thoroughgoing and complete that God could cancel out his guilt entirely'.¹⁹ Thus there is no problem in commending him. But the immediate question is what things stated by Job then are commended by God? This interpretation contains the seeds of its own destruction, since to admit the need for forgiveness is tantamount to stating that much of what Job has uttered is in fact wrong and in need of correction. These words hardly warrant commendation by God, even if the man Job has been forgiven. Second, as Moore points out, 'In repenting, Job speaks what is true about himself, not, as God specifies, "what is right concerning me"'.²⁰

¹⁸ Pope, *Job*, 350.

¹⁹ G. A. Archer, Jr., *The Book of Job: God's Answer to the Problem of Undeserved Suffering* (Grand Rapids, 1982), 11. See also E. Good, 'Job and the Literary Task: A Response', *Soundings* 56, 1973, 482.

²⁰ Moore, 'Integrity', 21.

Several more textually well-based reasons may be given for seeing the words of Job 42:7–8 as referring to Job's speeches. First, the contrast is made between Job and his friends, Eliphaz in particular; in other words, between Job and three of his primary adversaries. While it is noteworthy that Elihu is not mentioned in the epilogue, the contrast drawn between the two groups is reminiscent of the tension throughout the major portion of the book. Second, there is the simple fact that the book is for the most part preoccupied with Job in dialogue with his friends. It seems more reasonable to suppose that these words constitute the first place to turn for consideration, otherwise why are they included? Again, reference to Eliphaz and the other two friends seems to imply Job's speeches with them. Third, forgiveness of the friends is said by God to be dependent upon the prayers of Job. This in effect reinstitutes their discussion though on a different level, one which clearly makes Job 'right' at least in God's eyes and makes his friends dependent upon his words for their very salvation.

It is difficult to find scholars who argue that the words of God in Job 42:7–8 refer to the short speeches of Job in 40:4–5 and 42:2–6 in response to God's overwhelming interrogation in chs. 38–41. But this does not mean that there are not several plausible reasons that such reference might in fact be the solution. First, these words are the last words spoken by Job before God gives his word of commendation, and seem to indicate that God's commendation does in fact come as an evaluation and response to them. Also, these words are the most proximate to God's commendation. Second, Job's other speeches are separated from God's words of commendation by several chapters, since Job's last recorded speech ends with ch. 31. After Job finishes speaking, both Elihu and God speak, each at great length, before Job speaks again, this time his words in direct response to God, who has answered his challenge to speak. Third, when Job's short speeches in 40:4–5 and 42:2–6 are analyzed, they point in a different direction from his earlier comments. This is the general scholarly opinion regarding Job's comments as found in most commentaries, but it has recently been called into question by Curtis. In his lengthy and well-developed essay, Curtis argues that in fact

Job in his final words to Yahweh has rejected the god who responds to the anguished plea of his most devoted worshipper with contemptuous and arrogant boasting. In short, the concluding speech

²¹ Curtis, 'Job's Response', 505.

of Job is consistent with his sharpest denunciations of God in the rest of the dialogue. There is not the slightest suggestion that he recants or in remorse grovels before the divine.²¹

If Curtis is correct, the entire book takes on a different cast, with Job the mocking, cynical and ironic hero defying the proud and haughty God. It would also eliminate the problem posed above regarding which specific words of Job are commended, since God would have to be commending all of the words of Job, since they are of the same cloth. The problem is raised however, why would such a God commend anything that Job says? Of course, he would not, unless the epilogue is an appended afterthought by a later redactor and the author or final redactor is making sport with his readers, as well as God. If this is not the case, then the question is raised about why such a dense redactor would append a statement of commendation upon a series of speeches by Job which are so clearly out of harmony.

In light of Curtis's speculation, a more reasonable case can be made for adopting the traditional interpretation, that is, God commends Job's response to God (42:2-6), especially as Job begins by admitting, 'I know that Thou canst do all things' (42:2). In light of God's intense questioning of him just previously, the inference is that Job did not fully realize this truth previously. Also Job says in 42:3: 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' This verse, reflecting 38:2, God's opening question to Job, seems to be a tacit acceptance that he is guilty as charged.²² It has already been noted that in 42:3b Job admits that he was declaring that which he did not understand. But surely the firmest support of all comes from v. 6, where Job says that he retracts and repents in dust and ashes. Pope speculates that there may have been an object lost after 'retracts', and various proposals include 'myself' (LXX), 'my wealth', and most importantly 'my words'. If the last is the correct understanding (though this is speculation),²³ then it points distinctly away from the speeches with Job's friends as commendable and toward this speech, since Job would be retracting his words in dialogue with his friends. The statement by God about forgiveness of the friends is better understood if it is seen in light of this speech by Job. Job's words may be construed as a prayer, since they are addressed to

²² Pope, *Job*, 348.

²³ Cf. N. C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (London, 1985), 582, who suggests that the object of the verb is 'Job's suit' (cf. 31:35); and Curtis, 'Job's Response', 502-503, who believes the word is not 'repent' but 'melt, dissolve, sink down', which does not need an object. These suggestions merit further analysis.

God, and this action is then seen as effective for not only himself but for others as well. It is worth speculating that Job and his friends were given the opportunity to respond to God's speech in chs. 38–41, but that only Job recognized its significance.

Is Theodicy a Solution to the Interpretative Dilemma?

Now that the various solutions to the dilemma of Job 42:7b have been surveyed and analyzed, is it possible to decide what the referent of the verse is, i.e., what words of Job are commended by God? Several considerations may be suggested in the hopes of finding a solution. First, although it is possible that there is a single solution, i.e. that the author or God meant that certain, specific words of Job either in his speeches or in his response to God were to be commended but for some reason the solution has been obscured, this is only a remote possibility. The first part of the formulation may well be correct, but unfortunately it is not at all helpful for later interpreters analyzing the text. The grammatical features of this stretch of language have been analyzed, and there is nothing syntactical or lexical to point to either one of the major solutions.

Second, solutions on the basis of the argument of the entire book heretofore have proved inconclusive, although each one has something to offer. Those who argue for reference to Job's speeches in dialogue with his friends seem to endorse not the patient Job of theological tradition but a God who for whatever reason attacks the apparently orthodox theology of Job's friends. Focusing upon Eliphaz, who is cited by name in Job 42:7–8, as encapsulating this orthodox position, Timothy Gorringer summarizes this view as follows: (1) 'There is an immutable law linking sin to evil which is not only a terror to evil-doers but much more a comfort to the innocent (4:7–9)'; (2) 'Can mortal man be righteous before God? Can a man be pure before his maker?' (4:17)', with the answer 'no'; (3) 'Man is born to trouble . . .'; (4) 'God is a Savior, and we must therefore trust in him'; and (5) 'that person is blessed who is chastened by God'.²⁴ This view then calls into question both the necessity and the honesty of the repentance of Job after God reveals himself to him. Why is repentance necessary if the words which supposedly reveal a benighted

²⁴ T. J. Corringe, 'Job and the Pharisees', *Interpretation* 40, 1986, 19–21. See also D. J. A. Clines, 'Six Characters in Search of an Order: A Reading of the Book of Job' (Sheffield Univ. Inaugural Lecture, 1985), 2–5.

understanding are later commended? And how honest a repentance can be found in a man who is later commended for his unrepentant past? On the other hand, those who argue for reference to Job's reaction to God's greatness seem to endorse a majestic theology and a repentant, humble Job (much closer to the stereotypical Job) who cannot answer God's questions. But this calls into question the purpose of the major portion of the book and the appropriateness of Job's repeated questioning of God's ways. Honest questioning becomes only a prelude to being corrected. At the least, this view eliminates normativeness for any of the chapters of dialogue.

Third, the solution is to be avoided which simply follows the majority of scholarly opinion, i.e., those commentators who are virtually unanimously agreed that the words referred to are Job's speeches in dialogue with his friends. It has been noted above that too many instances of special pleading are used to justify this solution. Besides, biblical exegesis by consensus alone is always dangerous.

Fourth, a solution to be avoided is the resolution which preserves the supposed common-sensical understanding of the text. Again, this would seem to be the solution that sees the words referring to the words of Job in dialogue with his friends. But it is an interpretation that promises no future to biblical exegesis, since biblical analysis cannot simply be the reinforcement of preconceptions; it must push for better understandings, wherever these may lead in regard to the common understanding.

Another solution is possible, but it is one that in fact does not solve all of the problems involved but merely reaffirms them. How can this be of any help? Scholars have widely recognized that Job is a book concerned with theodicy, or the problem of evil.²⁵ All of the elements of the classical formulation of the problem of evil are in fact present in the book: there is an omnipotent and highly exalted God, as seen in the prologue and his theophany in chs. 38-41, and spoken of by Job and his friends; there is a God who is loving and compassionate, also depicted in the prologue. There is a very real problem of human suffering, as seen in the trials and tribulations of Job. Interestingly, the source of these evils is seen by the prologue to entail the so-called 'permissive will of God and the direct action of the Satan, two elements often found in

²⁵ See on the problem of evil S. T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, 1963), 97ff.

classical formulations of the problem of evil. As a result Job suffers.

At the conclusion of the book, Job has suffered unjustly, questioned vociferously and protested throughout. His friends have invoked traditional theological truths, although they are not convincing to Job, who continues to question his treatment at God's hands. Then God intervenes. In his theophany he only addresses the problem obliquely, instead creating a grand picture of his power, which leads to Job's comments in response.²⁶ The question is, has God answered Job's comments in response? Quite clearly, if by this one is asking whether God has answered satisfactorily according to the philosophical standards of today how to reconcile the various elements of theodicy, the answer is 'no'. But this itself appears to be the answer: all of the elements of the formulation are acknowledged as 'correct'. Job is said to be right to question the God and universe that seem to visit evil upon those who act morally and justly. As Burton Cooper states,

Job acted correctly in raising the question of divine justice. In this view, Job's friends erred in allowing an ideology—only the guilty suffer—to override the experience of undeserved suffering. Job knows that his suffering is undeserved. What he does not know is how it is possible for undeserved suffering to exist. That question remains unanswered.²⁷

This is certainly the case with Job and there is nothing in God's speech to dispute this. He in fact allows for this to be the case within a universe in which he is sovereign. But Job is also right to repent because of his lack of understanding. Job has acted like the philosopher, trying to solve all of the philosophical problems of the day. He comes to realize that this philosophical probing has interfered with his theological understanding, or rather this philosophical questioning has outstripped his theological reflection. Lacocque says that the lesson is that agonizing humankind should not ask questions but suffer in silence.²⁸ But that is exactly what is *not* being said. The closest approximation to this

²⁶ Cf. A. Brenner, 'God's Answer to Job', *VT* 31, 1981, esp. 136, who says, 'Job is prepared to recognize that God does not ignore the questions that he (Job) has raised. On the contrary, he acknowledges their validity and admits that a solution has yet to be found.' I agree with much of this quotation, but find that the final clause should be recast. The solution has been found for God, but humans do not understand it.

²⁷ Burton Z. Cooper, 'Why, God? A Tale of Two Sufferers', *Theology Today* 42, 1986, 420.

²⁸ A. Lacocque, 'Job and the Symbolism of Evil', *Biblical Research* 24, 1979, 7.

reasoning in the book of Job is found in Job's friends. They are not commended, but Job is. Job is not told to be silent, but is commended both for his protesting and questioning and for his repenting.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it is a misguided effort to say which specific words of Job are correct. The text is not more specific regarding which exact words are referred to by God. But this leaves the interpreter with the begrudging inference that all of what Job has said is correct: he has been right to probe the imponderable issues of justice, evil and human suffering, but he has also been right to recognize that he is a human being, rightly concerned with such issues, but he is to be concerned in a different way. These issues are ultimately of God's concern, for he is the one who existed before the foundation of the world and he is the one who presides in the court of heaven. In this sense, as Clines has pointed out, the prologue and the theophany of chs. 38–41 are 'in complete harmony . . . their concern is to affirm that the created order exists for God's purposes and benefit, not humankind's, and that therefore, implicitly and by analogy, so does the moral order. Suffering is a hippopotamus; it makes no sense to humans, but it does to God.'²⁹ As Clines says further of Job's realization regarding God,

the natural order is analogous to the moral order of the universe. Much of it remains revolting and incomprehensible to man, even threatening his existence, but all of it is the work of a wise God who has made the world the way it is for his own inscrutable purposes. Suffering is a hippopotamus. The only sense it makes it makes to God.³⁰

The modern person finds this solution unsatisfying, for it leaves him or her to continue to ask the same questions as before, with the same answer to be given, a potentially endless cycle of inquisition and frustration. Lacocque consequently says of God's theophany, 'it seems undeniable that *Yhwh* badly misses the target'.³¹ But Job 42:7 seems to be more complex than that in

²⁹ D. J. A. Clines, 'False Naivety in the Prologue to Job', *Hebrew Annual Review* 9, 1985, 135 n. 11.

³⁰ Clines, 'Six Characters', 10. Cf. W. A. Young, 'Leviathan in the Book of Job and *Moby-Dick*', *Soundings* 66, 1983, 388–96.

³¹ Lacocque, 'Job or the Impotence of Religion and Philosophy', 34.

what it is saying: Job is an object, not an agent, in history,³² although he is left to contemplate what at least one interpreter has called 'existential' questions.³³ Several interpreters have gone further and interpreted some of the great human disasters of the twentieth century, such as the holocaust, in light of its affinities with the predicament of Job.³⁴ This and other issues—vital as they are—must be pondered at greater length elsewhere.

This analysis concludes with the recognition of a parallel between literary analysis and theology. At the outset of this paper the task was set of trying to disambiguate the reference of Job 42:7b, the words of Job that are commended by God. The analysis must end in ambiguity, in which it is almost inescapable that in this instance we as interpreters must accept that both parts of the dilemma are correct, even if the statements themselves are in tension. The ambiguity is unsettling, and may even force some to say simply that for now we cannot know the answer to our interpretative dilemma. But I would prefer to say that, rather than suspend judgment, we grasp both horns of the dilemma, at least for now. A similar paradox confronts the theologian. J. A. Loader says of the book of Job that

the enigma serves here as a warning to theologians not to lose their awareness of the limits of their theologies. To lay claim, even by implication, to 'God proficiency' is blasphemy. A theology that consists in a system of conclusive answers or operates as such or thinks itself to be in full 'possession' of God's truth does not speak of God what is right as did his servant Job. To him who, in his search for truth, asks what we should say then about these things, the answer is that in the innermost circle of theology there is no other procedure than that of questioning, observation, the forming of hypotheses and their constant testing.³⁵

The same can and must be said of literary analysis.

³² This is an inversion of J. S. Southwick's statement summarizing his process theological analysis of Job (*Job: An Exemplar for Every Age*, *Encounter* 45, 1984, 390).

³³ A. Di Lella, 'An Existential Interpretation of Job', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15, 1985, 50–53.

³⁴ See, e.g., R Dedmon, 'Job as Holocaust Survivor', *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 26, 1983, 165ff.

³⁵ J. A. Loader, 'Job—Answer or Enigma?', *OT Essays II* (Pretoria, 1984), 29.