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## Difficult Texts in Job: Job's Humble Reply--Is the Question Really the Answer? (Job 40.1-7)

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# DIFFICULT TEXTS IN JOB

## JOB'S HUMBLE REPLY

### IS THE QUESTION REALLY THE ANSWER?

#### (JOB 40:1–7)

BY CRAIG BOWMAN

“One of the most perplexing features of the Hebrew Bible is the believer’s conviction that God has become a personal enemy, wielding extraordinary power to frustrate the cause of truth and righteousness.”<sup>1</sup> The paradoxical tension inherent in the personal lament and the divine lawsuit, each expecting God to answer, opens a way for understanding Job 40:1–7, where the magnificent artistry of the author and the mystery of Yahweh’s majesty intersect powerfully. This provocative passage also has several textual, translational, hermeneutical, and theological difficulties that must be addressed.

#### Translation:

1. And Yahweh answered<sup>1</sup> Job:
2. Will he who disputes<sup>2</sup> Shaddai<sup>3</sup> cease?  
Whoever argues<sup>2</sup> with God<sup>3</sup> must  
respond!”<sup>1</sup>
3. And Job answered Yahweh:
4. “I am slight.<sup>4</sup> How<sup>5</sup> can I answer You?!  
I put my hand over my mouth.<sup>6</sup>
5. I spoke once,<sup>7</sup> but will not answer;  
Twice,<sup>7</sup> but never again!”
6. Then Yahweh answered Job from the stormwind:<sup>8</sup>
7. “Gird up your loins like a warrior;<sup>9</sup>  
I will question you and you will inform  
me!”

#### Textual/Translation Notes:

1. “answer” in the book of Job is almost an enigma. Job receives unwanted answers from his friends; condemns their answers for being merely “clay” and empty platitudes (13:12); demands God to answer him (23:5;30:20; 31:35); is mocked for crying out for an answer (5:1; 17:2; 30:9); is ridiculed for talking to himself as one unanswerable (11:2); is labeled a laughingstock for one who calls to God assuming he will answer (9:16; 12:4; 15:2); and contemplates his own answer should God call him to account (31:14).<sup>2</sup> Yahweh first answers Job in 38:1, which is identical to 40:6. Also, for the first time since the prologue, the author calls God Yahweh. “*Let him answer*” in 40:2b, often read as a Qal jussive, functions rhetorically as a modal imperfect which implicitly questions Job’s capability to answer the God with whom he has argued. Throughout the book Job has been without an answer until Yahweh answers him. Ironically, the divine answer he has hoped for leaves him utterly speechless.<sup>3</sup>

2. “*rib*” is read as Qal participle to preserve parallelism with the Hiph participle *ykh* (he who argues). Although others point *rib* as an infinitive absolute (as the MT), the parallel structure and some of the ancient versions (Targ., Symm., Vulg.) indicate that it is better construed as the participle. In this context, these two words resume the emphatic legal metaphor of the disputation between Yahweh and Job found earlier in the book (cf. the use of “dispute”

in 4:14; 9:3; 13:6; 29:16; 31:35; 32:7; 33:19; 37:23; and the use of “argue” in 9:33; 13:3; 16:21; 19:5; 32:12).

3. *Shaddai* is an archaism used 30 times in Job and throughout the patriarchal narratives (Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3; Exod 6:3); ‘*Eloah*, also an archaic form, is found in later poetry and used 41 times in Job (cf. Deut 32:15,17; Ps 18:32).<sup>4</sup>

4. *qll*, meaning “light, slight,” as the self-description of Job intentionally contrasts Job’s mortal being with God’s glory (*kbd*) in this theophonic context of the whirlwind.

5. The exclamatory (How!) is preferred over the interrogative (What?). In this case, as in Job 9:14, Job’s emphatic declaration that he cannot answer Yahweh suggests a certain amount of intentional ambiguity in his words. This is especially evident against the background of 9:2–4, 13–16, 29–32, where Job ironically admits the impossibility of humanity’s being just before God. God’s unsearchability is simply too overwhelming and baffling for Job, or anyone else, to respond to (9:32). When Job realizes that Yahweh is categorically other, he admits the impossibility of defending himself.

6. Putting one’s hand over the mouth is an idiomatic expression used frequently in the book of Job, usually describing a gesture of silence. At times, the person automatically covers his mouth with his hand in silent astonishment and awe. Often, however, the speaker commands his listener(s) to quiet themselves in this position. In this case, Job commands himself in the terrifying presence of Yahweh, recognizing during the intensity of the moment that he has nothing to say, though he might be able to speak. Cf. Job 13:14; 21:5; 29:9; 31:27; and Prov 30:32; Sir 5:12; Jdg 18:19.

7. Ascending numeration is a common stylistic feature of biblical and ancient Near Eastern poetry. There are two distinct forms: (1) multiple numbers used collectively to mean “several,” rather than exact indicators (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; Mic 5:4; etc.; and (2) a numerically itemized list (Job 5:19; Prov 6:16; 30:5, 18, 21, 24, 29). In this case the first form is used. *Several times* Job has spoken to Yahweh.

8. “From the whirlwind” connects Yahweh’s speeches in Job (38:1 and 40:6) to many traditional, theophonic appearances of Yahweh in a storm (Exod 19:16; Jdg 5:6; 2 Sam 22:8–16=Ps 18:8–16; Isa 19:1; 29:6; 63:19; 64:1–3; Jer 23:19; 30:23; Ezek 1:4; Mic 1:3–4; Nah 1:3; Hab 3:5; Zech 9:14; Ps 50:3 68:8; 97:1–5; 144:5–6). The revelation

of God accompanied by thunder and lightning recalls the majesty of Yahweh’s sudden and terrifying presence at Sinai. The irony of the scene in Job 40:6 is that Yahweh appears only by voice; he is not seen by Job nor does he answer Job.

9. “*Warrior*” (RSV, man) in the book of Job has a particular meaning that provides insight into Job’s relationship with Yahweh. Job is unique; “There is none like him” (1:8). As a *geber*, Job is perfectly pious and wise, a strong person who will not renounce God though the Satan is permitted to harass him. When God summons Job as a *geber*, he issues a challenge to him as a warrior. Job must finish the legal battle begun earlier. In 16:14 Job claims that God ran against him like a warrior, picturing God as the divine warrior who attacks him. This is certainly contrary to the typical description of Yahweh protecting and fighting for his people, not against them (Deut 10:17; Isa 10: 12; Jer 32:18 and Ps 24:8). The playful scorn by which Yahweh appears in the vale of the whirlwind and invites Job to answer is a contest between warriors. Job backs down, conceding that he is not up to the challenge. The hardy *geber*, who had lost his way and felt fenced in by God, who caused his downfall (3:23), has shown himself utterly weak rather than strong (cf. chapter 16).

### Interpretive Issues:

When it comes to classifying the literary form of the book of Job, scholars have proposed many ideas. They range from “impossible” to unique, from lament to lawsuit. These attempts to capture the essence of Job in a single form exemplify one of the hazards of form criticism. The literary genre of a work with as broad a perspective as Job cannot be restricted to a single category. To avoid the danger of atomizing any of the types of speeches in Job, one needs to recognize that the speeches are a mixture of genres from at least three areas: law, wisdom, and psalms. The author of Job combines these three components unconventionally throughout the entire drama. Applying traditional legal metaphors, wise sayings, and the language of lament, this author directly challenges the overly simplistic worldview reflected in Proverbs. With respect to other comparable literature of the ancient Near East in which a righteous sufferer dares to question God, lament and dialogue about suffering are typical. In Job the doctrine of divine retribution receives its most “difficult case” and is refuted.

### The Legal Metaphor

The book of Job is built around the metaphor of a legal confrontation between Job and his friends, and between Job

## How can Job hope for a fair trial if Yahweh is both judge and prosecutor simultaneously?

and God. In 40:2 the words “dispute” and “argue” immediately define this legal context a final time. With this verse, the disputation metaphor used throughout the book culminates dramatically. Although Job has already named God as his enemy, accused God of causing his affliction, and lamented over his life (chapters 3 and 6), Job declares in 9:32b, “Let us go to court together,” that he will take God to court. Job apparently knows that this human request ought to exclude Yahweh, “For he is no mortal that I could answer him” (9:32a). Again and again, against this better judgment, in his defense to his so-called friends, Job states his intention to prove his innocence before Yahweh (13: 3,18, 22). Ultimately, in whatever way Job might understand God as judge, he must deal with a clear difference between the human and heavenly courts. Whereas the participants of the earthly court have plainly defined roles, in the heavenly realm God performs all duties, and partiality toward the defendant is of little concern. Consequently, in 14:1–3 Job complains that Yahweh rejects his case because transient human creatures are not worth wasting time over (cf. 40:4 *qll*).

Indeed, God is nowhere to be found, that Job might enter the divine court. Yahweh’s absence is particularly troublesome, for as Westermann points out, “When God is silent, that means death.”<sup>5</sup> Job whines bitterly that if God’s tribunal were more easily discovered, he could lay out his case, argue his blamelessness, and be acquitted (23:1–10). God seems to be toying with Job like a boxer whose instinctive reaction keeps him just beyond the reach of his opponent. Job’s efforts to find God are in vain, for he thinks that Yahweh intentionally hides himself. Job assumes, however, he can reason with God as an equal, albeit a fettered equal. Job believes he has a chance if God is willing to shield Job from the awful dread of his terrible presence,

and if God simply pays attention to him. How can Job hope for a fair trial if Yahweh is both judge and prosecutor simultaneously? Job almost concludes that justice cannot be served, for God will simply intimidate him into accepting a guilty verdict (9:12–20).

Yahweh must restrain himself as the judge and opponent of Job if Job is going to have a just hearing at all. Thus, Yahweh has this ominous dual role in the proceedings, and since there is no third party to adjudicate or appeal for the guilty, Job wears rapidly.

Surely now God has worn me out;  
he has made desolate all my company.  
And he has shriveled me up,  
which is a witness against me;  
my leanness has risen up against me,  
it testifies to my face.  
He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me;  
He has gnashed his teeth at me;  
my adversary sharpens his eyes against me. (16:7–9)

In 9:23–24 Job accuses God of criminal behavior: “When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges—if it is not he, who is it?” The Creator is now a criminal. Furthermore, the plan of this evil Creator is darkness (38:2). The Accused, God, defends himself by putting his adversary, Job, on trial. Yahweh’s reply to Job begins with a strong rebuke (38:3; 40:2, 8). The Challenged becomes Challenger, asking in effect, “Are you creature or Creator?” God answers, but in the form of rhetorical questions, more like a college lecture on natural history and science than a direct answer to Job’s predicament. With a thundering voice, Yahweh hands Job a battery of test questions beyond human comprehension. The multiple-choice answers are concise, clear, and more difficult than the exam: (a) accept the divine appraisal of the universe and suffer innocently, (b) object to God’s plan for the world as it is and work to reduce innocent suffering, innocent suffering, or (c) reject God, suffer unjustly, and die hopelessly. Job is left dumbfounded (40:4).

Yahweh’s speeches berate Job’s lack of knowledge and power to understand the world. In spite of Job’s reluctance to answer, God refuses to return a verdict on Job’s guilt or innocence. That does not seem to be the author’s concern.

Thus, Yahweh does not respond directly to Job's demands, because they have the wrong presuppositions. Job has bought into the same theology as his friends: "I have lived a good life. Why has God stripped me of his blessings? I deserve more. God is unfair." The friends justified God's fairness; thus Job must have sinned to be punished this way. Both sides make the mistaken assumption that if one lives an upright life, everything works out fine. Job learns that the world is not structured that way, and that he is not the measure of the world.

### **Dramatized Lament**

The disputation speeches contain accusations against God especially, and against Job's friends. In 40:4, Job admits his "light-weightness" when he finds himself face to face with the "heavy" glory of the God who questions him. His confession of weakness, "I cannot answer you," picks up the lament theme from chapters 3, 6, 9, 13, 16, 19, etc. Inasmuch as God is Job's real antagonist, Job's speeches depict Yahweh as the enemy (6:4; 7:12; 16:9–14; 19:7–12).<sup>6</sup> He vehemently accuses God of neglecting him and graphically describes his suffering. Thus, Westermann and others have characterized the book of Job as a *dramatized lament*.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Job's opening speech is a powerful lament cursing his birth and complaining that God has fenced him in as a righteous warrior who has lost his way (chapter 3). His closing argument (chapters 29–31) contains both lamentation and disputation. Job first remembers the days of old when God watched over him; continues crying out to a God, turned cruel,<sup>8</sup> who refuses to listen to the afflicted; and after making a negative confession to assert his innocence, demands one final time that Shaddai answer him. Although Job sees God as his enemy, he nonetheless finds himself resonating between that accusation and his trust that God is the only one who can deliver him.<sup>9</sup> "In other words, precisely where Job utters the sharpest and most dangerous words against God, he also speaks the words which nevertheless most clearly show him holding fast to God."<sup>10</sup>

Most of Job's laments deal with his adversity and pain in a way familiar to us from the Psalms. The particularities of his situation are not difficult to discern, although the reader, in contrast to Job, knows from the prologue a simple reason for his suffering. Job may ask why he suffers and may accuse God as the enemy, but most of the time the reader sides with Job's friends and their defense of God's righteousness. Job's personal plight is caused because

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Yahweh's hand has touched him and left him alone (19:13–22). Even when Yahweh speaks to Job from the whirlwind, he stands alone before Yahweh, his distress undiminished. The typical deliverance from sickness, expected by Job and found in many of the psalms of lament, is absent. Job is greeted, not with compassion, but with a stern rebuke. God pushes Job into a corner—he must recognize God as Creator and Lord, even when his experience leads him to name God as the enemy. Will Job be able to understand that the God who created the universe created him? Can he comprehend that the one who subjected him to torment will be the one who graciously saves him? In the end, Job knows that there is no other God. Lamentation holds together the mystery of God's incomprehensible character for Job and for us.

### **Job's Humble Reply: Our Answer, Too**

The combination of lawsuit and lament brings out the tension of the one God who is at once judge and deliverer, warrior and savior. In Job's case, Yahweh is each for him, and cannot be escaped by him. Has Job finally had enough? Has the tempestuous power of Yahweh's speeches forced him into a posture of silent submission? Must we read Job's stance simply as quiet dissatisfaction? Could his response/question really signal something else? Could it really be the answer?

"Job 40:4–5 is not, strictly speaking, an answer; it is an act of silencing which precedes the answer itself."<sup>11</sup> While this might be true in some respects, what Job utters in verses 4–5 is essential for his further insight in 42:2–6. Job is silenced, but he speaks about that state apologetically without being self-conscious. He is so astonished that, before he can keep the words from getting to his tongue, he has spoken them. Throughout the contest Job has pleaded for God to answer him. Ironically, once Yahweh's thunderous voice breaks the silence, Job startles himself—and God—with a muffled outburst, and must clamp his hand over his mouth.

These verses, in light of the whole book, and with particular respect to the combination of lawsuit and lament, can be read as Job's involuntary entrance into quiet consideration. Yahweh's command that Job must respond is a forced opportunity for him to reflect on the pain of his human existence in the real presence of the Creator. What God offers Job is a retreat from theological debate in order to experience fully the divine presence. Throughout the disputations, speculative answers to the question "What kind of God is this?" were argued by Job and his friends from their traditions and experience. Now Yahweh himself delightfully describes who he is and what he does. When humanity rests its case, God makes his, but it is transcendent, magnificent, and wholly other from what mortals had offered or demanded, hoped, or understood. The result for Job is a transformation of character by divine justice. What pursued him with seemingly eager vengeance and scorn, what he at once desired and dreaded, has overwhelmed his senses without destroying him and will eventually restore his person.

One of the most difficult aspects of the book of Job is the succession of chapters in which God is accused of having destroyed both the innocent and guilty, good and evil, deserving and undeserving without distinction. In other words, the sublime juxtaposition of God's majesty and the apparent insignificance of humanity is troubling. How can the same God ignore Job's pain for chapters but passionately tell him about the universe and animals on the endangered species list? At the heart of the impasse is the one God who can be both enemy and redeemer at once. The reader is shocked, and certainly unsatisfied, to discover in Yahweh's final speeches that creation rests in the uneasy balance of its Creator. Job's struggle, and ours, is to trust God even when we cannot comprehend how, in the midst of our suffering, we are safe from ultimate chaos. Could God just explain finally why humanity is subject to the uncertainty of his creation and why his protection seems to be so random?

In his encounter with Yahweh in 40:1–7, Job is forced to acknowledge, and us through him, God as the *only* power who can deal successfully with the threatening forces of darkness. Although God might be perceived as our enemy at times, he does not carelessly abandon the world or humanity to unlimited evils. Even as terrifying as Behemoth and Leviathan are, they remain creatures subject to God's power as if they were his playful pets. Job finds new confi-

dence to be what he is. Job's initial response to Yahweh, his declaration of silence, takes to heart the admonition of the psalmist "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:11).<sup>12</sup> His final answer, in 42:2–3, completes the exhortation emphasizing Job's new knowledge of Yahweh:

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

Abraham Heschel made a statement about prayer that captures the theological import and pastoral application of this passage:

The way to prayer leads through *acts of wonder* and *radical amazement*. The illusion of total intelligibility, the indifference to the mystery that is everywhere, the foolishness of ultimate self-reliance are serious obstacles on the way. It is in moments of our being faced with the mystery of living and dying, of knowing and not-knowing, of love and the inability to love—that we pray, that *we address ourselves to Him who is beyond the mystery*.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes we must be silenced by God in order to listen, to speak, or to minister. We must learn to critique our ministries by looking at the Jobs around us. How quick we are to speak and defend God to those who suffer, while we might listen, learn, and offer quiet assistance to them instead. As Elie Wiesel suggests, we must allow Job to be our contemporary, to be our example, to become our teacher leading us to the One who is beyond the mystery.<sup>14</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> J. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xi.

<sup>2</sup> The verb "to answer" is often used as a juridical term, usually with reference to the accused making a response as in Job 9:14–16. Ironically, in the book of Job, God, whom Job has accused, becomes unresponsive. When Job is summoned by God, he is speechless, unable to respond. This verb is also an essential feature of the lament psalms in which God's answer is viewed as a source of blessing and deliverance (Ps 20 is a classic in this sense; cf. Ps 3:4; 4:1; 5:1; etc.). A deity who refuses to answer is

reason for the suppliant to panic, for one of the paradigmatic themes of the lament psalms is Yahweh's listening to and answering those who call upon his name (Ps 22:1-2; 116:1; cf. P. Miller Jr., *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1994]).

<sup>3</sup>T. Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 188; claims that "Job feels he has indeed been answered by God." That is why he has nothing to say.

<sup>4</sup>On the meaning and use of the divine names in Job, see T. Mettinger, 69-72; and M. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).

<sup>5</sup>C. Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 41; cf. Ps 41:9; 35:12-14; 38:19; 69:8-12; 109:4; and note 2 above.

<sup>6</sup>For an in-depth discussion of this see Crenshaw, 62-75. These texts are only a few of the many that could be cited (Job 9:17-24; 10:8, 16-17; 23:16-17; 27:2; 30:19-23).

<sup>7</sup>Westermann, *Job*, 4; structures the book simply, "disputation within lament." Chapters 4-27 (dispute) are framed by chapters 3 and 29-31 (lament), giving way to a new dispute between God and Job in chapters 38-41. See also, D. Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 75.

<sup>8</sup>As Crenshaw states, "The cruelest blow of all has come from an unexpected source, the deity" (70). It is as if God were schizophrenic, at times exchanging his divinity to become a haunting demon. See M. Moore, "Job's Texts of Terror," *CBQ* 55 (1993): 662-75.

<sup>9</sup>J. L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook of the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) has suggested that the root metaphor underlying the Psalms is Yahweh's kingship. Royal theology stands as the foundation for both Job's accusation and request for deliverance. God as the King has the power to reverse any threatening situation by the power of his royal command. On the other hand, when the divine king seems to be inattentive to the innocent suffering of a loyal subject, he may rightfully be accused of wrongdoing and violating his promised protection and prosperity (Ps 89).

<sup>10</sup>Westermann, *Job*, 45.

<sup>11</sup>Westermann, *Job*, 125; makes this observation en route to what he calls "Job's real answer" in 42:2-6. Westermann wants to preserve the integrity of Job's one answer. In essence, Job's answers (40:4-5 and 42:2-6) are one and the same. The first part, however, is his immediate response, which opens his mind for receiving Yahweh's next speech and prepares him to speak more affirmatively and conclusively in 42:2-6.

<sup>12</sup>Psalms 46 is a Song of Zion celebrating Yahweh's protection of Zion, which makes the divinely chosen city of Jerusalem a secure refuge against the nations. In the event of enemy attack, Yahweh would, as a royal warrior, defeat them and open an age of universal eternal peace. Yahweh, in verse 11, commands the nations to desist from war and know that I, Yahweh, the victorious king, brook no rivals. Job has learned this firsthand through combat with Yahweh and is ready to surrender.

<sup>13</sup>F. A. Rothschild, ed., *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism from the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 213.

<sup>14</sup>Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Summit Books, 1976), 211.