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WHERE SHALL
WISDOM
BE FOUND

A Resource Reading Guide of Job

By Mark A. Matson

The book of Job is vitally important for a well-balanced Christian theology, yet its length and difficulty often keep preachers and students from a full grasp of the text's richness or complexity. Indeed, Job has often been called the most difficult book of the Bible, both in terms of its language and its philosophical depth. Here, perhaps more than with many books of the Bible, the help of others who have studied the writing is necessary to enrich our own reading. Unfortunately, the literature on the book of Job is so extensive that any literature review of the book will necessarily be incomplete and tentative. What I have attempted, therefore, is to provide a cross section of some of the best English material produced in the last few decades, both of the technical kind, aimed at those with a more scholarly bent, as well as more descriptive works aimed at the general audience.

I. Job and Wisdom Literature

Study of the book of Job should begin with an understanding of the nature of Israelite Wisdom literature and its relation to Wisdom literature generally. Wisdom literature, as represented most clearly by Proverbs, and by Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira in the Apocrypha, is a practical literature which stems more from observation of the world than from revelation. It is clear that Israel shared a common interest in Wisdom with her Near Eastern neighbors, and this interest was deep-seated in the community thought of the people of antiquity. According to the Wisdom worldview, the world is orderly and just, rewarding the good and punishing the bad. From this vantage point, Job is a voice of protest against an overly facile embrace of the Wisdom worldview. It is, then, always in dialogue with the prevailing wisdom concepts, and this partner in dialogue must be considered at every step of the interpretation process. It is essential for the student of Job to be familiar with

the general presumptions and theological motifs of Wisdom thought as a backdrop for the biblical book.

The single most helpful introduction to Israelite Wisdom is James Crenshaw's *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (John Knox Press, 1981). Crenshaw's particular strength is the way he frames the Old Testament books of Wisdom (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira) as parts of an extensive worldview that was extant throughout the ancient world. Crenshaw provides a nice introduction to other books that circulated in the ancient Near East that are similar to Proverbs and Job. After presenting a summary of this Wisdom worldview, Crenshaw considers each of the biblical Wisdom books in turn, examining its relationship to the general Wisdom concepts. Crenshaw is especially sensitive to the problem of theodicy, which runs as a constant counter to Wisdom thought. For those who would explore Crenshaw's ideas in greater depth, a new collection of essays is now available (*Urgent Advice and Probing Questions* [Mercer Press, 1995]), containing many journal articles and book reviews published over the last twenty years.

An older and more technical treatment of the Wisdom traditions with which Job is in dialogue is found in Gerhard von Rad's *Wisdom in Israel* (Abingdon Press, 1972). Originally written in German in 1970, this translation is now in its eighth paperback printing. Von Rad is especially cogent in his treatment of the relationship of knowledge to piety, and the special impact that creation ideas bear on the Wisdom tradition, both of which are critical issues in the Job narrative.

II. Commentaries

For many ministers and teachers, the commentary remains the single most used reference point for sermon and classroom preparation. There are a number of good com-

mentaries for Job, and I will survey the ones that I find most sound and helpful.

An excellent entry point into the literature of Job, a pre-commentary so to speak, is one of the various essays meant to summarize the contents and structure of the book and to raise critical questions confronting the student. Such an essay can be found in various introductions to the Old Testament, as for instance Brevard Childs' *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Fortress, 1979), or Georg Fohrer's *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Abingdon Press, 1968). Better, and certainly more up to date, are the survey articles by Marvin Pope in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1962) or James Crenshaw in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday and Co., 1992).

The one commentary that, I believe, consistently provides the best insight into both the contextual framework and the technical details of Job is Norman Habel's contribution to the Old Testament Library, *The Book of Job* (Westminster Press, 1985). As with many fine commentaries, Habel's volume always pays close attention to the peculiar problems faced by the difficult Hebrew of Job. Without rejecting textual emendation out of hand, Habel is cautious about free alteration of the text, preferring instead to search for the meaning of the received text despite difficulties. But Habel's particular strength is his focus throughout the book on the development of the narrative. Each dialogue builds upon preceding dialogues, creating momentum and developing meaning in the story. Habel continually points the reader back to the development of thought in the book and thus keeps an eye on the connections that exist within the text. This approach leads Habel to make sense of the text as it stands, rather than resort to rearrangement or emendation. If there were a single book to secure for studying Job, this would be my choice.

Coming from a perspective more influenced by the history-of-religions approach (but still well worth consulting) is Marvin Pope's commentary, *Job* (The Anchor Bible [Doubleday and Co., 1965]). Pope pays particular attention to the derivation of the language and thought of Job. This is an essential work for those interested in the technical aspects of the Hebrew text. Here, too, is a valuable sourcebook for other ancient Near East accounts that are parallel to Job or influential on its language. The Ugaritic and Akkadian stories of creation and conflict, as well as narratives that deal with the problem of theodicy, provide stock imagery against which Job's unique interpretation of

God's relationship with humanity is told. Thus, Pope's discussion about the mythic background underlying the Behemoth and Leviathan elements of God's tempest speeches helps one interpret the book of Job in its ancient Near Eastern setting. But Pope too often stops at identifying parallels, as if discovering the background or derivation of a mythic image explains its meaning.

One of the most sophisticated and nuanced interpretations of Job is found in Edwin M. Good's "reading," *In Turns of Tempest* (Stanford University Press, 1990). Highly influenced by modern literary theories, Good deliberately downplays the historical elements as a means of interpreting the book, suggesting that the text itself remains open to each new interpreter. Thus he begins his book with a "Dispensable Introduction," which deals with issues of historical background, as well as an "Indispensable Introduction," which introduces the issues directly pertinent to the text: linguistic and hermeneutic issues that affect translation and interpretation, as well as a fine discussion of Hebrew poetry. One should not be surprised that Good brings to his interpretation a close study of the Hebrew: the book contains a new translation, with excellent grammatical notes. But the real treasure is his chapter-by-chapter interpretation of the text as found in the Bible—a reading that is well attuned to the rich use of language in Job: double entendres, reversals of meaning, and ambiguity. This is a book that, while based on sophisticated literary theory, is full of deep insights in the book of Job and worthy of reading and re-reading.

A commentary that undoubtedly will be important when completed is the one by David J. A. Clines in the Word Biblical Commentary series, *Job 1–20* (Word, Inc., 1989). The first volume covers only the first twenty chapters. Clines, a competent Old Testament scholar, focuses on the canonical text as it stands without attempting to get behind it. The structure of the book allows profitable use by scholars and casual students alike.

Two other commentaries are worth mentioning as helpful for teaching or sermon preparation. In general I view these commentaries as secondary, with a less clear vision of the significant issues presented in Job, but they do have the advantage of being more approachable by the casual reader. The first of these is *Job* (John Knox Press, 1985), found in the Interpretation commentary series. The author, J. Gerald Janzen, offers sound theological interpretations of the passages, generally without the intrusion of techni-

cal issues. But one feels that Janzen too often rushes to provide his solution to problems without adequately discussing what the problems are. The second is H. H. Rowley's contribution to the New Century Bible Commentary series, *Job* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970). Like most contributions to this series, *Job* follows a line-by-line format, remarking on significant difficulties encountered in the text. Rowley's commentary is a helpful companion to the Bible for reading the text, especially where the text is confusing, but it lacks significant comments about the theological development, irony, and narrative construction in the book of Job.

III. Translations and Dramatic Interpretations

It is always helpful in studying a book to read multiple translations. Simply reading across the King James, New Revised Standard Version, and New International Versions provides comparative insight into the text. One translation that brings a unique voice to the book is that by Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (North Point Press, 1987). While it contains a good introduction that explores in short compass the major movements and issues in Job, the importance of this book is the translation itself. Mitchell especially makes a great effort to capture the poetic nature of the Hebrew text and, in so doing, both captures the emotional power of the poem and offers some interesting interpretational insights.

But Mitchell's translation begins with some very definite biases. In the first place, Mitchell attempts to reconstruct the "original" poem, before it was modified by later redactors. In some cases this means minor trimming of extraneous material, but Mitchell too readily deletes the Wisdom poem (chapter 28) and the Elihu speeches as secondary. In the second place, and worth considering even if ultimately rejecting, Mitchell interprets the final resolution of the Whirlwind Speeches so as to blunt the discomfiting sense that God wins because he is simply more powerful; Mitchell interprets Job as finally grasping an ethics and beauty that exist in his own weakness and finitude.

A more cautious, yet very helpful, recent translation is that offered by the Jewish Publication Society, *The Book of Job* (Jewish Publication Society, 1980). The translation is sensitively done and offers fresh insights into the book. Moreover, there are excellent short introductions to aspects of Job by leading Jewish scholars: a general introduction of Job by Nahum Sarna, a discussion of Hebrew text and

translational difficulties by Jonas Greenfield, and a review of some of the theological highlights by Moshe Greenberg.

I think no student of Job should overlook the insight that can be gained by reading Archibald MacLeish's rendition of the Job story in dramatic form. *J. B. A Play in Verse*, written in 1956, interprets the story in modern terms, with J. B., his wife, Sarah, and their children set in modern America. God and Satan do not appear, but a pair of circus entertainers overseeing "the play" stand in for them with telling comments and interpretations. And in this recast setting, the issues at stake in Job are brought strikingly home in a way that will surely influence its preaching and teaching. Most notable is the way MacLeish develops the pathos of J. B. and his wife. Without a doubt, this play will add new life to any reading of Job and will provoke thought about the issues of theodicy and piety which are central to the book.

IV. Special Studies

A number of more narrowly focused treatments are especially noteworthy for the preacher to help connect the book of Job with pressing issues of contemporary living.

Perhaps the most interesting one because of its breadth is a collection of essays from a broad spectrum of opinion (*Dimensions of Job* [Schocken Books, 1969]). Edited by Nahum Glatzer, this book contains thirty-two essays by Jewish, Christian, and Humanist authors who all find Job to have struck a significant chord in their experience of life. Of particular note, I have found the following essays continue to attract my re-reading: Martin Buber's "A God Who Hides His Face," Ernest Renan's "The Cry of the Soul," and Søren Kierkegaard's sermon "The Lord Gave and the Lord Hath Taken Away." This volume is one of the richest treasure troves of insights into Job and ought to be purchased by anyone with even a passing interest in Job.

Another collection of essays about Job, this one more technical with contributions from biblical and historical scholars rather than essayists and preachers, is the collection edited by Leo Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin (*The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* [Abingdon Press, 1992]). This volume contains excellent and thought-provoking essays by such biblical scholars as Norman Habel, Edwin Good, and Michael Fishbane. It also reviews some of the ways Job has been treated in the past, including a survey of rabbinic interpretations of Job as well as an examination of Calvin's sermons on Job. Finally, there are

a number of essays that reflect theologically on the biblical figure of Job. This is a mature and very fine collection of essays, one which will rank with Glatzer's collection in value.

Even a casual reader of Job confronts the difficulty of God's own activity *vis-à-vis* Job. God is not the passive arbiter between Satan and Job, but is rather the one who incites the test. This and other difficult texts that focus on God as a testing or oppressive force are the subject of James Crenshaw's provocative little book, *A Whirlpool of Torment* (Fortress Press, 1984). This book is written for the college or seminary student, but is a helpful study for any minister or teacher.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the leading liberation theologians, brings to his interpretation of Job (*On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* [Orbis Books, 1985]) a concern and sensitivity for those who suffer without cause. From his concern for the poor and oppressed, Gutiérrez finds Job's own personal experience mirrors a reality that is all too prevalent, whether in developing countries or affluent nations. Of particular note is the way that, for Gutiérrez, Job is always a Christian document, anticipating the revelation of Jesus Christ and God's embrace of suffering upon the cross. This reading offers a sensitive and intimate insight into the book of Job.

One of the more significant book-length treatments of Job in recent years is J. T. Wilcox's book, *The Bitterness of Job: A Philosophical Reading* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 1989). This book is written not by a biblical scholar but a student of philosophy. It explores the deep issues of evil and the morality of God as constructed in Job. Wilcox believes that Job in fact does curse God (as Satan predicted) by charging God with shockingly unseemly qualities, thus demonstrating Job's bitterness at the conflict between the orthodox idea of a moral world order and Job's own actual

state of being. But, Wilcox argues, the author of Job sees that such heroic and honest bitterness is ultimately untenable because it is a form of spiritual illness. The divine speeches, by pointing out Job's (and hence humanity's) ignorance and by refusing to define God in terms of justice, achieve reconciliation and restore Job's sense of balance. This book is a thoughtful consideration of the meaning of Job for a humanity confronted with injustice and seeking for a God to worship.

The student of Job will all too quickly find the book challenges his or her concepts of literary types. Here we find prose narrative, laments, disputations, wisdom poem, and divine speeches intermixed in a single unit. What exactly these literary types are and how these genres work together is the subject of a valuable monograph by Claus Westermann (*The Structure of the Book of Job* [Fortress Press, 1981]). Although technical in nature, this book is actually fairly short and easy to read. Certainly, it is a very important work which will handsomely reward the reader for time spent in it.

Finally, the Christian interpreter of Job will find an important and thoughtful reflection of Job in a series of excurses in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* (T. & T. Clark, vol. 4, pt. 3, first half). This frankly christocentric interpretation locates Job as "a witness of Jesus Christ." For Barth, Job's suffering anticipates and points to Christ's suffering and death as a final culmination in God's free choice for humanity. The essays are tightly argued and full of insights into the text as a reflection on God's action in Christ.

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