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DEFIANT FAITH IN THE
FACE OF SUFFERING

WRESTLING

with

JOB



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your adoration, your worship, and your love—regardless of your circumstances? Will your faith in God’s goodness endure when it is tested?

Make no mistake: in some way, your faith will be tested. Jesus spoke of that in his parable about the four soils into which the sower sows the seed of the Word of God. Jesus warns us that some will receive the word with joy. The seed will sprout, and they will believe for a while, but in the time of testing they will fall away (Lk 8:13). Will that be true of you? What will that testing look like in your life?

You may be tested with prosperity. “Wouldn’t that be nice!” you say. Yes, but wealth and pleasure can become like weeds that choke the life of the seed. Prosperity can be deadly to faith when it results in a sense of self-sufficiency and pride or when your faith in God becomes dependent on his blessings. The book of Job challenges that kind of self-serving faith.

Or your faith could be tested with simple distraction. You can become preoccupied with paying the rent or getting promoted at work or with fears about that lump under your skin or handing over the car keys to your teenager. We can be overwhelmed by the cares of this world and all the anxieties and fears that fill our minds. Even the fear that you might become like Job could undermine your faith.

Or your faith could be tested by actual pain and suffering. And this can be the toughest test of all, for nothing can call into question our faith in the essential goodness of God like our suffering. Hardship and affliction can become a trial, an examination, an evaluation. Can God be trusted? Is he really worthy of my worship? In whatever form that testing comes, Jesus says, only those who persevere produce a crop (Lk 8:15).

the importance of perseverance. We can’t overstate the importance of perseverance in our faith. Paul says, “If we endure, we will also reign

with [Christ]” (2 Tim 2:12). In Hebrews we read, “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Heb 10:36). And again, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Heb 12:1). James says, “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (Jas 1:12). Twice in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says that only “the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22; 24:13).

Simply put, without an enduring faith we are lost. The book of Job is a lesson in perseverance in the face of incredible suffering—inexplicable suffering, innocent suffering. For suffering—especially suffering that seems to come upon us for no reason, suffering that seems to make no sense, suffering that is too random or too evil—that is a supreme challenge to our faith.

On the one hand, suffering can make us angry and defiant before God. History is littered with the anti-Christian testimonies of atheists who point to the reality of pain and suffering as the ground of their unbelief, who curse the God whom they say they no longer believe in.

On the other hand, suffering can dampen and deaden our faith. It can make us lethargic and lifeless in our relationship with God. We no longer look to him as our loving Father. Instead, he becomes a distant caretaker of the cosmic order with no personal concern for a little minion like me. We find ourselves no longer on speaking terms.

But for others, for those with the courage to hold on—their suffering can become a gateway to a deepened faith. As Viktor Frankl, who endured the unbearable suffering of a Nazi concentration camp,

observed, “just as the small fire is extinguished by the storm while a large fire is enhanced by it—likewise a weak faith is weakened by predicaments and catastrophes, whereas a strong faith is strengthened by them.”³

We will suffer, you can be sure of it. And in our suffering—whether physically or emotionally—we must learn from Job if we are to endure faithfully to the end.

WHAT KIND OF BOOK IS JOB?

So as we approach this book, we must first ask, What kind of a book is it? I’ve already mentioned its artistic quality. In the ordering of our Bibles, it is listed with other poetic books—the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. It is often considered one of the Wisdom books, but that’s too limiting—it has more in common with lament psalms than with Proverbs.⁴

Some have described Job as a “lawsuit drama” or as “skeptical, protest literature.”⁵ But again, Job resists neat classification. Commentator Francis Andersen writes, “The book of Job is an astonishing mixture of almost every kind of literature to be found in the Old Testament.”⁶ The book also shows some fascinating parallels to other ancient Near Eastern books.⁷ Though they share some themes, the differences outweigh the similarities. One writer concludes, “Perhaps part of the fascination of the book of Job is that there is no other book like it, even in the ancient world.”⁸ It’s a book that in many respects must be understood on its own terms.⁹

³Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning* (New York: Perseus, 2000), 19.

⁴On the classification of Job as a Wisdom book, see Comment 1.1, “The Demise of ‘Wisdom Literature.’”

⁵See Comments 5.4, “Job as Lawsuit” and 5.5, “Parody.”

⁶Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 33.

⁷See Comment 4.1, “Dialogues in the Ancient Near East.”

⁸Wilson, *Job*, 7.

⁹See Comment 1.2, “The Genre(s) of Job.”

Who wrote the book? Its author is never mentioned, which leads us to believe that authorship isn't critical to the interpretation of the book.

Its setting is in the land of Uz, but no one knows where Uz was. One writer observed, "One might just as well search for the Land of Oz."¹⁰

When was it written? The book appears to be set in patriarchal times, in part because of its silence regarding the land of Israel, the priesthood, and the temple. But it was still connected to Israelite faith—with its insistence on the justice of God, and the denial of bowing to idols like the sun and the moon (cf. Job 31:26-28). At least in the prologue and the divine speeches, the narrator of the story uses the covenant name Yahweh—the name by which God revealed himself to Israel.¹¹ And very early this book became a part of Jewish Scripture. But its message is not linked to any particular event or setting in Israel's history. This broadens its message, setting it free from the bounds of time or place.

The story appears to be set in the time of the patriarchs, but when was it actually written? Again, we don't know. All attempts to date the book have been inconclusive. All we can say with certainty is that it was written after Job's death since the writer tells us that Job lived 140 years. But the way that Job appears to allude to other biblical books, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and especially the Psalms,¹² suggests a much later date—perhaps even after the exile.¹³

¹⁰Dermot Cox, *Man's Anger and God's Silence: The Book of Job* (Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1990), 21. Note also the comment of David Clines: "The importance of the name Uz lies not in where such a place is, but in where it is not. Israelites themselves may not have known its precise location, but they will have known, as we do, that it is not in Israel" (*Job*, 3 vols. [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989–2011], 1:10).

¹¹Though this name is almost never on the lips of the characters in the dialogue (found only in Job 12:9).

¹²See Comment 1.4, "Allusion and Intertextuality."

¹³See Comment 1.3, "Date of Job."

Should we read the book of Job as a precise verbatim record of what transpired in Uz between Job and his friends? That seems unlikely—people generally don’t argue in poetic verse.

Job seems to have been a historical figure. He is mentioned as a righteous man by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 14:14, 20), but that doesn’t mean that this book is what we would call strictly historical. The divinely inspired author could well have retold a well-known story about a famous man to explore the deepest questions of the human relationship with the God who made us and who rules this world. However it came about, the author of this God-breathed book has explored these questions in a most profound way.

The richness of Job’s message can’t be simply explained. It can’t be captured in the 280 characters of a tweet or even in one thirty-minute sermon. Instead, the message must be experienced. The reader must identify with the real experience of suffering, and what that means for one’s relationship with God. That’s why there are forty-two chapters. That’s why it’s best not to rush through it. You must enter into the narrative—you must feel what Job feels. The book of “Job is to be lived in and not just studied.”¹⁴

Christopher Ash, in his reflections on the book of Job, speaks of the difference between asking the “armchair questions” of the scholar and asking the “wheelchair questions” of the sufferer.¹⁵ Job is asking “wheelchair questions.” He is in desperate straits, and somehow we need to enter into his suffering to understand his struggle. The fact that the characters speak in poetry rather than prose means that their words are meant to touch our hearts as well as our heads. “Poetry doesn’t lend itself to summing up in tidy propositions, bullet points, neat systems, and well-swept answers,” Ash contends. “We need to let a poem get to work on us—we must immerse ourselves in it.”¹⁶

¹⁴Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 23.

¹⁵Ash, *Job*, 18.

¹⁶Ash, *Job*, 22-23.

Job is also a very long book, and that, too, is significant. The book consists of forty-two chapters because there is no quick-fix easy answer to the questions it raises. There is no instant release from grief. We must go through the process. The book's length invites the reader into the process of reflection; it takes us on a journey, and a journey takes time.¹⁷ It invites us to join in an exploration of the process of loss and grief. In that process our faith may be reworked and our lives may be transformed, as Job's were.

Beware: a study of Job may unsettle you. But in the end, you will be challenged and encouraged by it in all sorts of ways.

And the first encouragement we need from Job is the encouragement to persevere in faith to the end. We will be taken down a road of intense suffering—with all of the emotional and spiritual turmoil that creates—to come to a new appreciation of the God who is there all along. A journey through Job becomes almost like an extended Lenten observance on a path to Jerusalem. In this journey, we can see Jesus as a kind of Job—the ultimate innocent sufferer, who, on the cross, pronounces his own cry of desperation and dereliction: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46).

But as in Job, the gospel gives us a happy ending. We must see what the Lord finally brings about—the suffering of Good Friday gives way to the vindication of Easter morning. He is risen; he is risen indeed!

Yes, “the Lord is full of compassion and mercy” (Jas 5:11). We will see how Job wrestles with God until he gets that blessing.

DIGGING DEEPER

1.1. The demise of “Wisdom Literature.” For more than a hundred years, first in biblical scholarship, then in the church, it has been common to refer to Job, along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, as

¹⁷On the way the literary form of the book is a part of its meaning, see Comment 1.5, “Mimesis.”

belonging to a distinct category of biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts known as “Wisdom Literature.” According to this widespread view, these texts are the product of the universal search for wisdom. Rather than interpreting the world from the perspective of the Israelites’ special relationship with their God as presented in the Law, History, and the Prophets, these texts are said to offer insights, available to all, from the reasoned analysis of life. According to his view, in addition to being universalistic and rationalistic, these texts are occasionally empirical, basically secular, frequently skeptical, and fundamentally humanistic and individualistic.

Recently, biblical scholars have begun to question this consensus for a number of reasons.¹⁸ From a historical perspective, recent work has identified when biblical scholarship first grouped those specific texts together as a distinct “Wisdom” category, the mid-nineteenth century in Germany, a time and place in which the constellation of ideological values associated with the category—universalism, rationalism, humanism, and so on—were particularly popular. The suspicious similarity between the values of scholars at that time and those they attributed to the “wise men” who they thought wrote those books suggests this may be yet another example of nineteenth-century biblical scholars looking into the well and seeing their own reflections.¹⁹

From a literary perspective, the view of genre used to classify these texts into a single genre that sets them apart from others in the canon does not reflect how genres actually work. In fact, texts may be grouped together in many ways, depending on the similarities readers find significant among them. German scholars after the Enlightenment may have been interested in finding texts that were universalistic, rationalistic, and humanistic, but other

¹⁸See Will Kynes, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁹See Comment 6.2, “Defining Wisdom.”

readers, including those who lived closer to the time when the texts were actually written, when those ideas were not as popular, have noticed other significant affinities they have with other texts. Each of those genre groupings highlights a different feature of the texts; fully understanding them, then, requires not classifying them in a single genre (particularly not one first imposed for self-serving reasons in the nineteenth century), but learning from as many of them as possible. The Wisdom Literature category has cordoned off the texts associated with it from the rest of the Bible and its theology for over a century; the category's death offers an opportunity to reexamine what they mean.

1.2. The genre(s) of Job. A genre is “a group of texts gathered together due to some perceived significant affinity between them.”²⁰ Most texts can be grouped into multiple genres depending on which features have attracted our attention. These perceived similarities between texts shape our expectations as we read, and, at their best, help us to understand texts better. Grouping sonnets together enables us to recognize their structure; grouping love poems together highlights how they express their passion rhetorically. Some poems will be in both of those genre groupings and our reading expectations should be shaped by both. However, when we treat genres as exclusive categories, such that a text can only *be* one genre, and forget that these genre groupings result from our culturally located perceptions, genres can actually distort our interpretations.

Job is a prime example of both the distorting power of reading a text according to a single genre and the illuminating potential of reading it as participating in many genres. Though the general consensus for more than a century has been that Job is best classified as Wisdom Literature, it wears that label uncomfortably. A number of scholars have noticed this, and an increasing

²⁰Kynes, *Obituary for “Wisdom Literature,”* 107.

acknowledgment that Job's meaning cannot be contained with Wisdom Literature has contributed to the demise of the category as a whole.

Before the Wisdom genre category was invented in the mid-nineteenth century, Job was never exclusively grouped with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, or its message characterized by the philosophical ideas now associated with wisdom. Traditional Jewish reading put Job in a collection with Psalms and Proverbs called the *Sifrei Emet*, which highlights how much it shares with both those books.²¹ Early Christian tradition generally grouped Job with other books of poetry: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. This underscores the book's poetic nature. However, both Jewish and Christian ancient canon lists also occasionally grouped Job with the histories, either near Judges at the beginning or Esther at the end, which encouraged readers to note connections between Job and various figures from Israel's history. The closest historical connections to Job are found in the genealogy of Esau in Genesis 36.²² This link to Genesis also connects the book to the Torah (or Pentateuch) and Moses. Early readers, such as Ben Sira and Josephus, also grouped Job with the Prophets.

In recent scholarship, as the Wisdom category has begun to lose its influence, all of these groupings have been resurrected to some degree or another, as scholars have started to notice how comparing Job to these other collections of texts uncovers significant features that the category had buried. Even more genre groupings have been added, such as drama,²³ epic, lament, lawsuit,²⁴ apocalyptic, and parody.²⁵ None of these genres can fully encompass the book's meaning (which is

²¹Job's speeches in particular often sound very similar to psalmic laments; see Comments 7.4, "Appeals to Innocence in the Psalms" and 7.5, "The Biblical Tradition of Defiant Faith."

²²See Comment 1.3, "Date of Job."

²³See Comment 2.4, "Job as a Drama."

²⁴See Comment 5.4, "Job as Lawsuit."

²⁵See Comment 5.5, "Parody."

generally the case with genres), but each highlights important features of it.²⁶ So, just as the Wisdom category highlights the emphasis on the concept of wisdom in the book, these other genres underscore other significant features, such as Job's laments or the legal metaphor that drives his conflict with God. Only by reading the book in multiple genres can its full meaning be comprehended.

1.3. Date of Job. Many consider Job to be one of if not the oldest book in the Bible. This common view primarily results from the setting the book depicts, which appears similar to that of the patriarchs in Genesis. In fact, in the genealogy of Esau in Genesis 36, we encounter an Eliphaz (Gen 36:10), a Teman (Gen 36:11), a Zepho (translated in the Greek as "Zophar"; Gen 36:11), an Uz (Gen 36:23), a Bedad and a Bilhan (Gen 36:25, 27), which together remind one of Bildad, and a Jobab (Gen 36:33), which an addition to the end of the Greek translation explicitly connects with Job (Job 42:17). Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Job appears to offer his own sacrifices apart from the cultic trappings of tabernacle, temple, or priests. Indeed, the law, history, and covenants of Israel are never explicitly mentioned. The Hebrew of the book also has a number of archaic features. There is even a term used for money (*qesitah*) in Job 42:11 that only appears elsewhere in Genesis 33:19 and Joshua 24:32. Fittingly, a Jewish tradition developed that Moses was the author of the book.

However, this evidence is hardly definitive, and, even if it proved that the book was set in the patriarchal period, it would not indicate that it was written at that time. Thus, the rabbis consider a number of dates for Job: the time of Jacob, Moses, the judges, David, the Sabaeans (or possibly the queen of Sheba), the Chaldeans, and Ahasuerus.²⁷

²⁶For more on the various genres of Job and their contributions to its interpretation, see Kynes, *Obituary for "Wisdom Literature,"* 149-78.

²⁷Bava Batra 14b, 15a-b.

Lacking explicit reference to historical events, to determine the book's date, scholars have been forced to rely primarily on intra-biblical parallels, linguistic evidence, and the development of Israel's religion. However, conclusions based on evidence in each of these categories are tenuous. The evidence on which they rely can often be interpreted to support multiple and even contradictory conclusions. For example, the many allusions to other texts in the Old Testament contribute to arguments that Job is one of the latest texts in the Old Testament.²⁸ However, in many cases, those allusions could go in the other direction, with other texts alluding to Job, even if in Job's frequent parodies it makes much better sense to conclude that Job is the later text, twisting earlier texts toward his rhetorical purposes.²⁹ Discussions of the inconclusive nature of the evidence for Job's date have, therefore, become standard fare in commentaries.³⁰

The limited indisputable evidence for the date of Job includes the existence of several fragments of the book discovered at Qumran, which date back as early as the late third century BCE. These indicate Job must have been composed sometime before that. In recent scholarship, the book's date is generally placed after the exile, between the fifth and third centuries BCE, based on cumulative evidence, particularly the book's language, mention of a Satan figure (which is considered a late theological development), and challenge of a developed view of retribution, though the occasional argument for a seventh-century date may be found. Some even argue different parts of the book, such as the prose narrative, poetic dialogues, or Elihu speeches, were written at different times. David Clines, a leading Job scholar, summarizes the situation well: "Of [Job's] author or date of composition I frankly know nothing, and my

²⁸See Comment 1.4, "Allusion and Intertextuality."

²⁹See Comment 5.5, "Parody."

³⁰E.g., Habel, *Job*, 40-42.

speculations are not likely to be worth more than the many guesses that already exist.”³¹

1.4. Allusion and intertextuality. Unlike a quotation, which explicitly identifies itself, often with a citation, an allusion is “an intentional implicit reference to an earlier expression.”³² This implicit nature draws readers deeper into the interpretive process by relying on their ability to recognize how significant words, imagery, or structure in one text refer to an earlier text, creating a dialogue between them. Quotations and allusions are two of the many ways that all texts are interconnected with one another, either by their authors or their readers, both of whom are constantly using other texts to express or interpret meaning. The term for this broad phenomenon is “intertextuality.”³³ Though all texts are intertextual to some degree, Job is particularly tightly woven into a web of textual interconnections. Recognizing this is vital for reading the book well.

The author of Job constantly alludes to other texts in the Old Testament. To understand the book fully, readers must tune their ears to hear these notes from elsewhere in the melody of Israel’s story as they harmonize with Job’s tale. There are potential allusions to a broad swath of texts beyond Wisdom Literature, including Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel, Isaiah 40–55, Jeremiah, Amos, Psalms, and Lamentations.³⁴

Allusions are so pervasive within the text that Job appears to be what one scholar has termed a “citational text,” in which readers can justifiably suppose that the author intentionally cited a number of earlier texts with the expectation that the public would

³¹Clines, *Job*, 1:xxix.

³²Will Kynes, *My Psalm Has Turned into Weeping: Job’s Dialogue with the Psalms* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 36.

³³See Will Kynes, “Intertextuality: Method and Theory in Job and Psalm 119,” in *Biblical Interpretation and Method: Essays in Honour of Professor John Barton*, ed. Katharine J. Dell and Paul M. Joyce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 201–13.

³⁴See, e.g., Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, eds., *Reading Job Intertextually* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013).

recognize those allusions as relevant to the text's presentation and meaning.³⁵ Biblical examples would include Isaiah 40–55 and Revelation.³⁶ Modern texts of this type include the poetry of T. S. Eliot and the novels of James Joyce.

Because allusions, unlike quotations, are implicit, they are easy to miss, and just as easy to see mistakenly when they were not actually intended by the author (the unintentional resonances that readers recognize between texts are better referred to as “echoes”). However, some allusions are fairly clear, and, because they involve meaningful parodies, they can legitimately be considered intentional. The most famous is Job's “bitter parody” of the psalmist's praise of God's concern for humanity in Psalm 8:5 to lament God's oppressive presence (Job 7:17-18).³⁷ Enough significant connections between Job and other biblical texts are evident in Job that careful readers should expect to find more as they read and then should pay attention to how Job and the friends are interpreting those earlier texts.

1.5. Mimesis. Fundamentally, mimesis means imitation, and the term may be used to describe various imitative aspects of literary works. One particular understanding of mimesis that contributes significantly to our understanding of Job is the way that literary works can be written to imitate life. The book of Job accomplishes this in various ways. The most striking are the length of the dialogue between Job and his friends, the confusion it engenders in the conflicting answers it provides, and the abrupt mood swings that pervade Job's responses, all of which reflect

³⁵Marko Juvan, *History and Poetics of Intertextuality*, trans. Timothy Pogačar (Indianapolis: Purdue University Press, 2008), 146.

³⁶See Patricia Tull Willey, *Remember the Former Things: The Recollection of Previous Texts in Second Isaiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1995).

³⁷For other examples, see Comments 2.2, “The Prologue and Genesis 2–3”; 3.2, “Job's Counter-cosmic Curse”; 5.1, “The Question of Integrity”; 5.5, “Parody”; 7.2, “Allusions to Adam”; and 7.3, “Allusions to Deuteronomy.”

the real experience of enduring suffering, which frequently feels long, confusing, and emotionally jarring.

The Job poet demonstrates impressive psychological insight, both in his depiction of Job's progressive responses to his suffering and the friends' attempts to comfort their companion, which devolves from education to accusation. Even the lack of a definitive explanation for Job's suffering in the book as a whole, along with God's refusal to clarify how it can be reconciled with his power and justice, represents well human experience in a fallen world, in which answers to these questions elude us and we are forced simply to trust God.³⁸

³⁸See Comment 9.2, "Why Doesn't God Explain?"

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