

## SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING JOB

Crucial for your reading of Job is to understand what the author is ultimately about, through both his arrangement of things and the content of the various speeches. His concern lies at two points: (1) the challenge to God by Satan (1:9): “Will [a person] fear God for nothing?” and (2) the question the author himself asks (28:12, 20): “Where can wisdom be found?” The issues are two: As creatures wholly dependent on God for well-being, will the godly love God for himself or only for his benefits? As creatures endowed with creaturely wisdom, are the godly willing to live within the bounds of creaturely wisdom (which is to be one who “fears God and shuns evil,” 1:8; 2:3; 28:28), or will they demand to participate as equals in God’s wisdom? Thus creaturely dependence and creaturely wisdom are the points at issue. What will bring these questions to the fore—and will dominate most of the human speeches—is the question of theodicy, namely, how to reconcile undeserved suffering with a God who is both almighty and just. Each of the participants has a significant role to play in this divine-human drama.

*Satan* plays the crucial role of putting God on trial, as it were, about the basic relationship between God and his human creatures—whether their reciprocal joy in each other is only the result of what the human creature gets out of it. Job’s wife plays Satan’s role on earth by urging Job to “curse God and die!” (2:9). You can imagine Satan whispering, “Do it, do it!” At issue is whether human beings love God, not for his own sake, but for what they get out of the relationship—which puts them in the driver’s seat. But whatever else Job does or says, he will not curse God, as God in his wisdom knows.

*Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar* play the (likewise) crucial role of one form of “conventional wisdom”—the unbending, have-it-all-together theologians who believe their wisdom sufficient to understand the ways of God in the world: God is both almighty and just; suffering is the result of human sin; therefore, there is no such thing as undeserved suffering, and Job should own up and confess his (hidden) sins so that he will be restored.

*Elihu* plays the role of the overconfidence of youth, who think they really are wiser than their elders. At the same time, ironically, he does in fact have an additional point to make that the other three do not—that beyond Job’s obviously deserved punishment there is a chastening value to such punishment that Job ought to be willing to accept.

*Job* plays the central role. For him it is all a frustrating enigma. He believes that his calamities ultimately come from God, yet there is no clear cause-and-effect correlation. But that is also his problem, since at issue for him is his integrity—recognized by God in the opening narrative. He is thus both the innocent sufferer and the one for whom the easy answers do not work anymore. Although he knows that no one is without sin (9:2), nonetheless, in his case, there is no correlation between the enormity of what has happened to him and his sin, and to confess sins not actually committed would be to lose his integrity—and thus take from him something far more than life itself. So he continually seeks an explanation for his suffering, and many of his speeches are pleas for the right to defend himself before God.

*Yahweh*, of course, plays the ultimate role. As the initiator of the story, he is thus in charge from the beginning, including getting Satan to think about Job—not the other way around. In

the end the tables are completely turned: (1) The question of where wisdom is found is answered not only in terms of God alone but also by silencing all human voices that would insist that God must explain himself to them, and (2) the question of whether one will serve God without receiving benefits is answered with a resounding yes!—the crucial role Job will play in the story. The brilliance of this book lies in the fact that although it looks as though it were a theodicy (human beings putting God on trial, insisting on explanations for his actions), it turns out in fact to be a theology (God putting human beings on trial as to whether they will trust him not only when they receive no immediate benefits but also when he does not give them the explanations they demand—and thus as to whether they will live within the bounds of creaturely wisdom). The whole point of the final speeches to Job is that God’s wisdom evidenced in the created order is both visible to the eye and yet beyond human understanding (with no explanations given). If that be so, then Job should trust God and his wisdom in the matter of his suffering as well—to which Job offers the ultimate response of humility and repentance.

*One final matter.* With regard to the long speeches by the five disputants (including Job), we need to be reminded that these are not to be thought of as a word from God. Even though Job is more on target than the others (42:8), they all say things that carry enough truth to be dangerous. But their speeches are not God’s words; he speaks only at the end, when all human voices have been silenced. Your concern as you read these dialogues is to be aware of their measure of truth, but also of their false suppositions.

You might try reading the poetry aloud. It is much too good for you to let your eye skip over it lightly. The speakers are wrestling with deep issues, and they also have a sense of the power of words, so they often both phrase and rephrase their thoughts. Note, for example, how often a point of comparison is made and then elaborated considerably, even though the elaboration is not strictly required to make the point at hand. Thus, in complaining that his friends are of no help (6:14–23), Job likens them to intermittent streams (v. 15), which he then elaborates richly and eloquently for several lines before returning to their non-help (v. 21). All of it is a wonderful read, even in the midst of so much pain and anguish.

How to Read the Bible Book by Book (pp. 122-125). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.