SJT 66(2): 174–191 (2013)
doi:10.1017/S0036930613000045

The Trials of Job: Relitigating Job's 'Good Case' in Christian Interpretation

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Abstract

Applying the legal metaphor integral to the book of Job, this article re-evaluates the evidence for Job's innocence (Job 42:7). After examining the conflicted testimony of the book itself, the article focuses on exemplars of Christian interpretation throughout history (the author of James, Ambrose, Gregory the Great, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Kierkegaard, and Barth) to discuss the various attempts made to come to terms with the final form of the book of Job, including its testimony to Job's complaints. Though some interpreters simply ignore the complaints in their attempts to hold up Job as an exemplar of patience, following, it is often argued, the example of James 5:11, for those who wrestle with Job's apparent blasphemy, three general approaches emerge. The first, denial, refuses to acknowledge Job's accusations of divine injustice. The second, mitigation, attempts to minimise the force of Job's arguments against God. The third, absolution, acknowledges Job's defiance of God but claims that this wrong is not beyond God's grace, and that it may in fact highlight it. However, none is able to satisfactorily reconcile Job's accusations with the innocent verdict God delivers at the end of the book (42:7) and affirm that Job has indeed said what is right about God. Even so, the broader biblical testimony offers evidence to exonerate Job by testifying to divine favourable response to and even initiation of complaint in a tradition of 'faithful revolt'. Job joins the heroes of Israelite faith, Abraham (Gen 18:17–33), Jacob (Gen 32:6–12, 22–31), and Moses (Exod 32:1–14), the psalmists who dare to cry 'Why?' and 'How long?' and prophets such as Amos (e.g. 7:1–9), Jeremiah (e.g. 20:7–18), and Habakkuk (e.g. 1:2–4, 12–17) in confronting God and demanding that the deity make things right. Jesus endorses this tradition through both his parables of the importunate friend (Luke 11:5–9) and the importunate widow (Luke 18:1–8) and his cry of dereliction from the cross. Instead of reading Job's complaints in line with this tradition, when these Christian interpreters grapple with Job's accusations against God, Job's 'friends' once again become his accusers due to their application of a limited view of God and God's relationship to humanity.

Keywords: complaint, innocence, interpretation, James, Job, patience.

The 'double jeopardy' defence, which protects a defendant from a second trial for the same charges following a legitimate acquittal or conviction, is found in courts across the world. However, this widely held human right has not been extended to the biblical character Job. Despite an acquittal handed down by no lesser judge than God himself (Job 42:7), Job has been convicted time and again by biblical interpreters. This prosecutorial proclivity suggests a general belief that Job's acquittal was illegitimate. Even double jeopardy laws allow for a retrial in the case of a mistrial caused by a failure to take all the relevant evidence into account. Thus, Nahum Glatzer suggests that throughout Jewish and Christian interpretation Job has generally been judged on the basis of his depiction in the frame narrative, but his complaints in the dialogue section have been ignored or, at best, read through the rosy lenses of the frame.[1] When these complaints are taken into account, according to the nearly universal view of interpreters throughout the centuries, Job is clearly guilty. Since such doubts about its legitimacy draw Job's acquittal into question, and since the legal metaphor is '[i]ntegral to the structure and coherence of the book of Job',[2] the trial deserves a legal review to determine whether it has indeed dealt adequately with all the available evidence.

Relitigating Job's case will require a legal standard, and for the purposes of this article I will employ that of Christian theology. I am particularly interested in the Christian understanding of Job because, as Gerhard von Rad observes, Christian theology has particularly struggled to appropriate the whole of Job. Though he acknowledges that 'the "story of Job's patience" (James 5:11) has, of course, always had its place in Christian preaching', the poetic dialogue has been largely overlooked. He writes:

> Undoubtedly, in the course of the centuries, an immense amount of interpretive work has been accomplished ... however, the theological impact of the book on the teaching of the church has obviously always been slight. Apart from a few isolated voices which, however, had no lasting effect ... one is faced with the fact that neither Job's questions nor his theology were really taken up and used by the church.[3]

[1] See Nahum N. Glatzer, 'Introduction: A Study of Job', in Nahum N. Glatzer (ed.), *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 11–12.

[2] Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985).

[3] Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), pp. 238–9.

Opening Statements

The evidence against Job consists of two primary items, both from the lips of Job himself. First are Job's complaints against God. Job launches an unparalleled volley of vehement vituperation at the Almighty. As exhibit A, to demonstrate the verbal violence throughout Job's speeches in the dialogue (e.g. 3:3–4; 9:17–18; 16:11–14; 19:10–12), I offer Job 10:1–3 as a characteristic complaint, with its implicit accusation of divine injustice:

> I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favour the schemes of the wicked?

Second, and even more incriminating, is Job's own confession. After implicitly admitting the wrongfulness of his speech by laying his hand on his mouth following the first divine speech (40:4–5), Job's contrition appears to become explicit in his response to God's second speech: 'Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes' (42:3, 5–6).[4]

Case closed? Perhaps, but on further inspection this evidence may not be as strong as it first appears. Job's 'repentance' should be thrown out, not because it was coerced by the verbal battering he receives during God's speeches,[5] but because its ambiguity leaves open the possibility that it is not a confession at all.[6] The object of the first verb in v. 6, מאס ('despise, reject'), is missing and has been supplied here by the NSRV. The form of the second verb, נִחַמְתִּי, could mean 'I am comforted' instead of 'I repent', thereby

[4] For H. L. Ginsberg, these confessions are enough to prove that the author of the dialogue (or an edition of the book very similar to it) did not hold that Job had spoken properly of God: H. L. Ginsberg, 'Job the Patient and Job the Impatient', in *Congress Volume Rome, 1968*, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p. 89.

[5] For a response to the view that God aims in the speeches to overpower Job and that Job is responding subversively, see Michael V. Fox, 'Job the Pious', *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117 (2005), pp. 352, 356.

[6] The same judgement applies to the possible admissions of sin in Job's speeches in the dialogue (e.g. 7:20–1; 10:14; 13:26). Job appears only to confess *hypothetical* sin, with the exception of some youthful peccadilloes, which he does not believe merit the affliction he is suffering (13:26). Having occurred prior to the dialogue itself, these youthful iniquities are not relevant to determining whether his complaints are sinful.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000045 Published online by Cambridge University Press

making Job's 'confession' not one of wrongdoing but of confidence.[7] This leaves the moral and religious standing of Job's complaints as the primary issue to be determined.

The case against Job also must answer the evidence for Job's innocence. This begins with the first words of the book, which declare Job 'blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil' (1:1). God twice confirms this ringing character endorsement (1:8; 2:3). This was, however, before the event in question. Nevertheless, when the Job of the prologue has all his children and possessions torn from him, he maintains his flawless character. Famously, he first replies, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD' (1:21). Then, after his health is destroyed as well, he asks, 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' to which the narrator responds, 'In all this Job did not sin with his lips' (2:10).

Thus, the Job of the prologue is innocent of any fault. With this all interpreters should agree. But it is with the beginning of the poetic dialogue in chapter 3 and Job's cursing of the day of his birth that this judgement becomes more difficult to sustain. And, as indicated above, the difficulties do not stop there but extend to a steady march of complaints and accusations against God. An initial point in defence of these complaints is that the book presents Job as having good reason to complain: he has been treated unjustly. In fact, the plot depends on Job getting precisely the opposite of what he deserves. Whatever the intent of presenting this unjust situation,[8] the fact that God was incited by Satan to 'destroy him for no reason' (2:3) certainly offers moral support to Job's impious indignation.

Job's complaints also are not the only evidence to be taken from Job's contributions to the dialogue. Intermingled with his complaints are Job's much-debated flights of faith. The same Job who calls God his enemy also appeals to his 'witness in heaven' (16:18–19) and declares his faith in his 'redeemer' (19:25–7). The heated debate over the meaning of these passages

[7] See e.g. David A. Clines's trans.: 'So I submit, and I accept consolation for my dust and ashes': *Job*. 3 vols. Word Biblical Commentary 17–18B (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1989, 2006, 2011), vol. 3, p. 1205.

[8] I am persuaded by those who argue it was intended primarily to set the stage for an exploration of the proper response to unjust suffering. See e.g. Georg Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob*, Kommentar zum Alten Testament 16 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), p. 549; Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis*, trans. Charles A. Muenchow (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 1–2, 59, n. 4; Raik Heckl, *Hiob: Vom Gottesfürchtigen zum Repräsentanten Israels*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 70 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 205, 215.

taints somewhat the evidence they provide, but they indicate, at least, that even interpreters who emphasise Job's patient faith need not dismiss the Job of the dialogues entirely.

Less frequently discussed are Job's own declarations of innocence. He complains that he must appeal for mercy though he is 'innocent' (9:15), and accuses God of searching for his sin, though the deity knows Job is 'not guilty' (10:6–7). Contending with his friends, he bellows, 'Far be it from me to say that you are right; until I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days' (27:5–6). To prove his innocence he proclaims a lengthy self-curse should he have violated any moral requirements (31:1–40). Though this litany of lawfulness does not include an explicit denial of the charge of improper speech towards God for which Job is often arraigned, he does deny ever having 'been false to God above' (31:28), probably in the context of the allure of worship of the sun and moon (vv. 26–7). This adamant affirmation of innocence would serve little purpose if he knew he was in the wrong in his speech towards God. Though declarations of innocence are admittedly weak evidence, these statements do demonstrate that Job did not think that his actions were illicit. Few rebels may believe that their actions are wrong, but even fewer would claim that those they are rebelling against would agree with them on this judgement.

Much stronger evidence is God's verdict. After Job's 'repentance' in 42:6, God's wrath is kindled, not at Job, but at Eliphaz and his two friends. They, God declares, 'have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has' (42:7). This divine verdict is repeated verbatim in the next verse, and then Job's compensation is determined: twice as much as he had before from the hand of God himself (42:10).

Witnesses for the Prosecution

God's innocent verdict does not make this an open-and-shut case. It could be argued that God's approval of Job's speech only includes Job's immediately preceding statements repenting (if understood that way) of all his previous complaints.[9] From a text-critical perspective, commentators have observed that that verdict appears in the prose sections of the book, which have long been considered the work of another author, cobbled together uncomfortably with the dialogue section and its petulant version of the Job character, and thus God's verdict could apply only to the submissive Job of the prose

[9] E.g. Fohrer, *Hiob*, p. 539.

prologue.[10] The straight-forward evidence provided by the book is therefore insufficient to come to a confident verdict.

Thus, the eyewitnesses must be called to the stand to give their version of events. They do little to help Job's case. First are Job's 'friends', who show themselves well deserving of the scare quotes often surrounding their title. They start off kindly enough, with their leader, Eliphaz, complimenting Job on the instruction, strength and support he has provided others in need (4:3–4), but he then chides, 'But now it has come to you, and you are impatient' (4:5). Though he immediately returns to praising Job (4:6), an antagonistic trajectory has been set that will lead to this same Eliphaz slandering Job with false charges of stripping the naked of their clothing, withholding food and water from the famished and fainting, and forsaking the needs of widows and orphans (22:6–9). Bildad, Zophar and, later, Elihu, join Eliphaz in this prosecutorial assault, and, together with him, accuse Job of anger (5:2; 18:4; 36:13), improperly arguing his case (15:5–6, 12), ignorance (e.g. 11:7–9; 15:7–10; 34:35), stupidity (11:12), defying God (15:13, 25–6; 34:37), threatening worship of the divinity (15:4), and outright iniquity (e.g. 11:6, 14; 22:5–18, 23). Some of these charges are implicit, veiled in warnings about the fate of the wicked, for example, but their cumulative message is clear: in the view of the 'friends', Job's behaviour in the dialogues is an impious and completely inappropriate response to God in the midst of affliction. Instead, the proper response would be to acknowledge the innate sinfulness of the human condition (4:17; 15:14–16; 25:4–6), the inevitability of suffering (5:7), the insignificance of humans before God (22:2; 33:12; 35:5–8), and the impossibility of holding the deity to account (36:23), and then to trust God by committing one's cause to the Almighty (e.g. 5:8; 8:5; 11:13), receiving the instructional purpose of divine affliction (5:17; 36:15), and affirming God's justice (8:3; 34:10–12; 36:5–12), in which he delivers the just (8:6, 20) and destroys the wicked (8:13; 18:5–21; 20:5–29).

The arguments of the 'friends' seem to get their own divine stamp of approval when God appears in the whirlwind and bombards Job with a barrage of rhetorical questions. God begins by accusing, 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' (38:3), before unleashing a torrent of rhetorical questions, drowning Job, in his comparative ignorance and powerlessness, under a cascade of images of God's creation, from hungry young ravens (38:41) to the indomitable leviathan (40:25–41:26 [41:1–34]). The divine rebuke is most explicit at the beginning of the second speech: 'Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that

[10] E.g. Ginsberg, 'Job the Patient'.

you may be justified?' (40:8). Job's complaints in the dialogue seem to have done just that. Is he guilty as charged?

The testimony of the broader biblical canon could be called upon to support these condemnations. The most notorious rejection of complaining against God is found in his reaction to the Israelites' grumbling in the wilderness. In Num 14:27–30, these complaints are offered as the reason the exodus generation will not live to see the promised land. This text may have inspired the command in Philippians to 'do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent' (2:14), which uses a related word (γογγυσμός) to that which the LXX uses to describe the Israelites' complaining (γογγύζω).

Witnesses from Christian Interpretation

The broader canonical witness does not leave Job without a defence, however. Ezekiel holds him up as an exemplar of righteousness, along with Noah and Daniel (or Dan'el) (Ezek 14:14, 20), though this was probably written before Job's dialogue and so does not take the force of his complaints into account. In the New Testament, James explicitly endorses Job's behaviour as an example for suffering Christians. He writes, according to the KJV, 'Behold, we count them happy which endure (τοὺς ὑπομείναντας). Ye have heard of the patience (ὑπομονήν) of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy' (Jas 5:11).

This KJV translation spawned the common phrase 'the patience of Job', but the apparent incongruity between James' positive depiction of Job's behaviour and that recorded in the book of Job has inspired a widespread view that he must not have had the biblical Job in mind, at least not the Job of the dialogue. Ginsberg, for example, 'building on this phrase', divides the book into two main strata: the Book of Job the Patient and the Book of Job the Impatient.[11] A good case can be made that James is instead referring to the Job tradition depicted in the Testament of Job, where Job's ὑπομονή is emphasised.[12]

However, James' opinion of Job is fully reconcilable with the biblical account of his behaviour, including his complaints in the dialogue. As Christopher Seitz[13] observes, the KJV may contribute to the apparent

[11] Ibid., p. 88.

[12] Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 187.

[13] Christopher R. Seitz, 'The Patience of Job in the Epistle of James', in Rüdiger Bartelmus et al. (eds), *Konsequente Traditionsgeschichte*, Orbis biblicus et orientalis 126 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), pp. 378–80.

difficulty by translating ὑπομονή as 'patience', when it means something closer to 'endurance'.[14] Though 'patience' in common parlance may suggest 'bearing pains or trials calmly or without complaint', or, as Ginsberg glosses it, 'unflinching loyalty to God under unimaginably severe trials', the definition of 'endurance', Seitz claims, involves 'commitment through time without specific reference to emotional state, apart from the necessity of fortitude. Complaining or the lack thereof is not relevant unless it should slacken the ability to endure and hold fast to the end.' Because of the importance of the temporal dimension of this definition, Seitz notes that it does not in fact apply well to the Job of the prologue considered in isolation because he immediately expresses his acceptance of his affliction, and instead better describes the Job of the dialogue, which suggests, 'James was speaking of the Job of the whole book, especially its central section, and certainly not just the Prologue Job'.

James is not the only one in Christian tradition to speak positively of Job and, though Glatzer accurately observes that most of these interpreters employ various techniques to avoid direct confrontation with the bluntness of Job's complaints, it would be unfair to characterise them as merely using the frame narrative as an 'escape clause'.[15] A representative sample of several well-known readings of Job over the centuries will demonstrate the way Christian interpreters have struggled to come to grips with the tensions in Job's response to his suffering.

Whereas most patristic writers, perhaps with James' words in mind, interpreted Job simply as a paragon of patience, Ambrose (339–97), Bishop of Milan, was one of the few to reflect at length on his complaints.[16] He wrote in his 'The Prayer of Job and David', 'Many indeed have complained over human weakness and frailty, but the holy Job and holy David have done so in a fashion superior to the rest'. Whereas Job 'is straightforward, forceful, sharp, and displays a loftier style, as one who has been provoked by severe afflictions', David, by contrast, 'is ingratiating and calm and mild, of a gentler disposition'.[17] For example, he quotes 10:1–3 mentioned above and then continues on to v. 7, where Job declares, 'For you know that I have not acted impiously; but who can deliver out of your hands?' and then Ambrose

[14] Seitz acknowledges this may be more due to modern understandings of the meaning of 'patience' than a failure on the part of the translators.

[15] Glatzer, 'Study of Job', p. 11.

[16] J. R. Baskin, 'Job as Moral Exemplar in Ambrose', *Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (1981), pp. 222–31.

[17] Ambrose, 'The Prayer of Job and David', in *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works*, trans. Michael P. McHugh, Fathers of the Church 65 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1971), p. 389.

comments, 'Great is the faith, great the power of conscience, to summon God as a witness to its intent. Job does not deny what comes from the human condition; he rejects what comes from unholiness and confesses what comes from weakness'.[18] Referring to the latter part of chapter 10, where Job describes God's destruction of his creation in more detail, Ambrose remarks, 'How strong was the weight of the charge that God made man with His own hands!'[19] However, instead of exploring the ramifications of such an accusation against God, Ambrose sees it as an opportunity for the revelation of God's grace, which 'is made manifest by the favour of an eternal work in us and by the kindness of a heavenly protection'. Even when Job 'laments the circumstances of such a life', as Ambrose paraphrases Job 17:1–2, 11, Ambrose claims that 'he does not detract from God's judgment at any point, for he knows that the depth of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God is profound and that His judgments are incomprehensible and His ways inscrutable'. Thus, though Ambrose quotes several of Job's most vigorous complaints, he refuses to consider them actual challenges to God's behaviour.

Gregory the Great (540–604) also presents Job as a moral exemplar in his *Morals on the Book of Job*. Job is meant to demonstrate proper patience in the midst of afflictions,[20] and Gregory argues Job is a type not only of the Church, but of Christ, in the suffering he endures.[21] Though Gregory's allegorical hermeneutic allows his exegesis to wander far from the plain meaning of the text, he does not ignore Job's complaints completely. At 10:3, when Job accuses God of favouring the wicked, Gregory acknowledges the charge but claims it is 'so said by way of interrogation, that it is denied. As though it were in plain terms: "Thou, that art supremely good, I know dost not hold it good to oppress the poor man by calumny. And therefore I know that that is not unjust that I am suffering, and I am the more grieved, that I cannot tell the causes of its justness"'.[22] Though this could be seen as a creative attempt to skirt an exegetical difficulty, it does helpfully recognise the possible rhetorical purpose of Job's complaints. Job's apparent denial of God's justice may actually be assuming God's justice in order to accuse,

[18] Ibid., p. 341.

[19] Ibid., p. 342.

[20] Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, ed. C. Marriott, trans. anonymous, 4 vols, A Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church 18, 21, 23, 31 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844–50); trans. of *Moralia in Job*, preface, 6.13, vol. 1, p. 25.

[21] Gregory, *Morals*, 23.1.2, vol. 3, pp. 3–4. See Kevin L. Hester, *Eschatology and Pain in St. Gregory the Great: The Christological Synthesis of Gregory's Morals on the Book of Job*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2007), p. 57.

[22] Gregory, *Morals*, 9.46.70, vol. 1, p. 546.

though Gregory here sees Job directing this accusation at himself instead of God.

Despite Gregory's extravagant praise of Job, he cannot avoid claiming that Job had some sin of which he needed to repent.[23] And Gregory's interpretation does seem to conform to Glatzer's accusation of reading the Job of the dialogue through the lens of the narrative frame. He consistently denies that Job actually contends with God. For example, to Elihu's charge that Job is condemning God's justice in 34:17 Gregory creatively responds that Job does not deserve this criticism, for he had not condemned God, 'but *humbly enquired*, when involved in grief, why he had been smitten when without sin'.[24]

Writing several centuries later, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) offers an explanation of Job's complaints somewhat similar to the one Gregory takes to 10:3.[25] He argues that Job's speech about God comes in the context of a debate with his friends, and thus his questions, apparently directed at God, are, in fact, intended rhetorically, not to question God, but to confront his friends' deficient theology, which does not include a belief in the afterlife.[26] Therefore, Job's questions do not actually challenge God's wisdom, omnipotence, or justice.[27] This logical sleight of hand allows Aquinas to claim that Job does not explicitly sin in what he says, but Aquinas stops short of exonerating Job altogether. He claims Job 'has the right opinion about divine providence' but was 'immoderate in his manner of speaking', and thus, 'scandal was produced from it in the hearts of the others when they thought that he was not showing due reverence to God', leading God to

[23] Gregory, *Morals*, 32.3.4, vol. 4, p. 510. Here he is commenting on Job's first 'confession' in 40:5.

[24] Gregory, *Morals*, 24.24.51, vol. 3, p. 89. Emphasis mine.

[25] Thomas Aquinas, *The Literal Exposition on Job: A Scriptural Commentary Concerning Providence*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe, trans. Anthony Damico, Classics in Religious Studies 7 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).

[26] To demonstrate this deficiency, Job's complaints indicate how unjust the world *would* be without the doctrine of immortality. Susan Elizabeth Schreiner, '"Why Do the Wicked Live?": Job and David in Calvin's Sermons on Job', in Leo G. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin (eds), *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1992), p. 134. Thus, for Aquinas, 10:3 contributes to Job's argument in the chapter, which is intended 'to induce his opponents necessarily to posit another life in which just men are rewarded and evil men are punished, since if that position is not posited, no reason can be given for the trial of just men, who, it is certain, are sometimes troubled in this world'. Aquinas, *Literal Exposition*, pp. 185, 193.

[27] Aquinas, *Literal Exposition*, p. 156. See William W. Young III, 'The Patience of Job: Between Providence and Disaster', *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007), p. 599.

criticise Job.[28] It is not of blasphemy, but the appearance of blasphemy, and the potential that has for provoking impiety in others, that Job is guilty. With this interpretative move Aquinas 'downplays, and perhaps even effaces, the possibility that Job is questioning God directly'.[29] At least for Gregory, Job was questioning God, even though Gregory imagined him doing so humbly in contrast to the plain meaning of the text.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) offers a new approach to reconciling the patient Job of the prose with the impatient Job of the poetry which embraces both. Though he did not write extensively on the book, in his preface to his translation of it he writes that it is 'written for our comfort' because it demonstrates that 'God allows even his great saints to falter, especially in adversity'.[30] He explains:

> For before Job comes into fear of death, he praises God at the theft of his goods and the death of his children. But when death is in prospect and God withdraws himself, Job's words show what kind of thoughts a man – however holy he may be – holds toward God: he thinks that God is not God, but only a judge and wrathful tyrant, who storms ahead and cares nothing about the goodness of a person's life. This is the finest part of this book.

That Luther can both claim that Job falters in his behaviour in the dialogue (elsewhere he asks, 'Did not that holy man fall horribly?'[31]) and simultaneously declare this 'the finest part of this book' is a novel interpretative move. Instead of ignoring or explaining away Job's defiance of God, Luther welcomes it as evidence of the *simul iustus, simul peccator* relationship humans may have with God.[32] Rather than an endorsement of Job's complaints, Luther's argument depends on Job being wrong in challenging God. But, for Luther, Job is right even as he is wrong.

Job is also both right and wrong in the interpretation offered by John Calvin (1509–64) in his *Sermons on Job*. He claims the key to the whole book is understanding that 'in all this disputation, Job maintains a good case, and, on the contrary, his adversaries maintain an evil case', while acknowledging that 'Job maintaining a good quarrel, did handle it ill, and

[28] Aquinas, *Literal Exposition*, p. 415; cf. 441.
[29] Young, 'Patience of Job', p. 600.
[30] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 'Preface to Job', vol. 35, p. 252.
[31] *Luther's Works*, on Gal 3:1, vol. 26, p. 194.
[32] See *Luther's Works*, on Gal 2:18, vol. 27, pp. 230–1.

that the other setting forth an unjust matter, did convey it well'.[33] Job's 'good case' consists in his knowledge that God does not punish people according to the measure of their sins, but has secret judgements, for which believers must wait for divine explanation. But his ill handling of this case consists in his 'excessive and outrageous talk' which makes it 'seem that he would even resist God'.[34] Thus, in his sermon on Job 10:1–6,[35] Calvin claims, 'We may well use the words that are reported here, in good sort. But we see how Job utters his passions with which he was carried away.' Calvin would prefer his congregants to speak to God 'with all lowliness'. Though Job in this passage confesses a temptation to believe God takes the side of the wicked (v. 3), he also declares it 'to be impossible that God should not be utterly against evil, because he naturally hates it: otherwise he should be obliged to deny himself'. Though Calvin forestalls the force of this argument by making Job's affirmation of God's righteous behaviour explicit, he identifies the same rhetorical technique in Job's complaints as Gregory, in which, Calvin claims, 'Job speaks of the nature of God, even to the intent to obtain his request'.

With Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), we encounter the first challenge to the conviction in Christian interpretation of Job that humble submission is the proper response towards suffering. He proclaims that the 'secret in Job, the vital force, the nerve, the idea, is that Job, despite everything, is in the right'.[36] The young man in Kierkegaard's *Repetitions* observes that Job said far more than the pious submissive phrases for which he is famous:

> No . . . you became the voice of the suffering, the cry of the grief-stricken, the shriek of the terrified, and a relief to all who bore their torment in silence, a faithful witness to all the affliction and laceration there can be in a heart, an unfailing spokesman who dared to lament 'in bitterness of soul' and to strive with God. Why is this kept secret? Woe to him who . . . would cunningly cheat the sorrowing of sorrow's temporary comfort in airing its sorrow and 'quarreling with God.'[37]

For Kierkegaard's young man (whose views I will assume Kierkegaard shared, though we cannot be sure), Job's complaints need not be read in a

[33] John Calvin, *Sermons on Job* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993); repr. of *Sermons on Job*, trans. Arthur Golding (London: George Bishop, 1574), p. 1. In quoting from these sermons I have modernised the 1574 trans.

[34] Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, p. 1.

[35] Ibid., pp. 175–7.

[36] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings 6 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 207.

[37] Ibid., p. 197.

tone-deaf way as humble inquiry, explained away as directed at himself or the friends instead of God, declared evidence of his justified sinfulness, or decried as the ill handling of a good case. Instead, he claims, the fear of God is in Job's heart even when he complains; so Kierkegaard commands, 'Complain – the Lord is not afraid, he can certainly defend himself'. Job's complaints, in fact, give God the opportunity to defend himself, and so Job is ordered, 'Speak up, raise your voice, speak loudly'.[38]

However, even Kierkegaard, the strongest advocate for Job's complete innocence, wilts under cross-examination. He claims the divine speeches are a censure of Job, one that proved him to be in the wrong, and did so 'eternally, for there is no higher court than the one that judged him'.[39] That Kierkegaard claims Job was also proved to be in the right 'by being proved to be in the wrong *before* God' only brings his view into the realm of Luther's Job as *simul iustus, simul peccator*.

This Lutheran understanding of Job is developed even more fully by Karl Barth (1886–1968) in his *Church Dogmatics*. Barth discusses Job as a type of the 'True Witness'. As such, Barth follows Gregory in arguing that Job is a type of Christ.[40] He calls Job's complaint 'honourable' because 'it is that of the form of obedience appropriate to the partial action of his history with God'. In fact, Barth claims, 'He would not have been obedient if he had not raised this complaint and carried it through to the bitter end in spite of all objections'.[41] Job 10:3 serves as one example of Job's appeals against the 'alien form' in which he encounters God.[42] His right was constituted by 'the fact that as he hoped and was certain that God would reveal Himself afresh, that he called on God to do this in despair and waited for an answer'.[43] However, echoing Luther, Barth remarks, 'Job – *simul iustus et peccator* – is right in all his sayings as the servant of Yahweh, and in none of them as fallible man'.[44] He disputes Kierkegaard's claim that Job's complaints are thoroughly good (though, as mentioned above, Kierkegaard tempers that

[38] Ibid., p. 198.
[39] Ibid., p. 212.
[40] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 3/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), p. 388.
[41] Ibid., pp. 405–6.
[42] Ibid., pp. 402–3.
[43] Ibid., p. 427.
[44] Ibid., p. 406. By referring to Job's 'sayings' here, Barth may be attempting to avoid a weakness of the Lutheran understanding of Job as a justified sinner, since God does not merely approve of Job as a person in 42:7, but explicitly mentions his *speech*. Susannah Ticciati argues, however, that Barth's view does not do justice to Job as a human being within history, instead making his obedience 'reducible to the status conferred upon him as one eschatologically elected and justified by God'. Susannah Ticciati, *Job and*

view himself) by arguing, 'Ungodliness does not cease to be such because it is ungodliness in what is good'.[45] However, Barth ends up sounding very similar to Kierkegaard when he claims that God puts Job in the wrong while at the same time showing him to be right because it is God who puts him in his place.[46] He concludes that '*in spite of* all the wrong which Job has committed and confessed, God recognises him as His servant who has remained faithful to Him and proved his faithfulness afresh in this very admission'.[47]

Despite their efforts, these interpreters cannot seem to exculpate Job of that 'in spite of'. Though they all desire to exalt him as a moral exemplar, probably due to the influence of the James passage, none can treat his behaviour in the dialogue as completely exemplary given his vehement complaints against God. All these interpreters share the assumption that challenging God is wrong. They take three basic approaches to dealing with the fact that this is precisely what Job seems to do in the dialogue. The first is to largely ignore or deny Job's challenges. Many have accused James of doing this, but it is most explicit in Gregory, though even he thinks Job has done something of which he should repent, and Ambrose takes a similar approach. The second approach is to mitigate Job's challenges in some way. Thus, Aquinas claims Job is actually directing his questions rhetorically at his friends and Calvin argues Job, with his excessive language, is merely improperly carrying out a 'good case'. The third approach is to acknowledge Job's defiance of God, but claim that it is not a wrong that is beyond God's graceful absolution and, as Luther, Kierkegaard and Barth emphasise, that it may in fact highlight that grace. Within these three interpreters, there is some difference of opinion about just how wrong the challenges are, with Kierkegaard, on one pole, lauding Job for manifesting 'the love and trust that are confident that God can surely explain everything if one can only speak with him',[48] and Luther, on the other, claiming that Job fell horribly. Barth stands somewhere in between, suggesting, perhaps with Luther in mind, that Job 'stumbled, but he did not fall'.[49]

Biblical Witnesses

But are these approaches necessary? Are these interpreters judging Job according to a legitimate code of conduct? A parade of biblical witnesses

the Disruption of Identity: Reading beyond Barth (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), pp. 4, 7.

[45] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3/1, pp. 406–7.

[46] Ibid., p. 427.

[47] Ibid., p. 433. Emphasis mine.

[48] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p. 208.

[49] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3/1, p. 433.

suggest that challenging God is not the wrong, the stumble or fall in faith, these interpreters think, but that in certain circumstances, it may indeed be not only right but the consummate confident stride of faith into the unknown. Job joins the heroes of Israelite faith, Abraham (Gen 18:17–33), Jacob (Gen 32:6–12, 22–31), Moses (Exod 32:1–14), the psalmists who dare to cry 'Why?' and 'How long?' and prophets such as Amos (e.g. 7:1–9), Jeremiah (e.g. 20:7–18) and Habakkuk (e.g. 1:2–4, 12–17), in confronting God and demanding that he make things right.[50] In his struggles with God, Job reflects a tradition 'at the heart of Israel's faith',[51] one which embodies a central theological principle in Israelite religion, perhaps even, considering the meaning given the nation's name in Gen 32:29 [28], the defining principle. This broad tradition challenges an easy equivalence between conflict with God and rebellion against him. Complaint could apparently be fully consistent with great faith, probably because these challenges reflected a belief that God is good, powerful and loving enough to act justly. Confronting God on the basis of his character may even be the consummate act of piety because it expresses faith in God even when his current actions seem to militate against it. Thus, Gregory may be right when he identifies the rhetorical message of Job's accusation in 10:3 as 'so said by way of interrogation, that it is denied' because Job uses the assumption of God's justice to accuse him of injustice. The difference would be that, though Gregory has Job put the blame on his own ignorance – he just fails to understand how God's actions are indeed just – this tradition suggests that God can consider, and even allow temporarily, injustice which he must turn away from or rectify.

This broader understanding of faithful response to God in the midst of affliction is not restricted to the Old Testament. As a surprise witness, Jesus testifies to this same conception of what could be called 'faithful revolt'. Janzen links Job's persistent complaints with the parables of the importunate friend (Luke 11:5–9) and the importunate widow (Luke 18:1–8).[52] In the former parable, a man gains the three loaves he needs to entertain a friend through the 'impudence' of asking at midnight (Luke 11:8), and in the latter, an indefatigable widow wins justice from an unjust judge, leading to Jesus' observation: 'And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to

[50] See Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt: Exploring an Old Testament Theme* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

[51] Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3rd edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 34. Similarly, Patrick D. Miller, 'Prayer and Divine Action', in Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal (eds), *God in the Fray* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 211–32.

[52] J. Gerald Janzen, *Job*, Interpretation (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 159.

him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?' (Luke 18:7). Not only does he thereby endorse complaint to God, but he also acknowledges that there may be periods when believers face injustice which deserves to be rectified, not submissively accepted. Jesus concludes the parable, 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (Luke 18:8). These pleas for God to rectify injustice are not evidence of a lack of confidence in his sovereign control but of faith in it.

Jesus puts this teaching into practice when he echoes the words of psalmic lament on the cross, crying, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34; cf. Ps 22:2[1]). In Revelation, other martyrs similarly draw on the lament tradition. They cry out, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?' (Rev 6:9–10; cf. Pss 74:10; 94:3).

Closing Arguments

Thus, the wider biblical witness suggests Job's rebellion in the dialogue against the apparent injustice of God may be interpreted as evidence, not of 'courage to doubt' (*pace* Davidson[53]), but of the courage to believe in God despite his experience of divine antagonism. It demonstrates a vision of God which Job deems it worth fighting God for.[54] The biblical examples suggest that Job should not be condemned, and that lament, complaint and argument with God are acceptable avenues of interaction with the deity. In fact, several of these examples show God inviting this kind of dialogue. God decides not to hide the decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah from his chosen servant Abraham (Gen 18:17–19) and thereby invites the challenge, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' (Gen 18:25). The mysterious figure appears to Jacob, which enables the nightlong wrestling match (Gen 32:24–31). God tells Moses of the divine plan to destroy the people (Exod 32:7–14). Even though God commands Moses to leave him alone to carry out this plan, if he was concerned Moses' intervention might divert him from his purpose, he could have simply withheld it from Moses. God apparently wanted to change his mind. God is the one who calls the prophets, initiating the relationship which often involves them challenging the deity. In Amos 7, God shows the prophet his planned destruction before allowing Amos'

[53] See Davidson, *Courage to Doubt*.

[54] Thus, even the widespread use of parody in the book, such as the parody of Ps 8:5[4] in Job 7:17–18, can be interpreted, not as an indication of scepticism, but of faith. See Will Kynes, 'Beat your Parodies into Swords, and your Parodied Books into Spears: A New Paradigm for Parody in the Hebrew Bible', *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011), pp. 303–6.

objections to cause him to relent. Jesus, in his parables, commands believers to ask so that they may receive (Luke 11:9) and to cry to God day and night so that God might grant justice (Luke 18:8).

These examples of successful interventions to change God's ways invite the question: if Job had not complained as he did, would he have been restored? Would the submissive Job of the prologue still be sitting on the ash heap? We cannot know, but the biblical testimony suggests that Job's complaints, with all their blustering, could be an integral part of the divine plan, in which God draws God's servants into dialogue, even initiates arguments and wrestling matches (physical and metaphorical), which then alter divine behaviour. Job is not wrong to ask, even to complain. Interpreters may condemn his manner of asking, but that is a quantitative and not a qualitative distinction, and one which depends on a subjective and relative judgement over just how rhetorically forceful an acceptable request to God can be. Though Job's rhetoric takes the complaint tradition to the extreme, as he complains 'in a fashion superior to the rest', as Ambrose puts it, he still fits within it.

If Job has a vision of God which he deems worth fighting God for, the friends have a much smaller understanding of God which they are only willing to fight Job for. Might Job's interpreters also suffer from a similarly small vision of God, which prevents them from including Job's defiance within acceptable expressions of faith? Christian interpreters also fall into the trap of defending God. Among other things, they echo the friends' explanation of Job's pain as pedagogic,[55] and accuse him of impatience,[56] immodest speech,[57] threatening the worship of God,[58] taking part in the general fallibility of humanity,[59] and outright guilt.[60] Job could take the accusation God directs at him and turn it on both his friends and these interpreters: 'Will you condemn me so that God may be justified?'

The failure of Job's 'friends' to account for the suffering of the righteous Job is often attributed to the overly strict application of the doctrine of retribution. But for Job's Christian interpreters, the failure to account for the complaints of the righteous Job appears to be due to an overly strict application of the doctrine of providence. Trusting God's goodness and control of the world cannot mean that believers will not encounter injustice, or else, as in Job's case, there would be no opportunity to express faith, and it need not require passive submission to the afflictions which tear at human

[55] E.g. Ambrose, 'Prayer', p. 374; Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, p. 191.
[56] E.g. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3/1, p. 406.
[57] E.g. Aquinas, *Literal Exposition*, p. 415; Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, p. 1.
[58] E.g. Aquinas, *Literal Exposition*, pp. 415, 441.
[59] E.g. Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, p. 248; Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3/1, p. 406.
[60] E.g. Luther, *Luther's Works*, on Gal 3:1, vol. 26, pp. 193–4.

existence. Instead, trusting that God is good and powerful enough to remove that injustice can engender the opposite reaction: an appeal to those very traits to remove the affliction and make the situation right. The character of Job offers both of those reactions, and he is not alone in doing so.[61] If God chooses to respond to these appeals with a change in plan, averting disaster or righting a wrong, it need not mean that human intervention has thwarted God's sovereign plan, but could suggest that God has included humanity within the carrying out of his purpose. As Calvin, no lacklustre advocate for God's sovereignty, observes, God uses means, even human means, in his providential direction of events.[62] And these means include prayer and even, apparently, argument.[63] That God argues back only legitimates Job's behaviour and further proves this Job, though libelled and slandered by the tradition which sets out to defend him, to be in the right.

[61] For the similar combination of responses to God in Abraham and Job, see Lennart Boström, 'Patriarchal Models for Piety', in David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (eds), *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000). Note also David's response to his child's illness in 2 Sam 12:22–3. He acts in the hope of changing God's ways, but upon seeing that they will not change, he submits.

[62] See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols (London: James Clarke, 1957), 1.17.4, vol. 1, p. 187.

[63] Nicholas Adams, 'The Goodness of Job's Bad Arguments', *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 4 (2004): http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume4/number1/ssr04-01-e03.html.