

Dust and ashes

by [Bruce van Voorst](#) in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Job (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary)

Samuel E. Balentine

Smyth & Helwys

The book of Job is one of the most beautiful and perplexing books of the Bible. G. K. Chesterton said, “The *Iliad* is great because all of life is a battle; the *Odyssey* is great because all of life is a journey; the Book of Job is great because all of life is a riddle.”

Thomas Carlyle wrote, “A Noble Book; all men’s Book! It is our first, oldest statement of the never-ending Problem—man’s destiny, and God’s ways with him here on this earth.” John Calvin, while rejecting Job’s challenge to God, preached 159 sermons on the book in a single year.

Yet there has been sweeping disagreement over what the book says. Virtually every verse in the book—including some of the most decisive ones—has been subjected to scholarly debate. Some exegetes conclude that whole sections, including the prologue and epilogue, are add-ons by scribes eager to temper Job’s brusque vilification of God. Others see the so-called Wisdom section (chapter 28) as totally unrelated to the original text. A majority of interpreters view the lengthy intervention by Elihu as an annoying addendum. In recent years scholars like Carol Newsom, Norman Habel, Edwin Good and Robert Gordis—to mention only a tiny fraction—have made splendid contributions to unraveling Job’s mysteries. Given this volume of scholarship, it might be asked whether there’s anything more to say about Job.

Samuel Balentine, professor of Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, crafts powerful and imaginative understandings of some of the most central—and controversial—matters of the book’s theology. Walter Brueggemann, author of *The Theology of the Old Testament*, calls Balentine’s achievement breathtaking: “There is not a page of this commentary on which I was not led, in generative ways, to where I had not previously been.”

Among the most salient points is Balentine’s forthright analysis of the stunning revelation by God (Job 2:3) that he entered the capricious wager with Satan “for no reason.” God’s often overlooked (or intentionally ignored) revelation is compounded by his remark to Satan in the same verse that he put Job, who is “blameless and without sin,” through hell because “you incited me against him.” Balentine is clearly deeply distressed at this passage, and his thorough analysis of it (he refers to it 74 times) contrasts markedly with most commentators’ failure even to mention the passage.

Balentine concedes the inescapable conclusion: even though Job’s three friends argue passionately throughout on God’s behalf for the traditional doctrine of retributive justice, the entire book is a repudiation of that doctrine. It describes God’s seemingly unjust and capricious treatment of the sinless Job, of whom God says early on, “There is no one like him on earth” (1:8).

Given that Job, unlike Adam, is free of sin, Balentine concludes, “The presumptive causal connection between sin and misfortune does not apply in his case.” Balentine describes this as the problem of the book. The answer to the entire theodicy issue is simply that the connection between righteousness and suffering cannot be established.

Balentine is sensitive to the fact that even though the ways of God are incomprehensible to humans, the doctrinal thunderbolt “for no reason” raises enormous obstacles for Christians. God’s horrific, undeserved treatment of Job—who of course knows nothing of the wager—raises fundamental questions about the nature of God. God’s affliction of Job leaves humankind “to wonder if God can be trusted.” Humankind—and that is who Job represents—is “left more vexed than satisfied.” And then the ultimate question: “Even if Job has passed God’s test for fidelity, we must wonder if God has not failed Job’s test for what is required for God.” Balentine offers no rationale for God’s action. The book of Job, he writes, “asks us to think about possibilities that conventional expectations may long since have discarded.”

Balentine’s candid analysis of the character of God continues in his extensive treatment of fear as a factor in the human relationship to God. Balentine cites multiple entries on Job’s love of God, but just as many on fear. “‘Fearing God’ and ‘turning from evil’ are the virtues that define Job’s prologue piety (1:1, 8; 2:3).” Phrases not unlike those used by the angel in describing Abraham in Genesis (22:12) occur repeatedly throughout the book, especially in the focus on God’s awesome power (9:5-7), which Job perceives to be “destructive and brutal. . . . He senses that God’s power is motivated by Anger.” Job divulges that even before his affliction, during the golden years of his prosperity, he feared disaster. His affliction: “Every terror that haunted me has caught up with me, and all that I feared has come upon me” (3:25). Balentine writes, “It looks like one who lives in persistent ‘fear’ and ‘dread’ (v. 25) as S. Michell has put it, like one ‘whose nightmares have come to life.’ In the end, it looks like one whose life is defined completely by negatives and absences: there is unease, no ‘quiet,’ no ‘rest.’ There is only turmoil (v. 26). The only place where this terror will cease, as Job has already discerned, is in Sheol—and even the hope for Sheol is vain.”

Balentine also examines Satan’s charge that Job loves God only because God has provided well for him. “Has not Job good reason to be God-fearing?” Satan asks sarcastically, “Have you not hedged him round on every side with your protection,

him and his family and all his possessions?” (1:9-10b). This extraordinarily provocative question goes unanswered (except that in the epilogue Job is indeed recompensed “twice as much as he had before” for his loyalty—which would seem to confirm Satan’s charge).

Balentine’s commentary is further distinguished by his efforts to take seriously the speeches of Job’s three “friends,” and especially the interloper, Elihu. He’s aware that the friends are widely dismissed as parroting doctrinal generalities. Although he concedes that Elihu is almost certainly an add-on (“a measure of comic relief, [who] offers an easing of tensions that may be compared to the roles of the *alazon* or buffoon in classical Greek comedy”), Balentine makes a determined effort to probe his arguments. After all, he points out, the angry young Elihu speaks more uninterrupted lines (159) in the book than anybody else except God.

Elihu (whose speeches were discovered in the caves at Qumran) not only presents himself as a critic of the three friends, but he has the effrontery to offer his views as if they came from God himself. Overlooking the bombast, Balentine, while acknowledging that Elihu’s discourse “increases, rather than diminishes,” the tensions of the book, still finds merit in Elihu’s explanation of Job’s suffering: the real answer to suffering is human pride. “God uses dreams and visions to warn people like Job against the disposition to be proud. If they do not understand the first message, then God will try to get their attention by a second, and decidedly more painful, means of communication.”

Traditionally the great Jewish sin was for a person to try to subvert the gap between God and humankind. Elihu is angry with Job “not because he has cried out in his suffering, but because he has cried out against God.” In Elihu’s world, challenging God is unthinkable. Balentine emphasizes that Job doesn’t listen to Elihu.

Still, Balentine senses in Elihu more than mere anger at Job. He bases this on a conviction of the universality of suffering—that “with so much suffering in this world, it is little wonder that most, if not all persons, feel themselves to be only spectators.” He suggests that for all his bluster, Elihu recognizes that his own well-being “is informed and defined by collective values that have a direct bearing on how every individual lives.” In a word, Elihu is far from being as self-confident as his nonstop barrage of Job suggests. Balentine quotes with strong approval Martha Nussbaum: “Blame is a valuable antidote to helplessness.”

Balentine again goes his singular way by finding in God's two "whirlwind" speeches a much more upbeat interpretation than do most scholars, who generally deprecate the speeches as a denial of humankind's right to question God. Surely God's "gird thy loins" is hardly an invitation for a friendly conversation.

Balentine sees in God's theophany speeches an effort to reach out and embrace Job. Job is not challenging God, but only asking for justice and an understanding of suffering. Balentine argues that the speeches show that God "takes extraordinary measures" to discuss with Job "the intricate details of creation's day-to-day rhythms." Balentine finds in God's insistence that Job speak up evidence that God's design of the world "requires more than one voice. What God has to say is not complete until Job adds his words." God is encouraging Job to speak up. "If we have sympathy for Job, we will be looking for signs that his quest for comfort and consolation is important to God." Balentine takes every opportunity to search out textual nuances which suggest that God is actually patting Job on the back. In rebuttal, it might be pointed out that Elihu was motivated by anger and showed no concern for Job's state.

A verse of paramount importance to Job—and equally so for Christian doctrine—is 42:6: "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (NRSV). Balentine notes that there are no fewer than five translations that "deserve consideration as legitimate possibilities." In reality, there are dozens more, including:

Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes. (King James)

Wherefore I abhor my words, and repent, seeing I am dust and ashes.
(Jewish Publication Tanach)

Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust. (Steven Mitchell)

Abhor "myself" or abhor "my words"—there is a significant difference. And "I will be quiet" suggests there is no recanting. Under the circumstances, how can any claim be made regarding what "truth" Job speaks, except that "dust and ashes" describes the mortal condition?

"Textual ambiguities also make it clear . . . that whatever Job's last words may mean, they convey anything but a simple confession of sin," Balentine writes. He agrees, however, that Job's experience leads him to conclude that he has been

consigned to live in a world where he cries out to a cruel God who doesn't answer. After the whirlwind, Balentine argues, "God's disclosure invites a transformation in Job's understanding about what it means to be 'dust and ashes.'"

Balentine concludes with a defense of Job—and God: "The lesson for Job seems to be that those who dare to stand before their maker with exceptional strength, proud prerogatives, and fierce trust come as near to realizing God's primordial design for life in this world as it is humanly possible to do."

Balentine gives special attention to creation imagery—the cosmic setting against which Job's entire ordeal with suffering takes place. Creation images are common throughout the Hebrew Bible, and Balentine underscores the "role of creation imagery in Job's situation." "Presumably God's objective is to say something that connects with Job's own covenantal instincts, something that enlarges, modifies, and/or corrects his understanding of how to respond rightly to misfortune." Here, however, Job faces a contradiction between the friends' argument that a covenantal relationship is "defined by humility and passive acceptance of the misfortunes God may use to discipline him," and God's approbation of Job for his other covenantal virtues, "including strong words and fierce resistance."

What's clear to God certainly isn't clear to Job. Thrust into the malevolent hands of Satan, Job begins, with good reason, to doubt the ways of God. Almost immediately (chapter 3) Job's sanguine relationship with God disintegrates. "Job begins to address God as the enemy who wages an unjust war against him." He believes God wants to destroy him, and he begins to talk back. For 38-odd chapters Job describes to God, in terms bordering on (and perhaps entering) the realm of blasphemy, the realities of human existence on earth. "In the prologue, it is Job who is on trial. Now Job reverses the charges. When God assaults the innocent without reason, it is divine justice, not human fidelity, which must be put on trial," writes Balentine.

Job demands justice from God. Humankind's problem is how to bring charges "against an adversary who will not be bound by reason or logic." Even though he realizes that he risks death, Job is prepared to take an oath—a profound step in the Hebraic context. "Between Job and his friends it is easy to side with Job," writes Balentine, but "between God and Job where should we take our stand?"

"When it comes to 'suffering for no reason,'" the book of Job "seems intent on reminding us that questions about the world, human existence, and God necessarily

remain open.” To some extent this is a book about wisdom: “But where shall wisdom be found?” Job asks. “And where is the place of understanding?” (28:12). But the wisdom is that “mortals do not know. . . . God knows” (28:12, 23). “Whenever someone proposes to explain suffering by saying it is simple as one, two, three,” says Balentine, “the only thing the numbers will likely add up to is a zero. Statements about a truth falsely conceived can claim at most to be only half-truths.”

Balentine’s *Job* comes with an array of superb prints and engravings and a wealth of stimulating references to literature, drama and music on an accompanying CD. It is a classic against which other commentaries will be measured for a long time.