Job: Responses to Questions

## Preliminaries

*Is Job really a historical figure – or is this just a story, a fictional piece?*

\*\*In the end, there is no way of knowing. Given that disasters do happen to people of faith and that they then have to deal with them, I think it likely that the book is based on something that happened. On the other hand, when people go through such an experience, they do not usually speak in poetry, and that is a sign that if the book is based on something that happened, this has become the launching point for reflections that are semi-independent of that. And this would fit with the hyperbolic nature of the description of events in the opening and closing chapters. But like Jesus’ parables, the book’s reflections stand or fall independently of whether it is a fictional piece. (I do not think the reference to Job in James 5:11 is affected if the story of Job is quite fictional, any more than Jesus’ reference to Jonah.)

*Is Job an Israelite? He exhibits a devotion to God and to wisdom that Jews would admire. However, the absence of references to beliefs distinctive to the Torah and the Prophets makes me wonder if he is a Gentile – a figure who represents the plight of people with problems everywhere.*

\*\*Yes—as a man from the country of Uz he is portrayed as not an Israelite.

*Does the historical context of the book inform our understanding? Can we explain some of the problems in light of the exilic or Second Temple context?*

\*\*I doubt if it can be seen as a veiled discussion of why Israel suffers, because it’s unlikely that anyone would symbolize Israel by someone of unique integrity. But it makes sense to think of the Second Temple period as one when many Israelites found it harder to relate to faith in Yahweh as the one who brought them out of Egypt many centuries ago, so this fact provided less help with questions about the nature of God’s relationship with them, the nature of God, and the question of suffering—somewhat in the way these questions trouble many Christians now in a way they did not a generation or two ago. This bit of background might provide one pointer to the way the story discusses its issue in terms of a Gentile’s experience. It’s seeing what can be said without appealing to Israel’s distinctive experience of God.

## The Adversary

*Does the talk of sons of God relate to the sons of God in Genesis? Is there really a court in heaven*

\*\*Yes, OT and NT always assume that there are a lot of characters in the supernatural world, and “sons of God” is one term for them. The picture is commonly of God as the president of the heavenly cabinet surrounded by the subordinate heavenly beings who take part in decision-making and the executing of the cabinet’s decisions. The Adversary’s job is to make sure that no one gets away with things that they should not get away with.

*Is Satan as Job talks about him the same as Satan in the New Testament?*

\*\*To begin with, translations such as NRSV and TNIV put you on the track of the fact that *satan* in Hebrew is not a name but an ordinary noun meaning “adversary” (TNIV) or “accuser” (NRSV). It can thus refer to a supernatural figure or to an earthly one: in 1 Sam 29:4, for instance, it refers to David. So I think it is odd that the translations have “Satan” in their main text rather than “the Adversary” (the *New Jewish Publication Society* translation has “the Adversary” in the main text). The word also comes in Zech 3:1-2, where the Adversary fulfills a role in court, accusing the priest Joshua (a different Joshua from the Book of Joshua) of being too defiled to function as priest. That corresponds with the role he has in Job. He is an adversary in a legal sense, someone who acts as an accuser. There is a sense in which he thus fulfills a positive role in making sure that no one gets away with things they should not get away with, like a prosecutor in court. But it is striking that both in Job and in Zechariah his suspicions are false or are disallowed. Actually, if you begin reading the New Testament in light of Job, it gives you interesting angles on Satan’s role there.

## The Testing

*The story in chapters 1—2 seems like nothing else in scripture. Are we meant to take it seriously?*

\*\*I wouldn’t say that most individual elements in it are like nothing else in scripture but the total effect is unique, and I waver about how to deal with the details. In Jesus’ parables, you have to be wary of basing things on details that are there just to make the story work, and sometimes I think that the beginning of Job is there just to make the story work and that we should not base too much on it. Likewise it’s unwise to base a whole theology on something that comes in only one passage of scripture, such as the millennium (that’s joke, because people do!). But I don’t want to let myself off from taking things seriously that should be taken seriously. Our criterion in reading the book needs to be whether the insights we don’t like really are unparalleled elsewhere in scripture.

*Why did God ask Satan if he has “considered Job?” It appears that God initiated the trials/ testing of Job. Did God want Job to be tested? If so, how often does this happen?*

\*\*For God testing us, see Gen 22; Deut 8:1-2; 13:1-3; Ps 26:2; 139:23; John 6:5-6; 1 Thess 2:4; James 1:3-4; 1 Peter 1:7. I don’t know how often God does it.

*How do you read James 1.13-14 (“God does not tempt”)?*

\*\*Tempting is designed to put someone down. Testing is designed to build them up. The same action can be designed to work either way, as is the case in Job.

*What does “upright” (1:1) mean? Is it same as sinless?*

\*\*Upright refers to the basic orientation of a life toward the right way—as is suggested by the explanation that follows, that he lived in awe of God and resisted wrongdoing. The same is true of the word for blameless, which comes in English translations alongside “upright,” and sounds even more as if it implies sinless—but the word for “blameless” is a positive word, indicating that orientation of his life. Job was a man of integrity and uprightness. He later acknowledges that no one is actually sinless before God. (Beware of the fact that many translations refer to “fear of God” instead of “awe of God—Job wasn’t afraid of God (as he goes on to show.)

*God already knows that Job is upright, so what is purpose for the testing?*

\*\*I think there are two sorts of reasons here and elsewhere. One is that God wants what he knows to be publicly vindicated. The other is that even for God it is one thing to have a hunch about what is inside someone and another to see that hunch vindicated by what they do—e.g., under pressure.

*Are all pains we have in the world from only God’s permission? Does Job really give us a picture of God who blesses and curses? Gives life and deals death? Is everything from God's hand? And if so – what are we supposed to do with that?*

\*\*I’m glad that everything that happens in the world requires God’s permission in some sense, though this is a special case. The alternative is that things happen in a way that is out of God’s control, which would not be nice. I would rather God be in control but do some odd things than be very nice but not be in control.

*Seven sons and three daughters die. Things happen which affect other people too, and yet the story is about Job. Can we draw anything from this? Are some people’s lives just “used” for others lives? Maybe we understand this differently because of our idea of life and death?*

\*\*I think we think about it differently because as modern people we are focused on the rights of individuals, whereas in reality the lives of families are tied up together and the fates of individuals are tied up with the fates of their families and communities. But yes, God does “use” people in connection with his broader purpose. But your point about life and death suggests another insight in this connection—oddly, it opens up a possibility which offers an insight on our problem. I imagine after the resurrection saying to these ten people, “Don’t you think you had a rough deal?” And I imagine them saying, “Oh, yes, but it opened up the possibility of our story being a blessing to millions of people over the millennia, so we are okay about it.” See further the question about “love” under the “Yahweh” section later in this document.

*Does the book of Job relate to Jesus’ suffering? Is he an anticipation of Jesus?*

\*\*He is an illustration of faithfulness despite suffering and his suffering does benefit us by giving us ways of thinking about God and God’s ways with us. But I don’t see that as central to the book’s importance.

*Why wasn’t Job’s wife harmed? How do we make sense of Job’s wife and her response?*

\*\*I don’t know why the adversary left her alone. Maybe it links with her reaction in 2:9-10. Is she in deep pain and wanting him to get out of it? Or is she cynical? Either way, she can only react in thatw ay because she has not been harmed—or maybe having to watch him suffer is her testing.

*What does it mean to “Curse God and die” (2:9)?*

Presumably, in effect it means “Put an end to it all”—make God kill you.

## Job

*Is there an answer to the question in 1:9, “Does Job live in awe of God for nothing?”*

\*\*Surely yes—the story proves that he did.

*Does the presence of Job’s friends finally push him over to curse the day he was born or did they just open up the space for him to vent what he was already thinking in his heart?*

\*\*The story doesn’t seem to “blame” them at this point, so more likely their presence is nothing to do with it.

*What is the significance of “What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me”?*

\*\*Apparently it indicates that Job had always thought that his life might be too good to be true.

*There seem to be contradictions in Job. Job says that no one can win a case against God, then he says “If only I knew how to find him, I would state my case before him” (did he know how to find him before, or is this a new problem?). Then Job calls God his vindicator, right after he says that “God himself has put me in the wrong.” What do we make of this?*

\*\*Maybe they indicate that when you go through Job’s kind of experience, you may not speak with complete logic.

*Is Job a lament psalm? How is it similar and different?*

\*\*Yes, it’s been illuminatingly described as a vast lament psalm.

*Can we think about the need for a mediator or advocate between God and humanity (9:32-35, 16:17-22) as a kind of foreshadowing of Jesus? What was the cultural expectation of this kind of thing? Who/what did they see as fulfilling this role?*

\*\*The trouble is that the mediator/advocate Job is looking for is someone who will vindicate him as a person of uprightness and integrity, which is not what Jesus did for us! Culturally, I imagine he is looking for the equivalent of someone who will take your side is court, maybe as a kind of character witness.

*In 14:12-14; 19:25-27: Is Job referring to life after death?*

\*\*The picture in 14 is the usual OT recognition that people go to Sheol and don’t come back, but Job has the idea of God putting him there temporarily until he had calmed down and was prepared to look at Job fairly. In 19 he has another idea, of someone to mediate between him and the God who is finding him guilty without trial, so that if Job can’t get vindication before death, he can at least get vindication when he is dead. (So Handel’s use of the words here to apply to Jesus has nothing to do with their original meaning.)

*Job and his friends think there should be justice in the world. Should there?*

\*\*Oh, surely, yes! And that’s where the book ends!

*What would have happened if Job had given up and renounced his innocence? What would be people’s response and God’s response?*

\*\*I guess they would have congratulated him and God would have rebuked him!

*Where is God in suffering? Is God absent?*

\*\*He’s absent in this case—holding back for a long time. You can’t generalize from that fact, but neither is it necessarily loving to tell someone who is suffering that God is with them even if it doesn’t feel like it (that’s the kind of thing a ‘friend” does!).

## The Friends

*What is the significance of the friends sitting for seven days without saying anything? Is this an appropriate action? Does this demonstrate care and concern or just ineptness in the face of suffering?*

\*\*It’s tempting to make a link with the Jewish custom of “sitting shiva” (“shiva” represents the word for “seven”), when for seven days people come to sit with a mourner. It’s then Job’s words in chapter 3 that provokes them into speaking. One way or another, keeping quiet is the best things they ever do, which is a hard lesson to learn.

*Were Job’s friends really his friends? Are there significant differences between the three friends? How would the friends look in modern Christian language?*

\*\*No, they weren’t really! I’ve heard them described as a conservative evangelical, a Pentecostal/charismatic, and a liberal.

*Is there a danger in our speaking to someone in this sort of predicament when we do so out of some ignorance? Should there be a “waiting period” for us before we even open our mouths? Discern from God what we are to say? What should be our kind of preparation before we go to someone?*

\*\*I’d say the problem with the friends isn’t ignorance or haste or waiting on God. It’s that they know their theology and are prepared to apply it to Job whether it fits or not.

*It seems as though the three counselors are saying the same thing that Job is, with reference to God but they are just pat answers. What is the purpose of these lengthy re-statements in Scripture?*

\*\*Maybe it’s because what they say is indeed what people often say, so their mistakenness needs underscoring!

*When I used to read Job, I would underline many lines from Job’s friends’ section, because what they said to Job seemed so right. I don’t think it’s not biblical either.  But I know also that his friends’ understanding of Job’s suffering wasn’t right either.  So, how should we interpret their understanding of suffering?  Can we draw biblical view of suffering from friends’ understanding though it does not necessarily apply to Job?*

\*\*Yes, that’s right—they are not wrong in principle but wrong in insisting that what they apply applies to Job.

*At the end God chastised the friends for their theology; yet in the end God seemed to be telling Job similar things, so how come God can say it, but not Job’s friends?*

\*\*It illustrates how the friends are not wrong in their theology in principle; they are wrong in the way they apply it to Job.

## Elihu

*How does Elihu fit in, because God never rebukes him?*

There are two ways of approaching that question, both of which might be right. One is the theory that the Elihu section is a later addition to the book. The other is that Elihu’s speeches anticipate God’s and prepare the way for God’s.

*Why is Elihu’s explanation so common among Christians?*

\*\*Because it seems less unfeeling than the other friends’, and it avoids saying the dreaded words “We don’t know.”

## Yahweh

*Why does God speak where God speaks? God doesn't speak for chapters upon chapters, but then finally speaks and all resolves?*

\*\*Because Job and the friends have to talk themselves out?

*The book seems to be built on an ancient understanding of reality by which all things in the universe are directly directed and upheld by the supernatural hand of God and thus all events are attributed to God. Nowadays we know why lightening strikes and rain clouds form, etc. etc. Doesn’t this ean the message of Job is in need of a face lift?*

\*\*I think you underestimate the book’s capacity to see levels of explanation—at least, Ecclesiastes 1 (for instance) shows an awareness of what we would call natural processes. And then you give us an unsophisticated account because you have simplified the levels in a way that makes the “natural” the only one!

*What are proper and warranted laments or complaints to God and what is crossing the line?*

\*\*God rebukes Job for thinking and talking as if he is the center of the universe. There is something bigger going on than he realizes (but God never tells him what it is). So the thing to be wary of is thinking we are the center of the universe.

*Job says that he had only heard reports of God before this but now has seen him face to face. Could we take from this story that God uses hard things/the adversary and trials to bring us closer to Him? Or would that be missing the point that there are no answers other than God is God.*

\*\*The idea that God uses things to bring us closer to him is Elihu’s solution to the question about Job’s suffering, and there is truth in it. But if it is what Job means, Job has missed God’s point!

*What kind of love is there in this kind of a relationship between God and Job? How do we even talk about it?*

\*\*I know only of two references to God’s love in the book. In 10:12 Job sees his earlier life as characterized by God’s love (*hesed*)—but not his life now. Elihu draws Job’s attention to God’s *hesed* in relation to the created world (37:13). You could argue that God’s willingness to stake his reputation on Job is an act of love. But you are right that love for Job is not God’s priority. You could say that God’s love for the world, which gains through the existence of the story, is a priority. Maybe this question suggests another angle on the question about whether Job foreshadows Jesus. How could we even talk about God’s letting Jesus suffer being an act of love for him? But it was an act of love for the world. Likewise this question suggests another angle on the question about God’s treatment of Job’s children. They, too, are sucked into God’s love for the world.

*What are the Behemoth and the Leviathan? The latter sounds like the description of a dragon, what does that mean/represent?*

\*\*Both are figures for destructive power asserted against God and his purpose, so that they are more equivalent to Satan (cf. Rev 12:9) than the Adversary in chapters 1—2 is! The point about the reference here is then to say that Yahweh has them on a leash; they can’t do as they like.

*God shows up and tells Job he can trust him. Why didn’t God tell Job it was a test?*

\*\*I love the fact that God doesn’t tell him, because that means Job is in the same position as us—we too don’t know why things happen, and are challenged to trust God anyway.

*How does God’s response link with laments? Is this the answer to laments? Does it validate laments, because God does not invalidate Job’s pain, but reveals himself?*

\*\*The thing with a lament is that you can’t predict God’s response. It may be positive or it may be negative (e.g., Jeremiah, Hosea). It’s not a cash machine process but a personal interaction.

*What is it that Job has done wrong? Is God’s address to Job a rebuke, a reaffirmation or just a reminder?*

\*\*What Job has done wrong is forgotten the reasons for trusting when he can’t understand. Here, it’s a rebuke and reminder. The reaffirmation comes in chapter 42.

*Why does God rebuke Job twice after he seems to get it the first time?*

\*\*It’s not exactly a second rebuke; there are two issues God needs to sort out. One is about Job’s place in the world. The other is about God’s control over evil.

*Even if humans aren’t the center of creation, how do we see ourselves as the pinnacle of creation (Gen. 1)? Where does humanity stand?*

\*\*Does Gen 1 say we are the pinnacle of creation? We are created to look after creation, not to sit at the pinnacle.

*Why did Job repent (42:6)? Does that mean he realized he had sinned?*

It’s usually taken to indicate not that he had originally sinned but that he has sinned in his overreaching in the debate. But the translation is tricky. The traditional translation is “I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” But there is no word for “myself” and the preposition doesn’t mean “in” but “over. So maybe it’s “I despise and repent about dust and ashes”—that is, I’m going to climb out of the ash heap now. But the word for “repent” can also mean “get relief,” and CEB has “I relent and find comfort on dust and ashes.”

## The Ending

*When God said that Job is right (vs. his friends) is God referring to Job’s response at the end to God’s speech or how Job has lamented the whole way through?*

\*\*He hasn’t said much about God in that response and the friends have said nothing, so it surely myst be his talk all the way through the protests.

*Why are Job’s friends punished for their limited view?*
\*\*They aren’t punished, but they have been telling untruths about God’s way in the world and about Job, so they need to express some sorrow and make up for it.

*The ending seems to water the story down by giving it an unrealistic/Hollywood ending. Real life doesn’t usually happen this way. What can people who don’t have these kinds of endings take from this story?*

\*\*Speaking as someone who lived without such an ending for years (my first life lived with multiple sclerosis for decades and ended up unable to speak or swallow or think (as far as I could tell), I was very glad of the ending. It promised me that the present reality of what was happening to Ann wasn’t the whole or final story.

*Did it all work out for God?*

\*\*Apparently, though the ending doesn’t refer back to the beginning!

*So much of scripture tells us that God is good and we can have confidence in that. It seems like the story of Job tells us, our faith is not to be in God’s goodness—but we are to trust God just because He is God! Can we still believe God is always good? Is it wrong if our faith is dependent on that?*

\*\*I imagine the author of Job believed God is good. Maybe a better way to put it is to say that God being good may involve something different from what we think. When God let people kill prophets or disciples in OT and NT, God’s goodness to them was evidently something different from what we might be inclined to think. So it would be unwise for us to make our faith dependent on what we would see as God’s goodness.

*Do you think that the story of Job is just?*

\*\*By “just” do you mean “fair”? I don’t see much indication in scripture that what we would call fairness is one of God’s priorities. It’s not fair that I am sitting at my desk on a sunny day in California and my brothers and sisters in Jesus in some Middle Eastern countries are being persecuted.

## Looking Back

*What is the true meaning of pain in Christianity? Penalty, testing, or training?*

\*\*The point of the story is that all those may be true, but that you may never know which understanding applies in a particular case, or whether there is something else going on that you don’t know.

*How can we use Job to evangelize people?*

\*\*It wouldn’t have occurred to me to do that. Isn’t it people who already believe in Jesus who need to study it?

What do you say at the end to the person who gets to the end of Job and *Just*. *Doesn't*. *Get it* ?

\*\*When someone doesn’t get it, there is nothing else to say. You have to leave them until some future time when maybe they will be able to get it. It’s the same with lots of things.

*How is this supposed to draw us closer to God?*

\*\*By encouraging us to submit to God being God.

*Why revere God at all when God afflicts those who revere him with such hardships?*

\*\*Because God is God.

*From Job, how do you address suffering and how do you help other people address suffering? How do we deal with our own suffering in light of Job's example?*

\*\*It depends whether or not you are talking about people who are suffering now. Job isn’t a book to offer to people who are suffering now. What they need is support and love. The most important thing is not to think that our task in relation to people’s suffering is to provide people with an answer. That’s what the friends thought, and it’s a great temptation. Of course if they want to know how to think about their experience, that’s different. Then you could get them to think through the various angles on suffering that the book offers are see if any of them ring bells. For people who are not suffering now, the importance of the book is to enable us to see those various angles and let the book shape our thinking so that if suffering comes to us, they can be a resource along those lines.

*Is the aim of Job to speak about the nature of God’s character, the nature of human suffering or both?*

\*\*I’d say the nature of the relationship between us and God—Job’s suffering isn’t the focus but the lead into this bigger question. The big question is about whether we let God be God.

*Where did we get the idea that if we do good things we will prosper and be blessed?*

\*\*The Torah promises it, and so does Jesus (Matt 6:33).

*Why does suffering happen? What causes suffering? Why does God allow suffering? Why does God allow so much pain and suffering? Does God cause suffering or just allow it? What is God’s purpose in suffering?*

\*\*These are just the kind of questions that the book of Job tells you that you may get no answer to, even if there is an answer (as there was in Job’s case).

*Because of Jesus, is life any less of an enigma than Job experienced?*

\*\*I don’t think so, is it (especially to judge from the agonizing of Christians about evil and suffering).

## Babylonian Theodicy

*How dependent is Job on the Babylonian Theodicy? Or does the similarity indicate that the question “Why do bad things happen to good people?” is a universal one pondered by people in all cultures?*

\*\*The Babylonian Theodicy comes from about the time of Moses and is thus centuries older than Job. So the writer of Job might have known it, but it’s more significant that the two works belong to a common tradition of trying to think things through.

*What - if anything - does the Israelite narrative have to "offer" by way of the problem if evil that the Babylonians or any other polytheistic religion does not?*

\*\*Maybe nothing, except the key point that the one we are bowing down to is the real God.

*How would one claim that the Bible is completely true and necessary in the stories and lessons being taught if there are ancient stories that can be dated prior to the Bible?*

\*\*The most basis answer is that the reason why the Bible is vital is that only the Bible can tell us the gospel—the story of God’s involvement with Israel in way that comes to a climax in Jesus, which brings about the world’s redemption.

*How can Job’s theology be an advance on Proverbs’ theology if Job was written first? And if it was written first, how did they lose the advanced theology?*

\*\*On the usual view Job was written later, but there had always been thinking about the issues it raises and I wouldn’t call one an advance on the other—they complement each other.

*What does Job tell us about God’s nature?*

1. God wants real relationships with us, based on covenant not contract.
2. God doesn’t pre-program us.
3. God deals with us in a way that can be seen not on the basis of superior knowledge.
4. God trusts us and will risk his reputation on us.
5. God takes risks with us.
6. God doesn’t mind having an argument and being confrontational.
7. God has a much broader range of concerns than us.
8. God is in control of evil.
9. God makes things work out okay in the end.
10. God gets really proud of us.