

A Lesson in Not Leaving before It's Over

I opened my church's class on Job by asking the group what they knew about the book. One class member offered this summary: "It's simple: Job complains, God shows up and puts him in his place, and Job repents." I pressed further, asking, "Why does Job need to be put in his place?" The response was terse: "Because he questioned God, and you just don't do that."

A Wanting Interpretation

Why can't people like Job question God? This argument seems to be based on God's magisterial speeches toward the end of the book (38:1-40:2; 40:6-41:26), where He essentially says, "I'm God—you're not." But is that a satisfactory answer to Job's questions? Perhaps more important, is this how we should interpret the book? The view tends to gloss over God's final, brief comment—one that recasts the entire book (42:7-8).

Questioning God

We're ill-advised to say that Job shouldn't question God. In the opening chapters, God pronounces Job wholly "blameless and upright" on two occasions (1:8; 2:3). Then, after the first test, which resulted in Job losing his children, God compliments Job when speaking to Satan by pointing again to Job's model faith. He even adds the reminder, "you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason" (2:3). Nevertheless, Satan convinces God to agree to

another round of even greater sufferings that effectively cost Job everything. God's declarations of Job's righteousness show that He has indeed tested Job "for no reason." Thus, Job has every reason to ask questions.

The bulk of the book consists of a series of speeches in which Job's three friends and an interloper named Elihu chastise Job, arguing he must have sinned to warrant such suffering. Their arguments reflect their orthodoxy, which originates in the "acts and consequence" model that animates Deuteronomy and Proverbs. Through this lens, Job's friends reason that Job is suffering, and therefore—because of how the world works—he must have sinned. The friends are not wrong in thinking that the world works this way; they err by assuming that the world *always* works this way.¹ As his friends deem his questions illegitimate, Job continues to profess his innocence. As readers, we know that Job is right and the friends are wrong.

At last God appears and delivers two speeches to Job. In a mocking fashion,

God demonstrates that Job is not the center of the universe, and that he lacks the wisdom and power to rule the cosmos (e.g., 38:3–4). Yet this hardly seems a reply to Job’s complaint. Throughout his speeches, Job has affirmed God’s power and monopoly on wisdom (see Job 28). Job’s main grievance is with divine justice. God assaults Job with a dissertation on divine power. Although He does not provide an answer to Job’s questions, He doesn’t label them as illegitimate. He sidesteps them entirely.

A Defiant Job

We often view Job’s first response to God’s declarations as a sign of submission, paired with his later repentance (see 40:3–5, esp. v. 4; see also 42:1–6, esp. v. 6). In Job 40:4, he declares, “See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further.” The Hebrew in this section is ambiguous. It may be better translated, “Since I am held in contempt by you,” which signals Job’s dismay at how little value humanity holds in God’s creation.² Job does not appear to acquiesce. He remains defiant, as revealed in his vow of silence in response to God’s demand for answers.


The Hebrew of Job 42:6 says, “therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” It may be rendered either “repent *in*” or “repent *of* dust and ashes.” The first rendering supports the traditional interpretation, while the second testifies that Job is giving up his lament and getting on with life. The line could also be rendered, “I protest and am sorry for dust and ashes,” which would again reveal Job’s sorrow over how insignificant humanity and his suffering appears to God. Job does not appear repentant—he may have no reason to be. He seems to stand firm in his questions.

God’s Final Words: The Interpretive Crux

Caught up in the divine speeches, we too often ignore God’s final words. In Job 42:7, God addresses Job’s friends, declaring His wrath at how they, not Job, had spoken about Him. He declares Job as the only one in the right: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” If there was any doubt, God repeats this pronouncement in Job 42:8. The way we often interpret Job makes little sense if Job is the only one who has spoken rightly.

Job speaks to God and about God with bold and daring questions. God’s final speech in the book does not demonize Job’s questions—nor does it answer them. But it does affirm them as a proper way to speak.

Will It Preach?

Reading Job in this way, we find a testimony to the dynamic, unsettling God. The God of Job—and of the Bible—is beyond easy codification. He’s free to be who He is, not who we wish He was. While pointing us toward a God we may understand, Job also equips us with vocabulary to ask questions. He provides believers with a bold and daring example. And through Job’s story, we see that God actually endorses our pointed questions and direct speech. Indeed, He welcomes it. 

Biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).



John Anderson has a Master of Theological Studies from Duke University and a Ph.D. in Old Testament from Baylor. He currently teaches Old Testament.

¹ Tremper Longman III, *Job* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 56.

² Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2007), 122.