

## Introduction

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The book of Job tells of a wealthy and virtuous man in an unfamiliar land in the East. His virtue is so great that God points him out to *hassatan*—literally the *satan*, “the adversary,” a sort of prosecuting attorney in the divine court, who, whether by temperament or profession, is skeptical regarding the possibility of genuine human piety. (This is not the Satan with a capital S of later scriptural works and related lore and legend, although the two are soon identified.) This adversary argues that Job’s piety is only the result of divine favor. If God stripped him of his good fortune, Job would curse God to his face. God lets the accuser destroy Job’s wealth and kill his children. When even this produces no more than the pious refrain “the Lord has given and the Lord takes away” from his servant, God lets the *satan* afflict Job with a terrible disease.

Job's wife counsels him to "curse God and die," but he remains steadfast in his piety.

In what some see as a final trial, three friends of Job arrive—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They hardly recognize him. They sit with him in silence for seven days. Eventually Job speaks—and at this point the text moves from prose to poetry. In fact, Job curses. Yet he curses not God but the day of his birth. This provokes or permits his friends to speak, so one after another they try to make sense of his affliction. They all subscribe to versions of a retributionist view that sees suffering as divine punishment for iniquity, and they counsel Job to confess to sins, even ones he may not have known he committed, or ones committed by his children. Job, certain he has not sinned so grievously as to deserve such punishment, responds to each friend, with confusion that grows into anger. Afflicted by his friends' failure to recognize his innocence, Job increasingly addresses his words to God, whom he would like to call before a court. Many elements of a court case are imagined, including a *go'el*, a kind of advocate or champion who might vindicate Job, even if Job has by that time died. Job's speeches, each in a different mood, culminate in an assertion of innocence and a demand for a fair hearing, but also in the discovery that his case is not exceptional: the innocent suffer all the time in God's world.

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After three cycles of speeches by the friends and responses by Job (the third friend speaks only twice), a hymn is delivered that sings of the inaccessibility of wisdom, and a new character speaks up, a young man named Elihu. Elihu provides his own account of what is happening: God sometimes tests the righteous, but always offers some resources to help them. Job does not respond, or doesn't get a chance. God now speaks from a whirlwind. In two powerful speeches reciting the marvels and the terrors of nature, God draws attention to the structures of creation and to some of its frightening denizens, including the giant beasts Behemoth and Leviathan. Job's questions about his own case and about the injustice of human life in general are not addressed. After each speech Job makes a kind of concession, the second ending with a tangle of words that is difficult to translate. The most well-known rendering:

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.<sup>1</sup>

The narrative returns to prose as God addresses the three friends (not Elihu) and condemns them for not speaking rightly as Job has. They are commanded to offer sacrifices, which must be conducted by Job. Job's life is restored. New children

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are born and Job receives twice the wealth of before,  
living out his days in happiness.

The book of Job is often understood as the Bible's answer to the problem of evil. Many find in it the Bible's deepest reflections on the meaning of suffering. Others see it as monotheism's admission of moral bankruptcy, posing a question so difficult that even God cannot answer it. G. K. Chesterton thought even God was tempted to atheism in the book of Job, and C. G. Jung thought God suffered such a moral defeat at Job's hands that he had to assume human form and sacrifice himself in order to recoup. It is remarkable that a single book should impress such different kinds of people. Indeed, readers are so uniform in their praise of its sublime power that one recent commentator has been led to wonder if it isn't a work of ideology, religiously mystifying injustices of a more mundane kind: it just kicks problems of human injustice upstairs, making it easier for us to ignore them.<sup>2</sup>

Job is concerned that he not be ignored:

Oh, that my words were written down!

O that they were inscribed in a book!

O that with an iron pen and with lead

they were engraved on a rock forever!

(19:23–24)

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Job wants his story to be a book, and every interpreter has tried to be the bookbinder. Yet the book of Job resists being corralled into a single interpretation. Orthodox interpreters have an especially hard time: Job says things they find difficult to accept. The pious asseverations of Job's friends, condemned by God, are the passages in the book of Job that best square with other texts accepted as scriptural. But the book of Job trips up modernizing readings, too, not least with its apparently bullying God.

There is a sense in which any interpretation of a text renders it a book. Any reading, no matter how sympathetic or disruptive, brings a more explicit order to the text. But Job's words at 19:23–24 are a particularly helpful way of thinking about the drama of interpreters' attempts to befriend the book of Job. Job's friends get it wrong, after all, and are restored to grace only by Job's sacrifice for them. Job's wish to write his own book prevents us from thinking we have made final sense of his story, even as the book of Job suggests Job's own words may be inadequate to the task, too.

This biography of the book of Job follows the book as it was read and used, fought over, defended, and reimaged. Our method will be to explore various interpreters' attempts to make sense of this Gordian knot of a text. The sequence of chapters is loosely chronological, but the main concern of each

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is to explore the career of a different set of interpretive strategies. While some may seem arcane, each can show us enduring possibilities within the book of Job. Each way of reading brings to bear assumptions not only about the book of Job but about the work of interpretation itself. Some of these assumptions will strike us as arbitrary, outmoded, or even capricious. Yet we will learn more from the book of Job if we explore all these different approaches. We need all the help we can find.

The book of Job arguably has more puzzles than any other book of the Bible. It starts and ends in prose, but the speeches of Job, his friends, and God are in poetry. It has many *hapax legomena*—words appearing nowhere but here—as well as passages of such great obscurity that interpreters have sometimes felt obliged to change letters to make any sense of them. (Some of the most influential passages, 13:15, 19:27, and 42:6, are among the most opaque.) Nevertheless, this challenging text has remained unchanged for a very long time. The Masoretes, the Jewish scholars who in the five centuries starting in the seventh century CE set about producing an authorized text of the Hebrew scriptures, found little meaningful variation among the manuscripts at their disposal. The Targum of Job, found in the library of Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls), largely aligns with the Masoretic text (see figure 1).

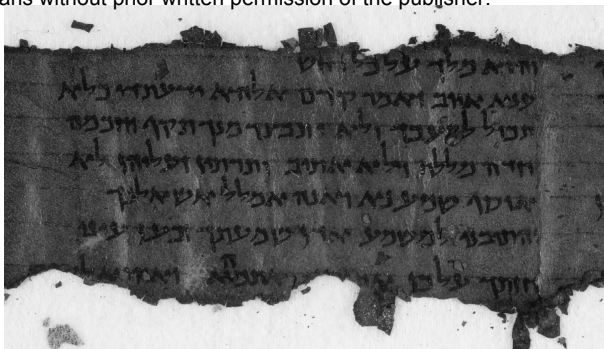


Figure 1. The Aramaic Targum (paraphrase) of Job was among the texts found at Qumran known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. As for many of the texts found here, it largely coincides with the Masoretic text, which became canonical. This fragment corresponds to Job 41:25–42:6. Photograph by Bruce and Kenneth Zuckerman, West Semitic Research. Courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority. Collection of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The only significant variant is found in the Greek translation of the Bible known as the Septuagint. This rendition of the book of Job has streamlined some of the speeches between Job and his friends and softened some of the language asserting God's agency in Job's trials. Essentially unchanged, however, are the puzzles and profundities that we will trace, challenges that arise from the larger shape and structure of the work as much as from its details. There are two interesting additions to the text,

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however. Job's wife, who has only one line in the canonical text,<sup>3</sup> here is allowed to speak:

How long will you persist and say, "Look, I will hang on a little longer, while I wait for the hope of my deliverance." For look, your legacy has vanished from the earth—sons and daughters, my womb's birth pangs and labors, for whom I wearied myself with hardships in vain. And you? You sit in the refuse of worms as you spend the night in the open air. As for me, I am one that wanders about and a hired servant—from place to place and house to house, waiting for when the sun will set, so I can rest from the distresses and griefs that have now beset me. Now say some word to the Lord and die!" (2:9–9e)<sup>4</sup>

Also added is a genealogical appendix, showing Job to be "the fifth from Abraam" (42:17a–d).<sup>5</sup> This lineage draws explicitly on "the Syriac book," the translation of the Bible known as the Peshitta, an attribution which confirms that even at that time, more widely used versions did not connect Job to the story of the people of Israel.

Although the oldest versions are in agreement, the troubled text on which they agree nevertheless appears to be corrupted in at least two ways. First, it seems not to be of a piece but to have been composed of distinct parts that do not fit together



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entirely happily. The speeches of Elihu and the “Hymn to Wisdom” look most like insertions in this respect, but incongruities between the frame narrative and the poetic dialogue might suggest composite authorship on the largest scale. We’ll discuss the implications of these possibilities, as well as of the different understandings of textual meaning and integrity that attend them, in chapter 5. Second, pieces of the text seem to have gone missing, and what survives seems in places to have been mixed up. Job’s responses to the friends’ speeches sometimes sound out of sync with them. In other cases, he takes up arguments it might seem he should be rejecting. A widely shared interpretation we’ll see in chapter 5 recommends rearranging sections of Chapter 27. A recent Christian commentary moves the “Hymn to Wisdom” into the speeches of Elihu.<sup>6</sup>

Awareness of the composite character of a text inevitably changes the way we understand its meaning and its effective history. This awareness need not undermine the value of interpretations from eras unaware of the text’s history, however. Readings that hinge on Elihu’s speeches (like most of the important medieval Jewish commentaries<sup>7</sup>) or on the “Hymn to Wisdom” (like that in the recent *Africa Bible Commentary*<sup>8</sup>) may seem exercises in futility, doomed to irrelevance. But the relation between

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Job's parts is more complicated than mere incompatibility. Its incongruities, however they came to be, are now a part of the text. The widespread view that the prose frame and the poetic dialogues are irreconcilable, thus forcing any reader implicitly or explicitly to choose one over the other, is itself an interpretation and, like any interpretation, a simplification.

Similar concerns attend what are now seen as mistranslations—*hassatan* as “Satan,” or *go’el* as “redeemer” among the most significant. And yet there are more reasons than mere anachronism to set aside this knowledge in reading the history of pre-modern interpretation. It is the book of Job as it was found that shaped our traditions. Early readers were fully aware of the difficulties around its interpretation. This is one reason none of them thought it possible to read the book of Job on its own. However uneasily it fits, the book of Job comes to us as part of the greater whole of scripture—Jewish or Christian—and has long been understood in that context. Pruning it so it can stand on its own is another interpretive intervention. We are increasingly coming to understand that the multiplicity of voices may be constitutive of the power of the book of Job. Indeed, so effectively do its voices complicate each other that it may be understood as a polyphonic whole, perhaps even the work of a single ingenious author.<sup>9</sup>

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If the text is pretty certain, for all its rough edges, its origins are anything but. Premodern commentators wondered who wrote it: Job himself, perhaps, or Moses? Robert Lowth, the father of modern literary studies of the Bible, was sure it was the work of Moses, and also thought its language proved that it was the oldest text of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> But archaizing language is a genre of its own, and a Hebrew author familiar with Aramaic could explain at least some of the linguistic variety. The text may show familiarity with some texts of the Hebrew Bible, notably some of the Psalms and the creation story in Genesis, which Job seems to invert when he curses the day of his birth in Chapter 3. References to historically datable Sabeen raids (1:15) and the gold of Ophir (22:24) provide a *terminus ante quem*, the latest the book—or at least the passages in which they appear—could have been written. Already in the Talmud it was suggested that the book of Job was written during the period of the Babylonian captivity, although hypotheses were offered linking it to the concerns of many other periods as well. Here as elsewhere the historical and interpretive tasks cannot be so easily distinguished.

Even finding a home for the book of Job in the Bible is harder than it might seem. There are two scriptural references to Job that have for centuries

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been taken as proof that he belonged, but neither seems to refer to the protagonist of the *book* of Job. The prophet Ezekiel refers to three men whose piety was so great that their lands were protected by it:

Mortal, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it, and break its staff of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it human beings and animals, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job, these three, were in it, they would save only their own lives by their righteousness, says the Lord GOD. (Ezekiel 14:13–14)

This hardly sounds like the story of the Job we read of in the book of Job, even the pious Job of the prose tale, for his righteousness was the cause of his children's destruction! (Ezekiel's Daniel, too, is not the biblical seer but seems better associated with a Canaanite king named Dan'el known from tablets in late second millennium BCE Ugarit.) More fundamentally, the book of Job seems, of all the books of the Bible, to be least interested in and invested in the dependence of individuals and communities on each other's virtue. There may have been an ancient Job, but the story told in the book of Job seems to have been crafted later, perhaps even as a riposte to the ancient story.

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The brief New Testament Epistle of James provides a second but equally problematic biblical attestation of Job:

As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the patience of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (James 5:10–11)

Patience is not mentioned in the book of Job, however—nor is prophecy. James may be referring explicitly to an oral tradition: “you have *heard* . . .”<sup>11</sup> The book of Job has always been accompanied by what has been called the “legend of Job,” in which superlative patience is indeed Job’s defining trait.<sup>12</sup> (We will see fruits of this tradition in chapters 1 and 3.) The legend may have come first, the book of Job (or at least its poetic diatribes) added by way of angry satiric subversion. The story of the patient Job was strong enough to lead the early fifth century commentator Theodore of Mopsuestia to argue against the canonicity of the book of Job. He thought the now scriptural account to be a slander on the name of a historical hero.

The still idiomatic “patience of Job” is a good example of a Job interpretation we should handle

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with care. It's not enough to notice that the Job of the poetic dialogues seems to us far more "impatient" than "patient." Many contemporary interpreters who see the book of Job as composed of incompatible prose and poetic sections even distinguish them in these terms, pitting "Job the patient" against "Job the impatient." As we will see in chapter 5, the "impatience of Job" is well on its way to becoming proverbial, too. Still, what is translated as "patience" in the Epistle of James can perhaps more accurately be rendered "persistence" or "steadfastness" or "endurance."

It may be that James wasn't referring to the Job of "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away" (1:21) as opposed to the Job who grieves and curses and rails, but to both. Reading the reference to Job in context, James may not have been recommending a passive resignation but its opposite, what has been called a "militant patience."<sup>13</sup> Instead of rejecting the "patient Job" of the frame story, we might do better to rethink our conception of "patience." Abraham teaches us as no philosophical argument could what faith is; Job may do the same for patience.

Maybe the attitude of persistent Job, insisting on justice, is not impatience but true patience. The narrator's assurance that Job "didn't sin with his lips" (2:10) and God's claim (twice) that Job had

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“spoken of me what is right” (42:6, 7) led premodern readers to see the book of Job as demonstrating just how much a patient person *could* say without sinning. Those responsible for the appropriation of Job’s speeches for the Christian burial liturgy understood that the book of Job defines the parameters of patience. There are registers of religious expression—such as lament and protest—that saccharine modern understandings of religion can no longer imagine.

Another way of anchoring Job in the Bible is to fit him into its historical narrative, but without something like the Septuagint’s genealogical addendum this proves difficult as well. Job is from the Land of Uz: could he have lived in the land of the firstborn son of Abraham’s brother Nahor, whose name was Uz (Genesis 22:21)? And there is a Jobab mentioned in a lineage of kings of Edom descended of Esau (Genesis 36:33–34), though if this Jobab did anything of note, it is not mentioned. He comes and goes within a verse. What difference could so passing a reference in Genesis make for Job?

In fact, the question of whether Job was a Jew or a Gentile was an important one to both Jewish and Christian interpreters—for different but not unrelated reasons.<sup>14</sup> Being a lineal descendant of Esau would be no prize, but at least it would make Job a distant relation of the family of Israel. More

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than one loose end is tied up by the teaching that

Job's second wife was Jacob's daughter Dinah, another victim of biblical trauma, who disappeared from the biblical text after her rape and her brothers' revenge (Genesis 34). If Job was an outsider to the covenanted community, at least his descendants were not. A non-Israelite Job implies the possibility of access to God outside of the covenant. As we'll see in chapter 4, his place outside the covenantal community will help Job become a key figure in modern thought as well. Like a modern, he seems to have a relationship with God on his own and through conduct alone, unmediated by covenants, sacred law, or communal rituals.

Research on ancient analogs and sources is also of limited help in fixing Job's time, form, or authorship. There are texts, ranging from ancient Egypt to Babylon and the Hittites, which seem to overlap with one or another aspect of Job's story—a divine test, a pious man and his friends, a discussion of providence—but nothing similar enough to suggest a clear source or direct parallel.<sup>15</sup> The book of Job is evidently in conversation with what scholars have since the late nineteenth century called the “wisdom” tradition: a cosmopolitan intellectual tradition focused on the meaning of individual experience in this world, outside the context of specific religious narratives or traditions. But it is difficult



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to say more. At this remove it is impossible definitively to distinguish participation in a genre from a parody or attack on it.<sup>16</sup>

Many premodern commentators thought the riddle of Job could be answered if one could discern its genre: epic, perhaps, or tragedy? Its happy resolution might even classify it as a comedy. Several genres do seem to be at play in the book of Job, but as a whole it is *sui generis*. However its components came about or were brought together, the resulting text has asserted itself as a whole, complete with tensions, for two and a half millennia. Its recalcitrance has become part of its mystique and, on some readings, of its message. Whether one thinks that divine providence is inscrutable or that Job's suffering is beyond words, the text's resistance to final interpretation and classification strengthens its force.

The role of the Job interpreter is thus not an easy one. Short of repeating the whole text verbatim, as one of Søren Kierkegaard's awestruck protagonists proposed,<sup>17</sup> what can she do? The text is involved, or conflicted, or rich, or barbed, or ironic, or inspired, or corrupt enough that no reader is truly comfortable with everything in it. Whether we connect this with a notion of authorial intention or not, it is part of the enduring power of the work. The questions raised by the book of Job—providence and evil, the meaning of innocent suffering, the nature of God

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and humanity's place in creation, among the more obvious—are ones that resist closure.

In the narrative that follows I will highlight the assumptions various readers bring with them in working out their interpretations. This is not to accuse them of having hidden agendas. There are certainly better and worse readings of a text. Each makes use, in better or worse faith, of what she finds and interprets. The terms used—"figurative," "philosophical," "fragment"—are our terms, charged with our language and concerns. But this is only a problem if we ignore it. Trying to understand a text in relation to previous knowledge is part of any serious engagement with it. We are inclined to deny this basic condition of interpretation for a variety of reasons: the Reformation idea that the biblical text speaks unaided; the Enlightenment idea that we can set aside our prejudices; the Romantic idea that we can empathetically feel our way into a text; the Fundamentalist idea that meaning is literal and univocal; and the New Critical idea that each work of genius is its own world and must be allowed to be semantically autonomous.

It is particularly tempting to reject interpretations that appeal to preexisting belief since a central part of the drama of the book of Job is God's condemnation of Job's received wisdom-spouting friends. But Job himself offers no new way to speak.

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One thing it might seem we can say is that an interpretation mustn't be allowed to displace the text itself. It seems unacceptable to change or omit passages one finds troublesome, as Stephen Mitchell does with his translation—but the Hellenistic Jews who generated the translation of the Septuagint did the same, and Hebraists remind us that in some passages of the book of Job the reader/translator has no choice but to intervene. Some of the pivotal moments in the book of Job are so obscure as to force even translators to interpret boldly.

A biography of the book of Job must not confine itself to readers, translators, commentators, and interpreters. The history of the reception of the book of Job is the history of its *use*. People turn to this text because it's part of a tradition, next up in a lectionary cycle or ritual manual. But they also turn to it in grief and confusion, in rage and existential crisis. The book of Job was more often heard than read; indeed, Job's was one of the most familiar biblical voices. Only rarely were such readings not structured by prayers, and interwoven with other texts. These were not understood as interruptions but as devices for disclosing the true meaning of the text—a meaning that went beyond the words on the page. No reader of the book of Job thinks it is possible to discuss theodicy (the problem of evil) dispassionately. The book is used in consolation, in

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self-help literature, in articulating confusion, and more. Its uses in liturgy, and in expressions and enactments of the oral traditions with which it shares its protagonist, must be part of our picture. Some of the book of Job's most interesting questions arise when it is performed.

While they are arranged in a roughly chronological order, the chapters of this book introduce ways of reading the book of Job that continue in one form or another into the present. There are distinct Jewish and Christian ways of reading scripture, and of reading Job in particular, but it seems more valuable here to suggest the ways in which the book of Job drove interpreters in many different contexts and traditions to some of the same kinds of inspiration, despair, and invention. It helps us situate ourselves more honestly to admit this, to admit Jewish, Platonist, Christian, Aristotelian as well as modern and postmodern presuppositions as our companions.

Chapter 1, "Job in the Ancient Interpreters," looks at efforts to read Job into the Bible by reading the Bible into Job. As we have seen, Job, Uz, and the rest are obscure, their relevance to the history of revelation uncertain. This chapter explores ways in which interpreters and commentators have made sense of the book of Job through etymologies, analogies, and contrasts—and engagement

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with the rival Jobs of legend and oral tradition.

Chapter 2, “Job in Disputation,” traces medieval interpretations of the book of Job as a philosophical discourse. The encounter of Job and his friends has been seen as representative of a wide array of disputing philosophical and theological views, and also of the conventions and limits of philosophical dispute itself—especially among friends. Chapter 3, “Job Enacted,” follows the career of Job outside the text, probing his significance for the Christian burial ritual of the dead and his role in religious and non-liturgical performances. These premodern approaches to the book of Job are still vital to understanding the life of the book of Job.

Chapter 4, “Job in Theodicy,” maps Job’s iconic role in the emergence of modern western conceptions of religion grounded in the problem of theodicy—indeed in its insolubility—and the related thematics of the religious sublime. Chapter 5, “Job in Exile,” explores the ways historical critical understandings have unsettled interpretations of Job, and the resonance a book now understood as fragmented has with considerations of the meaning of suffering and questions of justice and meaning after the Shoah, and more generally in a supposedly secular age. The Conclusion looks to the contemporary vitality of Joban interpretation in the modes discussed in past chapters, but also in some of the

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new contexts of global Christianity and western  
secularity.

The covers of most books about the book of Job depict Job or his God. More fitting for a biography of the book would be an image showing the different reactions of Job's comforters, who want to be friends to Job but ultimately fail. In a striking illumination from a ninth-century CE Byzantine Bible, for instance,<sup>18</sup> one friend weeps. Another tears his clothes in public sympathy. The third seems to cover his mouth in horror. The expression on his face may reflect the friends' initial inability to recognize Job in so woeful a state, or its overcoming. But he's probably also covering his nose at Job's stench. (In the modern age, most of us are innocent of the smell of physical decay and the visceral effect it can exert.) Job's debacle doesn't produce simple responses. And the book of Job warns us that what starts as companionable grief can become scapegoating betrayal.

We would do well to assume that all interpreters of Job come to the story as Job's friends do. We are not Job, and we do not know the mind of God or what goes on in his court. We come to this unbearable story with prejudgments and try to make sense of it with limited imaginations, the story cutting closer to home than we are comfortable acknowledging. The book of Job should teach us to expect

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failures of friendship, especially from ourselves.

Part of the legacy of the book of Job has always been the way it empowers strong opinions. It is as much the friend of the accused heretic as of the accuser. It empowers sufferers, both patient and angry, critics of orthodoxy, and defenders of mysteries. We must be careful not to condemn them in the same way as those “miserable comforters” who think they can understand Job without wondering why they themselves are spared.

Many interpreters, among them Gregory the Great, the pope whose commentary made the book of Job one of the most important works of the Christian Middle Ages, considered themselves called to the study of Job by a life of physical pain: “perchance it was this that Divine Providence designed, that I, a stricken one, should set forth Job stricken, and that by these scourges I should the more perfectly enter into the feelings of one that was scourged.”<sup>19</sup> Elie Wiesel, who saw a Job on every street of post-World War II Europe, can observe: “There were those who claimed that Job did exist but that his sufferings are sheer literary inventions. Then there were those who declared that while Job never existed, he undeniably did suffer.”<sup>20</sup> Such readers know the realities of agony and abandonment, and how they can distort consciousness. I can claim no such interpretive privilege. From where I

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sit—not an ash heap but a college classroom—I see the book of Job appealing powerfully to those who know or suspect or fear that all is not right with the world, sufferers of many kinds. They turn to Job and his book for reassurance, but also for confirmation of the truth of their questions.

Some readers are put off by Job, but most want to take his side. Some readers are put off by Job's God. But almost all readers are put off by Job's friends, who seem the prototype of the adage, "with friends like these, who needs enemies?" And yet there is no place for *us* in the text except as friends, perhaps late arrivals like Elihu—though great has been the temptation to do better than Job's God. Part of the biography of the book of Job is the story of Job's friends over the centuries, readers who think they know and understand Job's sufferings, his character, and the meaning of his story. Some of these friends, at least, are mistaken. God reproves them for not speaking rightly. Friends, like interpretations, often disappoint, but it seems we cannot live without them. Job's friendships are the first part of his life to be restored after his calamity.