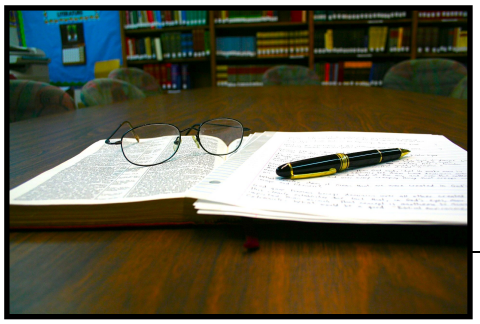

TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Papers | Reviews | Essays

JOB'S MIND CONSOLED: A STUDY OF JOB'S "REPENTANCE" (JOB 42:6)

David Anguish

Carol Newsom relates the following as part of her treatment of the connection between the divine speeches in Job 38-41 and Job's final words in 42:6:

> The power of these speeches to comfort was powerfully articulated by a mother whose teenage son had been killed in an automobile accident. She described how, on the morning of his funeral, she rose early and reached for her Bible, reading to herself the speeches of God from the whirlwind. When asked why she chose these chapters, she said, "I needed to know that my pain was not all there was in the world."[1]

That mother's pain rings true to life. So too does her understanding that it is only as one remembers that he has a God who is bigger than the world and its troubles that he can find solace in his darkest hours.

But however much one identifies with the comfort that mother derived from a review of the nature of the God of Job 38-41, that understanding encounters serious difficulty in the face of the way chapter 42:6 is almost universally translated, e.g., as in the ESV: "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."[2] In light of Job 42:7, which reports that Job was spared the Lord's anger because he had "spoken of [God] what [was] right," one must ask, of what did Job repent? Was he wrong about his innocence, in fact guilty of some sin that had led to his ordeal? Did he blaspheme in his bitter complaints? How does repentance on Job's part in any sense square with the heroic figure of the rest of the book who consistently

[1] Carol A. Newsom, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary and Reflection," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 631.

[2] A survey of standard translations shows the consistency of this phrasing. KJV, NKJV, ASV, NASB, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NAB, NJB and NLT all use the word "repent" in the last part of v. 6, though renderings for the first part of the verse vary. But it is of interest that Jewish translations and sources take a different approach. LXX has ἤγημαι [*hēgēmai*] (not μετανοέω [*metanoeō*], or even μεταμέλομαι [*metamelomai*]); the Tanakh (1985) translates the verse, 'Therefore, I recant and relent, Being but dust and ashes"; and the Targum on Job, "one of the earliest of all paraphrases of the Hebrew text," has "I console myself" in place of "I repent" (for the Targum citation, see Daniel J. O'Connor, "Job's Final Words – 'I Am Consoled . . .' [42:6]," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 50 [1983-84]: 182).

refused to admit wrong in the face of his suffering?[3] Furthermore, if he did repent, in what way is his situation of any comfort for modern believers faced with suffering that appears to have no connection to specific sin?[4]

These questions are not resolved by saying that we just do not understand all the ways of God. Job affirmed as much (Job 42:3). The meaning and value of Job's story hinges on the fact that he did not know the specific reason for his suffering.[5] If, at the end, he confessed repentance, either because he was browbeat into such a confession, or because he acquiesced to the view that all suffering is caused by some specific sin, then any comfort derived from his story in the belief that God's ways are not ours is misguided.

While these concerns are capable of providing an intellectual challenge, they are more important than that. At an existential level, believers want a different answer from the one these questions imply. But, as O'Connor has observed, "If ['repent' was] the only possible translation of the MT one would have to accept the harsh ending."[6] This paper will argue that there is a better alternative, the evidence for which is found in a correct understanding of the word translated "repent" (נִחַם, *naḥam*) in light of the divine speeches in chapters 38-41 and the context of the book as a whole. Once this evidence has been established, attention will be given to the benefits of this alternative position for personal faith and ministry.

A Challenging Context and Enigmatic Verse

That the statements in 42:1-6 are put forward as Job's "answer" (v 1) to Yahweh's questions in chapters 38-41 requires us to consider and study the content and purpose of those questions before undertaking a study of Job's reply. O'Connor may understate the point when he observes that the divine speeches have always posed problems for interpreters.[7] Carson, Hartley, and Hicks represent the emphasis on this point in the literature, pointing out that "God's defense was not quite what Job had in mind;" that God "does not respond to the 'why's' of Job's suffering;"[8] that "Yahweh ignores Job's complaints

---

[3] The description of Job as a "heroic figure" is suggested by the comments of O'Connor who has observed that "to consider that Job's rash words spoken out of pain would require the final word (42:6) from him to be one of self- loathing and repentance ('I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes') is surely ungracious of the poet who had already so skillfully won our admiration for Job's high moral stature" (p. 188).

[4] The phrase, "specific sin" is significant. Based on Genesis 2:17, it can be argued that God would be just in executing a man upon the commission of just one sin. That he does not do so is an extension of his grace. The importance of this for Job's story is seen in the fact that there is no claim of sinlessness for Job. The question is not whether he had committed any sin, but whether he had committed a specific sin that led directly to his experience of suffering. For further discussion of Genesis 2:17 and the certainty of the promise of death found there, see John Mark Hicks, *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1999), 67-73. (Hicks does not specifically mention the matter of the right of God to exact the death penalty on the basis of one sin, but the matter did come up for discussion in the online exchange in his web course in which this writer participated in the spring of 2001, copies of which were saved and filed. The course, offered by Lipscomb University, was entitled, "Seminar on Suffering and Providence.")

[5] See Elmer Smick, who points out that, though the reader is told the reason Job suffered, Job is never told as much. "Had he been told, the book would have immediately lost its message to all other sufferers" (Elmer B. Smick, "Job," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988], 1029.)

[6] O'Connor, 181.

[7] Ibid., 186.

[8] D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990), 171-172.

and avoids making a direct response to his avowal of innocence;"[9] and that "in one sense" the divine speeches do not answer Job's questions.[10]

Some have applied the most negative of connotations to this apparent change of subject. Carson, for example, cites George Bernard Shaw who saw in these chapters a God who mocked Job.[11] Pope said that "God's queries are ironical in the extreme, almost to the point of absurdity."[12] Curtis goes even farther. In support of his thesis that 42:5-6 comprise Job's "final and objective rejection of God," he argues that God is depicted in the speeches as a being who "responds to the anguished plea of his most devoted worshipper with contemptuous and arrogant boasting," a "God-figure, [who] pathetically, almost comically, assert[s] the empty shibboleths of theology, all the while unable even to perceive that for the innocent sufferer a real problem exists."[13]

Such statements reflect the fact that chapters 38-41 do not directly respond to Job's complaints or questions about his suffering. Instead, one finds a series of questions from God, delivered "like a teacher instructing a student who fails to understand an important matter,"[14] stressing God's design of and control over a world that is often puzzling and chaotic. Are the speeches designed merely to impress Job with God's greatness[15] or to "overwhelm [him with] the gracious divine presence"?[16] Are they intended to rebuke him "for the audacity of thinking that he could dispute with God as an equal,"[17] to correct "the mistaken judgments he had spoken about Yahweh's purposes in the incidents which had taken place in his life as well as in the rash statements he had made,"[18] or to "call him on the carpet" because of his "willingness to condemn God in order to justify himself"?[19]

Closer analysis of the speeches in the context of the book as a whole shows that these options are unsatisfactory. Though one can argue from 42:3 that Job's awareness of the majesty of God increased as he considered the divine questions, it is incorrect to say that Job had no or even little awareness of God's power prior to chapters 38-41.[20] Nor, in light of 42:7, is it reasonable to argue that the speeches were designed to correct mistaken judgments

---

[9] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 488.

[10] Hicks, 175.

[11] Carson, 173.

[12] Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973), LXXX.

[13] John Briggs Curtis, "On Job's Response to Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979): 510, 505, 511.

[14] Hartley, 488.

[15] D. David Garland, *Job*, Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 101.

[16] David Atkinson, *The Message of Job: Suffering and Grace*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 157.

[17] Hartley, 488.

[18] Garland, 101.

[19] Carson, 172.

[20] Norman Habel notes that passages like 9:1-24 show that Job had long acknowledged God's power, though chapters 38-41 do present him with inscrutable questions (Norman Habel, *Job*, Knox Preaching Guides, ed., John H. Hayes [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981], 95-96).

about God.[21] What, then, is their point? Do they in any sense provide a defense[22] for God's actions in light of his sovereignty, despite the fact that they do not address the particulars of Job's situation? Hicks's response is instructive:

> But how do these speeches answer Job's question? In one sense they do not. They do not address the particulars of Job's situation. God does not tell Job about the heavenly wager described in the prologue. . . . The speeches do not address Job's specific questions about suffering and justice. They address the critical issue that was raised in the prologue and assumed throughout the dialogues: trust in God's management of the world. Do we believe God is wisely managing his creation? This is what Job doubted, and this is what gave rise to the questions and accusations of the laments.[23]

In other words, the speeches are part of the book's total effort to declare something about the importance of faith, even when we do not know or understand all we would like.

This approach to the divine speeches, taking into account their place in the book as a whole, must be kept in mind as one comes to Job's reply, and especially his statement in 42:6. Job responds, in light of his earlier questions and laments, to the answer God has given him. That 42:1-6 is depicted as Job's final answer to God, one that, as the following verses (especially vv 7-9) show to be enough to satisfy him and bring an end to the drama, leads one to expect that, whatever Job's response, it will harmonize with the theme of the book as a whole and with the epilogue in particular. This expectation explains why the translation, "repent" is so jarring. It also points in a direction for understanding Job's reply that finds support in a study of נָחַם (*naḥam*).

The significance of this emphasis on context is seen when one understands that the meaning of נָחַם (*naḥam*) is not determined by merely turning to the original Hebrew text and a lexicon. "[T]he significance of what [Job] says [in v. 6] is not easily discerned. . . . That Job will no longer attempt to argue with God is clear, but his state of mind and the reasons for his withdrawal can be understood in more than one way." This is so because verse 6 closes a

---

[21] Curtis, 510, contends that the prologue and epilogue represent such a different picture of Job from that found in the "poetic dialogue that the prose sections and the poetical sections of the book cannot originally have belonged together." Why, then, are these sections included? Curtis replies: "The most important purpose of the prose, . . . is that of deliberately misleading the reader as to the actual content of Job's final and decisive rejection of God."

Though he does not reflect the consensus of scholarship on this matter, Curtis's assertion should not go unchallenged. While the prologue and epilogue should not be the decisive factors in interpreting the poem (see O'Connor, 188), neither should they be completely divorced from the poem, as Curtis is wont to do. The book has come down to us as a unit, the whole of which is designed to make its point. Thus, any interpretation of a specific passage within the book must be undertaken in light of the context of the whole.

[22] Regarding the question whether the speeches are part of a theodicy of God, Newsom perceptively observes that "God's speeches do not invite speculation as to *why* the chaotic is a part of creation. They are not a theodicy in the sense that a theodicy attempts to explain or to justify the presence in God's creation of those things that render human existence fragile and vulnerable" (Newsom, 630).

[23] Hicks, 175.

section of verses that are "terse and enigmatic" and the verse itself is "grammatically ambiguous."[24]

Lexically, נָחַם (*naḥam*)[25] has various meanings, e.g., "be sorry, console oneself, moved to pity, have compassion for, rue, suffer grief, repent, comfort oneself, be comforted."[26] Two of these are primary. First is the idea of "a change of mind," best illustrated in texts where נָחַם (*naḥam*) is used with reference to God. In such cases, the issue is not "genuine remorse and sorrow [since] God is free from sin," but a matter of changing his mind. The second primary meaning is "to comfort" or "to be comforted."[27] The connection between the two meanings is not hard to discern; people often receive comfort when their minds are changed or made at ease.[28]

It is reasonable to think that either of these meanings, or perhaps a combination of both, would better translate נָחַם (*naḥam*) in 42:6. First, the grammatical construction,

---

[24] Newsom, 627-628. William Morrow and Daniel O'Connor offer typical examples of this ambiguity. Morrow suggests three possibilities: (1) Wherefore I retract (or I submit) and I repent on (or on account of) dust and ashes. (2) Wherefore I reject it (implied object in v. 5), and I am consoled for dust and ashes. (3) Wherefore I reject and forswear dust and ashes (William Morrow, "Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 [1986]: 211-212). O'Connor suggests two: (1) I repent (sitting) upon dust and ashes or (2) I am comforted for dust and ashes, i.e., I am comforted for the humiliations and sorrow (O'Connor, 184).

[25] נָחַם (*naḥam*) is not the only significant word or problem in verse 6. מָאַס (*māʾas*), translated "despise" in the ESV (also RSV, NRSV, NIV), is also variously translated, e.g., "abhor" (KJV, NJV, ASV), "retract" (NASB, NJB), "disown" (NAB), and "recant" (Tanakh). Its translation is complicated by the fact that there is no object in the Hebrew text. Some translations supply an object (e.g., KJV, NIV, NRSV, all of which have "myself," NJB and NLT which supply "what I have said" as the object) while others leave the matter to the interpreter (e.g., NASB, "I retract," and Tanakh, "I recant"). This and other challenges in the passage deserve fuller treatment which they have received elsewhere. But, while they have an impact on the meaning of the verse generally and the word נָחַם (*naḥam*) in particular, this paper's thesis can be demonstrated without a detailed study of these issues.

[26] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 636-637.

[27] Both primary meanings are from Marvin R. Wilson, "*naham*," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 571. As an aside, a comparison of the number of times various translations render נָחַם (*naḥam*) "repent" is instructive. KJV does so thirty-eight times (where the word is used in the Niphal). But, in ten uses of "repent" in the ESV and NRSV, only one—Job 42:6—renders נָחַם (*naḥam*). The same is true of the NIV's twelve uses of "repent." In the case of the NASB, three of twelve passages where "repent" is used are among the 102 verses where נָחַם (*naḥam*) appears in the Hebrew. Job 42:6 is one of the three. This is an important point to notice since נָחַם (*naḥam*) is used in six other passages in Job. More attention will be given to this point below.

[28] There are cases where נָחַם (*naḥam*) is not improperly translated "repent." For instance, in Jeremiah 8:6, the Lord laments that, though he has listened to the people, they have not changed their ways. KJV, ASV, NASB, NIV and NRSV all render נָחַם (*naḥam*) with "repent" (e.g., NRSV - "no one repents of wickedness"). This does fit the context of this verse, but it is the context that allows this translation, not the primary meaning of the word. The verse makes good sense if another translation is chosen, e.g., as in the ESV – "no man relents of his evil" (thus bringing out the force of the "change of mind" idea). A survey of other texts where נָחַם (*naḥam*) is used to refer to human actions show a similar ambiguity (cf. Ex. 13:17; 1 Sam. 15:11). One should also take into account that the Hebrews had other words that better represent what modern English-speaking people mean by the word "repent," e.g., שׁוּב (*šuḇ*), to turn or return. It is significant that the author of Job knows of and uses this word several times, but not in 42:6 (though it is used in 42:10, translated "restore" in the ESV). See Job 1:21; 6:29; 7:7, 10; 9:12f, 18; 10:9, 16, 21; 11:10; 13:22; 14:13; 15:13, 22; 16:22; 17:10; 20:2, 10, 18; 22:23; 23:13; 30:23; 31:14; 32:14; 33:5, 25, 30, 32; 34:15; 35:4; 36:7, 10; 39:4, 12, 22; 40:4; 42:10.

specifically the use of the Niphal,[29] similar to uses in several other texts, supports this alternative. Patrick writes that "the majority of the instances of *nhm* in the Niphal mean 'change one's mind' or 'reverse a decision,' as in Exod. xiii 17, 1 Sam. xv 29, Jer. iv 28, xv 6, xx 16, Ezek. xxiv 14, Joel ii 14, Jonah iii 9, Zech viii 14, Pss. cvi 45, cx 4."[30] But the similarity with other passages includes more than merely the use of the Niphal. O'Connor points out "that *nhm* followed by *'al* [the construction in v. 6], has this kind of meaning" in other texts.[31] He also notes that the word is used as part of an important "consolation motif" in Job.[32] Indeed, as Hicks has pointed out, "the Hebrew term translated 'repent' (NIV) [in 42:6] occurs seven times in Job (2:11; 7:13; 16:2; 21:34; 29:25; 42:6, 11). In every instance, unless 42:6 is an exception, it refers to comfort or consolation."[33] This point is more clearly seen when all seven of the Job passages are considered together.[34]

2:11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, . . . They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and *comfort* him.

7:13 When I say, "My bed will *comfort* me, my couch will ease my complaint, . . .

16:2 I have heard many such things; miserable *comforters* are you all.

21:34 How then will you *comfort* me with empty nothings? There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood.

29:25 I chose their way and sat as chief, and I lived like a king among his troops, like one who *comforts* mourners.[35]

42:6 . . . therefore I despise myself, and *repent* in dust and ashes.

42:11 Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. And they showed him sympathy and *comforted* him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him. And each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold.

Taken together, the context of the book as a whole, including the way נָחַם (*naḥam*) is used throughout the book, along with the primary meanings of the word, suggest that the sense of the word as used in Job's reply in 42:6 is that of a change of mind on Job's part that serves to put his mind at ease, or give him comfort. Because Job saw God more clearly, he also received "an answer to his profound anxieties. It [was] not indeed the kind of answer he had been looking for, and yet it [brought] the fulfillment of his hopes."[36] What remains is to elaborate this conclusion and show its application for the use of Job in ministry.

---

[29] Patrick defends the identification of נָחַם (*naḥam*) as a Niphal form in 42:6: "The pointing of *nhmt* fits both Piel and Niphal stems, but the meaning of the Piel does not suit the context, so we must construe our case as a Niphal" (Dale Patrick, "The Translation of Job 42:6," *Vetas Testamentum* 26 [1976]: 370).

[30] Ibid.

[31] O'Connor, 184. Specific texts he mentions are Jer. 31:15; 16:7, and Ezek. 14:22.

[32] Ibid., 190.

[33] Hicks, 177.

[34] All are cited from the ESV.

[35] O'Connor points out a number of connections between chapter 29 and chapters 38-42. "In ch. 29 Job is shown as the *Grand Seigneur* to whom the highest respect was paid by all levels of society; in ch. 38-41 God is the Great One—creator and provider of the universe, in whose presence Job is reduced to insignificance" (183). In light of so many parallels, he notes that "the comforting of the mourners is the final act of Job's magnanimity (29:25c)" and then asks, "is it also the final act of God in favour of Job?" (184). His analysis, barely summarized here, is part of an instructive longer section of his article on the consolation theme in Job. See pp. 183-191.

[36] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 82.

What Job Learned

As suggested in the introduction, whether one sees 42:6 in terms of Job's repentance or his reception of comfort has an impact upon the value of the book for dealing with modern crises of suffering. In order to appreciate this point, additional attention needs to be given to the whole of Job's story and how 42:6 helps resolve his crisis.

Notice first verses 1-6, and especially verse 5. Job acknowledged that God had plans he did not know, that there was more to God than he had previously seen (or would ever see)[37] and so that he had spoken in a way that overstepped his limited point of view. He then says, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (v 5). The usual interpretation of this statement is to take it in the sense of a contrast between what he had previously heard about God and suffering—the same traditions his friends had employed to try to persuade him to acknowledge the supposed grave sin that had caused his suffering—and what he now sees about his problems. But this interpretation overlooks the fact that Job did not receive answers about his suffering, only a different view of God.

But, if verse 5 does not refer to the traditions he had heard, to what does it refer? Newsom's alternative explanation has merit. Noting the importance of keeping in mind the relationship between verse 4, where Job cites the Lord's statement to "hear, and I will speak," and verse 5, Newsom argues that verse 5 should be taken "as Job's confirmation that he has indeed listened, as God has commanded him; the consequence of that hearing is that Job now 'sees' God (i.e., 'I have listened to you with my ears, and now my eye sees you')."[38] This epiphany is the key to understanding why Job is comforted. What Job has learned from chapters 38-41 is that there is

> a world in which the vulnerability of human existence can be understood, not in terms of divine enmity, but in terms of a creation within which the chaotic is restrained but never fully eliminated. Thus it is fitting that Job should speak of a change of mind and perhaps of a consolation concerning the human condition. His final words signal his appropriation of the vision of reality and the nature of God disclosed in the divine speeches.[39]

Verse 6 is understood only in light of these things. Job does not admit "sorrow over sin or remorse over guilt."[40] Nor does he acknowledge any sense of self-righteousness,[41] as

---

[37] Ibid., 83.

[38] Newsom, 628. The significance of this is seen in this further comment: "The language of 'seeing' God has a special place in Israelite religious tradition. Seeing God is rarely permitted and often associated with a momentous occasion in the life of an individual or a people (Gen. 16:13; Exod. 24:9-11; 33:20-23; Isa. 6:1). Job had earlier expressed the fervent desire to see God with his own eyes (19:26-27). The context in which that desire has been fulfilled, however, is quite different from what Job had anticipated'" (628).

[39] Ibid., 629. Guitierrez, 85, offers a similar analysis: "The salvo of questions launched by God, as well as the direct dialogue at last granted to Job have left him no choice but to acknowledge humbly and joyfully an encounter that has changed his life: 'I once knew you only by hearsay, now my eyes have seen you' (42:5). . . . Job now perceives that there is another way of knowing and speaking about God."

[40] Habel, 96.

[41] *Contra* Hartley, 536, who argues that "Job has moved dangerously close to pride, i.e., being certain that he is able to judge God," and Carson who argues that Job "repents of his arrogance in impugning God's justice, he repents of the attitude whereby he simply demands an answer, as if such were owed him. He repents of not having known God better" (174).

he would have done had he thought as his friends had. No, "his 'repentance' is a change of attitude, an acknowledgment that there are levels of divine mystery and might which he cannot grasp."[42] Put another way, Job's perspective has changed. "[T]he point of reference is God: God's plans, God's words, God's presence. Job's attitude has changed, therefore, though there is still no acknowledgment of any sins that supposedly have brought deserved suffering on him."[43]

Job's comfort in knowing and trusting that the God he had seen in chapters 38-41 is in control and therefore can resolve the biggest crises of life—appearances notwithstanding—serves to resolve the biggest question of the book, raised by Satan in chapter 1. This point, often missed as people get caught up in the details of Job's suffering,[44] has to do with whether Job served God only because of the benefits of such service. In the final analysis, Job's contented response in verse 6, given against the backdrop of the powerful presence of God in chapters 38-41, proved that he did indeed "fear God for no reason" (1:9). His pains were still as real (the text gives no indication that his suffering has ceased at this point), his questions just as disturbing. But he had seen God and that was enough. Like the mother with whose story this paper began, Job had come to understand that his pain was not all there was in the world. The result of this trustful understanding is the reception of God's commendation and greater blessings than he had before.

Ministerial Value

What has been presented to this point in this paper is probably more detailed and of a much more technical nature than many churchgoers feel is necessary for the so-called "practical"[45] work of ministry. Indeed, experience teaches that the modern church is often quite impatient with doctrinal studies. The expectation today, in line with the current cultural emphasis, is for those things which teach the nuts and bolts of daily living, as briefly and simply[46] as possible. In far too many cases, "Ten Easy Steps To. . ." whatever problem is

[42] Habel, 96.

[43] Guitierrez, 82. Similar thoughts are expressed by Hicks, 177, who notes that Job "changes from lament to praise. He changes his approach to God. He gives up his lament . . . his 'dust and ashes' – the 'dust' of mourning (2:12) and the 'ashes' of his tragic lament (2:8)." As a result, "Job is comforted by his encounter with God."

[44] Modern sufferers should not miss this point. It is natural in times of suffering for one's focus to move away from God to the particulars of the crisis. It is just at this point that one needs to remember the story of Job as a whole, especially chapters 38-41. Like Job, modern sufferers need to remember that there is a God who is big enough to take care of any issue of life, even when experience would seem to indicate otherwise.

[45] "Practical" is highlighted as a way to call attention to its detrimental use among many believers. Certainly, the Christian faith ought to be practical, that is, useful for every day life, not an esoteric and academic exercise which has no bearing on real life concerns. But that usefulness is found only as deep spiritual roots are grown. So much of what passes for practicality today is a surface-level faith, the opposite of that which Job possessed and therefore the very kind of faith that makes a crisis of suffering even worse.

[46] What is often called simple is better described by the term simplistic. While there is nothing wrong with making the complex as understandable as possible (given the restrictions inherent in wrestling with the mind of God - cf. Deut. 29:29; 2 Pet. 3:16; etc.)—thus making it simple in a sense—this is not the same as watering down biblical teaching to the point that its real substance is never experienced.

in view has replaced the challenging—and deep—study of previous generations.[47] The irony of this experience is found in another: despite living at a time of relative ease,[48] people are deeply concerned with the problem of suffering.[49] Sermons and classes that address texts like Job, Habakkuk or Paul's thorn in the flesh strike a chord with modern churchgoers who are not content with easy answers or pious platitudes.[50] They are like the mother with whose story this paper began in that they are hurting dreadfully, sick with misery to the core of their being, desperately searching for something, anything in fact, that will console them in their pain.

Unfortunately, many of them have not experienced the same depth of understanding that characterized that woman. If they are familiar with the story of Job at all, it is often with a simplistic version which relates points A and Z—Job's test and restoration—but says nothing about points B through Y, the details that are so important to really see the profound (yet in a sense, simple) truth the book tells.[51] Those hurting people need to hear Job's tough questions. They need to know that he was patient, not in the sense of a pliable acceptance of his fate, but in the sense of bearing up under its strain even as he cried out in agony and lamented what God was doing to him.[52] As they suffer, they also need to be reminded of the power, control and overwhelming nature of the God who appeared to Job in the whirlwind and left him consoled, a God who is more than big enough to care for their needs, even when they do not understand his actions in their specific circumstances. Above all, they need to be presented with the true account of Job's ordeal, even when that means clearing away misunderstandings of the story generally and of specific translations in particular.

Such understanding can come only as teachers of God's word lead these sufferers through the depths of Job's story, past the Sunday-school caricature to the refined character who did indeed serve God for nothing. Only then will they be able to say, from the depths of their laments, "Now I see, and I am consoled in my pain."

---

[47] For an insightful discussion of this "dumbing down" process, see Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, Penguin Books, 1985). Postman's thesis is that the demise of modern civilization will result from an embracing of pleasure of the type presented in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* rather than through a totalitarian takeover like that described in George Orwell's *1984*. Among the many valuable insights in the book is his analysis of the contrast between the ability of frontier farmers to follow the intricate arguments and vocabulary in the two-hour speeches of the Lincoln-Douglas debates despite a general lack of formal education with the inability of modern readers and audiences to parse even the most basic of arguments and thoughts (pp. 44ff.). Nor is the church immune to this deficiency; see his discussion on pp. 114ff.

[48] Peter Kreeft notes that there is more psychological and spiritual suffering today, odd at a time when "most people go through seventy or eighty years with less than a dozen occasions of really agonizing, unendurable physical pain." He finds additional irony in the fact that the word "boredom," so common today, "does not exist in any premodern language." (*Making Sense Out of Suffering* [Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1986], 11.)

[49] Not in the atheist's "problem of evil," but in the problem of suffering.

[50] This writer once had the experience of preaching a sermon on Job which explored his candid questions in chapters 3, 9 and 10. A woman came to the back after the service and expressed her relief at finally hearing someone vocalize the kinds of things she had long thought.

[51] Simply put, that story is this: God is in control; trust him implicitly and totally.

[52] James 5:11 refers to this trait. The KJV refers to Job's "patience," but "steadfastness" (ESV), "endurance" (NRSV) or "perseverance" (NIV) are better renderings of the word, ὑπομονὴν (*hupomonēn*), the basic meaning of which is to "bear up under."

Works Cited

Atkinson, David. *The Message of Job: Suffering and Grace*. The Bible Speaks Today Series. Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991.

Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

Carson, D. A. *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990.

Curtis, John Briggs. "On Job's Response to Yahweh." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979): 497-511.

Garland, D. David. *Job*. Bible Study Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971.

Guitierrez, Gustavo. *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Translated by Matthew J. O'Connell. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985.

Habel, Norman C. *Job*. Knox Preaching Guides. Ed. John H. Hayes. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981.

Hartley, John E. *The Book of Job*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.

Hicks, John Mark. *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World*. Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1999.

Kreeft, Peter. *Making Sense Out of Suffering.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1986.

Morrow, William. "Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no 2 (1986): 211-225.

Newsom, Carol A. "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." In *The New Interpreter's Bible.* Vol. IV. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

O'Connor, Daniel J. "Job's Final Word – 'I Am Consoled . . .' (42:6)." *Irish Theological Quarterly* (1983-84): 181-197.

Patrick, Dale. "The Translation of Job 42:6." *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976): 369-371.

Pope, Marvin H. *Job*. The Anchor Bible. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973.

Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.* New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Smick, Elmer B. "Job." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary.* Vol. 4. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988.

Wilson, Marvin R. "naham." In *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. Ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980.

Other Works Consulted

Andersen, Francis I. *Job*: *An Introduction and Commentary*. The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Vol. 13. Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976.

Dailey, Thomas F. "And Yet He Repents – On Job 42,6." *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 105 (1993): 205-209.

Kaplan, L. J. "Maimonides, Dale Patrick, and Job XLII 6." *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978): 356-358.

Patrick, Dale. "Job's Address of God." *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 91, (1979): 268-282.

Wolfers, David. *Deep Things out of Darkness: The Book of Job*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.

Graduate paper written for Introduction to Wisdom Literature
Taught by Dr. Gary Holloway
Lipscomb University, Summer 2002