

MALEVOLENT OR MYSTERIOUS?

GOD'S CHARACTER IN THE PROLOGUE OF JOB

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Summary

Readers of the Book of Job often believe that the prologue reveals the entire reason for Job's loss and suffering and so the full background for all that transpires throughout the remainder of the work. Many readers find that this raises significant problems about God's character as depicted in the book. There are, however, subtle indications both in the structure of the prologue and the content of the entire book which suggest that the exchanges between Yahweh and the Satan do not offer to the reader the complete rationale for Job's suffering. Furthermore, it appears that the author of Job has deliberately created a riddle which, left unsolved, traps the reader into believing—as Job's friends believe—that a full reason for Job's suffering is at hand. Solving the riddle, however, entwines the reader in Job's ignorance and thus the book's insistence that there is some wisdom only Yahweh holds.

1. Introduction

For the man Job, all is well until the day arrives when God boasts of how upright and god-fearing he is to the Satan. This exchange precipitates a time of testing for Job, the purpose of which appears to be little more than to prove God's claims about Job to the Satan. These events have proven to be deeply disturbing to many readers who perceive in them an implication of injustice in God's actions. Such readers are not difficult to find, but the testimony of two or three witnesses shall suffice to illustrate the point. James Crenshaw writes:

... this story describes God as one who stops at almost nothing, even murder, to prove a point. Furthermore, God admits that the adversary

moved the deity to afflict Job without justification. Surprisingly, the deity makes no concession about the deaths of Job's children and servants, who are eradicated and then replaced without a word of apology. Such disregard for human worth stands alongside an amazing acknowledgment of exceptional goodness in one person... The disturbing feature of this depiction of God is that a heavenly courtier wields sufficient power to manipulate God and thus to inflict grievous suffering on earth—with God's explicit consent.¹

Roland Murphy has similarly noted:

The scene in the heavenly court may be imaginative, but it raises a nagging question: what kind of a God is this who is willing to prove a point of honor by sorely afflicting a faithful servant? The scene presupposes an understanding of God that the modern reader may be loath to share. Ancient Israel obviously did not have such qualms. There was a dark side, or underside, to God that was simply accepted. This dark side resulted from the worldview that attributed to divine agency all that happens, evil as well as good (cf. Deut. 32:39; Isa. 45:7).²

Norman Habel describes God in Job thus:

For God to intervene and erase all these successes without any provocation by Job seems not only arbitrary but totally out of character with God. God contravenes the moral laws of divine behaviour upon which the traditional way of wisdom was founded. This God does not appear to be God the sage but a version of God the jealous king, who is apparently willing to violate human life to gratify personal ends.³

¹ James L. Crenshaw, 'The Concept of God in Old Testament Wisdom' in Leo G. Perdue, ed., *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993): 12.

² Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (2nd edn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 36. Murphy does note that to focus on this issue is to miss the message of the text, and suggests that "[p]erhaps the author was not fully aware of how he had put the Lord in a 'no win' situation" (p. 37), although it is not clear how to reconcile this admission with the claim that ancient Israelites had fewer qualms about this supposed dark side of God.

³ Norman C. Habel, 'In Defense of God the Sage' in Leo G. Perdue, W. Clark Gilpin, eds., *The Voice from the Whirlwind* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992): 26; cf. Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985): 61; William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 54-55. Some reference to similar assertions include Edward L. Greenstein, 'The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job' in Nili Sacher Fox, David A. Glatt-Gilad, Michael J. Williams, eds., *Mishneh Todah: Studies in Deuteronomy and Its Cultural Environment in Honor of Jeffrey H. Tigay* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009): 341-42; Martin Buber, 'Job' in Nahum N. Glatzer, ed., *On the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1968): 190; Jacob Licht, *Testing in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Post-Biblical Judaism* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973): 21; Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995): 309; Stuart Lasine, *Knowing Kings: Knowledge, Power, and Narcissism in the Hebrew Bible*

If these readers are right and the book of Job does depict God as being manipulated into allowing Job to be afflicted in a gratuitous act of cruelty merely in an attempt to prove a point—not once, but twice—then it is not clear how this depiction of God can be reconciled with the character of God presented in the remainder of the Old Testament.⁴

2. What Is the Book of Job About?

Before attempting to understand how Yahweh is portrayed in Job it is necessary to identify the purpose of the book of Job. Unfortunately this has not proven to be an easy task—readers have long reached differing conclusions regarding precisely what the book of Job is about. To some extent this can be traced back to both the baggage each reader brings to the text and an inherent ambiguity in the text itself which (probably) arises from a loss of connection from its historical context in which its audience held sufficient tacit information to allow them to disambiguate meaning in the text and so identify its primary meaning. In spite of the diverse array of modern readings, many nonetheless prove to be problematic. For example, the common notion that Job seeks to present a theodicy faces the rather significant difficulty that, in the end, the book offers no real explanation for innocent suffering beyond Job's individual circumstances and no explicit justification for Yahweh's actions.

While it goes beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive defence of any one particular understanding of the purpose of the book of Job, I believe that a good case can be made that,

(SemeiaSt, vol. 40; Atlanta: SBL, 2001): 179; Samuel Terrien, *Job: Poet of Existence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1957): 25-26; Robert Frost, *A Masque of Reason* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1945): 16-17. André LaCocque, 'The Deconstruction of Job's Fundamentalism', *JBL* 126.1 (2007): 83-97 resolves the problem by finding in Job a god who is not omnipotent, while Rüdiger Bittner argues that God's approach is akin to "might makes right", see Rüdiger Bittner, 'Hiob und Gerechtigkeit' in Thomas Krüger, Manfred Oeming, Konrad Schmid, Christoph Uehlinger, eds, *Das Buch Hiob und seine Interpretationen: Beiträge zum Hiob-Symposium auf dem Monte Verità vom 14.- 19. August 2005* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2007): 455-65.

⁴ It is possible that the problem only exists for modern readers of the book of Job, created through the imposition of modern sensibilities on a text which, for its author and original readers, raised no such concerns. Yet it is likely that the original readers maintained the view that God's actions should be expected to be just and justifiable for that is precisely the default belief of both Job's friends (who staunchly defend the belief) and Job himself (who is deeply troubled by his failure to understand why God does not appear to be acting justly in his dealings with him).

in its present form, the book of Job is primarily about demonstrating the limitations of human wisdom and offering specific application of those limitations to the doctrine of retribution. Some justification for this claim can be found in the structure of the book which can be represented chiasmatically as follows:⁵

A	Prologue
B	Speech cycles (× 3)
C	Poem about wisdom (Job 28)
B'	Monologues (× 3)
A'	Epilogue

Although this analysis is somewhat simplistic, it does draw attention to the centrality of the poem of Job 28, a poem which unambiguously affirms the limitations of human wisdom. This point is further reinforced by the nature of Yahweh's own words to Job in chapters 38–42. Therein Yahweh offers no answers, instead he poses questions, questions to which neither Job, nor the reader, could offer an answer. This is affirmed in Job's response: 'I have made assertions, but I did not understand; these things are too difficult for me, and I do not know them' (Job 42:3b). There are many mysteries in the world; there is much that only God can know. With specific reference to Job's suffering, the answer is only that Job cannot know why it happened. The consolation for Job is that Yahweh's words make it clear that his friends were as much in the dark as he, and so their insistence that Job had necessarily committed some egregious sin which precipitated his suffering was also based on ignorance.⁶

Other portions of the book also serve to emphasise this message. Job's closing speech (Job 29–31) reiterates his innocence.⁷ Elihu's speech offers a spirited defence of the justice of God.⁸ Together, Job's

⁵ See Elmer B. Smick, 'Job' in Frank E. Gæbelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988): 841-1060. While this structure is overly simplistic and hence is not intended to represent a comprehensive description of the book, it highlights the centrality of Job 28 which many scholars treat as secondary. For a defence of the integral nature of Job 28 in the book, see Alison Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric: An Analysis of Job 28 in the Context of Job 21–31* (VTSup, vol. 97; Leiden: Brill, 2003).

⁶ See Job 42:7; cf. Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006): 16.

⁷ In particular see Job 31:1-40 wherein Job affirms his innocence and calls for an answer from God.

⁸ See Job 34–35. Elihu also insists that the arguments of the three friends were inadequate (cf. Job 32:6-22), implying that their insistence on applying the doctrine of

words and those of Elihu thus serve to reassert the apparent paradox of the book: Job is innocent and God is sovereign, yet Job suffers and God is just. However, if the point of the book is that a full explanation for God's actions in dealing with the creation is not available to human beings, the presence of a supposed rationale for Job's sufferings in the prologue could be understood to undermine this purpose.

3. The Structure of the Prologue

A close examination of the structure of the prologue to Job suggests that the conclusions reached by many about the character of God are, at best, premature. Beside introductory matters, the prologue recounts two repeated encounters between Yahweh and the Satan, each of which results in Job's being tested and each of which is concluded with a remark by Job himself. This structure may be represented as follows:

	First encounter	Second encounter
The Satan's arrival	1:6-7	2:1-2
Consider Job	1:8	2:3
The Satan questions Job's motives	1:9-11	2:4-5
God permits Job's testing	1:12	2:6
Job's loss/suffering	1:13-19	2:7-9
Job's response	1:20-21	2:10a
Affirmation of Job's integrity	1:22	2:10b

The repeated pattern is difficult to miss, but its significance is perhaps not so apparent. A number of observations which flow from this pattern help to elucidate that significance.

First, each challenge concludes with an affirmation of Job's integrity (1:22; 2:10b) which directly addresses the question raised in the dispute between Yahweh and the Satan. In Job 1:9-11 the Satan claims that Job's devotion to Yahweh is ultimately founded upon selfish motives: he's only in it for what he gets out of it, for the blessing and protection of Yahweh from which he benefits. The veracity of the Satan's claim is then put to the test through the removal of many of the blessings Job enjoyed—his family and his possessions.

retributive justice to Job was inappropriate. Elihu himself also appeals to this notion (e.g. Job 33:27; 34:37), but he also ponders other possibilities (cf. Job 33:1-33).

Once they have gone, Job's reaction is recorded in 1:20-22. The Satan claimed that he would 'curse (ברך) Yahweh to his face' (Job 1:11), but instead Job worshipped and blessed (ברך) Yahweh (Job 1:21).⁹ With these words Job effectively proves that the Satan's claims were spurious, a point demonstrated in the text by the fact that the conclusion in 1:22 leads into the second challenge. Having been proved wrong in the first accusation, the Satan tries a second time.

The second challenge proceeds in much the same way as the first. The conclusion to the second challenge is marked explicitly by the affirmation that Job does not speak inappropriately, countering the Satan's claim that he would so speak (Job 2:5; cf. 2:10b). The narrator has included these words to herald Yahweh's victory over the Satan: Job has risen to the challenge, he has retained his integrity and trust in Yahweh in spite of the events which the Satan insisted would prompt him to curse God.

Second, the pattern established in the move from the first challenge to the second leads the reader to anticipate the possibility of future challenges from the Satan, challenges which manifestly do not eventuate. There is no third day on which the Satan enters the heavenly courts to further call into question Job's integrity. There is no further suffering or loss to be inflicted upon Job in order to further test his faithfulness. The Satan does not return to insist that Job would abandon his integrity if only God were to allow Job's suffering to persist. Rather, with the close of the second challenge the matter is concluded, the question has been settled decisively. This observation is reinforced by the absence of the Satan in the remainder of the work, and notably in the epilogue—his place in the story has concluded with Job's utterance in 2:10b which clinches the case in Yahweh's favour and decisively demonstrates that Job's faith is not founded simply on self-

⁹ The text, however, has the Satan claiming that Job will 'curse' (ברך) Yahweh and Job finally 'blessing' (ברך) Yahweh. While I agree with the majority that the first is a euphemism designed to avoid juxtaposing the terms 'curse' and God's name, the result is that Job literally does what the Satan predicts. Some discussion of the ambiguities inherent in the terminology may be found in Philippe Guillaume and Michael Schunck, 'Job's Intercession: Antidote to Divine Folly', *Biblica* 88 (2007): 464-65, although they make the revealing but incorrect point that "[t]he alternation between cursing and blessing expressed by the same verb precludes any recourse to context". Since the identification of ambiguity can only be resolved by reference to the manner in which the reader's inferences either resolve or fail to resolve the ambiguity, ignoring either the broader context of the text or the immediate literary context of the words would seem only to be a formula for misreading the text.

interest as the Satan had claimed. Other significant shifts further highlight this transition—aside from the Satan's disappearance, so also Job's wife disappears, Job's friends appear, and the prose of the prologue gives way to poetic dialogues.¹⁰

Third, the remainder of the book of Job—the dialogues with his friends and the speeches by Elihu, Job, and Yahweh himself—do not contain further attempts to encourage Job to curse God. Although it might be argued that the friends' call on Job to confess to some unknown sin could amount to the same thing, it is unlikely.¹¹ The prologue seeks to find Job cursing Yahweh to his face (Job 1:11; 2:5) whereas Job's friends would rather Job disavow his own claims to righteousness. The latter, while at odds with what the reader knows about Job, should not be equated with cursing God. Job's friends seek to convince Job to denounce his sin in order to reconcile him to God and restore his fortunes in line with their understanding of the operations of retributive justice. They do not seek to have Job denounce God but denounce his own conviction that his behaviour does not warrant his treatment. If they have their way, Job will not curse God as the Satan had claimed he would, he would instead (although incorrectly) admit his own culpability and absolve God of any apparent violation of the principle of retributive justice. In this it is clear that the dialogues move to a new phase in the story of Job, a new phase which begins because the challenges of the Satan have been met and disposed of.

Many readers of Job proceed from the assumption that they are fully aware of the reasons underlying Job's suffering as the dialogues proceed. Greenstein, for example, notes in the context of the dialogues that '[i]t is worth remembering at this point that, as we read the book as

¹⁰ While the last of these is typically viewed as evidence of the amalgamation of originally disparate sources, such an analysis is ungenerous to the final author of the book, assuming a lack of sophistication and failing to see rhetorical significance in the transition. Rather, this change should also be viewed as an indicator that we've moved to a new phase in the story.

¹¹ David Noel Freedman has described the dialogues thus: "the friends and especially their arguments constitute a third effort on Satan's part to bring Job down". He argues that for Job to accede to his friends' insistence that he was guilty would have compromised Job's integrity. This fails to note that while Job's integrity may be compromised by such actions in one sense, the outcome would not be that which the Satan insisted upon in the prologue. Furthermore, the absence of the Satan beyond the prologue points to a new phase in the tale. See David N. Freedman, 'Is It Possible to Understand the Book of Job?', *Bible Review* 4.2 (April 1988): 26-33, 44.

a whole, Job's suffering is not a mystery to us. The cause is set forth in the narrative that opens the book. The source of Job's suffering remains a mystery only to Job and the other human characters in the story.¹² Yet both the structure of the prologue and the content of the speeches suggest that this may not be the case.¹³ Rather, whatever the reason for Job's continued suffering beyond Job 2:10, it is apparently *not* directly related to proving or disproving the point in dispute between Yahweh and the Satan in the prologue. That matter has been settled and Job's continued suffering should not be construed as a continuation of the dispute.

But if the Satan's challenge is effectively concluded in Job 2:10 so that Job's continued suffering is not to be explained by the challenge, what is it for? Why does Job still suffer once the challenge has been won and lost? Herein lies not only a riddle, but also a clue to its solution. First, it is worth noting that the answer to this question does not merely lie in the incompetence of an editor who arbitrarily attached the poetic portions of the book to the prose prologue, for the prose itself begins a new phase of the story in Job 2:11 with the introduction of the friends.

Second, with the challenge of the Satan comprehensively met before the conclusion to the prologue, there must be more here than meets the

¹² Greenstein, 'The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job', 349. See also Y. Hoffmann, 'Irony in the Book of Job', *Immanuel* 17 (1983–1984): 19; F. F. Bruce, 'The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Job', *The Bible Student* NS 23.2 (April 1952): 59; D. A. Carson, 'Job: Mystery and Faith', *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4/2 (2000): 41; Dirk Geeraerts, 'Caught in a Web of Irony: Job and His Embarrassed God' in Ellen Van Wolde, ed., *Job 28: Cognition in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2003): 37-55 (particularly the section entitled "The Irony of God's Speech II" where he writes "If Job's question is: 'Why do you torment me so while I am innocent?', we as readers know the answer, and we have known it from the very start of the book.").

¹³ This point has not been widely noted, and where it has been suggested there has been a lack of exegetical support for the suggestion. The idea that there is more behind Job's suffering than a desire to win a wager was made in 1857 by William H. Green for whom the Satan's presence among the sons of God indicated that he served at God's pleasure and that all the actions served some undisclosed purpose of God's. Green suggested that "[t]he trial was a chastisement likewise, not for overt acts of sin, but for the yet unsubdued corruption of the heart" (p. 295) based on the poetic account of Job's behaviour and the content of Elihu's speech. Green also wrote, however, that "[n]o haste is exhibited anywhere in this book to disclose the hidden purposes of God", indicating that he held that no comprehensive explanation for Job's suffering is given in the book, even when this additional reason is taken into account. See William H. Green, 'The Book of Job', *Biblical Reparatory and Princeton Review* 29 (1857): 281-327. While I agree with Green that there is more to Job's suffering than the cause explicitly identified in the prologue, he does not identify the aspects of the text discussed herein supporting this contention.

eye—the point of the remainder of the book cannot be restricted to further working out whether Job will maintain his integrity or curse God. That question has been answered. To suggest that the challenge persists in order to test Job's endurance is to change the conditions of the challenge itself. The Satan's second challenge was founded only upon Job's being struck physically, not upon his being left in that state indefinitely. Rather, something else is at hand. To some extent the argumentation of Job and his friends, as well as the words of God from the whirlwind help clarify the nature of this additional cause for Job's suffering, even if they necessarily (as shall become apparent) do not unambiguously identify that cause.

The debate between Job and his friends turns on the applicability of the traditional wisdom notion of retributive justice to Job. The poetic portion of the book is not part of the outworking of the wager between God and the Satan—although the possibility of reading it thus clearly acts as a trap for the unwary reader. The major part of the book sets forth the notion that there is wisdom that is hidden from us and that sometimes the answers to life's problems are not forthcoming. In the book of Job, the readers participate in this ignorance as much as Job and his friends, although it remains possible for the reader to overlook the clues and conclude that they do indeed understand the reason for Job's suffering much as Job's friends believed they knew the reason (although they offered a different reason to that which most readers would offer based on the prologue).

Thus the text hints at some unknown reason for Job's suffering above and beyond the dispute over Job's motives described in the prologue. Furthermore, this rationale for Job's suffering must necessarily remain unknown, for that is the very point of the book—in spite of the confidence of some to be able to explicate the reasons for suffering (whether that be Job's friends based on their confidence in the reliability of the doctrine of retribution or else readers based on their confidence in the supposedly comprehensive nature of the prologue), neither Job's friends nor his readers are truly able to access fully the reason for his suffering. God understands the way to it, and he alone knows its place.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Job 28:23.

4. Further Considerations

Some other aspects of the story further establish the value of this reading. First, it recognises that wisdom literature can be deliberately more complex than a simple surface reading of the text suggests. Although literary critics have long recognised the artful design and subtle complexities in both wisdom literature as well as other genres of biblical literature, it is apparent that the sages were themselves aware of the presence of more complex shades of meaning in their teachings than were necessarily apprehended by some in their audience. One indication of this can be found in Proverbs 1:6 where one of the functions of the book of Proverbs is said to be to aid in understanding the ‘words of the wise and their riddles’.

Precisely what is meant by the riddles of the wise is somewhat problematic. For one, the term ‘riddle’ (חידה, *ḥidah*) occurs nowhere else in the biblical wisdom literature, although it is said that the Queen of Sheba did test Solomon’s wisdom with riddles (1 Kgs 10:1; 2 Chr. 9:1). The only time the Hebrew Bible explicitly records an example of a riddle is in Judges 14 where Samson sets a riddle for the Philistines to solve. Although contemporary research has frequently identified the riddle with a very specific form,¹⁵ it is far from clear that the Hebrew term חידה has such a narrow referent. Rather, it seems more likely that it refers to enigmatic sayings in general, and thus the absence of explicitly labelled examples of riddles reflects the enigmatic nature of the riddle itself (which would lose some of its enigmatic quality were it explicitly identified as a riddle).¹⁶

¹⁵ Crenshaw, for example, cites a Sumerian riddle: “Whoever enters it has closed eyes; whoever departs from it has eyes that are wide open. What is it?” See James L. Crenshaw, ‘The Acquisition of Knowledge in Israelite Wisdom Literature’, *Word & World* 7.3 (1987): 245 citing S. N. Kramer. Crenshaw, however, does not appear to restrict the scope of ‘riddle’ to a precise form when he defines a חידה as referring to “enigmatic sayings and perhaps even extensive reflections on the meaning of life and its inequities” (see James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1981]: 24). Leo Perdue offers a far narrower definition of a riddle, see Leo G. Perdue, ‘The Riddles of Psalm 49’, *JBL* 93.4 (1974): 534. The use of the term חידה in contexts such as Ezek. 17:1-10 suggests that the term has a somewhat broader meaning than many admit.

¹⁶ Crenshaw also notes a Hebrew account of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon which recounts a series of nineteen “riddles” of which only three fit a technical definition of “riddle”, also suggesting that the term was not understood so narrowly. See James L. Crenshaw, ‘Riddles’ in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, V, 722.

James Crenshaw notes that 'riddles function both as clue and as snare'.¹⁷ This description could certainly apply to the book of Job. On the surface, God's behaviour could be construed as morally dubious. Closer examination, however, reveals that there is more to the events than the superficial explanation of the prologue can adequately account for, and so there is a clue that any conclusions drawn purely from the events recounted in the opening chapters should be treated with caution. In this way, the author has provided preknowledge in the opening narrative but introduced elements which warn the careful reader away from placing too much stock in the significance of that preknowledge.¹⁸

This notion is reinforced by other material within the wisdom corpus which indicates that there is more to being wise than merely appropriating the words of the wise. This is readily apparent in Proverbs 26:7, 9 which indicates that fools can quote wisdom texts as readily as the wise, yet they remain fools (and may even be harmed by their foolish appeals to wisdom). Job's friends, it would appear, are ultimately exemplars of precisely just such folly, for although they build their case on the pattern of retributive justice frequently implicit in many of the aphorisms recorded in Proverbs, they are ultimately rebuked for failing to speak the truth about God in Job's circumstances (Job 42:6).

Second, it applies a wisdom hermeneutic to reading the text. Although most genres of biblical literature do not provide any explicit hermeneutical guidelines, wisdom literature does, and it does so in connection with the note about the riddles of the wise in the opening verses to the book of Proverbs. Following the account describing the purpose of Proverbs, and in particular following the comment indicating that Proverbs was designed to instruct the reader in the means by which the riddles of the wise may be deciphered, the writer provides the first—and thus presumably the most significant—piece of

¹⁷ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 27.

¹⁸ Gerald Wilson describes preknowledge as "the intentional introduction of determinative information in ways that cannot be controverted and that have the effect of directing the way the reader understands what follows". Although some elements of the prologue do introduce preknowledge of this type (such as the description of Job as blameless), there are indications that other aspects of the prologue offer potentially deceptive preknowledge. In particular, the exchange between Yahweh and the Satan appears to offer preknowledge on which the poetic portion of the book builds, yet a careful analysis suggests that treating this as preknowledge is inappropriate. See Gerald Wilson, 'Preknowledge, Anticipation, and the Poetics of Job', *JSOT* 30 (2005): 243-56.

information required to understand the words of the wise and their riddles correctly: ‘The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge, wisdom and discipline are despised by fools’ (Prov. 1:7).

The implication of this hermeneutical rule is that where the wisdom literature is ambiguous or where the text is somewhat enigmatic—as could easily be said of the manner in which the opening chapters of Job portray God’s character—then the primary means by which the text ought to be disambiguated is by treating God with due respect. Indeed, it could be argued that this is the very mistake that Job’s friends make, for although they would appear to be defending God, they are ultimately imposing on God restrictions arising out of their own ignorance of the ultimate complexity of the universe.

Third, if the book of Job is about the limitations of human wisdom, it is difficult to see how providing the reader with the cause for Job’s suffering helps to enhance its argument. Some readers have recognised this problem but attributed it to the incompetence of the editor of the work. James Watts, for example, sees a contrast between God’s insistence that his ways are beyond human understanding in Job 38–39 with the narrator’s ‘banal’ explanation for Job’s suffering in Job 1–2.¹⁹

Yet, as we have seen, there are subtle indications throughout that the narrator’s work is not so banal as Watts claims, for in the words of the prologue lie clues guiding the wary reader towards a more subtle understanding of the book’s message which accords with the message Watts has identified in the divine speeches of Job 38–41. If the reader—along with Job and his friends—remains unaware of all that is happening behind the scenes, then the reader shares both the frustration and ignorance of Job, and shares in the experience of finding that there is knowledge available only to God.

¹⁹ James W. Watts, ‘The Unreliable Narrator of Job’ in Corrine Patton, Steven Cook, James Watts, eds., *The Whirlwind: Essays on Job, Hermeneutics and Theology in Memory of Jane Morse* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001): 168–80 ¶ 1.4. The obvious problem with posing the apparent conflict cited by Watts is that the words of the omniscient character (Yahweh) in Job 38–41 are presented by the narrator within the framework of the text (note, in particular, that the narrator introduces Yahweh’s speech in Job 38:1; 40:1, 6). See also Watts ¶ 2.4 where he highlights inconsistencies in his own reading (although he attributes the inconsistencies to the author of Job). Consequently the indicators of the narrator’s apparent naivety ought rather to be read as indicators of more complexity in the narrative than initially meets the eye. This fits better with the claim of Prov. 1:6 that wisdom literature may contain enigmatic meanings liable to be lost if read superficially.

Fourth, the oft-cited notion that the restoration of Job in the epilogue undermines the argument of the book is clearly ill-considered. David Clines highlights the supposed difficulty when he writes

[The epilogue] tells us, and not at all implicitly, that the most righteous man on earth is the most wealthy. If in ch. 1 he was the greatest of all the easterners, in ch. 42 he is simply one hundred per cent greater than that. And if there was any doubt in ch. 1 whether his piety was the cause of his prosperity and whether perhaps it was not the other way about, by ch. 42 no one, not even in heaven, is left in any doubt that it is the piety of Job, somewhat eccentrically expressed, to be sure, that has led to his ultimate superlative prosperity. What the book has been doing its best to demolish, the doctrine of retribution, is on its last page triumphantly affirmed.²⁰

In fact, the restoration of Job at the end of the book instead of at the conclusion of the challenges over which he triumphs in the prologue signals to the reader that there is more to Job's suffering than meets the eye. The delayed restoration does not undermine the victory of Yahweh over the Satan by proving that Job ultimately is rewarded for his faithfulness, instead it prompts the reader to ponder the delay in Job's restoration if the challenge had been won way back in Job 2:10.

Fifth, although it has been noted that the prose of the prologue and epilogue to Job could feasibly stand alone as a story, this reading of the book suggests that the amalgamation of the parts results in a far more sophisticated and subtle tale than is often recognised. Without the poetic dialogues and the persistence of Job's suffering throughout, the tale is largely reduced to one in which the sole cause of Job's suffering *is* the wager between Yahweh and the Satan. With the poetry, however, and its shift in focus away from seeking to encourage Job to curse Yahweh, it becomes apparent that there may be more to Job's suffering

²⁰ David J. A. Clines, 'Deconstructing the Book of Job' in David J. A. Clines, ed., *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990): 113. See also David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC, vol. 17; Waco: Word, 1989): xlvi where Clines nonetheless concedes that the principle is at least perturbed by Job when he writes that "according to the principle, the innocent Job should never have suffered at all; so the principle was partially defective". Further, on page lxii, Clines notes that "once the principle [of retribution] is successfully challenged, as it is in the Book of Job, even in a single case, its moral force is desperately weakened. For, once the case of Job becomes known, if a person who has a reputation for right living is found to be suffering the fate Proverbs predicts for wrongdoers, no one can point a finger of criticism; the Book of Job has established that the proper criterion for determining whether people are pious or not is the moral quality of their life and not the accidental circumstances of their material existence."

than meets the eye. The reader is placed in the same space as Job and his friends, pondering the mystery of Job's continued suffering.

5. Was It All for Nothing?

Although this reading offers an explanation for some of the more troublesome aspects of the book of Job, there is one brief comment made by Yahweh in Job 2:3 which threatens to bring it undone. In that verse, Yahweh apparently admits that Job's afflictions in the prologue were 'for nothing' (אֵינֶנּוּ; Job 2:3).²¹ Some, such as Samuel Balentine, understand this to constitute an explicit admission by Yahweh that Job's suffering was ultimately unjustifiable. He notes that

[t]he report that God has set about to destroy Job for no reason, like a nefarious sinner who ambushes the innocent, is in my judgment perhaps the single most disturbing admission in the Old Testament, if not in all scripture. The hermeneutical space it leaves open for interpretations that explain or exonerate God's behavior is small indeed. Seven sons and three daughters are dead—at God's instigation and with God's permission—for no reason. Perhaps Coleridge was right. The very existence of the Book of Job proves that the Bible is an utterly human production, because God would never have written such a powerful argument against himself!²²

However, there are good grounds for suggesting that Yahweh's words in Job 2:3 should not be read in this way. One immediate problem is that the narrator has already provided us with some reason for Yahweh to afflict Job—to prove that his faithfulness was not motivated by purely self-serving ends. Hence it would not be correct for Yahweh to say that he had afflicted Job for no reason.²³

Rather, it is important to note a subtle distinction in what is said: Yahweh says that the Satan's incitement of Yahweh to act against Job

²¹ See Kenneth Ngwa, 'Did Job Suffer for Nothing? The Ethics of Piety, Presumption and the Reception of Disaster in the Prologue of Job', *JSOT* 33.3 (2009): 359-80; Guillaume and Schunck, 'Job's Intercession', 460. *HALOT* identifies three usages for the term אֵינֶנּוּ: for no payment (given or received), e.g. Gen. 29:15; Exod. 21:2, 11; in vain, e.g. Ezek. 6:10; 14:23; Mal. 1:10; and without cause, undeservedly, e.g. 1 Sam. 19:5; 25:31. They place Job 2:3 in the third category, but Job 1:9 in the first, although Yahweh's use of the term in Job 2:3 doubtless recalls the earlier use by the Satan—his words are thrown back at him.

²² Samuel E. Balentine, 'For No Reason', *Interpretation* 57 (2003): 360-61.

²³ See Robert Sutherland, *Putting God on Trial* (Victoria, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2004): 40.

was for nothing, not that Job's suffering itself was for nothing, nor even that Yahweh had afflicted Job for nothing. Job's response to his initial round of suffering has proven that the claims made by the Satan which have resulted in Yahweh's afflicting Job were devoid of value, but this alone cannot exclude the possibility that there are other aspects to Job's suffering which remain undisclosed.

Clines also suggests that Yahweh here affirms the point, made more expansively in the first chapter, that Job's suffering is not warranted by anything he has done—the law of retribution is not applicable in Job's case.²⁴ Indeed, Clines hints at the fact that there is more to Job's suffering than merely winning a wager:

... that does not mean that the suffering is meaningless or gratuitous. His suffering has not been decreed in order to settle a divine wager, or to provide an object lesson for some second-rank heavenly being — but in order to lay bare a truth that lies at the heart of the moral universe (a truth that has been badly misconstrued by popular religion and professional wisdom alike), and even more perhaps... in order to lay to rest a doubt in the mind of God himself...²⁵

Consequently the best explanation for the admission that Yahweh had been incited against Job 'for nothing' in Job 2:3 is not that Job's suffering was without cause but instead that the Satan's accusation had been shown to be without value. Yahweh throws the Satan's words back in his face. It was not Job's actions which had no value, nor even his suffering and loss, but instead the claims of the Satan. Yahweh's words thus highlight the complete failure of the Satan's case against Job and set the scene for the second—and final—challenge.

Yahweh's exclamation that the afflictions of Job have thus far only demonstrated that the Satan's accusations have been without basis may even hint that Job's suffering is taking place for reasons undisclosed either to the Satan or the reader. Yahweh's words specifically point the finger at the Satan when declaring the futility of his provocation of Yahweh. The words do not justify the conclusion that Job's suffering served no other purpose.

²⁴ So Clines, *Job 1–20*, 42–43.

²⁵ Clines, *Job 1–20*, 42.

6. Conclusions

If Job's continued suffering cannot be simply attributed to the wager between Yahweh and the Satan in the prologue to the book of Job, the book as a whole takes on a rather more subtle and sophisticated character. The book of Job sets a trap for its readers: will they listen to the prologue but fail to hear the message of God from the whirlwind? The prologue appears to offer some explanation for the suffering of Job, and so many readers make judgments about God's role and motivations for allowing Job's suffering to take place. Yet when God finally speaks (and even in the words of the hymn of Job 28), the message to Job—and to the reader—is to beware of just how little we really do know. Comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind God's actions is far beyond our grasp, for we—like Job—are incapable of answering the questions posed by God. In the light of Job 28 and Job 38–41 we ought to rethink our assumptions about what we believe we know based on Job 1–2 in such a way that we recognise that the conclusions we may have reached are also based on incomplete knowledge. If we assume God's motives or purposes are comprehensively outlined in Job 1–2 and subsequently charge God with injustice, then we have succumbed to the folly of Job's friends: the belief that we have sufficient information to be able to make judgements—not only about the causes of Job's suffering—but about God's purposes behind that suffering. If we assume God's motives or purposes are comprehensively outlined in Job 1–2 and subsequently charge God with injustice, then we have failed to apprehend the central message of the book of Job regarding the impenetrable mystery of divine wisdom.

We ought not to be surprised by this. If the message of Job is that circumstances do not invariably admit to their causes within the realms of divine sovereignty, then would not the author have ultimately undermined this point by providing a comprehensive account of the causes of Job's suffering? Certainly the book begins with a cause, but—as we have seen—that is not a sufficient explanation for all that ensues. A careful reading of the book reveals that there is more going on than is revealed to the reader who thus shares the ignorance of Job and his friends. The trap for the reader of Job is the belief that they know more than they can and, oblivious to the clues of the text, they thus stand with Job's friends in not speaking what is right about God.