

## GUIDELINES FOR UNDER- STANDING AND PROCLAIMING THE BOOK OF JOB

Greg W. Parsons

Though many writers have given lavish tribute to the Book of Job especially concerning its literary excellence,<sup>1</sup> many preachers tend to shy away from preaching the book. If they do preach on Job, the sermons focus on only one aspect of the book—the familiar "storyline" of the prologue (chaps. 1-2) and epilogue (42:7-17) in which Job is portrayed as the paragon of patience. Consequently Job has often been presented as a model for modern-day believers to "be patient" in the midst of trials. However, few expositors delve into the complex dialogue between Job and his friends. Preachers tend to skip over Job's cursing of the day of his birth (chap. 3), the intricate and often argumentative interaction between Job and his friends (chaps. 4-27), and other hard-to-understand passages. Sermons or lessons have mainly focused on Job's idealized faith and patience epitomized in the famous verse, 19:25. Yet this image of Job is a distortion of the overall story presented in the Book of Job.<sup>2</sup>

This general neglect in preaching from the whole Book of Job is partially caused by the difficulty of properly understanding the book.<sup>3</sup> Because of the widespread misunderstanding of Job's mes-

Greg W. Parsons is Professor of Biblical Studies, Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary, Jacksonville, Texas.

<sup>1</sup> Essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle remarked concerning the greatness of Job among world literature, "There is nothing written, in the Bible or out of it, of equal literary merit" (cited by Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965], 3).

<sup>2</sup> See M. Vernon Davis, "Preaching from Job," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 14 (Fall 1971): 65.

<sup>3</sup> There is no consensus among scholars concerning its literary structure, unity, or essential meaning. A contributing factor to the distortion of the overall message of Job has been the difficulty of translating the Hebrew text into English. The Book of Job is probably the most difficult Old Testament book to translate since it has

sage, the biblical expositor finds a challenge in seeking to teach and preach the Book of Job in an accurate and relevant manner. Habel illustrates this predicament. "Preaching from Job is like nurturing a cactus garden. One is liable to recoil from constant prickles and miss the blossoms in the night."<sup>4</sup> The temptation is to follow the traditional, distorted view of Job's life and to ignore the many hard questions Job raised in facing the mystery of his innocent suffering. Yet the candid record that Job began to question God strikes a chord familiar to humankind. To ignore Job's question "why?" (see 3:11, 12,20; 10:18; 13:24; 24:1) and his search for God's answer is to ignore basic issues of life everyone must faces. Thus a second reason many do not preach from Job is the difficulty of answering the various theological and philosophical questions raised in the book.<sup>6</sup>

The present writer believes that it is worth the effort needed to understand the Book of Job. Continuing Habel's metaphor, one must cautiously approach the many prickly passages in order to gather the blossoms-messages that "touch the faith and fears of contemporary listeners. The spines and spikes of Job reflect a real world with which we can identify."<sup>7</sup> Yet there is a paucity of tips for the biblical gardener who seeks to cultivate the unfamiliar "desert land" located between the prologue and epilogue of Job. Though many have written concerning various hermeneutical factors related to the Book of Job, there has been no comprehensive study com piling guidelines for understanding the book.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore little has been written on the teaching or preaching of the Book of Job. Habel has contributed a small but helpful study for preaching the whole Book of Job.<sup>9</sup> From the perspective of an African-Arnerican pastor, J. Alfred Smith has contributed practical insights for lessons and sermons on the Book of Job.<sup>10</sup> Yet no

more rare words and a richer vocabulary than any other biblical book (Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job*, v, 160-63). Furthermore the poetic body (Job 3:1-42:6) contains numerous images foreign to modern culture.

<sup>4</sup> Norman C. Habel, *Job*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: Knox, 1981), 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Davis, "Preaching from Job," 65.

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.* and J. Alfred Smith, *Making Sense of Suffering: A Message to Job's Children, A Guide to Teaching and Preaching the Book of Job* (Elgin, IL: Progressive National Baptist Convention, 1988), 41, and the table of contents in Ord L. Morrow, *The Puzzles of Job* (Lincoln, NE: Back to the Bible, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> Habel, *Job*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most helpful introductory discussion of these issues is C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 83-88.

<sup>9</sup> Habel, *Job*.

<sup>10</sup> Smith. *Making Sense of Suffering: A Message to Job's Children*. Though writ-

resource is available that summarizes specific guidelines for preaching and teaching the book.

The purpose of the present study is to cultivate an interest in the study and use of the Book of Job by pastors, teachers, and laypersons in ministry. Specific guidelines for understanding and communicating this ancient wisdom book are proposed.

## SUGGESTED HERMENEUTICAL GUIDELINES FOR JOB

### INTERPRET INDIVIDUAL PASSAGES IN LIGHT OF THE OVERALL LITERARY STRUCTURE (AS A UNIT) AND MAIN PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

This fundamental rule of interpretation is more crucial for understanding the Book of Job than for any other Old Testament book except Ecclesiastes. Largely a dialogue between Job and his "friends," the Book of Job "contains all sorts of wrong advice and incorrect conclusions as they come from the lips of Job's well-meaning 'comforters.'"<sup>11</sup> Thus much of the book is human wisdom, "seemingly logical but actually wrong."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore it contains much that is theologically sound but with wrong applications to Job's situation.<sup>13</sup> Consequently preachers who ignore the dialogue or try to pullout some principle without an awareness of the immediate and overall context are in danger not only of distorting the story of Job but also of misrepresenting (however unwittingly) the message for today.<sup>14</sup>

*Procedure.* The first step (which will be obvious to many readers) must be emphasized since it is so foundational and crucial: read the book in its entirety (preferably at one sitting in a modern version) several times to observe the "big picture."<sup>15</sup> After the fast-paced action of the prologue (chaps. 1-2), one may be

ten from a nonevangelical perspective, this volume contains practical insights on understanding Job, ideas for helping laypersons study the book, and several messages (of varying value) based on the Book of Job.

<sup>11</sup> See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 193-94.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>13</sup> See Elmer B. Smick, "Job," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 4:859-60; and Derek Ridner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 60-61.

<sup>14</sup> As already mentioned, Job 19:25 has frequently been abused in this way. See also the misuse of 15:20-22 as explained by Grant R. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 192.

<sup>15</sup> The student of the Book of Job often "cannot see the forest for the trees" and needs a "photograph" taken, as it were, from an aircraft to understand how each individual "tree" fits the whole rugged landscape of the book.

frustrated by the intricate poetic "dialogue" (3:1-42:6). Ryken warns the reader not to expect "a fast-moving plot" but "to respect the leisurely pace of Hebrew poetry" with its skillful use of repetition and figurative language.<sup>16</sup> One goal of this inductive approach is to find the natural boundaries (or major subsections) in the landscape of Job. Another objective is to formulate a suggested purpose for the writing of the book.<sup>17</sup>

Proper view of structure as a literary unity. To understand its message one should assume the literary unity of Job.<sup>18</sup> Though it has various contrasts and opposites, the book should be viewed as a harmonious whole.<sup>19</sup>

Through one's own inductive reading and preliminary study, the following major landmarks in the rugged terrain of the Book of Job should be observed.

I. Prologue-in prose (chaps. 1-2)

II. Poetic Body (3:1-42:6)

A. Job's initial monologue or lament (chap. 3)

B. "Dialogue"<sup>20</sup> in three cycles between Job and his

<sup>16</sup> Rather than "looking for a sustained philosophic argument," one should expect "characters in conflict, oratorical outbursts," and "the leisurely poetic embellishment of virtually everything that is said" (Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], 342-43). Contrary to David McKenna (*Job*, Communicator's Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1986], 19-20), the dialogue of the Book of Job has no simplistic plot that moves logically forward in a definable pattern. Though he acknowledges that he has oversimplified the data, he wrongly analyzes the plot of Job as a drama in the classical Greek and modern Western sense. Norman Habel uses biblical narrative as a more reliable model to understand the plot development of Job: "In biblical narrative the dialogue not only reports or foreshadows actions in the plot but may itself also be an action which retards, complicates, or resolves an episode in the plot. . . . This model has been modified with expansion of the dialogue into speeches which both retard and complicate the plot" (*The Book of Job: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985], 26).

<sup>17</sup> In this reading and inductive study, one must eschew commentaries and study helps. However, see Hans Finzel, *Opening the Book: Key Methods of Applying Inductive Study to All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1987), 109-10, 120-25, for a helpful format in conducting an inductive study of Job.

<sup>18</sup> See Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 83. It is important that the expositor deal with the text in its current canonical form rather than discarding portions of Job that do not fit his preconceived notions. See Gregory W. Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 142-43, reprinted in Roy B. Zuck, ed., *Sitting with Job: Selected Studies on the Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 18, esp. n. 2.

<sup>19</sup> For a summary of some of these contrasts, Habel argues cogently that these various "opposites" in Job need not reflect irreconcilable conflict but "points and I counterpoints" or necessary "polarities" (Job, 4-6).

<sup>20</sup> This is not a dialogue in the modern sense but more like a "speech contest" in which one speech is not necessarily correlated to another (Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976], 96-98).

- friends (chaps. 4-27)
  - C. Poem on wisdom (chap. 28)
  - D. Job's concluding "monologues" (chaps. 29-31)
  - E. Elihu's speeches (chaps. 32-37)
  - F. Yahweh's speeches and Job's replies (38:1-42:6)
- III. Epilogue--in prose (42:7-17)

Two extremes must be avoided in examining the relationship of the prologue to Job's speeches in the main body. The first extreme is the tendency of critics to overemphasize the differences between the "patient Job" of the narrative framework (chaps. 1-2 and 42:7-17) and the "impatient Job" of the poetic body (3:1-42:6) so that the book is seen as without unity.<sup>21</sup>

Ironically some evangelicals also have unwittingly interpreted Job in a similar fashion. By assuming that a Christian should never ask God "why?" or candidly offer complaints to God, they seem to side with Job's friends in castigating Job for questioning the Lord.<sup>22</sup> However, Westermann wisely concludes that this is not a biblical concept. The complaint, which was a necessary part of the sufferer's prayer in the Psalms, has been divorced from its original context.<sup>23</sup> Thus the Book of Job demonstrates that Job was a real person (not an imaginary hero of a "folktale") who struggled with his emotions and feelings. The second extreme is to obliterate the differences between the two portraits of Job so that Job's apparent statement of faith in 19:25-26 is made determinative for the whole dialogue and poetic body. For instance McKenna sees this as the turning point after which the resolution of the conflict is assured by faith.<sup>24</sup> However, this is too simplistic. In reality Job's confidence of vindication it developed into an overconfident and self-righteous attitude (see esp. 31:35-37 where he demanded that God answer and vindicate him).<sup>25</sup> The real turning point in Job's faith was his final

<sup>21</sup> Critics allege that this is a sign of "sloppy editing" by the author of Job who failed to reconcile the "folktale" with his own portrait of Job in the dialogue.

<sup>22</sup> Because the modern perception of "complaint" is necessarily negative in connotation, people are urged to "suffer without complaining."

<sup>23</sup> See Claus Westermann's penetrating analysis of this modern misconception ("The Two Faces of Job," in *Job and the Silence of God*, ed. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristan [New York: Seabury, 1983], 18-19). What has resulted is discord between the patient Job of the prologue and the complaining Job of the dialogue and speeches.

<sup>24</sup> McKenna, Job, 19-20.

<sup>25</sup> Longman rightly criticizes McKenna's emphasis on Job's development of faith as a distortion of the data which "shows Job moving away and not toward God in the dialogues" (Tremper Longman III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991], 98).

response to the Lord (42:1-6).<sup>26</sup>

Though each passage is important for a proper interpretation of the Book of Job, the roles of the prologue (chaps. 1-2) and Yahweh's speeches (38:1-42:6) are particularly crucial. The prologue is the indispensable backdrop for the story of Job as a whole. It tells the reader (like the narrator in a dramatic production) that Job was innocent. Since the reader is aware of the scene in heaven whereas Job and his friends (real-life "actors") were not the prologue sets the stage for irony. The basic problem of the book is articulated in 1:9.<sup>27</sup> If the prologue serves as the vital platform for the story of Job, the climactic speeches of the Lord are "the most determinative part of the book."<sup>28</sup> Since much of the Book of Job is the human speculation of Job and his friends, to interpret any part without the divine input from chapters 38-42 is to distort the meaning of the book.

*Purpose.* The expositor also needs to do an inductive study of Job to determine the possible major purpose for its writing.<sup>29</sup> The key to unlocking the purpose of the book is the Lord's speeches. They do not give a direct answer to Job's question, "why?" Instead they challenge Job with an avalanche of questions to insinuate, "Who do you think you are?" (see esp. 38:2-5; 41:11) so that he may find the answer by faith in "who the Lord is."<sup>30</sup> Until one becomes confident in stating his own understanding of the message of Job, the present author's conclusion concerning the purpose of the writing of the Book of Job may be used as a working hypothesis: "The purpose of the Book of Job is to show that the proper relationship between God and man is based solely upon the sovereign grace of God and man's response of faith and submissive trust."<sup>31</sup>

Job's faith found no resolution until the Lord had confronted him for this attitude of pride he had developed after the coming of his three friends. Only then did he become willing to trust God as sovereign Lord without knowing all the answers to his questions.

<sup>27</sup> Terrien states, "Here is the starting point of the discussion, the nerve of the drama, the basic verse in the whole book. . . . Is not Job pious, as any other man, in exchange for his privileges?" (Samuel Terrien, "The Book of Job: Introduction and Exegesis," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954], 3:913).

<sup>28</sup> Bullock, *An Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> There has been no consensus concerning a single purpose for the book. Some authors argue that it is not possible to state one single purpose (Smick, "Job," 858). Cf. Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 85. For tips on an inductive approach to Job, see Finzel, *Opening the Book*, 121-25.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. McKenna, *Job*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Only the "basis of the proper relationship between God and man" as articulated in the prologue (1:9) is broad enough to encompass all the subthemes in the book.

RECOGNIZE THE VARIOUS LITERARY FORMS AND DEVICES UTILIZED BY THE AUTHOR TO COMMUNICATE HIS MESSAGE

*Literary forms.* It is generally agreed that the Book of Job is a mixed genre combining a variety of literary types to communicate its message.<sup>32</sup> In his literary composition the inspired author utilizes various traditional literary forms (such as the lament-or complaint--and the hymns familiar in the Psalms, the legal language of the lawsuit, and the disputation speech from wisdom literature) by transposing them to meet his specific needs. Though the book does "weep with complaint, argue with disputation, teach with didactic accuracy, excite with comedy, sting with irony, and relate human experience with epic majesty," it is a unique literary masterpiece that "must not be fit into any preconceived mold."<sup>33</sup> Therefore it is imperative for the student of Job to become familiar with these various genres so that he may learn to identify them according to the normal structure and language of each.<sup>34</sup> Based on this norm, the reader must then carefully look for the ways the author has adapted or combined them to convey the message of the book as a whole or to shape the precise meaning of a specific passage.<sup>35</sup>

*Literary devices.* Though the Book of Job exhibits the basic types of poetic parallelism, the inspired poet created unique patterns and variations.<sup>36</sup> Both antithetic--or contrasting--parallelism so common in Proverbs and strict synonymous parallelism (in which one line repeats the thought of the previous line) are infrequent in Job. Rather the poet prefers "ambiguous variation" from one line to the next, which is sometimes spiced with

The issue of Job's innocent suffering was only the catalyst for the larger issue of how man should relate to God whether he is suffering or not. See Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," in *Sitting with Job*, 22-23.

<sup>32</sup> Andersen observes that the Book of Job is "an astonishing mixture of almost every kind of literature to be found in the Old Testament" (*Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, 33). For several examples of the dozens of literary forms sewn skillfully into the fabric of Job, see William S. LaSor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 578-82.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 574-75.

<sup>34</sup> For an orientation to the main literary forms in the Book of Job, see John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 37-43. Also see LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 578-82. For a thoroughgoing analysis (from a nonevangelical perspective) with emphasis on the structure and message of the book, see the invaluable work of Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther, Forms of Old Testament Literature*, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 3-82.

<sup>35</sup> See Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 42-43.

<sup>36</sup> See Smick, "Job," 849-50. Examples of the three traditional categories of parallelism are as follows: synonymous (13:12), antithetic (8:20), and synthetic (38:2).

implicit word plays.<sup>37</sup>

The Book of Job also abounds in verbal imagery, including metaphors, similes, and other graphic word pictures.<sup>38</sup> For instance, chapter 14 combines three poignant similes of man's temporary life (vv. 1-6) with multiple nature analogies to emphasize the seeming finality of death for mankind: an extended metaphor contrasting man and a tree (vv. 7-10), and comparisons of man with dried-up bodies of water (vv. 11-12) as well as with an eroded mountain never to be restored {vv. 18-20}.<sup>39</sup> Greenberg's summary captures some of the innovative imagery that permeates the poetic body of the book. These include the felled tree which renews itself from its roots (14:7-9) as a metaphoric foil for man's irrevocable death; humanity's kinship with maggots (17:14) and jackals (30:29) as an image of alienation and isolation; the congealing of milk (10:10) as a figure for the formation of the embryo; the movement of a weaver's shuttle (7:6), of a runner in flight, or of the swooping eagle (9:25-26) as similes for the speedy passage of a lifetime; God's hostility figured as an attacking army (19:12); God's absence represented in the image of a traveler's un found goal in every direction (23:8; a striking reversal of the expression of God's ubiquity in Ps. 139:7-10).<sup>40</sup>

The legal metaphors that (in tandem with legal terminology) saturate the poetic body<sup>41</sup> are probably the most significant imagery occurring in Job.<sup>42</sup> Through the legal metaphor Job dared to treat God as his equal by entering, as it were, a "lawsuit"<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> An example of subtle variation and ambiguity is "Naked I came from my mother's womb/And naked I shall return there" (1:21). See Habel, *The Book of Job*, 47-48.

<sup>38</sup> LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 575-76.

<sup>39</sup> See Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, 170-71, 173.

<sup>40</sup> Moshe Greenberg, "Job," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1987), 302. The dating of the writing of Job is debatable, but a good case can be made for it after the writing of Psalm 8, which seems to be parodied in Job 7:17-18. See the introduction to the Book of Job in the present author's contribution to *The New King James Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, forthcoming).

<sup>41</sup> However, the prologue may initiate the legal imagery with the mention of Satan, who brought the charges against Job and placed him on trial before God and the community. Strictly speaking the Hebrew *šāṭān*, "the adversary," is not a proper name for Satan but designates "a prosecutor or accuser in a court of law" (see Ps. 109:6). See Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> This phenomenon is consistent with Job's role in 29:7-17, 22-25 as an important city official or judge. Thus Job felt at home with the legal metaphor and jargon. See the present writer's brief analysis of legal metaphor in Job in "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," in *Sitting with Job*, 28-33.

<sup>43</sup> The Hebrew term *šāṭān* (whether as the verb "to contend or make a complaint or accusation" or the noun "complaint") is used metaphorically in Job of the "lawsuit" between Job and God except for two places where it denotes Job's previous judicial experience (29:16 and 31:13). See *ibid.*, 29.



against God for malpractice as Creator and Judge of the universe.<sup>44</sup> In 41:11 the Lord confronted Job for feeling that He owed him something for his righteousness and for insinuating that God ought to "pay" him (i.e., make restitution<sup>45</sup> for the property, reputation, and posterity He allegedly had wrongfully seized from him; see 9:12 and 10:2-3).<sup>46</sup> Thus the use of the legal metaphor illustrates the bankruptcy of viewing man's relationship to God as a business "contract" between equals that can be enforced through court proceedings.<sup>47</sup>

The Book of Job (as part of ancient wisdom literature) also utilizes several key metaphors from creation theology that reflect the mythological milieu of the ancient Near East.<sup>48</sup>

Another significant literary feature of the Book of Job is the use of irony saturating nearly every section. At least two types of irony are frequent in Job: dramatic irony and verbal irony.<sup>49</sup> The former, similar to that found in Greek drama, is an irony of events whereby the reader (or "audience") has knowledge concerning the activities on the heavenly "stage" of which Job and his friends were not aware. Because the readers know that Job was innocent of wrongdoing and was being tested by the Lord, the vigorous debate between Job and his friends becomes almost comical at times as they frequently make dogmatic statements that are undermined by their ignorance of the events of the prologue.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> The dilemma of Job, who portrayed God as both an unjust judge (9:15-20) and legal adversary (10:2), sets the stage for Job's cries for an impartial mediator to help him (9:32-33; 16:18-21). Then Job placed his confidence in his "redeemer" or legal advocate (19:25). Finally Job wished (or more likely demanded) that God hear him in court to vindicate him (31:35). However, the Lord ignored Job's plea for a day in court and rebuked him for seeking to bring a "lawsuit" against Him (40:2).

<sup>45</sup> The Hebrew verb means to pay a debt or to make restitution for something lost or stolen (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1955], 1022). See especially the NIV translation of 41:11 (Heb., v. 3): "Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me."

<sup>46</sup> See Sylvia Huberman Scholnick, "Poetry in the Courtroom: Job 38-41," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Elaine R. Follis (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1987), 187-88, reprinted in *Sitting with Job*, 424-25.

<sup>47</sup> The Lord contradicted Job's misconception (based fundamentally on the retribution dogma he shared with the pagan religions) that He is obligated (as though by a business contract or a judicial claim) to reward man if he is obedient.

<sup>48</sup> Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (Sheffield: Almond, 1991), 28-31, 74, 260-73.

<sup>49</sup> For a brief introduction to irony and its utilization in Job, see the present writer's "Literary Features of the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 215-18, reprinted in *Sitting with Job*, 38-43; also see Habel, *The Book of Job*, 51-53.

<sup>50</sup> Whedbee describes comedy as including a "perception of incongruity that moves in the realm of the ironic, the ludicrous, and the ridiculous" (William

Verbal irony (a literary relative of sarcasm) is employed repeatedly by Job and his friends as they trade remarks laced with the very words previously used by one another but with a modified or opposite meaning.

Job frequently used mythopoeic language (the poetic usage of mythological allusions without endorsing the pagan beliefs or practices). For example he alluded to the pagan belief that an eclipse was caused by the chaos monster Leviathan which could be called up to swallow the sun or moon (3:8).<sup>51</sup> Job's clear statement of monotheism (31:26-28) suggests that the numerous mythological allusions in the book should not be interpreted as belief in the existence of other deities or the validity of pagan practices but merely as borrowed imagery from the ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore the Book of Job sometimes neutralizes polytheistic allusions by demythologizing them or even reversing them in polemical fashion.<sup>53</sup> For instance 26:5-14 (which emphasizes Yahweh's sovereign control over all forces of nature) contains several mythological allusions<sup>54</sup> to show that the Lord, not a nature deity, controls the chaotic sea.<sup>55</sup>

#### INTERPRET THE BOOK OF JOB IN LIGHT OF THE LARGER CONTEXT OF ANCIENT WISDOM LITERATURE, BOTH BIBLICAL AND EXTRABIBLICAL

Two suggestions may be made in connection with understanding the Book of Job in its cultural milieu.

Whedbee, "The Comedy of Job," *Semeia* 7 [1977]: 4-5; see also 12, 15, 23, 25, 29).  
51 However, his clarifying words in 9:7, which states that the command of God is the real cause of an eclipse of the sun, demonstrate that Job was not endorsing pagan cult practices; rather he was employing the most vivid and forceful language at his disposal to express the intensity of despair and anguish. See Parsons, "Literary Features of the Book of Job," in *Sitting with Job*, 43-44.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-45. For an in-depth look at various kinds of mythopoeic allusions in Job, see the two significant articles by Elmer Smick, "Mythology and the Book of Job" and "Another Look at the Mythological Elements in the Book of Job," reprinted in *Sitting with Job*, 221-44. (Also see the more recent summary by Smick, "Job," 863-71.)

<sup>53</sup> The concept of polemic derives from the Greek  $\epsilon\lambda\iota\omicron\varsigma$  ("war, battle"); thus it is an offensive war of words against a rival concept.

<sup>54</sup> In 26:12 Job referred to "the sea" (C*'*iJ, with the definite article), which grammatically indicates this is not the proper name of the god Yamm. This is in contrast to 7:12 in which the context suggests that the same Hebrew word (without the article) may refer to this pagan deity. See Parsons, "Literary Features of the Book of Job," in *Sitting with Job*, 44-47; and Smick, "Job," 865-66, 868-70.

<sup>55</sup> This teaching is reinforced by Yahweh Himself in 38:8-11, where He shows that (the) sea is not really a rival chaotic force or god, though it was considered such in that culture. The absence of the article with the Hebrew word  $\text{יָם}$  in verse 8 is not necessarily significant since the article is infrequent in Hebrew poetry.

First, the expositor should note that the message of the Book of Job challenges some common assumptions of traditional wisdom literature. Traditional ancient wisdom, as illustrated in the Book of Proverbs, assumes a fundamental unity of the cosmos--a relationship between the natural and social-moral order. What one observes in the natural order has implications for the social or moral order.<sup>56</sup> Job's friends operated under this assumption. For instance Bildad championed this traditional understanding what analogies from nature could be used to confirm principles in the social and moral sphere.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore the Book of Job includes various facts and analogies from nature to challenge this view of moral retribution.<sup>58</sup> This is particularly true of Yahweh's speeches.<sup>59</sup> On one hand there is no mechanical law or principle that determines how Yahweh must always act in either the natural order or the social-moral order;<sup>60</sup> on the other hand the mysterious order observable in nature is an implicit testimony to an analogous order that (despite the protests of Job) exists in the social and moral spheres. The traditional wisdom belief in moral retribution, which lay at the core of ancient Near Eastern religions,<sup>61</sup> had become a dogmatic assumption (with no exceptions) for Job's friends. Because the righteous were always blessed and the wicked always punished, Eliphaz and Bildad alleged that Job's suffering proved he was guilty of hidden sin (4:7-11; 8:11-20; 18:5-21).<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> See Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 162. In Egypt this concept of unity also included the political order. For documentation of the concept of cosmic unity in Egypt and Ugarit, see Greg W. Parsons, "A Biblical Theology of Job 38:1-42:6" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980), 10-11, 145.

<sup>57</sup> Bildad argued that the principle of cause and effect, which is illustrated in nature (8:11-19), could be transferred to prove the dogma of divine retribution. Dramatic irony shows the foolishness of his conclusion (in 8:20-22) that from the effect (Job's loss of health and wealth) he could deduce the cause (Job is a sinner). See Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *The Book of Job: God's Answer to the Problem of Underserved Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 56-57.

<sup>58</sup> See Habel, *The Book of Job*, 57-58. Job frequently used an analogy from nature or compared his own situation to some animal or phenomenon of nature to argue his innocence despite the allegations of his friends.

<sup>59</sup> He argued from the natural world that His universe includes chaotic elements such as the sea (38:8) and the desert (38:26-27) as well as the magnificent creatures Behemoth and Leviathan (40:15-41:34), which were symbols of chaos in the ancient Near East. Yet He restrains these chaotic forces so that order and balance in nature results according to His divine plan (38:39; 39:1-4).

<sup>60</sup> See Habel, *The Book of Job*, 65, 68-69.

<sup>61</sup> See Parsons, "A Biblical Theology of Job 38:1-42:6," chap. 1. Cf. John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 179-87.

<sup>62</sup> Ironically because Job accused God of injustice in order to maintain his own

The Book of Job serves to refute this "retribution dogma," a simplistic understanding of the divine retribution principle maintaining that there is an automatic connection between one's material and physical prosperity and one's spirituality.<sup>63</sup> Though divine retribution is a valid biblical principle (Deut. 28), the error is making it an unconditional dogma by which man can predetermine God's actions and judge a person's condition before Him. God is not bound to act according to this manmade retribution dogma, though He will normally bless the righteous and punish the wicked.

Perdue argues that the traditional metaphors of creation theology that Israelite wisdom literature shared with the ancient Near East have been "deconstructed" in the Book of Job. The man Job made a wholesale assault on each metaphor of creation faith in order to challenge the view of Yahweh as the righteous Ruler and Judge who maintains creation with retributive justice.<sup>64</sup> Second, along with noting how the Book of Job challenges traditional wisdom assumptions, the expositor should consider parallelliterature (including the "innocent sufferer" texts). The expositor should utilize both primary and secondary resources to observe key parallels or contrasts to the Book of Job.<sup>65</sup> A general comparison of the Book of Job with the "righteous sufferer"<sup>66</sup> texts in the ancient Near East shows that the Book of Job contains the same basic solutions to the problem of "innocent suffering" as found in the extrabiblical texts.<sup>67</sup> The main difference between

innocence (40:8)-assuming that God was punishing him, though unjustly-he subconsciously held to this dogma of retribution. See Parsons, "Structure and Purpose," in *Sitting with Job*, 24-25.

<sup>63</sup> See *ibid.*, 23; and Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 48.

<sup>64</sup> Job radically revised traditional metaphors of God as a beneficent artisan or as the divine warrior who wins the combat with chaos monsters to establish order in the cosmos. Job portrayed Him as a capricious judge (9:14-24) and vicious warrior (16:6-17) who had turned against creation (Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 171, 269-71).

<sup>65</sup> James B. Pritchard's classic work, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), remains the most accessible primary source for the general reader. For a brief but beneficial survey of the main parallel literature from Egypt and Mesopotamia with valuable bibliography of primary sources, see Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context*, 169-89. Also note Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 132-40; Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 6-11; and LaSor, Hubbard and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 538-42.

<sup>66</sup> See Parsons "A Biblical Theology of Job 38:1-42:6," chap. 1, where six of these texts are compared to Job.

<sup>67</sup> These solutions are as follows: (a) man's congenital sinfulness (Job 5:6-7; 15:14-16); (b) accusation of God as unjust (9:22-24; 24:1-17); (c) incompleteness of human understanding (Job 28; chaps. 38-42; cf. Zophar in 11:7-9). See James L. Crenshaw, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 82 (1970): 387-88; and Walton, *Ancient Israelite*

the Book of Job and these other texts is the direct theophonic intervention of God and His direct speeches (chaps. 38-41).<sup>68</sup> Thus the Book of Job offers neither a definitive answer to Job's question "why?" nor a solution to the problem of innocent suffering; therefore the significant point of the book is not its approach to the problem of suffering,<sup>69</sup> but the uniqueness of the God to whom man must properly relate (whether suffering or not).<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore individual parallels or contrasts can sometimes shed light on specific passages in the Book of Job. For instance in contrast to the Egyptian "Dispute over Suicide"<sup>71</sup> and the Babylonian-Assyrian work "The Dialogue of Pessimism,"<sup>72</sup> Job (though he "cursed" the day of his birth and longed for death, chap. 3) never considered suicide.<sup>73</sup>

#### HAVE A PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF JOB TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

The expositor should not read the New Testament back into the Old Testament. One should heed Bullock's caution to avoid using "New Testament concepts as tools to hammer and chisel the book of Job into New Testament shape."<sup>74</sup> Thus Job ought to be interpreted in light of its own cultural context before considering the impact of the New Testament on its message.

Two examples illustrate the proper procedure: the role of Satan in the prologue, and the mention of Job's "redeemer" in 19:25. *Literature in Its Cultural Context*, 183-86.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 540-41. The one and only true God Yahweh is both transcendent and personal in contrast to the immanent yet impersonal nature deities of the ancient Near East.

<sup>69</sup> Yet the Book of Job is a unique work which stands "head and shoulders" above "its nearest competitors in the coherence of its sustained treatment of the theme of human misery, in the scope of its many-sided examination of the problem, in the strength of its defiant moral monotheism. . . . Comparison only serves to enhance the solitary greatness of the book of Job" (Andersen, Job, 32).

<sup>70</sup> This supports the conclusion that the purpose (or central issue) of the Book of Job focuses on the basis of the proper relationship between God and man.

<sup>71</sup> See Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 405-7. For a modern paraphrase, see Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York: Paulist, 1991), 206-11.

<sup>72</sup> See Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 437-38, 600-601. For a modern paraphrase, see Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 219-24.

<sup>73</sup> Andersen, Job, 29-30, 32, 109; Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 7-9. That Job merely desired that the Lord would allow him to die is supported by other passages such as 7:15-21 and 10:18-22.

<sup>74</sup> Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 88.

First, Satan does not appear in Job as the chief adversary of God as he does in the New Testament. Therefore one must not presuppose all that is later revealed about him.<sup>75</sup> Second, as tempting as it may be, one must not allow the New Testament doctrine of the Incarnation to shape the understanding of Job's "redeemer."<sup>76</sup> In 9:33 Job longed for a mediator or neutral party to arbitrate a settlement between himself and God, and 16:18-21 continues the legal metaphor.<sup>77</sup> That Job ardently wished for an intercessor in 19:25 is undeniable, but it is not likely that Job conceived of his "redeemer" as being God Himself or Jesus Christ.<sup>78</sup>

PRELIMINARY HOMILETICAL GUIDELINES FOR JOB  
PREACH EACH PASSAGE AS PART OF THE WHOLE STORY OF THE BOOK

It is imperative to consider the entire Book of Job in preparation for preaching on a particular portion. Sermons on the prologue should take into account the "rest of the story," namely, the "impatient Job" of the poetic body.<sup>79</sup> Also sermons utilizing a portion of Job or one of his friends' speeches must be preached in light of the total argument of these many speeches. Failure to do so may not only reinforce a distorted picture of Job as a "patient saint" but may also encourage the misuse of proof texts.<sup>80</sup>

If the expositor realizes that the Book of Job presents a message in counterpoint (presenting opposing views in a delicate balance), he may carefully traverse the exegetical "tightrope" between opposing views about Job, about God Himself, and concerning such issues as the reason for human suffering.<sup>81</sup> It would

<sup>75</sup> See *ibid.*, 86-88, for the cogent argument that the development of the doctrine of Satan (like the Old Testament doctrine of the Messiah) was not fully disclosed until the New Testament.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>77</sup> See above, n. 44.

<sup>78</sup> However, this does not negate the conclusion that the ultimate fulfillment of Job's need for a mediator and "kinsman-redeemer" was found in Jesus Christ. See Parsons, "Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," in *Sitting with Job*, 31, esp. n. 74; and Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 88.

<sup>79</sup> Habel recommends reading portions of chapters 3, 7, 12, and 16 to provide a balance to the traditional portrait of Job in chapters 1-2 (see Habel, *Job*, 2-3).

<sup>80</sup> As noted above, Job 19:25 is often ripped from its literary context, the intricate poetic body (3:1-42:6). Kaiser cites Job 36:11 as one of the proof texts wrongly used by advocates of the so-called "prosperity gospel." This interpretation ignores the overall context of Job's whole life and that Elihu is parroting a traditional idea of the three friends who were rebuked by the Lord in 42:7 (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Testament Promise of Material Blessings and the Contemporary Believer," *Trinity Journal* 9 [Fall 1988]: 151-52, 166-67).

<sup>81</sup> Habel observes, "A passage from one speech in Job finds its counterpoint in another. Points and counterpoints are typical of the great debate. Opposing views

be unbalanced to assume that the friends spoke only error<sup>82</sup> or that Job was always right; therefore one must exercise care in making valid application today.<sup>83</sup>

As already noted, a careful study of Job's life reveals two contrasting "faces." Each has important features for people today. The traditional portrait of Job as the patient "saint" who belongs on a stained glass window (with a halo) must be modified (in light of the poetic body) to portray Job as the persevering saint who struggled with his emotions. Thus he is a person with whom each believer may identify. Similarly the profile of the almost blasphemous Job which emerges from the poetic body reveals that believers may ask honest questions of God when confronted with the question "why?" To focus on only one "face" of Job for preaching without consideration for the other creates an imbalance that may cause one to misapply the text. Biblical faith is not a stoic acceptance of suffering.<sup>84</sup> Thus the next guideline addresses the need to make valid applications.

IN LIGHT OF ONE'S OWN CULTURE AND COMMUNITY, UTILIZE THE UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF JOB (AS PART OF WISDOM LITERATURE) AS POTENTIAL CLUES FOR A TIMELESS MESSAGE

The Book of Job contains an extraordinary range of subjects of universal interest, including "emotions of serenity and terror, hope and despair; the contrasting characters of men; doubts about and affirmations of cosmic justice; the splendors and wonders of animate and inanimate nature."<sup>85</sup> Job's "questioning of the value of faith and his search for the reality of God" are points at which contemporary humankind "can most readily identify with him."<sup>86</sup> It bears repeating that Job's struggle supplies the preacher with a fertile source for sermons that engage basic issues of life. Why is there suffering, pain, and inequity in life? Is life really worth living? Why do good people suffer bad things? Modern humanity has still not resolved these fundamental issues of human existence.<sup>87</sup> These subjects are universal in appeal and should

about God, suffering, human nature, wisdom, and prayer recur throughout the book" (Job, 4).

<sup>82</sup> This is illustrated by the fact that Paul quoted Eliphaz (Job 5:13) with approval in 1 Corinthians 3:19.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Roland E. Murphy states that "the formalism which prohibits an honest confrontation with God is not part of biblical faith" (*The Psalms, Job, Proclamation Commentaries* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977], 88).

<sup>85</sup> Greenberg, "Job," 302.

<sup>86</sup> See Davis, "Preaching from Job," 65.

<sup>87</sup> See the feeble attempt of Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to*

yield timeless applications.<sup>88</sup>

Consequently with proper consideration of one's own culture and particular community, the expositor should seek applications that are both relevant and timeless (true to the context of Job's story and culture as well as for his own modern cultural setting). After having followed the proper hermeneutical guidelines already suggested, the expositor should prayerfully read and meditate on the passage<sup>89</sup> (as well as the book as a whole). (1) He ought to reread continually the whole book in light of his knowledge of the general needs of his culture and the specific needs of his community.<sup>90</sup> However, the focus must remain on how the Bible has the answer to every need of humanity.<sup>91</sup> (2) By prayerfully meditating on the text, the expositor should discern the underlying theological principle that "bridges" the gap between the "then" of the text and the needs and issues of the "now."<sup>92</sup> Sometimes he may perceive specific parallels between the biblical situation and various general or specific issues today as a clue to the timeless message.<sup>93</sup>

*Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981), who concludes that God is limited and not in control of everything. For an excellent analysis from a conservative evangelical scholar, see D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

<sup>88</sup> Cf. McKenna, Job, 17. Habel states that Job's speeches touch "the quick of human suffering and the passion of real life" (Job, 1).

<sup>89</sup> See Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 343; and John MacArthur, Jr., "A Study Method for Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. John MacArthur, Jr. (Dallas, TX: Word, 1992), 216-18, who rightly states that this step is an important link between exegesis and timeless applications.

<sup>90</sup> For some thought-provoking questions and insights relating to pastoral and theological considerations, see Daniel J. Simundson, *The Message of Job: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986). A pastor or missionary must not only have a thorough knowledge of the text of Job but must also get to know his flock. He should spend time with them so that he may know their interests and discern their needs. Then he can correlate this data with the issues addressed in the text. Proper contextualization occurs when there is specific application to the situation of the audience (Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 346-47).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Roy B. Zuck, "Application in Biblical Hermeneutics and Exposition," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 24. One must not become so concerned with contemporary relevance that he preaches what people want to hear rather than "thus saith the Lord." The message must not be lifted from its historical-cultural and biblical context to tickle the ears of the audience or to massage the hurts of the sheep. See Richard L. Mayhue, "Rediscovering Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, 1, 6, 14.

g}. See Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 345; Zuck, "Application in Biblical Hermeneutics and Exposition," 26-27; and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 151-52, 197-98. In the Book of Job this principle is often inseparably tied to the overall purpose of the book.

<sup>93</sup> Osborne warns that these "parallels should be genuine rather than contrived" (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 343).



For example in chapter 24 Job questioned the inactivity of Almighty God, who seemingly ignores the cries of poor and helpless members of society who are exploited by the wicked (vv. 1-12). He complained about the high crime rate especially at night (vv. 13-17). These issues of social injustice and crime are certainly relevant today.<sup>94</sup> In chapter 38 the Lord responded directly to Job's remarks (vv. 12-15). He reminded Job that because He controls the coming of the dawn, the chaotic darkness is dispelled and the activities of the wicked are restricted. Though crime and injustice are prevalent in the world, this does not mean that the Lord has abdicated his throne to Satan or to chaotic elements in the world.<sup>95</sup> An underlying theological principle is that God is still in charge and in control even when things seem chaotic and senseless. The timeless message and application will relate to this. The Book of Job utilizes the subject of human suffering and social injustice to teach that God is trustworthy even when circumstances may shroud His sovereign plan and call His goodness into question.

Job 3 has contemporary relevance in particular for the issues of suicide and euthanasia (mercy killing). If anyone ever had good reason to consider suicide, Job did. However, as already noted, Job (in contrast to other writings from his time) did not consider suicide; rather he wished that he had never been born and he desired to die to escape suffering. Furthermore he never asked his wife (who had already suggested in 2:9 that he commit "indirect suicide" by cursing God<sup>96</sup> or any of his friends to assist him in self-destruction.

The Book of Job also demonstrates that the believer should be able to pour out honestly all his emotions and feelings to God. Job 3 and many other passages in the poetic body document the venting of Job's bitterness and frustration to God in prayer.<sup>97</sup> Thus individuals who are facing circumstances that cause them to feel angry toward God should not be told to suppress or to ignore their feelings. Rather they ought to be encouraged to get alone with God as they read Bible books such as Job. They ought to ventilate their intense hurts and needs to the One who alone understands the

<sup>94</sup> This sounds almost like a letter to the editor in the newspaper protesting government failures to deal adequately with social problems. Perhaps a sermon on Job 24 could begin with the reading of such a letter (either real or imagined) as a catalyst for the message.

<sup>95</sup> In the prologue Satan had to ask permission to torment Job (1:11-12; 2:5-6), and 38:8-11 emphasizes the Lord's control of the chaotic sea.

<sup>96</sup> Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, 93.

<sup>97</sup> See C. S. Rodd, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 88, 104-10.

depths of human pain and frustrations. The Book of Job (in the context of the Bible as a whole) provides answers to the human problem of depression.<sup>98</sup> Job rode an emotional roller coaster that began with the height of patient trust in God (chaps. 1-2) but sharply dipped to despair (chap. 3) and then continued mainly on the downward side toward despondence, bitterness, and despair but with occasional glimmers of hope throughout the dialogue.<sup>99</sup> Many today can identify with such emotions.<sup>100</sup>

Job eventually learned to have confidence and trust in God's sovereign plan even in the midst of mystery. This trust resulted in renewed stability to his emotions. Therefore the expositor should challenge those who are suffering inexplicable pain and emotional turmoil to dare to trust the Lord with their lives and circumstances even though they may never fully understand why. If Job could realize this even before the coming of Christ, how much more should believers today (in light of New Testament revelation) exhibit faith in the \_midst of suffering.

#### EXPLORE THE NEW TESTAMENT AS THE PRIMARY KEY TO ANSWER JOB'S QUESTIONS AND TO MAKE VALID APPLICATION FOR TODAY

Several writers have noted that without the New Testament the Book of Job remains incomplete. Many of Job's questions remain unanswered until the coming of Christ.<sup>101</sup> However, the caution already issued about not reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament must be heeded. The preacher or teacher must balance the Old Testament context with the input from the New Testament.

<sup>98</sup> See John Job, *Job Speaks Today* (Atlanta: Knox, 1980), 55-68.

<sup>99</sup> "Throughout the story, Job plummets into the depths of despair just short of hell itself and vaults upward to the heights of revelation" in other passages (McKenna, Job, 24). Cf. Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 67-69. For example in chapter 14 Job alternated between despair over the futility of life (vv. 1-6) and the finality of death (vv. 7-12) and then had a glimmer of hope for life after death (vv. 13-17). But he returned to the reality of life's despair and pain (vv. 18-22). Chapter 19 begins in dark despair (vv. 1-22) but ends in a note of confidence of vindication (vv. 23-29).

<sup>100</sup> Simundson observes that the sharp mood swings of Job are normal for sufferers; those swings are usually unpredictable and beyond control (Simundson, *The Message of Job*, 67-68.)

<sup>101</sup> See John Job, *Job Speaks Today*, 12-13; and McKenna, Job, 24-25. For instance Job's longing for a mediator (9:33; 16:18-21) ultimately is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). However, as already noted, this does not mean that this was the thinking of Job. His question of whether man has more hope of life after death than a tree (Job 14) is answered in Jesus' teaching (John 11:25) and in His resurrection, which guarantees the believer's future resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-23). See G. Campbell Morgan, *The Answers of Jesus to Job* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973).

Habel suggests expositors preach a series of sermons before Easter Sunday in which they view Job's major struggles in the context of Christ's suffering.<sup>102</sup> One must not ignore the overall context of the Old Testament, however, as one moves to the New Testament.<sup>103</sup>

The New Testament corroborates or clarifies one's understanding of certain key points in the story of Job. For instance the earlier conclusion that the Lord (in the prologue) did not abdicate His sovereign position to Satan is confirmed by the New Testament record that Satan was given permission to sift Peter as wheat (Luke 22:31-32).<sup>104</sup> Like Job, the Book of James demonstrates that suffering may operate for higher purposes than humans may realize.<sup>105</sup> In contrast to Job's friends who said "in effect: 'When you meet with various trials, repent.' James wrote, 'When you meet with various trials, rejoice.'"<sup>106</sup>

#### EXPLORE THE USE OF DRAMA AS A VEHICLE FOR COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE OF JOB

One goal of the expositor should be to find illustrations from parallel situations in one's own culture to reproduce the effect of the message so that it may be communicated as clearly as in ancient times.<sup>107</sup> Drama may be a modern analogy<sup>108</sup> that can be

<sup>102</sup> Habel, *Job*, 10-12. Hubbard suggests an interesting parallel between the questions asked by Jesus' opponents and the series of interactions between Job and his "friends" (D. A. Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith," *Tyndale Bulletin* 17 [1966]: 28, n. 60).

<sup>103</sup> The relationship of Job to the so-called "Suffering Servant" songs of Isaiah might serve as an important transition to help one understand Christ's passion and how He identified with human pain (Hartley, *The Book of Job*, vii, 14-15; and Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, 72-73).

<sup>104</sup> Christ's prayer for Peter illustrates that trials from Satan have a higher divine design (Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 59-60).

<sup>105</sup> Hubbard "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith," 23.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* (See James 1:2-3). Also James clarified that God was not tempting Job as Satan was, but was testing him to see if he would persevere (James 1:12-13).

<sup>107</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 318, 325.

<sup>108</sup> Job has been compared to a cosmic drama on a double stage that allows the reader (as an audience) to observe it as the curtains of heaven above and then earth below open (Luis Alonso-Schokel, "Toward a Dramatic Reading of the Book of Job," *Semeia* 7 [1977]: 46-47). Edwin and Margaret Thiele also develop the book in analogies to a drama (*Job and the Devil* [Boise, ID: Pacific, 1988]). For a briefer comparison to a play with nine scenes, see Mildred Tengbom, *Sometimes I Hurt* (Nashville: Nelson, 1980), 14-15. However, van Selms notes that the ancient Near East, unlike ancient Greece did not know drama as an art form (A. van Selms, *Job: A Practical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 4).

utilized to present the message of the book.<sup>109</sup> Though Job is unlike drama in having virtually no plot,<sup>110</sup> Ryken calls it a "closet drama," intended to be read rather than acted.<sup>111</sup> The literary form of the Book of Job is "ideally suited to dramatic recitation or presentation."<sup>112</sup> The role of irony in Job suggests audience participation (originally the reader).<sup>113</sup>

However, another possibility may be to convert the "dialogue" occurring at the "ash heap" (or garbage dump) into a modern situation.<sup>114</sup> Perhaps a trial with various witnesses<sup>115</sup> or a debate format between actors who voice in modern idiom the concerns of Job in contrast to Job's friends and to the Lord Himself could approximate some of the intense feelings found in chapters 3-42.

### CONCLUSION

This article has proposed four hermeneutical guidelines and four homiletical suggestions for understanding and proclaiming the Book of Job. However, to learn the lessons of Job and to seek to

<sup>109</sup> In doing so the emphasis should be on using drama to enhance the biblical message rather than as a theatrical gimmick (John MacArthur, Jr., "Frequently Asked Questions about Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, 345). The present writer's former student Terry Tolleson has utilized the following format: (1) preaching a sermon emphasizing the story and message of Job on Sunday morning; (2) in a more informal setting such as Sunday evening dividing the congregation into small groups to study different character parts; and (3) preparing for the actual dramatization for the next Sunday.

<sup>110</sup> Gordis concludes that Job is "poles away from Elizabethan and from modern drama" (*The Book of God and Man*, 4). However, in the virtual absence of plot, Job parallels the modern "theater of the absurd." Other parallels to this type of drama include "a sense of loss, alienation, and metaphysical anguish which culminates in . . . the total absurdity of the human condition" (Renate Usmiani, "A New Look at the Drama of 'Job,'" *Modern Drama* 134 [1970]: 197, 199-200). Furthermore all the speakers "talk past each other" and they did not really know what the issue was in Job's trials (van Selms, *Job: A Practical Commentary*, 4).

<sup>111</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 343.

<sup>112</sup> J. H. Eaton, *Job* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1985), 39; and Alonso-Schokel, "Toward a Dramatic Reading of the Book of Job," 45-61.

<sup>113</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 343. In some churches (though certainly not all) an informal service or class might allow for actors who insert laughter or even cat-calls at appropriate junctures where Job's friends misjudge him as they place "their foot in their mouths" or holler to Job (who cannot hear) that Christ is the answer to his various questions.

<sup>114</sup> However, one should not go so far as in Archibald MacLeish's Pulitzer Prize play, *JB* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

<sup>115</sup> The present writer's student Jerry Payne used this format successfully for a seminary class with various classmates reading a prepared script. For clues on how to incorporate the legal metaphors into a drama, see Alonso-Schokel, "Toward a Dramatic Reading of the Book of Job," 46-50, 52-59.

teach and apply them to one's own generation is a lifelong journey of faith one must "experience as an adventure on the growing edge of the human spirit."<sup>116</sup> Job's example provides practical truths such as persevering in prayer during trials. But these : truths must be applied by faith. A person may never fully appropriate them until he suffers.<sup>117</sup>

Job probably never knew the reason he suffered and seldom do others. Therefore the question is, "Will we persevere in prayer and in life no matter what happens?" The proof of faith will be the way a person lives in the midst of fiery trials. Can the believer say with Job in 23:10, "When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold (cf. 1 Pet. 1.6-7).

<sup>116</sup> McKenna, *Job*, 15.

<sup>117</sup> See Rodd, *The Book of Job*, xiii.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary  
3909 Swiss Ave.  
Dallas, TX 75204  
[www.dts.edu](http://www.dts.edu)

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)

The Book of Job (/dɛˈɒʃb/; Hebrew: עֵשֶׂב) addresses the problem of theodicy, meaning the vindication of the justice of God in the light of humanity's suffering. A rich theological work setting out a variety of perspectives, it has been widely and extravagantly praised for its literary qualities, with Alfred Lord Tennyson calling it "the greatest poem of ancient and modern times". It is found in the Ketuvim ("Writings") section of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), and is the first poetic book in the Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the book of Proverbs. Greg W. Parsons. The Book of Proverbs includes many practical and down-to-earth sayings. Yet few sermons are preached from this book. For many preachers the Book of Proverbs apparently seems like "nothing more than a deserted stretch of highway between Psalms and Ecclesiastes" that appears "dry and barren."<sup>1</sup> Collins asserts that "the crisis of relevance" for the preacher is particularly acute for the Book of Proverbs since it provides little inspiration or excitement.Â Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs 157. words from the context (as in 25:25-26, 28),<sup>41</sup> the reader must be cautious about the "announced" kind of parallelism.