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Concluding the Book of Job and YHWH: Reading Job from the End to the Beginning

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Penitentialist, consolationist, and existentialist interpretations of Job read the concluding words of Job 42:2–6 as spoken by Job and then struggle to explain how these words form a coherent conclusion to the book. In this article, the narrative frame in 42:1, 7 is applied to its immediate context and understands Job as speaking the words in verses 2–4 but YHWH as uttering the statements in verses 5–6. Job's prosecutorial declaration in verse 4 that he will ask the questions and that YHWH will answer him signals the shift of speakers and allows Job to have his day in court. YHWH's announcement in verse 6a of the withdrawal of his case against Job marks an end to the legal proceedings, and his profound expression of repentance in dust and ashes in verse 6b provides redress for his unjust treatment of Job, which requires vindicating Job (42:7–9) and making restitution (42:10–17). This new perspective allows these final words in 42:2–6 to provide a coherent conclusion to the major issues in the book.

Job's interpreters generally agree that Job 42:2–6 represents the conclusion of the book and expend enormous effort trying to understand Job's final words as a coherent conclusion.¹ This effort results in a myriad of disagreements about what

I dedicate this article to my mother, LaValta Ruth Martin, and to Sr. Essie Gary, Rabbi Charles D. Isbell, and Prof. Jon D. Levenson, all of whom taught me how to read the Hebrew Bible. Avis Clendenen, Charles Gibson, Jeffrey Stackert, and John Burnight have been helpful conversation partners in the writing of this article, a version of which was presented at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Region of the Society of Biblical Literature. I am grateful to those in attendance including JoAnn Scurlock, Richard H. Beal, Lowell K. Handy, Amie D. Littrell, and Lucas M. Weethee. Except where noted, the translations are either my own or from the RSV.

¹Samuel E. Balentine, *Job*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 693; Edwin M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 375; David J. A. Clines, *Job*, 3 vols., WBC 17, 18A, 18B (Nashville: Nelson, 1989–2011), 3:1218; Jan P. Fokkelman, *The Book of Job in Form: A Literary Translation with Commentary*, SSN 58 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 313; Tremper Longman III, *Job*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 448.

Job was attempting to say, “ranging from a statement of regret and repentance to a declaration of being consoled or of contempt of humanity ... up to an expression of hope for being comforted after his death.”² Carol A. Newsom even argues that these ambiguities are intentional to produce “ironic dissonance rather than coherency.”³ Such a “polyphonic” or “polysemous” conclusion to the book may satisfy postmodern relativism and inclusiveness. Any conclusion, however, that does not address the book’s major issues will fail to satisfy at least some readers.⁴ A satisfying conclusion may be in the eye of the beholder, but reading the book from the end to the beginning once again can provide a coherent alternative to the solutions already proposed.⁵

I. A COHERENT CONCLUSION

Each interpreter tries to present an understanding of Job’s final words as a coherent conclusion but does so by substituting a problem that differs from the one described in the book.⁶ Penitentialists, who understand Job’s final words as an expression of repentance, identify the problem as some defect in Job’s character, such as sin, self-righteousness, hubris in challenging God, or lack of knowledge.⁷

²Thomas Krüger, “Did Job Repent?,” in *Das Buch Hiob und seine Interpretationen: Beiträge zum Hiob-Symposium auf dem Monte Verità vom 14.–19. August 2005*, ed. Thomas Krüger et al. ATANT 88 (Zurich: TVZ, 2007), 217–29, here 217, 219.

³Carol A. Newsom, “The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *NIB* 4:317–637, here 636.

⁴For *polyphonic*, see Carol A. Newsom, “Job,” *WBC*, 208–15, here 209. For *polysemous*, see William Morrow, “Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6,” *JBL* 105 (1986): 211–25, here 223, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260390>. For critique of postmodern approaches, see Charles Muenchow, “Dust and Dirt in Job 42:6,” *JBL* 108 (1989): 597–611, here 598–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267182>; Clines, *Job*, 3:1223; and Krüger, “Did Job Repent?,” 222–23.

⁵This reading participates in a growing trend in Joban studies that understands the book as “a legal altercation between God and Job.” See F. Rachel Magdalene, *On the Scales of Righteousness: Neo-Babylonian Trial Law and the Book of Job*, BJS 348 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2007), 1–12; quotation from 2.

⁶James L. Crenshaw, “Job,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 331–55, here 333. For the various approaches, see Mark Larrimore, *The Book of Job: A Biography*, *Lives of Great Religious Books* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), *passim*.

⁷For sin or self-righteousness, see John Chrysostom, *Comm. Job* 42:6, in *Job*, ed. Manlio Simonetti and Marco Conti, ACCSOT 6 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 218; John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 537. For hubris, see Longman, *Job*, 450; John D. W. Watts, John J. Owens, and Marvin E. Tate Jr., “Job,” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen et al. (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), 4:22–151, here 149; Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 577. For lack of knowledge, see Michael V. Fox, “Job the Pious,” *ZAW* 117 (2005): 351–66; Fox, “Reading

Whatever the subject of Job's repentance, penitentialist readings require that he in the end admit his defect and submit "to a power infinitely greater than himself" by uttering, "I repent in dust and ashes."⁸

Interpreters who see no defect in Job's character react strongly to penitentialist readings. For example, Jan P. Fokkelman says, "Therefore it is cuckoo in 42:6 to present a Job who buckles under pressure and to make him moan words that are totally unfounded and completely contrary to his character and personality." Fokkelman points out that the narrator (1:1, 22; 2:10), YHWH (1:8, 2:3, 42:7), and even Job himself (6:10, 24–30; 7:20; 9:14–24; 10:1–7; 12:1–6; 16:17; 23:10–12; 27:1–6; 29:11–25; 31:1–40) affirm that Job has done no wrong and that he is not even wrong in his assessment of God or the situation.⁹ Job is blameless, as everyone in the book affirms except his friends, who are clearly wrong (42:7–9). A repentant Job cannot be the meaning of his final words, "for this is what his friends have been urging" but Job has been resisting all along.¹⁰ These friends need repentance and expiatory sacrifices, but Job requires neither (42:7–8).¹¹ Francis I. Andersen says that if Job repents, "the whole story would collapse."¹² Penitentialist readings of Job's final words, therefore, do not provide a coherent conclusion for many scholars.

Seeking a more adequate conclusion, others propose that the deficiency is in the situation of mourning rather than in Job's character. For example, Dale Patrick argues that the preposition *על* with the verb *נחם* ("to repent") in 42:6 never designates the place of repentance but always refers to the object of repentance from which the penitent turns.¹³ He rejects the traditional translation that Job repents "in dust and ashes" in favor of Job's repenting "of dust and ashes," explaining that this verse "expresses Job's intention of abandoning the posture of mourning." Others support this interpretation by pointing out that the verb *נחם* and its word group elsewhere in the book always refer to comfort, comforting, or consolation (2:11; 6:8–10; 7:13–14; 15:11; 16:2; 21:2, 34; 29:25; 42:11).¹⁴ Thomas Krüger admits that

the Tale of Job (Job 1,1–2,13 + 42,7–17)," in *A Critical Engagement: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of J. Cheryl Exum*, ed. David J. A. Clines and Ellen van Wolde (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 145–62.

⁸Jon D. Levenson, *The Book of Job in Its Time and in the Twentieth Century*, The Le Baron Russell Briggs Prize Honors Essays in English 1971 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 1–2.

⁹Fokkelman, *Book of Job in Form*, 317.

¹⁰Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 376.

¹¹David A. Lambert, "The Book of Job in Ritual Perspective," *JBL* 134 (2015): 557–75, here 558, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1343.2015.2878>.

¹²Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 14 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 315.

¹³Dale Patrick, "The Translation of Job XLII 6," *VT* 26 (1976): 369–71; L. J. Kaplan notes that Maimonides earlier proposed a consolationist reading ("Maimonides, Dale Patrick, and Job XLII 6," *VT* 28 [1978]: 356–58).

¹⁴Krüger, "Did Job Repent?," 223–24. Clines (*Job*, 3:1220) cites others who have a similar

the use of this verb in 42:6 could be an exception, but he does not think so.¹⁵ Most recently, David A. Lambert proposes that Job 42:6 describes “the renunciation of a ritual stance of mourning” as Job abandons his dust and ashes, drops his protest, and reintegrates into normal society.¹⁶ According to a consolationist reading, therefore, this verse marks the end of Job’s mourning.

Not everyone is convinced, however, that such a reading of Job’s final words adequately concludes the book. The most serious challenge is that Job’s mourning does not end with verse 6 since his siblings and acquaintances come later to comfort and console him (42:11). Even some of those who adopt a consolationist reading recognize that it “contains one of the biggest surprises of the book.”¹⁷ David J. A. Clines explains, “We have not been prepared by the course the book has taken to witness Job’s abandoning his case against God. His arguments have been so cogent, his passion so sincere, that it is almost unthinkable that at the end of the day he should merely withdraw from the lawsuit.”¹⁸ Clines perceptively recognizes that a consolationist reading of Job’s final words leaves many of the issues raised in the book unresolved, and the reason for Job’s abandoning his mourning is not entirely clear.

Some attempt to provide a reason. Fokkelman proposes that Job is consoled when he sees God.¹⁹ One wonders, however, how seeing the God who has caused him such pain would be consoling to Job rather than contributing even more to his perplexity. Ellen van Wolde attributes Job’s consolation to a realization of his limited insight and his adopting YHWH’s point of view.²⁰ The major problem with these proposals is that Job’s mourning is occasioned by YHWH’s prosecution of him (Job 1–2), and Job’s final words, according to consolationist readings, do not mark an end to that prosecution. As long as the prosecution continues, Job cannot be consoled, and consolationist readings of Job’s final words do not provide an entirely consistent conclusion to the book.

Even less coherent are existentialist readings that locate the problem neither in Job’s defective character nor in Job’s situation of mourning but rather in the nature of existence itself. J. Gerald Janzen proposes that Job changes his mind about his human condition while Edwin M. Good asserts that what Job abandons is the

understanding, including Ina Willi-Plein, “Hiobs Wiederruf?—Eine Untersuchung der Wurzel נחם und ihrer erzähltechnischen Funktion im Hiobbuch,” in *Essays on the Bible and the Ancient World: Isac Leo Seeligmann Volume*, ed. Alexander Rofé and Yair Zakovitch, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: E. Rubinstein, 1983), 3:273–89; and Daniel J. O’Connor, “The Comforting of Job,” *ITQ* 53 (1987): 245–57.

¹⁵ Krüger, “Did Job Repent?,” 224.

¹⁶ Lambert, “Book of Job,” 559, 572.

¹⁷ Clines, *Job*, 3:1222.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Fokkelman, *Book of Job in Form*, 318.

²⁰ Ellen van Wolde, “Job 42:1–6: The Reversal of Job,” in *The Book of Job*, ed. W. A. M. Beuken, BETL 114 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994), 223–50, here 250.

“entire structure of the world” in terms of guilt and innocence.²¹ James L. Crenshaw notes that “repenting of a world where repentance plays no role is hugely ironic.”²² Indeed, many of these existentialist readings understand Job’s final words as ironic or sarcastic.²³ John B. Curtis asserts, “With biting sarcasm and hostility Job declares it useless to try to talk to a god who is so concerned with great matters (like cosmology) that he does not even recognize that the small problems (like the suffering of the innocent) exist.”²⁴ Curtis proposes that Job’s final words represent a total rejection of an omnipotent deity who ignores “the complaints of a mere man.”²⁵ Norman C. Habel thinks that Job exposes God “as a blind force and blustering orator who is threatened by Job’s insights” and that an innocent Job repents just to mollify this God. According to Habel, Job’s final words are “his final act of defiance,” as he resists God even while speaking tongue in cheek.²⁶ Since they involve deconstruction of reality, rejection of God, or human defiance, these existentialist approaches to Job’s conclusion seem odd for a book that takes so seriously the human condition of suffering and the divine–human relationship.²⁷

Nor do these readings of Job’s final words provide a fitting conclusion to the major problem raised by the book. The book’s plot is initiated and sustained by YHWH’s prosecution of Job (chapters 1–2). YHWH’s prosecution prompts Job to counter with a prosecution of his own as he demands to present his case against YHWH (13:3–19, 16:21, 23:1–17), who has treated him unjustly (2:3; 9:17, 22; 19:6; 29:1–31:40).²⁸ In whichever way the final words of Job in 42:2–6 are read, they should at a minimum provide an occasion for Job to present his case before YHWH,

²¹J. Gerald Janzen, *Job*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 6–57; Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 377; Good, “The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job,” in *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job*, ed. Leo G. Purdue and W. Clark Gilpin (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 50–69, here 68.

²²James L. Crenshaw, *Reading Job: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the Old Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 159.

²³For the former expression, see Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 377. For the latter, see Habel, *Book of Job*, 577; Leo G. Purdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 180.

²⁴John B. Curtis, “On Job’s Response to Yahweh,” *JBL* 98 (1979): 497–511, here 507, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3265665>.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 511. See also Leslie S. Wilson, *The Book of Job: Judaism in the 2nd Century BCE; An Intertextual Reading*, SJ(L) (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), 201–2.

²⁶Habel, *Book of Job*, 577.

²⁷See André LaCocque, “The Deconstruction of Job’s Fundamentalism,” *JBL* 126 (2007): 83–97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27638421>. See the response to LaCocque by Philippe Guillaume, “Dismantling the Deconstruction of Job,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 491–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25610135>.

²⁸Edward L. Greenstein describes the proceedings as suit and countersuit (“A Forensic Understanding of the Speech from the Whirlwind,” in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*, ed. Michael V. Fox et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 241–58, here 247.

they should designate the end of YHWH's prosecution of Job, and they should redress YHWH's unjust treatment of Job. Whatever else a coherent conclusion for the book may encompass, some resolution of these three main issues seems absolutely necessary. Although penitentialist, consolationist, and existentialist readings arrive at very different conclusions about Job's final words, they nevertheless all subscribe to a consensus that Job speaks all the words in 42:2–6 with perhaps an occasional quotation of God. This consensus needs rethinking if a coherent conclusion is to be found in the final words in 42:2–6.

II. A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Interpretations of 42:2–6 rarely give full import to the narrative frame in 42:1, 7. Even though 42:1 introduces Job as the speaker, some interpreters designate verse 3a and verse 4 as YHWH's words that Job quotes even though the text provides no markers indicating a quotation.²⁹ For example, Fokkelman renders verse 3a as “[You said,] ‘Who is this who obscures counsel without knowledge?’” Similarly, he translates verse 4 as “[You said,] ‘Hear now for I am the one who will speak; I will ask you and you will let me know.’”³⁰ The quotation marker “You said” is not in the Hebrew text, although many translators add it since YHWH speaks similar words in 38:2–3 and 40:7.³¹ Consequently, almost all translations place the words in verses 3a and 4 in quotation marks. Some others omit these words altogether as marginal glosses that have made their way into the text.³² Interpretations that do not attribute all of the words in 42:2–4 to Job but rather eliminate verses 3a and 4 or see them as quotations do not give full import to the frame in 42:1.³³

²⁹For examples, see Andersen, *Job*, 314; Jeffrey Boss, *Human Consciousness of God in the Book of Job: A Theological and Psychological Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 212; Janzen, *Job*, 251; Longman, *Job*, 424; Watts, Owens, and Tate, “Job,” 148; James A. Wharton, *Job*, WeBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 173; Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 125–26. See also Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Studies*, Moresht Series 2 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), 491, 573; and Mayer Gruber, “Job,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 1499–1562, here 1561.

³⁰Fokkelman, *Book of Job in Form*, 191, 193.

³¹Edward Ho cogently argues that such unmarked quotations are unlikely in a work that carefully places explicit markers elsewhere (“In the Eyes of the Beholder: Unmarked Attributed Quotations in Job,” *JBL* 128 [2009]: 703–15, here 705, 714–15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25610215>).

³²Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 15 (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 347–48; H. H. Rowley, *The Book of Job*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 265. For a list of other versions, including the NAB, that omit 42:3a or 42:4, see Clines, *Job*, 3:1206 n. 4.a.

³³Michael V. Fox notes that supposing unmarked attributed quotations can easily serve to mask or eliminate interpretive difficulties (“The Identification of Quotations in Biblical Literature,”

Similarly, interpreters do not give full import to the second part of this frame in 42:7, which reads, “And it happened after YHWH said these words to Job.”³⁴ Now Job 42:1 clearly indicates that Job begins speaking, but 42:7 just as clearly states that God has just finished speaking. According to these verses, Job must have stopped speaking somewhere between verses 2 and 6 and God must have begun speaking. Not a single interpreter, however, understands verse 7 in this way. Some separate this verse from the preceding because verse 6 is poetry while verse 7 is prose and because the portrayal of Job in the poetic sections starkly contrasts with the prose sections.³⁵ Many understand the prose epilogue in 42:7–17 as well as the prologue in 1:1–2:13 as later additions that obviate the need to interpret verse 7 in relation to verse 6.³⁶ The majority, however, make little or no reference at all to the relationship of verse 7 to the preceding but simply ignore the explicit force of this verse in its immediate context.³⁷

An exception is van Wolde, who comments, “It is odd that verse 7, which immediately follows this answer by Job, reports ‘After YHWH had spoken these words to Job’ ... it is strange that it says that YHWH spoke, while Job has just been speaking.” She explains that verse 7 points back to YHWH’s speech from the storm “as if verses 1–6 have not taken place.”³⁸ The obvious problem for her explanation is that verses 1–6 have “taken place” and cannot be so easily dismissed. Influenced by van Wolde, Clines comments on verse 7, “There is a strange opening to this narrative ... for it is Job who has most recently been speaking. It is as if the Yahweh

ZAW 92 [1980]: 416–31, here 423). Ho (“In the Eyes,” 705–6) agrees but then points out that even Fox himself resorts to such quotations because he cannot otherwise explain Job 42:3a, 4.

³⁴ One exception is the work of Manfred Oeming and Konrad Schmid, *Job’s Journey: Stations of Suffering*, Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 98–99, but they relate 42:7 to all of verses 2–6 rather than just to verses 5–6.

³⁵ Watts, Owens, and Tate, “Job,” 150. The cantillation marks indeed shift from poetic in verse 6 to regular in verse 7, and the parasha petuha at the end of verse 6 clearly indicates that verse 7 begins a new section that should be placed on a new line. All of these marks, however, as well as the shift in Job’s character do not preclude the narrative frame in verse 7 from referring to the poetic speech in verse 6.

³⁶ For examples, see Gordis, *Book of Job*, 573; and Edward L. Greenstein, “Job,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed., ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1490. In contrast, Frank Crüsemann thinks that the poet himself inserted the oldest kernel of the narrative frame (Job 1:1–5, 13–22; 42:11–17) into his original work (“Hiob und Kohelet: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Hiobbuches,” in *Werden und Wirken des Alten Testaments: Festschrift für Claus Westermann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Rainer Altermann et al. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980], 373–93, here 383–84). Westermann (*Structure of the Book*, 7) and others argue that the prose parts are essential to the book.

³⁷ Naphtali H. Tur-Sinai (Harry Torczyner) interprets 42:7 as a reference to what God said in chapter 18, which has been misplaced (*The Book of Job: A New Commentary*, rev. ed. [Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1967], 577–79). No manuscript evidence, however, supports his conjecture. See the critique of Tur-Sinai by Westermann, *Structure of the Book*, 19 n. 6.

³⁸ Van Wolde, “Job,” 238.

of v 7 is ignoring what Job has said in his speech in vv 2–6.”³⁹ Curiously, Clines blames YHWH for ignoring the explicit import of verse 7, but the blame must surely remain on those interpreters who refuse to relate verse 7 to its immediate context. Even though there is a growing trend in Job studies to read the book as a whole as being composed of a prose prologue and epilogue with poetic dialogue in between, interpreters persist in ignoring the explicit import of verse 7.⁴⁰ Allowing for the full import of 42:1 and 42:7 by applying this frame to its immediate context leads to a new perspective on the final words in 42:2–6. This perspective interprets the passage as a crisp dialogue between two litigants, Job and God, who battle it out in a rapid-fire exchange of words, and this reading provides a more coherent conclusion to the book than any proposed thus far.

III. JOB’S FINAL WORDS TO YHWH (42:2–4)

According to 42:1, Job begins speaking in verse 2 with a direct response to YHWH’s previous speeches from the storm (38:2–40:2, 40:7–41:26). The first speech emphasizing YHWH’s omnipotent execution of his cosmic plans leaves Job silent with little to say in response (40:4–5).⁴¹ The second speech, however, focuses on YHWH’s justice in executing his plans as YHWH asks a key question, “Will you even impugn my justice, deem me guilty so you can be innocent?”⁴² This question raises the pivotal issue in the litigation between Job and YHWH. The second speech, however, does not then address this issue directly but rather questions whether Job or YHWH has the power to bring the cosmos into line. Considering the Behemoth (40:15–24) and Leviathan (40:25–41:26), the obvious answer is only YHWH can do so.

Job appropriately begins his final words and responds in 42:2 to these two speeches by saying, “I know that you can do all things and that no scheme of yours is impossible.”⁴³ Throughout the book, Job never questions YHWH’s power, which is perfectly obvious to him as he experiences YHWH’s destructive might in the loss

³⁹ Clines, *Job*, 3:1231. See also William D. Reayburn, *A Handbook on the Book of Job*, UBS Helps for Translators (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 774.

⁴⁰ See Fox, “Job the Pious,” 351–66; Fox, “Reading the Tale,” 145–62; Lambert, “Book of Job,” 559; Yair Hoffman, “The Relation between the Prologue and the Speech-Cycles in Job: A Reconsideration,” *VT* 31 (1981): 160–70; Rick D. Moore, “The Integrity of Job,” *CBQ* 45 (1983): 17–31; Alan Cooper, “Reading and Misreading the Prologue to Job,” *JSOT* 46 (1990): 67–79; and C. L. Seow, *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary*, Illuminations (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 27–29.

⁴¹ Crenshaw, *Reading Job*, 149, 152.

⁴² Ibid. The translation is Crenshaw’s.

⁴³ The noun מַזְמָה can refer to a wicked plan or scheme (Job 21:27; Jer 11:15), and this meaning is appropriate to the context of this legal proceeding as Job casts aspersions on his rival litigant who has plotted to destroy him. See van Wolde, “Job,” 239; and Clines, *Job*, 3:1205 n 2.b.

of his family, fame, fortune, and health. In Job's opinion, these legal proceedings have no need to waste any more time demonstrating this point since both litigants agree about YHWH's unrestrained power.⁴⁴

Job's problem is not with YHWH's absolute power to control the cosmos but rather with YHWH's injustice toward him in particular.⁴⁵ YHWH's responses to Job from the storm (38:1–41:34) thus miss the point of Job's complaint.⁴⁶ After listening carefully to YHWH's responses, Job acknowledges his divine absolute power (42:2) but asks in 42:3a, "Who is this that hides counsel for lack of knowledge?" Words similar to these were spoken already by Elihu (35:16) and by YHWH (38:2) to state that Job's or perhaps Elihu's words have missed the point of the case.⁴⁷ Consequently, 42:3a is often considered a quotation of one or the other of these earlier utterances.⁴⁸ According to the new perspective, however, these words should be understood as Job's and not YHWH's or Elihu's. Edouard Dhorme and Edward Ho certainly take them that way.⁴⁹ In his final utterance (42:3a), therefore, Job throws these words back at YHWH to impugn YHWH as the one who has missed the point of the case by following a line of argumentation that merely defends divine power to rule the cosmos without specifically addressing YHWH's unjust treatment of Job.⁵⁰

In his final utterance, Job succinctly states his problem. Because YHWH has hidden counsel and has not communicated in his two speeches the knowledge Job needs to understand his situation (42:3a), Job says, "I reported *your* disastrous deeds in respect to me and I do not understand *them* and I do not know *how you could do them to me*" (42:3b).⁵¹ This translation is obviously interpretive but makes

⁴⁴ Interestingly, the *ketiv* might indicate a second person in reference to YHWH while the *qere* is first person in reference to Job. Taken together, therefore, both the uncorrected and the corrected text indicate that the knowledge of YHWH's omnipotence is known or agreed upon by both litigants, YHWH and Job.

⁴⁵ Gruber, "Job," 1555.

⁴⁶ Newsom, "Job," 208.

⁴⁷ Ludwig Köhler describes this strategy as a common feature of ancient legal proceedings (*Hebrew Man: Lectures Delivered at the Invitation of the University of Tübingen, December 1–16, 1952* [London: SCM, 1953], 161).

⁴⁸ On the ambiguity of the antecedent, see Clines, *Job*, 3:1095; and Crenshaw, *Reading Job*, 148.

⁴⁹ E. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (1967; repr., Nashville: Nelson, 1984), 645; Ho, "In the Eyes," 711–14.

⁵⁰ Edward J. Kissane interprets the notion of darkening or hiding counsel in 38:2 and 42:3a in reference to previous statements that "tend to mislead" the hearers or "to lead them away from the true solution of the problem" (*The Book of Job: Translated from a Critically Revised Hebrew Text with Commentary* [Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1939], 264 n. 2). See also Crüsemann, "Hiob," 379–80.

⁵¹ Clines identifies the Hebrew term rendered as "reported" as a legal term in reference to a legal deposition, and he points out that Job said in 31:37 he would make his deposition if he were granted a hearing before YHWH (*Job*, 3:1204, 1211).

good sense of the grammar in the context of this legal proceeding. First, נפלאות, translated as “disastrous deeds,” is the only explicitly stated object for all three verbs. Second, the disastrous deeds are clearly those of God and should be specified by the pronoun *your* added in the translation. Third, ממני can mark a number of relationships, and many translations render this preposition with its pronominal object as a comparative and translate “things too wonderful for me” (ASV, KJV, NAB, NASB, NIV, and RSV). The context, however, indicates that the divine deeds are not just those in general but those specifically pertaining to Job.⁵² For these reasons, Job’s words in 42:3b are best rendered, “I reported *your* disastrous deeds in respect to me and I do not understand *them* and I do not know *how you could do them to me*.”

This translation of 42:3b emphasizes that Job’s problem is specifically with YHWH’s disastrous deeds, which are usually called “wondrous deeds” in many other passages. These deeds are understood as positive by almost all interpreters. Thus, the Hebrew people celebrate YHWH’s plagues against Egypt as wondrous deeds (Exod 3:20). As the beneficiaries of these deeds, the Hebrews deem them constructive wonders. From the Egyptians’ point of view, however, these plagues are disastrous evils. Their water supply turns to blood, their crops are destroyed, their livestock perish, their bodies erupt in painful lesions, and the oldest son in each home dies. The Hebrews also celebrate YHWH’s wondrous deeds in driving out the inhabitants of Canaan (Exod 34:10–11). For these inhabitants, however, YHWH’s deeds are a terrifying experience of genocide. YHWH’s wondrous deeds thus cut two ways. For the beneficiaries, they are truly *wondrous*; for the victims, however, they are disturbingly *disastrous* (cf. Dan 8:24). When recounting these deeds in respect to himself, Job often complains that YHWH counts him as an enemy (Job 13:24; 16:9; 19:11; cf. 27:7; 33:10). For Job, YHWH’s deeds are not wondrous but disastrous.

Job’s friends are convinced that whether one is the beneficiary or the victim of these deeds is determined by one’s behavior. Job disagrees with them because he is righteous and yet has suffered the full weight of YHWH’s disastrous deeds. Job finds no comfort or explanation for his situation in the doctrine of rewards and punishments but faces the terrifying prospect that YHWH acts and humans have no control over whether they will be the beneficiaries or the victims of these acts. Job thus testifies that he does not understand YHWH’s deeds and he does not know them (42:3b).

What can Job mean by this testimony (42:3b)? He certainly knows YHWH’s deeds well enough to recount them (42:3a), and he knows that YHWH can do them without any constraints (42:2). He has personally experienced them first hand in the loss of his family, fortune, fame, and health. What Job does not know is how to explain them and, more particularly, how YHWH could make his faithful devotee

⁵²Cf. Westermann, *Structure of the Book*, 126–27.

the victim of these deeds. Job's particular problem is how to make sense of YHWH's deeds as they relate to him.

After succinctly stating his problem (42:3), Job now demands an answer of YHWH. Job insists, "Listen now, and I shall speak. I shall question you, and you will answer me" (v. 4). Scholars typically attribute these words to YHWH or eliminate them from the text altogether. Habel, however, argues persuasively that the words in verse 4 should not be omitted because "the verbal modifications in this verse as compared to 38:3 and 40:7 evidence that it is not a scribal repetition."⁵³ Like many other interpreters, Habel then explains verse 4 as a quotation of these two earlier statements of YHWH. This explanation, however, does not account for why Job would quote YHWH at this point or what such a quotation would mean.⁵⁴

If spoken by Job as a direct prosecutorial challenge to YHWH, however, these words make good sense. Good perceptively observes, "If 42:4a is not a quotation of Yahweh but is Job's speaking in his own right, he may be seizing the opportunity to take the initiative in the trial as he had wished to do in chapter 13."⁵⁵ John E. Hartley also suggests that these words are "part of the formulaic request for a legal hearing."⁵⁶ Clines indeed places verse 4 in the genre category of "legal disputation," and he notes that the terms *listen*, *speak*, *question*, and *answer* all belong in a legal setting.⁵⁷ As Clines correctly perceives, the language of verse 4 often finds expression in legal proceedings as it is spoken by a litigant who takes the offensive and demands that the other litigant defend his or her actions. Words similar to these were spoken by YHWH from the storm in 38:3 and 40:7 when he came to prosecute Job and demanded, "Gird up your loins like a man. I shall question you and you will answer me."⁵⁸ The reference to girding up your loins as a man clearly indicates that YHWH is addressing Job in 38:3 and 40:7. This reference to a man, however, is lacking in 42:4 because Job now takes the offensive and initiates his prosecution of YHWH.⁵⁹

Unless Job speaks the prosecutorial words in 42:4, Job never receives what he has demanded throughout the book.⁶⁰ Repeatedly, Job complains that YHWH has forced him into court and is prosecuting him even though he is innocent (9:1–35,

⁵³ Habel, *Book of Job*, 576. Similarly, Gordis, *Book of Job*, 492.

⁵⁴ Hartley, *Book of Job*, 536.

⁵⁵ Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 372; Kissane, *Book of Job*, 292.

⁵⁶ Hartley, *Book of Job*, 536.

⁵⁷ Clines, *Job*, 3:1211.

⁵⁸ Magdalene understands the book of Job as an account of a legal proceeding and describes these questions as "an important rhetorical strategy" used by YHWH in the legal proceedings (*On the Scales*, 248–49). Greenstein says that they "sustain the juridical tenor of the proceedings" and are "precisely the language we would expect of a litigant drawing testimony out of a witness in cross-examination" ("Forensic Understanding," 253).

⁵⁹ Crenshaw, *Reading Job*, 157. Although he thinks Job is quoting God, Crenshaw nevertheless comments, "Because Job has listened to Yahweh for some time, he may ask for the same courtesy."

⁶⁰ Ho, "In the Eyes," 714.

10:1–22, 14:1–6, 16:1–22, 19:22, 27:1–6, 30:16–23). Job then wants to put YHWH on trial for treating him so unjustly (13:3–19, 16:21, 23:1–17).⁶¹ Job states, “I have prepared my case; I know I shall be vindicated” (13:18). Job says, “I would present my case before him . . . and be delivered from my judge” (23:4, 7). Unless Job speaks the prosecutorial words in 42:4, he never gets to present his case before YHWH, and the book of Job ends on a disappointingly incomplete note.

In addition to the command to gird up his loins like a man, another significant difference between YHWH’s prosecutorial words in 38:2 and 40:7 as contrasted with Job’s in 42:4 is that YHWH’s declaration “I shall ask the questions” is actually followed by questions while Job’s is not.⁶² This anomaly points to Job’s being interrupted and indicates that the following words in 42:5–6 are an abrupt outburst of YHWH, as often happens in ancient as well as modern legal proceedings. One has only to think of the case of the two prostitutes who appear before Solomon with each claiming the live son as hers and the dead son as belonging to the other. The two women keep interrupting one another shouting, “No, the live one is mine, and the dead one yours” (1 Kgs 3:22). Job’s prosecutorial declaration “I shall ask the questions, and you will answer me” is followed not by Job’s questioning but by YHWH’s outburst at long last answering Job’s pressing question.

The riveting moment in this trial, indeed the climax of the book, is reached as YHWH finally takes the stand to defend his gross mistreatment of his faithful devotee. Understood as Job’s prosecutorial challenge to YHWH, the words in 42:4 thus consummate Job’s desire to place YHWH on trial and consequently provide one of the three requirements for a coherent conclusion for the book. These words, however, also signal a transition between Job’s speech in verses 2–4 and YHWH’s speaking in verses 5–6 and obviate the need for an introductory formula for YHWH’s reply. Indeed, the lack of such a formula for verses 5–6 juxtaposes the repartee between these two litigants, intensifies YHWH’s outburst, and effectively heightens this poignant courtroom scene when the two finally come head to head over the real issue of this case. Job’s persistence finally pays off, and YHWH answers Job—but not as Job or anyone else could have predicted.

IV. YHWH’S FINAL REPLY (42:5–6)

YHWH responds in 42:5, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” These words contrast the less reliable information obtained from hearsay with the much more reliable information acquired from direct

⁶¹Larrimore, *Book of Job*, 2; Edward L. Greenstein, “Truth or Theodicy? Speaking Truth to Power in the Book of Job,” *PSB* 27 (2006): 238–58, here 249; Greenstein, “When Job Sued God,” *BAR* 38.3 (2012): 55–57; Greenstein, “Forensic Understanding,” 241–58.

⁶²Crenshaw, *Reading Job*, 157.

observation.⁶³ YHWH's response refers to the beginning of the book, when the satan accuses Job of not being a true devotee but rather of serving YHWH only for benefits (1:9–11). YHWH has no comeback to the accusation but instructs the satan to prosecute Job (1:12). In the beginning, YHWH has incomplete knowledge and has heard of Job only from hearsay but lacks the relational experience with Job to say, "Now my eye sees you."⁶⁴ After YHWH's prosecution of Job, YHWH now sees Job for who he really is. Job is a tried and true, faithful devotee, and he has proven himself by maintaining his integrity throughout all his afflictions.

YHWH's response continues in 42:6, and "perhaps no verse has occasioned more discussion than this one."⁶⁵ Krüger notes, "The semantic ambiguity of Job 42:6 results mainly from the ambiguity of the two verbs in this verse and of the overarching syntax of the two sections constituted by them."⁶⁶ Krüger then lists three possible translations of the verb **סָמַח** in 42:6a:

1. I reject (or despise) dust and ashes.
2. I reject (or despise) my former thoughts and statements.
3. I dissolve (or melt away)—in the sense of dying away or perhaps giving up.⁶⁷

The first two possibilities as contrasted with the third point to a disagreement among interpreters as to whether the verb **סָמַח** is from the root **סָמַח** ("to reject" or "to despise") or from the root **סָסַח** ("to melt" or "to dissolve").⁶⁸ Of the two roots, the former is more appropriate to legal proceedings and thus more likely in the context of the dispute between YHWH and Job.⁶⁹

The first two possibilities for translating the transitive verb **סָמַח** emphasize the need to specify a direct object for this transitive verb.⁷⁰ Although Krüger provides objects for this verb in his translation, the Hebrew text does not, and this ellipsis opens the door to numerous suggestions. The Septuagint translator supplies

⁶³ Dhorme, *Commentary on the Book of Job*, 646; Pope, *Job*, 348; Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 305; Gordis, *Book of Job*, 491.

⁶⁴ Gordis (*Book of Job*, 491), Hartley (*Book of Job*, 536), Newsom ("Book of Job," 629–30), Pope (*Job*, 348), and Watts, Owens, and Tate ("Job," 149) all see a contrast in this verse while Clines (*Job*, 3:1205, 1216–17) construes the two verbs as coordinate.

⁶⁵ Longman, *Job*, 449–50; Fokkerman, *Book of Job in Form*, 317.

⁶⁶ Krüger, "Did Job Repent?," 213.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 218. See also Morrow, "Consolation, Rejection," 211–12 and Newsom, "Book of Job," 629.

⁶⁸ For a discussion of these roots, see Clines, *Job*, 3:1207–8. For arguments favoring the root **סָמַח**, see Morrow, "Consolation, Rejection," 213–15.

⁶⁹ Pope, *Job*, 349.

⁷⁰ Of course, the verb could be intransitive as Janzen (*Job*, 251) and Boss (*Human Consciousness*, 212) think, or it could be reflexive as Hartley (*Book of Job*, 537) and Longman (*Job*, 424, 499) understand.

ἐμαυτὸν (“myself”) in reference to Job, as does Gordis, while others understand Job to be rejecting his previous argumentative words and questions or to be rejecting even God.⁷¹ A recent trend construes the prepositional phrase על־עפר ואפר (“upon dust and ashes”) at the end of the verse as the object of the verb אָמַס and thus understands Job to be rejecting dust and ashes.⁷² This construal of the syntax would be more persuasive if the preposition were ב or מן or if the words “dust and ashes” were in the accusative without a preposition. Nevertheless, all of these suggestions arise from attributing the verb אָמַס to Job.⁷³ According to the new perspective, however, YHWH says this verb, and its unstated object must be derived from the legal case YHWH is prosecuting against Job.

Although he views these words as Job’s, Habel nevertheless reasons, “If, however, we recognize the legal framework of Job’s response, then a clue as to the object of the verb *m’s* may be found in 31:13, where Job asserts that he did not ‘dismiss/reject’ the case (*mišpāṭ*) of his manservant.” Habel then applies his observation to the verb אָמַס in 42:6a and states, “The implied object in the present context, therefore, would appear to be Job’s case against God, which he ‘dismisses/retracts.’”⁷⁴ Habel thus identifies Job’s legal case as the object of the verb אָמַס and understands this verb to be expressing Job’s dismissing his case. Similarly, Fokkelman understands Job to be giving up his legal case and simply saying, “I quit.”⁷⁵ Clines also interprets Job’s words as withdrawing “his lawsuit against Yahweh,” and Sylvia Huberman Scholnick likewise sees 42:6 as a “retraction of Job’s lawsuit.”⁷⁶

Moving the insight of these scholars from Job as the speaker to the new perspective in which YHWH is the speaker means that YHWH’s uttering the word אָמַס announces the withdrawal of his case against Job. No direct object need be stated in the context of this legal proceeding because all a litigant need declare in the course of the proceedings is אָמַס, and the case is over.⁷⁷ YHWH initiated these proceedings, and only YHWH can determine when his prosecution is at an end. This single-word declaration tersely brings to a close the legal proceedings that have driven the action of the entire book since the beginning, and this announcement

⁷¹Gordis, *Book of Job*, 491. For Job’s rejecting his arguments, see Lester J. Kuyper, “The Repentance of Job,” *VT* 9 (1959): 91–94. For a list of others who follow Kuyper’s suggestion, see Morrow, “Consolation, Rejection,” 217 n. 21. For Job’s rejecting his questions, see Balentine, *Job*, 692; and for Job’s rejecting God, see Curtis, “On Job’s Response,” 504.

⁷²Patrick, “Translation of Job XLII 6,” 369–71. See also Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 376.

⁷³For further critique, see Clines, *Job*, 3:1218–19.

⁷⁴Habel, *Book of Job*, 576.

⁷⁵Fokkelman, *Book of Job in Form*, 317.

⁷⁶Clines, *Job*, 3:1218–19. Sylvia Huberman Scholnick, “The Meaning of *MIŠPĀṬ* in the Book of Job,” *JBL* 101 (1982): 521–29, here 521, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260896>.

⁷⁷Köhler explains, “Before the legal assembly the speech and counterspeech continue back and forth until one party has nothing more to say” (*Hebrew Man*, 159–60). YHWH has reached this point and is the defeated litigant. Contra Greenstein (“Forensic Understanding, 253) and Magdalene (*On the Scales*, 259–62), who think Job is defeated.

thus provides the second of the three constituents for a coherent conclusion by marking the end of YHWH's prosecution of Job.

Just as he listed three possibilities for translating the first verb אָמַס in 42:6a, Krüger also lists three possibilities for the second verb נִחַמְתִּי in the second half of this verse. He states that all of the following translations seem possible for 42:6b:

1. I regret (or am sorry because of) —
 - a. dust and ashes
 - b. my former thoughts and statements—in dust and ashes
2. I console myself —
 - a. about dust and ashes
 - b. in dust and ashes
3. I repent in dust and ashes.⁷⁸

Krüger states that the semantics of the verb נִחַמְתִּי cannot decide among these translations since this verb encompasses all three notions of being sorry, consoling oneself, and repenting. Interpreters are then forced to rely on their understanding of the context, and, not surprisingly therefore, no agreement has been reached about the meaning of this verb.⁷⁹ As long as interpreters remain committed to reading נִחַמְתִּי as spoken by Job, they will likely remain deadlocked over the meaning of this verb without any apparent means of resolution.

The new perspective that understands נִחַמְתִּי as spoken by YHWH, however, allows for a resolution. The meaning “console myself” is the least likely of the three possibilities listed by Krüger since the book does not describe YHWH as a sufferer in need of consolation. Options 1 and 3 therefore remain the most likely, and these two options are not completely incompatible since sorrow is often an emotion that accompanies repentance.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the third option provides a more coherent conclusion to the book since YHWH is the one in the relationship who needs to repent, for YHWH is the only one who has mistreated the other relational partner—although a repentant YHWH can then demand repentance from Job's three friends for their wrongdoing as well (42:7–9).

Whereas Job's righteousness is upheld throughout the book, YHWH behaves unjustly and even indicts himself by saying to the satan, “Job still steadfastly maintains his integrity although you incited me to destroy him without cause” (2:3).⁸¹

⁷⁸Krüger, “Did Job Repent?” 218. See also Morrow, “Consolation, Rejection,” 211–12; and Newsom, “Book of Job,” 629.

⁷⁹Greenstein illustrates this lack of agreement by rejecting all other translations and then translating, “I take pity on wretched humanity” (“Job,” 1555). See also Greenstein, “The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job,” in *Mishneh Torah: Studies in Deuteronomy and Its Cultural Environment in Honor of Jeffrey H. Tigay*, ed. Nili Sacher Fox, David A. Glatt-Gilad, and Michael J. Williams (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 333–62, here 358–60.

⁸⁰Morrow, “Consolation, Rejection,” 216 n. 17.

⁸¹Greenstein, “Problem of Evil,” 241–42.

Destroying someone without cause is an admission of unjust behavior. Job certainly accuses YHWH of injustice for wounding him without cause (9:17) and for destroying the innocent and the guilty together (9:22). Job states emphatically, "YHWH has wronged me" (19:6). Job's last words to his friends describe in detail his righteous life and friendship with YHWH, who has for no reason become his enemy (29:1–31:40).⁸² In this relationship, YHWH has acted unjustly and needs to repent.⁸³

The dialogues between Job and his friends further confirm the need for YHWH's repentance. Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, all defend YHWH's justice and insist that Job must have sinned for YHWH to destroy him as he did. Eliphaz (4:7) asks Job, "Whoever perished who was innocent?" Job challenges Eliphaz to show him where he has sinned (6:24), but Eliphaz cannot. Bildad insists that YHWH does not pervert justice but judges justly (8:3) and that, if Job were upright, YHWH would defend him (8:5–7). Job responds that YHWH has indeed wounded him without cause (9:17), declared him guilty even though he is not (9:20), and destroyed the innocent and the guilty together (9:22). Job does not agree with Bildad that YHWH judges justly. Zophar defends YHWH by saying that the punishment Job has received from YHWH is less than Job's guilt deserves (11:4). Job disagrees and answers Zophar by saying that he is prepared to argue his case and innocence before YHWH (13:3).

Job's three friends astutely realize that, if Job is righteous, YHWH cannot be, for YHWH is punishing Job without cause. Job resolutely maintains his righteousness, and his three friends finally fall silent (32:1). At the end of the book, YHWH determines who is right and says to Eliphaz, "My wrath is inflamed against you and your two friends because you have not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has" (42:7). YHWH disagrees with Job's three friends that YHWH has acted justly toward Job. Instead, YHWH agrees with Job that YHWH is in the wrong.⁸⁴ The dialogues between Job and his friends thus further confirm YHWH's need of repentance.

One additional feature supports understanding YHWH's repentance in 42:6b. Just after this expression of repentance, YHWH makes twofold restitution to Job (42:10–17). In the Covenant Code, twofold restitution is stipulated for someone who unjustly deprives another of property. Exodus 22:4 reads, "If something he

⁸²Crüsemann, "Hiob," 375.

⁸³Several passages indicate that God does not or cannot repent (Num 23:19, Ps 110:4, Jer 4:28, Ezek 24:14, Zech 7:14–15). Just as many or more passages, however, affirm God's repenting (Gen 6:6–7; Exod 32:7–14; 2 Sam 24:16; Ps 90:13; Jer 18:7–8; 18:10; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:10). Considering this ambiguity, Joel (2:14) and the king of Nineveh (Jonah 3:9) appropriately ask, "Who knows whether God will repent?" This ambiguity is reflected in 1 Sam 15:29, which reads, "The Glory of Israel will not lie or repent, for he is not a human that he should repent." Just a few verses later, however, YHWH repents for having made Saul king (1 Sam 15:35). These passages thus affirm that God does repent and that repentance is not impossible for God. The notion of God's repenting in Job 42:6b is therefore neither impossible nor unusual.

⁸⁴Greenstein, "Truth or Theodicy?," 256–57.

stole is actually found alive in his possession, he shall repay double.” YHWH replaces Job’s fortunes twofold, restores children to Job, and gives Job a long and healthy life (42:10–17). If YHWH had acted justly toward Job, YHWH would have no need to make these reparations. YHWH’s restitution is therefore a legal admission that he had unjustly murdered Job’s children, stolen his property, and afflicted him with illness. Of all this injustice toward Job, YHWH repents in 42:6b.

YHWH does not merely repent and make restitution, but YHWH repents *על-עפר ואפר* (“in dust and ashes”). Some interpreters reject the locative understanding of this prepositional phrase since the preposition *על* with the verb *נחם* elsewhere forms an idiom expressing some action or intention of which YHWH repents or changes his mind (e.g., Jer 18:8, 10). Charles Muenchow argues, however, that everywhere this idiom occurs, “the object of the preposition is a noun denoting a mental construct (thought, plan, idea), never a physical object” such as dust and ashes.⁸⁵ He further argues, “By placing the *athnach* where they did, the Masoretes clearly did not see in 42:6 an instance of the . . . idiom, and the judgment of the Masoretes on this point is sound.”⁸⁶ Muenchow points out the unique use of this prepositional phrase in 42:6b with a physical object and consequently argues for the locative sense. He further adduces the role of dust and ashes in gestures of repentance in support of a locative understanding. When the king of Nineveh repents, for example, he sits in ashes (*ישב על-האפר*; Jonah 3:6), and Muenchow sees a similar locative sense for the prepositional phrase in Job 42:6b.

Even though a unique instance, a locative understanding of this prepositional phrase with the verb *נחם* in Job 42:6b best fits the context.⁸⁷ YHWH’s unjust actions against Job have driven Job to sit in ashes (2:8) and to feel as though he had become dust and ashes (30:19). YHWH now takes his place next to Job on the ash heap (42:6). YHWH’s unjust actions have driven them both to the same place of diminution, but in this place of diminution, Job hears YHWH’s expression of repentance for treating him unjustly. In this context, the relational function of the verb *נחם* plays a significant role in enabling Job to turn from being a combative litigant and to rise from the ash heap and resume a positive relationship with YHWH. The relational function of this verb is clearly seen in the interplay between the verbs *נחם* (“repent”) and *שוב* (“turn”) in passages such as Jer 18:7–11, where a change of direction by one relational partner results in a change in the other as well, and so

⁸⁵ Muenchow, “Dust and Dirt,” 609–10 n. 53.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Van Wolde, however, understands the *athnach* as indicating that the prepositional phrase provides the object for both verbs in 42:6 (“Job,” 244). Since the *athnach* does not separate the preposition from the verb in the idiom, Muenchow’s observation is sound that 42:6 is different because the *athnach* indicates a separation. His explanation is therefore preferred.

⁸⁷ YHWH’s repentance in dust and ashes is indeed unique to the Hebrew Bible, but so is YHWH’s act of restitution to someone for mistreating them. Both of these unique actions emphasize the profound depth and the genuineness of YHWH’s repentance.

it is with Job when he hears YHWH's expression of repentance.⁸⁸ YHWH's repentance and subsequent restitution make it possible for them both to exit the ash heap and resume their relationship. In the end, their relationship is more than in the beginning (42:12).⁸⁹

YHWH's words in 42:5–6 are indeed the high point and crucial moment in this trial. On the basis (על־כֵּן; 42:6) of his new insight provided by the legal proceedings and his now seeing Job for who he really is (42:5), YHWH announces to Job, "I withdraw *my prosecution of you* and repent in dust and ashes" (42:6). In these legal proceedings, YHWH retracts and capitulates and decides not to continue his prosecution or to mount any further defense. During the proceedings, YHWH had asked Job (40:8), "Will you indeed put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" YHWH perceives the clear alternative that either Job or YHWH is just but that both cannot be. In the end, YHWH withdraws his case and recognizes Job as the righteous litigant. YHWH accepts the verdict that he is unjust, and he takes responsibility for treating Job unjustly. YHWH owns stretching forth his hand to destroy Job without cause (2:3), repents in dust and ashes (42:6), and makes the necessary legal restitution (42:10–17).

V. JOB AND LUDLUL BĒL NĒMEQI: A COMPARATIVE ANALOGY

Support for this new perspective in reading Job 42:1–7 may be found in the Babylonian poem of the righteous sufferer that is entitled *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*.⁹⁰ The author of Job certainly could have been familiar with this "well-known, widely-diffused, and highly valued poem."⁹¹ Although the poem is generally dated several centuries before the exilic or postexilic dating of Job, more than "fifty tablets or fragments, dating to the first half of the first millennium BCE, from seven different ancient cities preserve its text."⁹² Some of these tablets indicate that this poem was used in the training of scribes and thus was part of the scribal curriculum. Amar Annus and Alan Lenzi contend that during the first millennium BCE, "every advanced scribe would have read sections of *Ludlul* just as every high school student reads Shakespeare today." Other tablets of this poem from royal and scholarly libraries "confirm the poem's learned origins and social capital for cultural and

⁸⁸ God's complete change of mood is rapid, but such is the nature of repentance. For example, see the swift and total change of the Ninevites to Jonah's terse message (Jonah 3:1–10).

⁸⁹ Oeming and Schmid, *Job's Journey*, 101.

⁹⁰ JoAnn Scurlock first pointed me to the analogy of *Ludlul*, and Richard H. Beal kindly provided me with the text and English translation of this poem.

⁹¹ Amar Annus and Alan Lenzi, *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi: The Standard Babylonian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer: Introduction, Cuneiform Text, and Transliteration with a Translation and Glossary*, SAACT 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), ix.

⁹² *Ibid.*

political elites.”⁹³ Both spatially and temporally, the Joban author could have had access to this poem, and Jacob Kaaks comments, “*Ludlul* ... was certainly the model for the Book of Job.”⁹⁴

The structure of *Ludlul* is largely a monologue and differs so significantly from Job’s dialogical structure that any direct literary influence cannot be posited. Both texts, however, reflect a similar theme; both approach the problem of human suffering by focusing on a single person who is described as righteous.⁹⁵ In *Ludlul*, the righteous devotee Subsi-mesre-Sakkan endures the loss of status, wealth, and health as does Job. His suffering is blamed on falling afoul of the deity but for no apparent sin. His restoration is attributed to a turn or change in the deity’s attitude and affections toward him, and this similarity between the two works has some bearing on the interpretation of Job 42:5–6.

The poem *Ludlul* begins with these lines:

I will praise the lord of wisdom, the cir[cumspect] god
 Angry at night but relenting at daybreak.
 Marduk, the lord of wisdom, the circumspect god,
 Angry at night but relenting at daybreak. (*Ludlul*, I 1–4)⁹⁶

These lines set the tone for the entire poem and present a deity of contrasts. Marduk may cause his righteous devotee pain and suffering for a time but then relents or repents and makes a decided turn to restore his devotee. Marduk is the god “who in his anger is irresistible, his fury a flood, but his mind turns back, his mood relents” (*Ludlul*, I 7–8). Similar perhaps to Job 42:5, this change in Marduk is attributed to his noticing or seeing his devotee, who exclaims, “He [Marduk] frowns: the divine guardian and protective spirit withdraw; he takes notice: his god turns back to him whom he had rejected” (I 15–16). After Marduk takes notice, he restores divine protection to his devotee, who testifies, “[He who] struck me, Marduk, restored me (lit., raised up my head)” (IV 10–11). This restoration is attributed to a change in Marduk toward his devotee, who explains, “After the heart of my lord was st[ill], the min[d of] merciful Marduk was app[eased]. After [he accept]ed my prayer ... his [bene]volent attention was sweet” (III 51–54).⁹⁷

By applying 42:1, 7 to its immediate context, we encounter in the book of Job a similar God of contrasts. YHWH prosecutes his righteous devotee mercilessly but then takes notice or sees him (רָאָה; 42:5). After this reference to YHWH’s seeing, the very next words at the beginning of 42:6 are עַל־כֵּן, which “even more

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Jacob Kaaks, *Job and the God of Babylon: Theo-Politics, the Covenant and the Fall of Marduk* (Delft: Eburon, 2011), 36.

⁹⁵ Ibid. Kaaks, however, points out that Shubsi-mesre-Shakkan “assumes he has done something wrong, perhaps without realizing it” while “Job considers himself righteous.”

⁹⁶ Annus and Lenzi, *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, 31.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 31, 42, 39.

than לִכְן marks the causal relation of what went before and what follows.”⁹⁸ YHWH’s seeing Job with his eye for who Job really is *causes* YHWH to have a change of heart, mind, and attitude toward Job. On the basis of this seeing, YHWH withdraws (אָמַס) his case against Job and relents or repents (נִחַמְתִּי) in dust and ashes (42:6). This change in YHWH prompts him to make restitution and restore the fortunes of Job (42:10, 12–17). YHWH’s “turn” or “repentance” enables Job “to turn” and to be comforted by his family and friends (42:11), something Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar were unable to accomplish when the God-of-Contrasts was in prosecutorial rather than conciliatory mode. Reading Job from this new perspective points to some striking similarities between this book and Ludlul, the Babylonian poem of the righteous sufferer and his relationship with a god of contrasts, and these similarities support reading Job according to this new perspective.

VI. CONCLUSION

The final enigmatic words in Job 42:2–6 are indeed by all accounts the climax and conclusion of the book and almost require the modern interpreter to read this book from the end to the beginning and back again. These words allow Job to present his case before YHWH; they mark an end of YHWH’s prosecution of Job; and they redress YHWH’s unjust treatment of Job. In doing so, they tie up the loose ends of the narrative and provide a sense of closure to the book as a whole.

Job’s prosecutorial declaration in 42:4 depicts Job as having his day in court to prosecute YHWH for injustice. Job’s words in 42:4 thus supply the first constituent of a coherent conclusion for the book. YHWH’s word of response in 42:6a that tersely announces the withdrawal of his case against Job satisfies the second constituent of such a conclusion by ending the litigation. Finally, YHWH’s words in 42:6b that present YHWH as repenting in dust and ashes supply the third and final constituent of a coherent conclusion by redressing his mistreatment of Job. YHWH’s vindication of Job in 42:7–9 and his making the necessary legal restitution in 42:10–17 further emphasize the profound depth and earnestness of YHWH’s repentance. The legalities at an end and justice restored, the book concludes with the two no longer as combative litigants but as once again faithful devotee and benevolent deity.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Van Wolde, “Job,” 248. See also, Fokkelman, *Book of Job in Form*, 317.

⁹⁹ Köhler states that the “sole endeavor” of the legal assembly “is to settle quarrels” and that the most important matter is the safeguarding of community and justice (*Hebrew Man*, 156, 165). In the end, the trial of Job achieves all of these.