

“The Lord God Himself asked our adversary, “Have you considered My servant Job?” (Job 1:8). And the half brother of the Lord Jesus exhorted us all to imitate “the perseverance of Job” (James 5:11). But not enough Christians plumb the deep wisdom in the book of Job or know enough of its long-suffering hero to make much use of James’s exhortation. In these important endeavors, Anthony Selvaggio’s *Considering Job* helps us much. For newcomers in these tasks, *Considering Job* provides a clear and accessible introduction to one of the Bible’s most important and most neglected books.”

—Byron G. Curtis, professor of biblical studies, Geneva College

“Brimming with both theological precision and pastoral warmth, Anthony Selvaggio’s *Considering Job* provides us with a biblical framework to understand the origin and reality of suffering, as well as the practical aids to endure and even grow in spiritual maturity through the suffering that comes by the providential and good hand of God. I highly commend it!”

—Brian Cosby, senior minister, Wayside Presbyterian Church (PCA), Signal Mountain, Tennessee; and author of over a dozen books, including *Suffering and Sovereignty: John Flavel and the Puritans on Afflictive Providence*

“*Considering Job* will humble you, fill you with awe for our God, and move you to worship. There is no greater desired end for a devotional. Through his study of the book of Job, Selvaggio renders a magnificent picture of God that will serve you well when the bitter waves of life’s storms batter your shores. Best of all, after every turn, he points the reader back to Jesus. Get this book and read it. Then use it in your small group study or family devotions. Your friends and family will thank you for sharing it.”

—Marty Machowski, pastor and author of *The Ology*, *Wonder Full*, *Long Story Short*, *Parenting First Aid*, and other gospel-centered resources for church and home

CONSIDERING JOB

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Reconciling Sovereignty and Suffering

Anthony T. Selvaggio



Reformation Heritage Books

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Considering Job

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This book is dedicated to my congregation.

*It was during my preaching through the book of Job that
God united our hearts together in Jesus Christ.*

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Beginning Our Journey

The phone rings. It is the middle of the night. Your heart races, and your anxiety level rises. You pick up the phone. It's bad news.

You sit on the examination table in your doctor's office feeling vulnerable and wearing that gown you can't quite figure out how to tie properly. The room is freezing. The doctor knocks and then enters. It's bad news.

We pretend that our lives will proceed uninterrupted by trial and sorrow, but we are wrong. The phone call comes. The diagnosis is given, and life changes in an instant. How do you prepare for these inevitable moments? How do you prepare to help others as they experience and endure such moments? What do you say? How can you help? Will you be ready when this moment comes for you? How will you deal with it and make sense of it? How will you persevere through it?

The reality of suffering is common to the human experience, and its existence has challenged sages, philosophers, and theologians for generations. The existence of human suffering is one of the most powerful obstacles to accepting the reality that there is a good and all-powerful God. This is an incredibly hard subject, and there are no easy answers to the questions that arise from human suffering. However,

the Bible does provide us with an entire book on the subject. That book is the book of Job. *This* book is about *that* book.

The purpose of this book is twofold. First, it aims to glorify God as both sovereign and good despite the reality of human suffering. Many people use the mere existence of human suffering as a proof against the existence of a good and sovereign God. This book will equip you to respond to those who raise this as an obstacle to faith. Second, it will prepare you to better understand and deal with the suffering that you may experience in your life while simultaneously equipping you to more effectively minister to others who may be experiencing suffering in their lives. My method for achieving these two goals is to make the wisdom of this ancient book of Job more accessible to modern readers. I cannot promise that this book will answer all your questions and resolve all the mysteries surrounding the existence of human suffering. I can, however, promise you that studying the book of Job will make you wiser; and it will draw you closer to our holy, righteous, merciful, and good God.

A Disclaimer Before We Embark

Before we delve into the depths of the book of Job, let me issue a brief disclaimer about this journey. In addition to serving as a pastor, I am also a trained lawyer. One of the skills I learned as a lawyer is how to write an effective disclaimer—a clause pointing out the risks of undertaking a certain activity. I think it is appropriate to issue a disclaimer regarding the risks of embarking on this journey through Job. My disclaimer is simply this: journeying through Job will be challenging.

My guess is that you have not heard many sermons on Job. Maybe you have heard one or two sermons on select passages of Job, but I doubt you have heard a full sermon series that wrestles with the entire message of the book. The reality is that Job is often neglected in the pulpit, and the reason is that it is a challenging book. It is challenging because of its sheer size. It is a big book. It is also challenging because of the subtleties of how the book communicates its message. Simply put, Job is not an easy book to read and understand. The book of Job conveys its message through a mixture of prose, poetry, and wisdom, and it employs ample amounts of repetition. We live in an age in which people speak in tweets and text messages that are often replete with emojis and abbreviations. In our age we demand that data and information be conveyed to us as quickly and efficiently as possible. In contrast, the message of the book of Job can only be accessed by taking time to consider its poetry, reflect on its repetition, and meditate on its wisdom. In other words, to understand Job you will need to work at it, and you will have to do so with a lot of perseverance.

Another challenge presented by the book is its subject matter. Human suffering is a heavy topic. As we journey through the book of Job, it is very likely that its message will put pressure on raw parts of your own soul and experience. If you are currently experiencing suffering in your life, you will find parts of what the book of Job has to say incredibly challenging. It is also possible that in the time it takes you, or your study group, to work through this book, you, or a member of your group, may be faced with unexpected suffering. If this occurs, and I hope it doesn't, it will make your study of the book of Job more complicated and imposing.

Simply put, there will be times when you will not want to hear what the book of Job has to say.

There will be challenges on your journey through Job, but let me assure you that you will also find great encouragement in its message. I am confident that your journey will be rewarding, edifying, and even joyful. In other words, if you are willing to persevere in this journey, it will be worth it. I will not promise that you will always find the answers that Job provides to be wholly satisfactory, but I can promise you that Job will reveal profound truths to you if you listen attentively to its message. Job has deep truths to share with us about our God, our world, ourselves, and even our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now that we have thoroughly reviewed the fine print of the disclaimer regarding the challenges of studying the book of Job, it is time to embark on our journey through its message. As with any journey, it is best to get the lay of the land before venturing out into unfamiliar territory. In the remainder of this chapter, my goal will be to provide you with some basic information about the book so that you can engage more effectively with its message. We'll do this by answering seven fundamental questions.

Seven Questions

Who Wrote the Book of Job?

The short answer to this question, of course, is God. God is the ultimate author of the Scriptures, but we know that God chose to convey His message through the agency of inspired human authors (2 Peter 1:21). Sometimes the identity of the human author of a biblical book can be quite useful in understanding the message of the book. For example, consider the gospel of Luke. We know a great deal about the

author of this gospel. We know he was a gentile, a physician, a historian, and a traveling companion of Paul. Knowing these things about Luke helps us to understand the message of his gospel. For example, Luke's gentile background helps us to understand the emphasis he places on Jesus being the Savior, not only of Jews, but of gentiles as well.

When it comes to the book of Job, however, we have almost no information about the identity of the human author. The book is technically anonymous; the human author is not identified. The Talmud, an ancient Jewish source, attributes the book to Moses. Other scholars suggest the author was Solomon, Job, or Elihu (one of Job's comforters). Frankly, there is no real scholarly consensus on who wrote the book. Having said that, we do know a couple of things about this human author. First, given the complex use of literary forms in the book, we can say the author was clearly accomplished and skilled in wisdom literature. Second, the author was chosen to witness extraordinary events that no other human was privileged to see. Bruce Waltke comments on the uniqueness of the author's experience, "The author is a prophet who, with an eagle's-eye view, peers into the heavenly court and then descends like an angel to tell us what no other mortal, including Job, saw and heard."¹

While we don't know the identity of the human author of the book of Job, we do know the heavenly author. As the great Scottish Puritan James Durham (1622–1658) so elegantly stated in his masterful lectures on Job, "Be the writer who will, it is the Spirit who is the inditer, who has left it to

1. Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 928.

us for a spiritual jewel.”² Job, like all the books of the Bible, is God breathed. The fact that God, in His divine providence, chose not to make known to us the identity of the human author simply means that we do not need to know the author’s identity to properly understand this book.

When Did the Events in the Book of Job Take Place?

This question addresses where Job fits into the broader Old Testament timeline. The Old Testament timeline begins with creation, moves to the patriarchal age of Abraham and his descendants, then to the bondage in Egypt, to the exodus, to the time of the judges, the time of the kings, the time of the Babylonian exile, and finally, the return from the exile. Where does Job fit in this chronology?

As with the question of the human authorship of Job, the information we possess to answer this question is somewhat limited and inconclusive. We simply can’t be entirely certain exactly where Job fits within this historical timeline. Even the canon itself suggests the inability to exactly date the events of the book. The book of Job is not included among the historical books or among the prophets. Instead, it is grouped among the wisdom books (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs). The opinions of scholars on the dating of the events in the book vary widely, with some scholars placing the events of the book during the time of Abraham and others arguing that they took place much later in Israel’s history.

While we can’t be certain exactly where Job fits in the timeline, there are several reasons which support situating

2. James Durham, *Lectures on Job*, ed. Christopher Coldwell (Dallas: Naphtali, 2003), 13.

the book in the general period of the patriarchs. First, the divine names used for God in the book match those of books from the patriarchal period. Second, the means of expressing the extent of Job's wealth (i.e., the number of cattle, slaves, precious metals) also correspond well to the patriarchal age. Third, Job's lifespan of 140 years (Job 42:16) is consistent with the lifespans of this period. Fourth, and most convincingly, is the fact that there is no explicit or implicit evidence in the book of Job of the existence of a Levitical priesthood. Instead, what we find in the book is an explicit reference to Job, as the patriarch of his family, acting in a priestly role. Job 1:5 describes how Job offered sacrifices on behalf of his children: "So it was, when the days of feasting had run their course, that Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, 'It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job did regularly." Particularly noteworthy in that text is the fact that Job's offering of such sacrifices was not extraordinary, but rather Job did this "regularly." Job's assumption of this priestly role suggests that his story is situated prior to the giving of the law at Sinai and prior to the advent of the Levitical priesthood. This argument was particularly persuasive to James Durham, who contended that the events recounted in the book of Job took place during Israel's time in Egypt: "For the time, it is evident to be, when Israel were in Egypt, before the law, which is clear by Job's sacrificing in the land of Uz, which under the law was unlawful for him to have done."³ All these factors, when considered cumulatively, pro-

3. Durham, *Lectures*, 13.

vide substantial warrant for placing the events of Job's life within the period of the patriarchs.

Where Did the Events in the Book of Job Take Place?

Whereas the prior question dealt with the chronology of Job, this question deals with the geography of Job. Here the book finally yields a definitive answer to our question. In the very first verse, we are explicitly informed that Job was from the land of Uz. Finally, we know something for sure about this book! There is only one problem with this definitive information: we have no idea where Uz was. That is, you will not find the land of Uz on any ancient or modern map. So it appears that this definitive knowledge is not all that helpful.

Before you begin to despair, however, the Bible does provide us with some information regarding the possible location of Uz. The first mention of Uz in the Bible is not a reference to a place, but rather to a person. Genesis 10:22–23 makes reference to a person named Uz who was the son of Aram and the grandson of Shem. In the patriarchal period, a person's name often became associated with the land in which he lived. We receive additional information about the land of Uz in Lamentations 4:21 where we read, "Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz!" Here Uz is clearly associated with the land and people of Edom. Accordingly, the scholarly consensus is that Job lived in Edom (modern Saudi Arabia or southern Jordan). This information is interesting because this means that Job lived outside of Israel. The fact that the events of Job's life are set outside of Israel is perhaps suggestive that the wisdom of this book is intended to address a universal human problem rather than a concern that is limited to the covenant people

of God. Much like the book of Proverbs, Job has something to say, not just to Israel, but to the world. The main topic of the book of Job, human suffering, is one that transcends Israel's experience and applies to every human.

How Is the Book of Job Structured?

One of the fascinating aspects of the book of Job is its unique literary structure. As previously noted, Job is a lengthy book that has forty-two chapters in total. The book includes both a prologue and an epilogue. Between the prologue and epilogue is a series of dialogues between Job and four friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu). In these dialogues Job enters into debate with these friends over what role he played in the suffering he experienced. The book reaches its crescendo when Job encounters his final debating partner, God Himself. The following is a bird's-eye view of the entire book of Job:

Chapters 1–2: The book begins with a prologue to Job's story and suffering. The reader is informed of divine activity of which Job himself is entirely unaware.

Chapter 3: This chapter includes Job's visceral and poetic lament regarding his suffering. Here we find Job's first impressions as he confronts the tragedies that have befallen him.

Chapters 4–27: This large section of Job includes three cycles of dialogues between Job and three of his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, in which they try to explain to Job why he is suffering. Job, in turn, responds to each of them with a defense of his moral integrity.

Chapters 28–31: These chapters serve as a summary

and conclusion of the dialogues between Job and his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, and as a segue to the introduction to his dialogue with his fourth friend and comforter, Elihu.

Chapters 32–37: In this section of the book, Elihu, Job's much younger fourth friend, bursts onto the scene with a scathing rebuke of both Job's three older friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—and ultimately Job himself. Elihu endeavors to correct Job and defend God against Job's charges.

Chapters 38–41: Finally, after thirty-seven chapters, God personally intervenes in the story, breaking His silence. God puts Job in the dock, subjecting him to an intensive cross-examination in which God reveals to Job the limitations of Job's finite knowledge.

Chapter 42: This is the epilogue to Job's story. In this chapter we learn the end of Job's story. God renders His verdict on Job and his friends.

What Is the Literary Genre of the Book of Job?

At first blush, this question may seem rather unimportant, a matter of concern only for biblical scholars. We must remember, however, that discerning the literary genre of the biblical text is absolutely essential for sound biblical interpretation. Genre impacts interpretation. We all know this intuitively. Almost everyone would agree that a poem should be interpreted differently than a legal contract. Understanding *how* the book of Job is communicating its message is vital to grasping *what* it is communicating.

One of the fascinating aspects of the book of Job is that

it cannot be classified as fitting neatly into one single genre of literature. When it comes to literary genre, Job is multifaceted. The book of Job includes historical narrative, prose, poetry, and dialogues. Job contains almost every form of literature that we encounter in the Old Testament. Sometimes Job reads like Genesis, other times like the Psalms, and still other times like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes.

The question of literary genre raises another important question about the book of Job. Some scholars have suggested that Job should be understood as a parable rather than a historical account. Those who argue for this position do so based on the severity of Job's suffering. They contend that Job's suffering is so severe it must be hyperbolic rather than historical. According to those who make this argument, the book of Job is a parable on human suffering meant to teach a lesson to those who read it.

Against such an interpretation is the testimony of Scripture itself. Job is referred to as a historical figure in other parts of the Bible (see Ezek. 14:14, 20; James 5:11). Also, the prologue of Job follows a form that is consistent with other historical books in the Bible. Accordingly, it is my position that Job was a historical person and that he actually endured the events recorded in the book. I concur with James Durham who said of Job, "it is a true story, and no parable; a story of the affliction of a gracious man."⁴ At the same time, it should be noted that embracing the book of Job as a true and historical account does not preclude the interpreter from also recognizing that Job has a typological role to play in the unfolding drama of redemption. Much like Adam, Job

4. Durham, *Lectures*, 13.

is a historical figure God used to reveal universal theological truths that transcend his particular historical situation. Yes, the message of the book of Job is historical, but it is also timeless in its reach and application.

Why Was the Book Written?

Sometimes biblical books reveal their purpose to us. For example, Luke tells us that he is writing his gospel so that his readers may have “certainty of those things” in which they were instructed (Luke 1:4). Similarly, John reveals that his gospel was written so that we “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31). What about the book of Job? Does the text reveal its purpose?

Strictly speaking, the book of Job does not explicitly state its purpose. Historically, most biblical interpreters have considered the purpose of the book as providing what is known as a theodicy. A theodicy is an effort to reconcile God’s goodness and justice with the existence of human suffering and evil. Although I agree that the book addresses the topic of human suffering, I am less convinced that it should be considered as a formal theodicy. Taking the book as an effort at theodicy would lead one to believe that it is presenting an apologetic for God’s goodness. The book of Job really is not trying to do that. In it God is not concerned with defending Himself; rather He is concerned with correcting Job’s misunderstanding of the world, rebuking Job for his hubris, and demonstrating that Satan was incorrect in his accusations against both God and Job. Accordingly, I don’t think it best to consider Job a theodicy in the strictest sense of that term.

Instead, it is better to understand its purpose as an effort to provide a corrective counterpoint to a popular, but wrong,