

Wendell Ford

JOB

THE POWER OF
NEGATIVE THINKING



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Contents

Preface	7
Chapter 1: The Background	15
Chapter 2: Setting the Stage	27
Chapter 3: The Initial External Assessment	35
Chapter 4: The Attack on Job Begins	39
Chapter 5: Round Two	53
Chapter 6: The Final Round	65
Chapter 7: The Problems with the Text	71
Chapter 8: Wisdom	75
Chapter 9: Discourse: Job's Closing Arguments	83
Chapter 10: Discourse: Elihu, the Strident Voice of Angry Youth	89
Chapter 11: Discourse: God, from the Center of the Storm	97
Chapter 12: Epilogue and Recovery	117
Chapter 13 The Power of Negative Thinking	131
References	143



Preface

A real writer learns from earlier writers the way a boy learns from an apple orchard—by stealing what he has a taste for, and can carry off.

—Archibald MacLeish

In Proverbs 23:7 in the KJV appears the phrase: “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.” It has been taken out of context ever since and used as an axiom; almost everyone has heard it. Newer translations phrase it quite differently; however, the basic idea does appear throughout the Bible. Modern psychology affirms that our thoughts can have great influence on us. Behavioral and motivational psychologists recognize how important our attitudes and thoughts are in determining who we are. Norman Vincent Peale wrote *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), and Dennis Waitley wrote *The Psychology of Winning* (1979)—both books stress the importance of how we think about things. The well-known children’s story *The Little Engine That Could* teaches a positive motivational lesson. Medical research suggests that negative thinking in old age contributes to Alzheimer’s disease. In the *Star Wars* movies, Yoda points out to Luke Skywalker, “You do or don’t do; there is no try.”

Generally the Book of Job is used as an example of integrity, loyalty, and patience; however, if we consider it closely, we see a lot of negative thinking and how it steers the progression of the

discussions. Due to the poetic structure of the book (chapters 3–41), it is easy to get bogged down and not follow through with a train of thought and seems very repetitive because it is. Job's three friends have an opinion and stick to it, but Job does have some development in his opinion. To maintain continuity, one needs to consider the dialogue (chapters 3–27) as a whole and to read in one sitting. Then it is possible to follow certain themes though the book. In this book we will trace some of these themes and notice the negative thinking and its impact.

Job is probably one of the more neglected books in the Bible. There are many reasons for this. It is tucked away between the books of history which are easy to read and the other books of poetry which have an appeal and comfort. Job is also poetry, of course, but of a different nature which makes it more difficult to read. Hebrew poetry consists not in the rhyming of sound but the rhyming of the thought. Usually it is a couplet of lines as in Psalms and Proverbs, yet in Job this is carried on for many lines with the crux of the thought being repeated in many different ways. Thus one may think that there is not progression in the text. Actually a closer reading shows a development of ideas as the book proceeds.

Another hindrance is the sudden shift from the easy-to-read prose of the first two chapters to the poetry of the next thirty-nine chapters. There is also a dramatic change in the subject, which can catch one by surprise. It is said that the Hebrew is the most difficult to read in the Bible. Many of the Hebrew words are rare, some used only once and not found in other literature. For those of us who have to rely on translations into English, we find many variations. Translating is never exact because there is never an exact equivalence between words of different languages. In spite of all of this, Job has caught the attention of biblical scholars and serious readers. They have discovered that Job is much more profound than a casual approach to the book may indicate. The result is that a surprising number of books have been written about Job. The authors extract a lot of different teachings from Job which is indicative of the great

depth of the book. The story of Job has also inspired artists as they interpret many scenes from the book.

A person who is interested in studying Job can find a wide variety of approaches to the study. There are the classic commentaries that take it a verse, or even a word, at a time and do an in depth analysis of it. I find these hard to read straight through and gain much overall understanding, but they are good for resolving a particular point. Other authors use it for devotional use or for inspirational sessions. Some take a particular theme and develop it from what they find in Job. This illustrates the depth and profoundness of the book and illustrates how difficult it is to narrow down a selection of books that would serve one's interests. Computer searches are complicated by the fact that "job" to most means "occupation" and a lot of matches reference that meaning. Using "Bible" or "biblical" in the search parameters helps. Very few authors try to gain any historical perspective from the Book of Job. At this time perhaps all of the perspectives possible have been explored by some author or perhaps not.

As many of the books written about Job are rare, out of print, or otherwise hard to find, it is hard to learn all of the perspectives or even if they exist. I have read some of these over the years, but certainly only a small sample, and so am not familiar with every view. If one has a deep interest in Job, it behooves them to read several. The views, insights, and conclusions will be vastly different; even conflicting at times. This does not mean that any one is more correct or enlightening than another; it means only that the author had a particular perspective at the time of writing. A perspective that may be dismissed now may prove to be more relevant later because our life's circumstances have changed. The book that was the breakthrough in 1963 for me to finally gain a real appreciation for Job is Reference 1. (Unfortunately many, many years ago I loaned my copy to someone who never returned it, so have had to rely on notes I had taken and what I can remember. I have forgotten to whom it was I loaned it.) I am not sure how available it is now, so I will refer to some of the thoughts from it that I think

ought to be preserved and recognized. I have taught Job a few times to adult Bible classes and was helped most by that book. Every class I taught was a little different because each time I discovered something new or saw something from a different angle. Sometimes I even changed or modified my ideas, perhaps because my situation or experiences had changed, or because something in the world culture had changed, or because I had a different audience with different needs.

That there is a universal appeal in the story of Job is seen in how often it is referred to and elements of the theme in it are used by others. A play (named simply *J. B.*), written in free verse and first performed in 1958, by Archibald MacLeish, is a telling of the Book of Job. It won a Pulitzer Prize. Herman Melville has many allusions to Job in his novel *Moby Dick*. He even has the owner of Captain Ahab's ship as Captain Bildad, a pious, hard-hearted Quaker. The novel ends with "And only I am escaped alone to tell thee." In 1818 William Blake created watercolors depicting his interpretation of the Book of Job. A couple of years later he made engravings of them. Many people think that the 1900 children's fantasy by L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*, was influenced by the Book of Job noting the similarity between the land Oz and the land of Uz. Whether real or not, intended or not, many people see allusions to Job in other literary works. Doubtless many other stories will seem to be related to Job because people feel they are in the same predicament of being falsely accused. There are cases of someone having their previous criminal conviction overturned many years later because of new evidence. It matters not whether they did other wrongs in the past but whether they were being punished for the wrong reason. In the Book of Job we are told that he is innocent of any wrong doing; for others it is only necessary that they feel they have done no wrong to experience the same outrage and despair. There is a stigma, deserved or not, attached to anyone who has ever been accused. Popular opinion can forever haunt the victim who is then shunned and ostracized by the community. Self-righteous and proper people

avoid them. An example is the treatment of the homeless, a condition not duplicated since the Great Depression.

A very small sample of the kinds of approaches that have been used to characterize the Book of Job can be seen by the titles of books written about it. The first three references attest to that. References one through four are a cross-section of the treatment of the Book of Job. They span a period of writing of sixty-plus years. Carstensen focuses on Job defending his honor, as the title of the book implies. He makes use of ancient Greek literature to illustrate the prevalence of thought in the first millennium BC. His book is very readable yet offers profound insights. Where he has emphasized *honor*, I would probably consider *integrity* more. Safire, who was a political columnist for the *New York Times*, applied the Book of Job to the politics of time of his writing (1992). His intimate involvement with many of the significant historical politicians and events for about three decades provides very interesting reading for anyone interested in that era. He was an avid student of Job and collected a large number of books. Morgan (1863–1945) was pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, taught fourteen years at Biola College (now Biola University) in the Los Angeles area, and was a very prolific writer of over one hundred works. His book is of an inspirational or devotional nature. Walton is a professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College. His book is a considerable work (450-plus pages) that covers technical details through application (as the name of the series would imply). The books by Safire and Walton contain extensive bibliographies that don't duplicate any titles. This indicates that the message of Job can strike different people in different ways. It is not that anyone has a better insight than another but rather that Job is inclusive enough to cover a wide variety of one's inner struggles. Naturally all of the books will have the same basic details concerning the background and origin of the book. It is, after all, a part of the Bible. For the sheer number of volumes written about Job duplication happens. It may be impossible to present ideas that have not appeared before. What I am presenting is simply another dimension to

an already mega-dimensional universe. Each reading of Job can evoke different thoughts. One should not expect to discover in Job a solution to a current problem, but perhaps one can expect that the insight gained will have relevance at a later time. The value of Job is not a “go to” source for solutions to problems but is a source of building understanding and strength. A one time reading is not sufficient. One needs to return to Job on occasion simply for the pleasure of reading it. I find humor in it as well as deep, soul searching insights because it deals with the inward trials and foibles of all of us. Job is a platform for exposing the fears, anxieties, and questions we encounter as we go through life. At the beginning of each chapter I will have a quote by Archibald MacLeish that may have some insight to the chapter, is interesting for other reasons, or simply because I liked them. These were obtained by doing a web search on “Archibald MacLeish Quotes.” I received quite a number of hits and these quotes were taken from various ones. A lot of the quotes were present on a lot of web sites. Most did not give an exact source of the quote (much to my frustration) but are probably mostly from the play *J. B.* A typical site is: www.azquotes.com/author/9220-Archibald-Macleish.

Because we are humans we are curious and want to know why things are the way they are. We want to know why things happen and the meaning behind them. Those who think more deeply want to know more about their existence, why we are here, and what is the meaning of life. Philosophers have dealt with such questions almost since the beginning of recorded history. People want to think there is something more to their lives than merely to exist. This is a basic difference between humans and other animals. It is hard to focus on such thoughts when life seems to be going well and is full of contentment. On the other hand when everything seems to be going wrong, especially if there is pain and suffering, then one tends to consider what life is all about. Feelings are aroused that were once latent and not worthy of consideration. We are social creatures and want the approval and empathy of others. If these are denied because of conditions for which we don't understand or don't

know their source, then the sting of rejection greatly increases our woes. To discover that there are others in a similar situation both comforts and discourages us. If our fight is shared by others, it becomes easier to battle our own problems. Our arguments against our condition achieve a higher aim and our defense is strengthened. We are not alone in being abandoned and victimized.

In dealing with hypothetical problems (or even someone else's), it is easier to provide solutions and propose actions, if we don't have to implement them for our own comfort. Problems brought on people by themselves are apparent and, hence, the solution is apparent. No one feels they deserve the bad things that happen to them (they may have a different opinion about the good things). Religious people may reason that they should be exempt from many of the troubles experienced by the non-religious. Suffering ennobles only if it happens to someone else. Desperation can lead to actions and words that otherwise would never have been considered. Sources of relief are grasped that have little or no connection to the situation or reality.

People have often been referred to the Book of Job to find solace for their pain and anguish. To read the first two chapters and the last part of chapter 42, a story is constructed that implies that if one is patient enough, everything will turn out all right in the end. Delving deeper into the bulk of the book reveals a more complicated story. Issues are explored and questions asked that never occurred before. The basic question of "Why?" is never answered. Patience and how to obtain it are not addressed. If anything, the lack of patience is displayed and the frustration that accompanies it. Surprisingly, the way to a positive attitude is not shown, and a lot of negativity is expressed. In my last foray through the Book of Job, I discovered that negative thinking plays a key role in Job's life and also in our own lives. As I go through Job, I will take note of negative ideas expounded and how they shape the flow of the book and how we can use the power of negative thinking to shape our own lives.

CHAPTER 1

The Background

There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience and that is not learning from experience.

—Archibald MacLeish

The Book of Job is a bit of an enigma as a part of the Bible. At forty-two chapters, it is a significant work. As a work of poetry, Job introduces the Bible reader to other books of poetry that follow it. Understanding any book of the Bible is greatly aided by knowing as much about it as possible; the further from our own time the book is, the more important this becomes and may be harder to do. Background is asking a number of questions about the book. Who wrote it? Why was it written? Who was the original intended audience? When was it written and when did the events take place? Where was the physical location? What was the political climate? What is its relation to the rest of the Bible? How was it received? Why is it in the Bible? What is its relevance to us?

For the Book of Job, the answer to very few of the questions is provided; not in the book itself, not in other Scripture, not in literature contemporary with Job. There are, of course, clues, but very few. Thus the way is open for a lot of speculation. Ultimately the value of the book is what it contains and how it speaks to us; for that, the answers to the questions above are immaterial. Because we are so curious, the speculation about

the questions helps to satisfy that curiosity, even if no definitive answers are forthcoming.

The Bible is one continuous story, from the very beginning of time to the prophecy of the end of time, of God's dealings with humans. It begins with their first disobedience and continues to their final salvation. As such it describes only those events and people significant to that story. There would obviously be much going on in the world that was not recorded in the Bible; there are a lot of details left out of the story that is told. The Book of Job is the only book in the Bible that is not directly telling part of the story (Ecclesiastes, Jonah, and Song of Solomon may be on the fringe). Its purpose may be more to clarify part of the nature of God and His relationship with humans and deals with issues that are much deeper than could fit into the telling of the story.

Because of the uniqueness of the book, at least four ideas have been suggested as to its nature. The first is that it is a history of real events involving real people. This would be the initial inclination because the Bible consists of real stories of real people. However, there is a connection and a continuity to all of those stories that make them part of a larger story. Job is isolated. There is no connection to other events or other people directly, but a few clues are present. These will be discussed later when we consider location of the events in the book. Job is mentioned twice, once in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 14:14 as righteous) and once in the New Testament (James 5:11 as steadfast). And that is all; nothing else about his character or life is discussed. The poetry in the book is considered by many to be the finest and most profound of all Hebrew poetry. How could a person in Job's condition spontaneously produce such poetry?

This leads to the second idea that the book is a parable. There is immediate objection to this; that the Bible would not include something that was not absolute truth. This view ignores the fact that parables are very much a part of biblical teaching and secular teaching of the times. The fables of Aesop were a popular teaching tool in the first millennium BC. They were obviously only stories because several used animals as the

characters. To someone who does not think the Old Testament uses such a device, one only has to refer to 2 Samuel 12:1–6 where Nathan tells David about a rich man taking a lamb from a poor man. When David is incensed at the action of the rich man, Nathan says to David, “You are the man.” So this is a parable; why might others not exist in the Old Testament (Psalms 78:2)? Jesus used many parables in his teaching and they are plainly recognized as such (Matthew 13:10–16).

The third possibility is that it was a dramatic play performed for moral teaching. Several Greek plays exist from the first millennium BC so the device was well known. However, there is no known example in the Bible.

The fourth possibility would be that it was an epic poem. That was a popular contemporary literature form, especially with the Greeks of the time. The Psalms are this form although none of them actually comprise a story. The great teachings of the book are in no way dependent on which type of literature Job is. None of the points in the Book of Job are tied to the nature of the story. It’s the story itself and the issues raised in the discussion that are important. Perhaps it is a combination of all of them. Maybe there were real people who experienced the real events; the story was passed down in the oral lore so much that it achieved parable status; someone finally decided it needed to be preserved in written form as an epic poem which later was performed as a drama. Choose whatever form satisfies you the most and let the book speak to you.

There are three dates that can be considered in relation to the Book of Job. Part of the genius of Job is that it was written such that none of the dates affect the content. The first date is “When did the events take place?” The second is “When was the story composed?” The third is “When was the book written down?” There are no definitive answers to these, but there are a few clues from which inferences and educated guesses can be made.

The most accepted date for the events is the patriarchal era. This would be time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; however, as is discussed below, the highest probability would be around

the time the Israelites were in Egypt a little later. The livelihood activities seem to be same as Abraham; that is, in raising large flocks and having many servants to tend them. There is no mention of any other of the prominent characters of the Bible. The covenant is not mentioned, nor is the law. There is nothing about the sojourn in Egypt; this would imply that the characters in the book were not part of that contingent. As far as we know there was no written law before the Exodus. It was a time when God spoke directly to a few individuals but the manner is not always given and is not the same in cases when He did. He spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden but not necessarily face to face. It is uncertain exactly how He spoke to Cain in Genesis 4:9. The same is true for His conversations with Noah in Genesis 6–9 and with Abraham in Genesis 12 and 13. In Genesis 15:1 He spoke to Abraham in a vision. Other examples exist in Genesis of God's communications with Abraham. Later in the Old Testament, we find other methods like the burning bush to Moses, a still small voice to Elijah, and in visions to the prophets. In the Book of Job, God speaks to Job out of a whirlwind. All of these clues suggest the events in Job took place before Moses. Job could have even been a contemporary of Abraham's immediate descendants.

The time of the events would raise other questions to which no answers are given. To how many others did God speak directly with (including the time from Adam to Abraham)? How was the will of God made known to people, specifically ones like Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu? Did the fact that there seemed to be a moral code, arise from Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit? Remember it was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). In the Book of Job there is a universal moral code that everyone is expected to follow. This code has not changed much through the ages. Every civilization has a similar code even if it is not always adhered to. If all of the characters in Job are related to Abraham, the knowledge of God and His will would have naturally been passed on orally.

The origin of the man, Job, or the region where he lived is not well defined. He is said to have lived in the land of Uz. For almost all of the other important characters of the Bible, they are introduced by giving the name of their father. This is true for all of the books of the prophets except Daniel, Obadiah, and Haggai. Throughout the biblical narrative this is also usually the case. But in the Book of Job we have no clue to his ancestry. As a country Uz is mentioned two other times in the Bible, Jeremiah 25:20 and Lamentations 4:21. In Lamentations it is associated with Edom. It appears four times as the name of a person in a genealogy: Genesis 10:23, 1 Chronicles 1:17, Genesis 26:28, and 1 Chronicles 1:42. Because it is similar to Abram's home country of Ur, it is sometimes thought to be in the same region (but probably is closer to Edom). This area is roughly north of Babylon in what is now Iran. Job and Abram had the same occupation, so it is likely they could have lived in the same area.

Other clues come from the name of the homes and ancestors of the three friends who come to visit Job. The first mentioned is Eliphaz, the Temanite. There was a son of Esau named Eliphaz in Genesis 36. Esau and his family had moved away from Canaan and Jacob because "their possessions were too great for them to live together." This Eliphaz had a son named Teman from which the Eliphaz of Job might have come. We are not told where these descendants of Esau eventually lived. The second friend was Bildad the Shuhite. The term Shuhite came from Shuah who was one of the sons of Abraham and Keturah (Genesis 25:2). They also lived in the region of Edom. The third friend was Zophar, the Naamathite. Naaman (not the Syrian king healed by Elisha) was a son of Benjamin, Genesis 46:21, who also is thought to be from Edom. Thus the three friends (and perhaps Job himself) were probably descendants of Abraham and lived in the region of Edom. Edom is far away from the region of Ur; Edom is named after Esau, the twin brother of Jacob; Edom was his home after leaving Jacob. This is the region to the east and slightly south of the Dead Sea in what is now Jordan. The friends apparently knew each other

and did not travel far to see Job. Thus it seems that Uz, the dwelling place of Job, was also near Edom. Job being called the richest man in the east would also point to Edom because it is east of the home of Jacob. If they were descendants of Abraham, this means the events in the Book of Job happened while the Israelites were in Egypt. It would also explain how they knew God and worshiped Him and place the timing around 1500 BC.

In chapters 32–37 we are introduced to a new character. This is the young man named Elihu. There appears to be five different men with the name. The first is listed in 1 Samuel 1:1 as being in the lineage of the prophet Samuel which would place him a couple of hundred years before David. He is referred to in 1 Chronicles 6 as Eliel and Eliab. Three others appear around the time of David; 1 Chronicles 12:20, 1 Chronicles 26:7, and 1 Chronicles 27: 18. None of these is the Elihu of Job. Job's Elihu is the son of Barachel of the family of Ram who is thought to be descended from Abram's brother Haran. The above is speculation, of course. With all the possible connections of all of the characters to Edom, it seems that original story of Job may have been an Edomite story, which would explain why there is no mention or connection to Israelite people or events. The placing of the time of the book during Israel's sojourn in Egypt would fit. Because of the inhabitants of Edom being related to Abraham, they also would have worshiped Jehovah.

That there were others who worshiped Jehovah is shown by a couple of other examples. In Genesis 14 Abram waged war with tribes that had captured Sodom and Gomorrah and taken Lot, Abram's nephew, captive. He was successful in his campaign to free Lot and took a lot of booty. As he returned he was met by Melchizedek who was described as king of Salem (Jeru-salem?) and priest of God most high. Abram gave him a tenth of all he had captured. No other details are given about Melchizedek in Genesis but he is referred to in Psalms 110:4 and Hebrews chapters 5, 6, and 7. In Hebrews Christ is compared to Melchizedek as a priest. Hebrews 7:6 explicitly states that Melchizedek was not of the genealogy of the Hebrews. In Exodus chapter 2 Moses flees to Midian and meets up with

the family of Reuel and lives with them eventually taking a wife from one of the daughters. In Exodus 3:1 his father-in-law is called Jethro who is called the priest of Midian. These examples show the existence of other worshipers of Jehovah even to the extent of there being priests before the establishment of the Hebrew priesthood in Exodus. These two are mentioned in the Bible because of the intersection of their lives with the Hebrews. The Bible is the story only of the Hebrews. That is what makes the Book of Job more unique as there is no similar interaction with the Hebrews.

There is no mention of the age of Job when the events took place. Most often artists depicted Job as a very old man reminiscent of the way Father Time or the old year is depicted on New Year's Eve such as the series of works by William Blake mentioned earlier. He does seem to be the patriarch of his family. In those days the extended family usually lived together in a compound or other settlement or camp. Job's ten children lived within a short distance of him each in their own houses (1:4). However it is more likely that he was much younger. There is no mention of grandchildren or other descendants as there is in chapter 42. Eliphaz reminds him that the three friends are older than his father (15:10). And at the end Job lives for many, many more years.

Each time I do a study of the Book of Job, I discover different viewpoints. One question often asked is "How long did the events in the book take?" Again we have to rely on the few clues that are given. The travel time for the three friends could have been days or weeks. The time for the challenge to be made in heaven and the catastrophes carried out in chapters one and two is implied to be short. But the time that the suffering went on, the time the word spread to the friends, the time for journey preparations to made, and the time for the trip would be significant. As Job continues his lament in chapter three in rebuttal to the accusations made by Eliphaz in chapters 4 and 5, he describes months of suffering:

So I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. (Job 7:3)

In Job's summation in 29:2 he speaks of it being months since his pleasant days. His suffering has been going on long enough that he has become a target of ridicule (30:1–2). Also the debate could have been spread over time and the writing of it is a condensation of the proceedings. Thus its poetic form could no longer be an objection to the story being a relating of actual events.

That several details are omitted is a source of frustration to us because our curiosity wants to know those details. The Bible tends to not dwell on details that are not significant to the lesson being taught. For example, nothing is known of the life of Jesus between ages twelve and thirty. What did He do during that time? Or for that matter, what did He do from birth to age twelve? Again this provides room for a broad range of speculation. If we don't know, we can always make something up. That is suspected to be the case of a lot of ancient writings like in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

Little is known when the story of Job came together. It undoubtedly existed in an oral version long before it was written down because the actual writing is generally believed to have been in the third century BC. Even the reference in James appears to be to an oral version because it says "you have heard of the steadfastness of Job," whereas most references in the New Testament to the Old Testament begin with "it is written." Whatever the method of conveyance and whatever time it was written, it was considered worthy of inclusion in the Old Testament. Some other inferior versions of the story of Job circulated in the early centuries BC that were rejected for inclusion in the Old Testament.

Absolutely nothing is known about who actually wrote down the version that we have today. Some scholars think there might have seen a slight corruption or tinkering with text by the scribes through the centuries or accidental errors propagated. The places pointed to are the apparently abbreviated speech of

Bildad in chapter 25, the missing third speech of Zophar, the last part of chapter 27 which is attributed to Job, but sounds more like one of the others, chapter 28 as an isolated discourse on wisdom, and the inclusion of the speech of Elihu in chapter 32 to 37 which is ignored elsewhere. There is nothing in these passages that is critical to the message of the book. When appropriate, the issues with these passages will be dealt with.

The Book of Job presents some unique problems of text and structure. The Hebrew is the most difficult in the Bible. Many words are found nowhere else and others are rarely used. This makes for variations in translations. Read as many Bible translations as possible because there is no guarantee that any one is more correct than another. I will mainly be using the NRSV even though new copies are hard to come by because I like the way it and the RSV read. Notice that there is no mention of the Jews, no promises of God to His people, no reference to great Israelites. The covenant name of God (Yahweh) is used only three times in the poetry (12:9; 20:23; 28:28). In some ways chapter 28 (speech on wisdom attributed to Job) does not seem to fit and is more like what we find in Proverbs. Elihu, who speaks more than the other three friends, is completely ignored in the rest of the book.

The traditional view of the man, Job, derives from chapters 1, 2, and 42; that is, as a paragon of patience. (There is some literature contemporary with the Old Testament that contains a version of Job; for example, one called *The Testament of Job*.) The rest of the book paints an entirely different picture. The Jewish scribes settled on the version we have in our Bibles. The biblical version provides us with a much deeper insight of our relationship with God and also with each other. That is why the book is timeless and furnishes a message to all generations. The lack of reference to time and place makes the book enduring and gives it an ability to speak to any age. The sound one makes celebrating the dropping an anvil on one's big toe expresses a timeless vocabulary.

The book is arranged into three distinct parts. The prologue of chapters 1 and 2 give the introduction and setting. The bulk

of the book is contained in the dialogue in chapters 3 through chapter 28 and in the three discourses by Job (29–31), Elihu (32–37), and God (38–41). The dialogue is the heart of the book where the issues are raised and debated. In the epilogue in the last part of chapter 42 are the summations and conclusions. The prologue and epilogue are easy-to-read prose and form the basis of most peoples' understanding of the book. In so doing they miss the purpose of the book. The dialogue is very difficult Hebrew poetry. The rhyme is not in sounds but couplets of the same meaning. The construction in the poetry is three cycles of speeches followed by three discourses. Job speaks, is answered by one of the friends, he offers his rebuttal followed by another friend until the three cycles are complete. The last speech of the third friend Zophar is missing, leading some to think that chapter 27:13–23 might be Zophar speaking and not Job. The poetry ends with the three discourses. Of the forty-two chapters, twenty are attributed to Job, six to Elihu, four to God, four to Eliphaz, three to Bildad, two to Zophar, and three to the narrator of the prose. The description of events taking place in heaven shows that some, or all, of the book was given by inspiration.

We shall study the book as we have it. We will discover a Job you would never meet in the prologue and epilogue. As we will observe, Job is not a paragon of patience. Some have described Job as a rebel although the term dissident seems to fit better. A rebel usually wants to overthrow established authority while a dissident wants to change it from within. Notice the development in the speeches of Job and the increase in intensity (nothing much changes in the speeches of the friends except that they become more blunt). Job speaks truths evocative of every one's experience. The force of Job's arguments is not in personal tragedy, but its capacity to symbolize human outrage. It is an exposition of the way suffering people really feel when catastrophe strikes them. The language is of those shocked out of complacency that no reasonableness can justify. When one hits his thumb with a hammer, he tends to adopt a more vivid vocabulary.

The Book of Job provides a non-threatening basis for exploring questions we might otherwise be hesitant to ask. Whom do each of the characters typify? What is the significance of God's questions to Job? What questions would he ask modern mortals? Do mortals have a right to challenge God, to confront divine authority? Should a person accept spiritual authority when it is revealed in all its majesty? To what extent does authority need challenge from below to establish its powers? Does might make right? How much help can one expect from authority when he opposes that authority? Whose side are you on in the debate? The two weapons that Job has are his power to withhold his allegiance and moral authority. To truly be able to receive the message of the Book of Job, one needs to do what should be done when reading any good story: allow yourself to be absorbed in the characters and picture yourself as them. As you read each character's utterances, imagine yourself as being in the scene and experiencing what they are experiencing. As the story unfolds, see everything through their eyes and perspective. In so doing you will be able to gain the enlightenment the story of Job is meant to provide. You may even want to assume the role of Satan to imagine what he was thinking and why he was so negative.

Unless otherwise specified, all Scripture quotes are from the Book of Job, New Revised Standard Version. Because I make so many references to passages from the Book of Job, not all of them are quoted. Therefore, having a copy of the Book of Job handy as you read would be helpful.