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Did Job live “happily ever after”? Suspicion and naïvety in Job 42:7-17*

Abstract

The book of Job apparently ends happily ever after, with the restoration of the protagonist’s family and fortune (42:7-17). Juxtaposed with the rest of the book, however, this epilogue may appear incongruent and deeply problematic. In light of this, this article argues that a double reading is warranted. On the one hand, we may read the epilogue with a hermeneutic of suspicion, which resists superficial worldviews and protests against injustice. This reading will unmask troubling features in the representation of Job’s God, Job’s restoration, and Job’s speech. On the other hand, though – and drawing on Paul Ricœur – we may approach the text with “second naïvety.” We are thereby welcomed to inhabit the symbolic wholeness of the textual world. The text invites both these readings and does not adjudicate between them. By holding them in dialectic tension, we enrich both hermeneutics and theology.

Key words

Job; Job 42; epilogue; frame narration; Ricœur; second naïvety; suspicion; hermeneutics; happy ending; ambiguity

After these things, God restored the fortunes of Job, giving him twice as much as he had before – thousands of animals, and 10 new children to boot. And Job saw many generations, living out his days happily ever after (Job 42:7-17).

Thus ends the book of Job, jerking readers from the dark complexity of the whirlwind (chs. 38-41) into folkloric serenity. Dense poetry reverts to simple narrative; cosmic wildness is caged. This epilogue seems incongruous. For some readers, it is unsatisfactory, seeming to return to a world of make-believe after a profoundly real struggle.¹ Some find it a trite conclusion, a “stumbling-block,”² an embarrassment. Proposed solutions often do violence to

* This article is forthcoming in *The Journal of Theological Interpretation*.

¹ Various aspects of the epilogue are problematised by, e.g., Athalya Brenner, “Job the Pious? The Characterization of Job in the Narrative Framework of the Book,” *JSOT* 43 (1989): 37–52; R. Carroll, “Postscript to Job,” *Modern Churchman* 19.4 (1976): 161–66; David J. A. Clines, “Seven Interesting Things about the Epilogue to Job,” *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 6 (2014): 11-21; Dan Mathewson, *Death and Survival in the Book of Job: Desymbolization and Traumatic Experience*, LHBOTS 450 (New York; T. & T. Clark, 2006); Tina Pippin, “Job 42:1–6, 10–17,” *Interpretation* 53.3 (1999): 299–303; Hugh Pypers, “The Reader in Pain: Job as Text and Pretext,” *Literature & Theology* 7.2 (1993); James W. Watts, “The Unreliable Narrator of Job,” in *The Whirlwind Essays on Job, Hermeneutics and Theology in Memory of Jane Morse*, ed. Stephen L. Cook et al., JSOTSup 336 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 168–80.

² Muriel Spark, cited in Pypers, “Reader in Pain,” 113.

the text, lopping off the epilogue as an earlier (inferior) source³ or ignoring its existence entirely.⁴

But this does not do justice to the text as we have it. In this article, I take the epilogue seriously, and draw out its hermeneutical and theological implications. Drawing on Paul Ricœur, I will suggest that the strange reversion to simple narrative invites a double reading. On the one hand, it welcomes a hermeneutic of suspicion, a questioning of its own facile claims. On the other, it invites a hermeneutic of “second naïvety,” an embrace of symbolic wholeness. This polar doubleness proves restless: we cannot resolve whether Job lives happily or unhappily ever after. This has implications for the process of reading and theological appropriation.

Double reading is provoked by both the details of the text and broader hermeneutical considerations.⁵ At the level of textual details, one interpretation might foreground certain features. This constellation of features forms an overall picture in the reader’s mind, functioning as an interpretive guide for the rest of the text. The reader uses it to infer the meaning of ambiguous expressions and to fill in textual gaps. Another interpretation, though, might shuffle these layers. An alternative textual constellation comes to the fore, and an alternative picture emerges. I will suggest that this reshuffling may occur for the epilogue’s portrayal of Job’s God, Job’s restoration, and Job’s speech. At a broader level, different texts invite different hermeneutics. Through their genre and style, they construct their implied reader, whom they invite the actual reader to embody.⁶ I will propose that the dialogues of Job form a critical reader, who may still embody this hermeneutic upon reaching the epilogue. The epilogue itself, though, suggest a trusting reader imbued with a second naïvety. The reader’s interpretation, therefore, depends partly on how profoundly they have been shaped by literary context, or how seriously they take the claims of the epilogue itself.

Job’s “unhappy ending”

The book of Job may have formed a certain hermeneutical stance in the reader. The prologue is straightforward, lulling the reader in the security of a folkloric world. The dialogues, though, are quite different. As Carol Newsom describes, they offer a reality where contradictions are centralised and are not resolved, forging a truth which is plural, dialogic, and unfinalisable.⁷ This, in turn, imagines sophisticated readers prepared to enter the fray and to adopt the dialogue’s “interrogative mood,” which “privileges dissidence.”⁸ As actual readers grapple with the book, they may find themselves embodying this stance.

³ The conventional source-critical solution is that the prologue and epilogue constitute an earlier folktale, which was later combined with the dialogues. Countering this, several scholars suggest they belong to a single integral work. E.g. Yair Hoffman, “The Relation between the Prologue and the Speech-Cycles in Job: A Reconsideration,” *VT* 31.2 (1981): 160–170. See further C. A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 3–11; 36–37.

⁴ E.g. C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Paul, 1954).

⁵ For an analysis of how ambiguity is constructed in narrative, see S. Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

⁶ See Newsom, *Moral Imaginations*.

⁷ Newsom, *Moral Imaginations*, 79–89. Drawing on Bakhtin, Newsom reads Job as a polyphonic text in which no single voice is privileged.

⁸ Newsom, *Moral Imaginations*, 89.

The hermeneutics of Paul Ricœur are a helpful lens here. Ricœur suggests a three stage hermeneutical journey.⁹ It begins with first naïvety. This is a posture of a trusting acceptance, of the sort displayed in the prologue by Job himself and by compliant readers. The second stage is critical distance. It is marked by suspicion and intense questioning, such as Job's own questioning of religious doctrines, his shattering of "the first, naïve expression of the moral vision of the world."¹⁰ Readers may emulate Job here: like Ricœur's "masters of suspicion" who intellectually dismantle fundamental religious structures,¹¹ the reader might deconstruct appearances, digging towards the underlying reality. Doctrine and experience no longer align, text is not untroubled, and treasured beliefs begin to crumble. This process is painful, intellectually and existentially, throwing Job and readers into the "desert of criticism."

Alongside Job, readers may have grappled with complexity. Without an adjudicator to guide them, they have been thrown into the fray of competing opinions, voices offering contradictory narratives to frame personal and cosmic reality. They have been immersed in dense poetry – nuanced, metaphorical, elusive – requiring penetration, but straining away from fixity. Alongside Job, readers may have resisted unsatisfactory worldviews. Systematising and totalising metanarratives, such as rigid retributive paradigms,¹² are deemed by Job inadequate to explain his reality. Structures and orders discerned in the cosmos are thrown to chaos in the near-entropic expanse of the divine speeches (chs. 38-41).¹³ Juxtaposed with this, the simple sense-making of the epilogue may appear unacceptably naïve.¹⁴ Alongside Job, readers may have protested injustice. Job's courtroom rhetoric assumes justice to be graspable, and commends grasping after it, no matter how strong the opposing powers may be; no matter if they are even God. God himself¹⁵ celebrates creatures who resist – the ox straining free from his ropes (39:10); the Leviathan repelling the javelin (41:18-21 [Eng. 26-29]); the human girding his loins (38:3; 40:7).¹⁶

The dialogues may thus construct readers capable of entering the fray themselves, alongside Job. And, jarringly, when they reach the epilogue, Job speaks no more. Perhaps readers take his place, grappling with complexity, resisting unsatisfactory worldviews,

⁹ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan, Religious Perspectives; v. 17 (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 347-57.

¹⁰ Ricœur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 314. Ricœur discusses the book of Job on pp. 314-22, but does not examine the epilogue.

¹¹ Ricœur identified Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in this way. Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, Terry Lectures; 38 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), 32-33. See the discussion in David Stewart, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Literature & Theology* 3.3 (1989): 296-307.

¹² Though we should not caricature Job's friends (see Newsom, *Moral Imaginations*, 90-129), their speeches tend in this direction. Retributive schemata have an important place in Israelite sapiential traditions (e.g. Proverbs). Such schemata – even if intended as motivational, flexible, and/or contingent (see T. Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs and Qoheleth*, VTSup 90 [Leiden: Brill, 2002], 18-43) – can easily ossify into rigid dogma (Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* [Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985], 165-76).

¹³ Several scholars have found moral implications in this; namely, that the cosmos is not regulated by a strict system of justice. The classic expression of this view is Matitiah Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," *HUCA* 37 (1966): 73-106.

¹⁴ This has led James Watts to argue that the narrator of the epilogue is not to be trusted. Watts, "Unreliable Narrator."

¹⁵ In this paper, I refer to "God" and "Yahweh" using masculine pronouns. This is theologically problematic, but accords with the text: in the book of Job, the deity is apparently gendered male.

¹⁶ Samuel E. Balentine, *Job* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 679-92.

protesting injustice. In so doing, they may break through the epilogue's exterior, which can seem too stylised, too balanced, too perfect – too good to be true.¹⁷ They may unearth gaps and incongruities, troubling assumptions and claims, about Job's God, restoration, and speech.

Job's God opens the epilogue. Anticipating that Job will pray for his friends, he commits himself to accept that prayer, “לבלתי עשות עמכם נבלה” (42:8). English translations, with few exceptions,¹⁸ render this as “not to deal with you according to your folly” or similar. Translators thus ascribe “folly” to the friends. But this is linguistically problematic.¹⁹ Indeed, on a straightforward rendering of the Hebrew, Yahweh pledges *himself* “to not commit נבלה with you.” נבלה – a “folly,” an “outrage.” Uniquely here it tempts the divine, Yahweh worrying that he will infract socio-religious norms and values,²⁰ raping the friends' dignity as the Benjaminites raped the concubine and Amnon raped his half-sister.²¹ God may need Job's prayer, it seems, to placate his otherwise irascible anger,²² presenting himself as temperamental and easily swayed. In a disconcerting retraction from his sublimity in the whirlwind, he reverts to his prologue self: here incited against baseless suffering; there incited to it (2:3).

Indeed, the epilogue holds Yahweh responsible for Job's suffering. There is no satan into whose hands Job is placed, who strikes him with loathsome sores (cf. 1:12; 2:6-7).²³ It is almost as though, as Athalya Brenner puts it, the satan “has been incorporated into the figure of God.”²⁴ The narrator gives Yahweh sole agency: it is he who brought all this evil (נבלה) upon Job (42:11). The problem of evil is, of course, central in the book. God's folly (נבלה; 42:8) has been proposed as a way round this:²⁵ evil is a by-product of his foolishness; it is not his reasoned intention or his direct activity. But divine נבלה cannot sidestep the problem of divine רעה, not when the two stand but three verses apart. Both “folly” and “evil,” it seems, come from Yahweh's character.²⁶

Yahweh's character is also suspect in his *restoration* of Job, for why is Job restored? A reward? For passing the prologue's celestial test, for holding his integrity through hardship (Job 2:3, 9)?²⁷ But if the man Job maintains his integrity here, the book Job may not. Chapters 3-41 have taken the edifice of retribution through violent demolition. The chaosing of the universe has dispersed and decentred neat structures of piety and prosperity. Compensation,

¹⁷ Brenner, “Job the Pious”; Clines, “False Naïvety.”

¹⁸ Exceptions occur in NAB, NJPS, NEB.

¹⁹ If the phrase meant “according to your folly,” we would expect נבלה to be qualified by a preposition and pronominal suffix, e.g. כנבלתכם. Without this, נבלה is seemingly the object of the verb עשה. This collocation – עשה נבלה – occurs commonly elsewhere, meaning “to commit an outrage” (Gen 34:7; Deut 22:21; Josh 7:15; Judg 19:23-24; 2 Sam 13:12; Jer 29:23).

²⁰ Anthony Phillips, “Nebalah: A Term for Serious Disorderly and Unruly Conduct,” *VT* 25.2 (1975): 237–42.

²¹ These events are described by נבלה in Judg 19:23-24; 20:6, 10; 2 Sam 13:12.

²² Samuel E. Balentine, “My Servant Job Shall Pray for You,” *Theology Today* 58.4 (2002): 502–18.

²³ The prologue is ambivalent in ascribing responsibility. The satan goads Yahweh to “stretch out [his] hand” against Job (1:11; 2:5); Yahweh places Job into the satan's hand (1:12; 2:6). Job himself ascribes the responsibility to God (1:21; 2:10; see further below)

²⁴ Brenner, “Job the Pious,” 46.

²⁵ Philippe Guillaume and Michael Schunck, “Job's Intercession: Antidote to Divine Folly,” *Biblica* 88.4 (2007): 457–72.

²⁶ The LXX seems to find both these features problematic. It replaces “not to commit an outrage against you” with “not to destroy (ἀπόλλεσθαι) you,” and removes the reference to God bringing evil.

²⁷ A variation of this view suggests that Job is rewarded for praying for his friends. Thus Hartley describes this as an instance of “[t]he fundamental spiritual principle that in giving one receives and in forgiving one is forgiven.” John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 540.

then? Legal restitution for unjust losses incurred. Throughout the book, Job has insisted that Yahweh be brought to court. Perhaps here, as though to hush up the details of the trial, the text skips to the verdict: like a condemned thief (Exod 22:3[4]), Yahweh doubles Job's stolen cattle and sheep (Job 42:12, cf. 1:3).²⁸ Or perhaps more palatable: sheer divine freedom?²⁹ But if so, the capriciousness which blesses might easily flip to a maliciousness which distresses. Yahweh may strike again.

Indeed, the capricious and malicious conspire even within blessing in Job, even lexically speaking. In the prologue, the lexeme בָּרַךְ is dissected into two antithetical English terms: to bless and to curse. “Curse God and die!” says Job's wife (בָּרַךְ אֱלֹהִים וּמָת; 2:9); “Blessed be Yahweh's name” says Job (יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבֹרָךְ; 1:21) – both using the same Hebrew term. Though often dismissed as scribal euphemism,³⁰ this double usage may create unrelievable tension around the term – a “semantic undecidability” and “theological faultline.”³¹ Thus, as Hugh Pypers puts it, “we cannot simply read God's latter blessing of Job as an unmixed affirmation. All uses of the root *brk* carry with them a shadow-side of curse.”³²

In Job's latter “blessing” (42:12), we do not know what becomes of the final curse, the greatest test – his debilitating disease (cf. 2:4-8).³³ The text mentions no physical healing; perhaps those loathsome sores are chronic. We do know that Job receives plentiful replacement livestock: 23,000 domestic animals, signifying his wealth and dominion (42:12). 23,000 domestic animals, that is, subdued after their celebration of wild freedom in the divine speeches. The revelry of the oxen and donkeys, who laughed at human pretences at control (39:5-12), proves premature, as they are subjected to Job's rule.

Fertility is rife, it seems, for Job also has “seven sons and three daughters”³⁴ – 10 children to replace those lost in the prologue. This seems scandalous. Any of the bereaved will tell you of the irreducible irreplaceability of their beloved. The text's blithely proposed solution of replacements may seem an outrage and a mockery. Job's wife apparently plays no part in the birthing or naming of these children. The text seemed to banish her for blasphemy in the prologue, and grants her no restoration here.³⁵ It is Job who names his daughters: Dove, Cinnamon, and Eye-Liner,³⁶ the most beautiful women in the land (42:14-15). Beneath the

²⁸ Anderson calls it a “wry touch” that Yahweh is depicted “like any thief who has been found out.” Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: IVP Press, 1976), 293.

²⁹ J. Gerald Janzen, *Job, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 267.

³⁰ According to this view, pious scribes could not countenance writing “curse” alongside the name of God, and so euphemistically replaced it with “bless.” This view is countered by Tod Linafelt, “The Undecidability of בָּרַךְ in the Prologue To Job and Beyond,” *Biblical Interpretation* 4.2 (1996): 159–62.

³¹ Linafelt, “Undecidability,” 168, 169.

³² Pypers, “Reader in Pain,” 118.

³³ Jeremy Schipper, “Healing and Silence in the Epilogue of Job,” *Word & World* 30.1 (2010): 16–22; Guillaume and Schunck, “Divine Folly,” 457–58.

³⁴ The Hebrew for “seven” here is the unique form שִׁבְעֵנָה. Some have taken this as a dual, i.e. “fourteen.” However, given that the number of the daughters is not doubled, this is unlikely.

³⁵ On Job's wife, see F. Rachel Magdalene, “Job's Wife as Hero: A Feminist-Forensic Reading of the Book of Job,” *Biblical Interpretation* 14.3 (2006): 209–58; Samuel E. Balentine, *Have You Considered My Servant Job? Understanding the Biblical Archetype of Patience*, Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 77–110.

³⁶ יַמְיָמָה, “Dove,” is a hapax here, apparently from the Arabic cognate *yamāmatun* (BDB; KB). קִצְיֵעָה, “Cinnamon,” or “Cassia” appears as a fragrance alongside “myrrh and aloes” (מֵר וְאֵלוֹת) in Ps 45:9. קֶרֶן הַפֹּךְ, “Eye-Liner,”

flighty, perfumed, painted exterior, there may be something faintly illicit here.³⁷ The suspicion of cosmetics runs deep in the Hebrew Bible:³⁸ cinnamon scents the strange woman's bed (Prov 7:17);³⁹ eyeliner enlarges the adulteress's eyes (Jer 4:30; cf. 2 Kgs 9:30).

Despite the mention of his daughters' naming, and the prayer for his friends, Job is not the subject of any direct *speech* in the epilogue. This after, for chapter upon chapter, he has laid bare his anguish in verbal tempests to match Yahweh's own. The epilogue dissolves him into silence. This may be troubling.⁴⁰ Curtains close without warning; a voice-over chimes out the ending; the protagonist is denied his final soliloquy. We might find here the victim of injustice muted after the superficial redress of balances. We might see the survivor of trauma refused the essential space for remembrance, memorialisation, and testimony. The Jewish storyteller and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel is disturbed by this:

“I was offended by his surrender in the text. Job's resignation as man was an insult to man. He should not have given in so easily. He should have continued to protest, to refuse the handouts. He should have said to God: Very well, I forgive You... But what about my dead children, do they forgive You?... Only he did not. He agreed to go back to living as before.”⁴¹

But there is a strange tension here, for right at the point when the text renders Job mute, Yahweh declares his words right (נבונה;⁴² 42:7, 8). Conversely, his friends, the careful expounders of Israelite theology, have spoken wrongly. How can this be? Job railed against God. In face of the unqualified power of the divine warrior, he refused submission, protested injustice, demanded vindication. In pronouncing his words right, Yahweh perhaps vindicates not only Job, but Job's protest.⁴³ And, I suggest, this might vindicate readerly protest too. It validates a hermeneutic which takes up Job's cause now that he himself is silent, which looks beyond the epilogue's exterior. Through this hermeneutic, we have read the epilogue grappling with complexity, resisting unsatisfactory worldviews, and protesting against injustice. We have been left with disturbing implications about Job's God, Job's restoration, and Job's speech.

literally translates as “horn of antimony.” Antimony was a black mineral, kept in a horn, and combined with soot to make kohl for the eyes.

³⁷ Pippin, “Job 42:1–6, 10–17,” 302.

³⁸ Laura Quick, *Dress, Adornment, and the Body in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 151–80. Quick notes that (excluding these verses), “the biblical references to eye painting are always negative” (159).

³⁹ The word for “cinnamon” in Prov 7:17a is קנמון. This term is more common than the קציעה of Job 42:14, but probably refers to a very similar substance. See Benjamin James Noonan, “Foreign Loanwords and Kulturwörter in Northwest Semitic (1400–600 B.C.E.): Linguistic and Cultural Contact in Light of Terminology for Realia” (PhD, Hebrew Union College, 2012), 152–55.

⁴⁰ Terrence W. Tilley, “God and the Silencing Job,” *Modern Theology* 5.3 (1989): 257–70.

⁴¹ Elie Wiesel, “Job: Our Contemporary,” in *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 234. Cf. Carroll, “Postscript to Job,” 165–66.

⁴² נבונה is a niph'al participle of כון “to establish”; thus “an established thing,” sometimes designating what is true and proper. It indicates what is right in Exod 8:22, is coupled with אמת “truth” in Deut 13:15 [Eng 13:14], 17:4, and is absent from the mouths of the wicked in Ps 5:10 [Eng 5:9]. See further Eric Ortlund, “How Did Job Speak Rightly about God?,” *Themelios* 43.3 (2018): 353.

⁴³ For alternative interpretations of Yahweh's statement, see below.

Though profoundly troubling, this may yet provide theological resources. In reading with this hermeneutic, we become suspicious of the idolatry of simplistic textual representations which claim to capture God. In recognising and problematising God's alleged "folly" (נבלה) and "evil" (רעה), we push back against cosy images of the deity. The God of the epilogue restores Job, yet still retains darkness and ambiguity. This apparent disjunction in God's character, evident elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible too,⁴⁴ pushes the limits of human comprehension of the divine.⁴⁵ Though Israel's overall characterisation of her God resounds with justice and mercy, it is important to also take these ambiguities seriously.

Furthermore, this hermeneutic validates protest against perceived injustice. Like numerous lamenting psalmists,⁴⁶ Job speaks rightly (נבונה; 42:7-8) in his defiant outbursts against God. Similarly, we may speak rightly when we decry simplistic restitution for the traumatised, when we denounce the sexism which ignores wives, objectifies daughters. Job is muted in the epilogue, prompting us to listen harder, to listen into and beyond the statements offered in officially sanctioned texts. We might thereby hear, and learn to amplify, the voices of the traumatised and oppressed. In this reading, we have discovered Job's "unhappy ending." Unhappy endings may make for unhappy readers – but perhaps more genuine and just readers too.

Job's happy ending

I say "perhaps" because I think a genuine and "happy" ending might yet be possible. What if, instead of pressing forward the critical hermeneutic fostered by the preceding dialogues, we let ourselves instead be formed by the hermeneutical cues of the epilogue itself? The prose framework relieves the tension of the dialogue by presenting itself as a straightforward didactic narrative.⁴⁷ Its pedagogy functions through its simple style (straightforward language, repetition, perfect numbers, exaggeration, polar characters, alternating scenes, and so on). Job himself is a model for the reader, not of dissidence, but of piety – blameless and god-fearing (1:1, 8; 2:3); righteous in speech and refraining from sin (1:21-22; 2:10). The narrative constructs its implied author and reader around "the submerged metaphor of parent-child."⁴⁸ The implied reader, childlike, is expected to trustingly accept the claims of the text – its narrative thrust and proposed truths. The actual reader can, of course, rebel against such claims,

⁴⁴ Brueggemann discusses this disjunction as the tension between Israel's core testimony and countertestimony. The countertestimony witnesses to God's hiddenness, abusiveness, contradictory conduct, unreliability, and negativity. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 315–403.

⁴⁵ In Job, limits of human comprehension are emphasised (e.g. 11:7-8; 26:14; ch. 28). Often, this is tied to God's powers of both creation and destruction (e.g. chs. 36-37, 38).

⁴⁶ The connections between Job and the lament tradition run deep. Claus Westermann considered the book as a whole to be a dramatization of lament. Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis*, trans. Charles A. Muenchow (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

⁴⁷ Newsom, *Moral Imaginations*, 32-71; cf. Walter Moberly's discussion of the prologue as "parabolic." R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 257.

⁴⁸ Newsom, *Moral Imaginations*, 46.

but this is a wilful defiance, and not an inevitability. For Walter Moberly, to do so is to “misread.”⁴⁹

That the book ends this way this way aligns with Ricœur’s hermeneutical journey. Ricœur takes us from first naïvety to critical enquiry, and then “[b]eyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.”⁵⁰ Job, it seems, is responsive to this call, submitting in 42:6⁵¹ and praying in 42:7-10. Ricœur calls this final stage “second naïvety.”⁵² It is only accessible by first traversing the critical desert. And (even if newly naïve) it does not abandon criticism. Indeed “we seek to go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative.”⁵³ The epilogue’s stylistic reversion to didactic narrative encourages us into this hermeneutic.

In second naïvety, the reader does not necessarily assume that text and doctrine are factual accounts of reality. But she does trust that they convey a mythos, symbols to reveal a deeper truth. She thus re-enlivens what was neutralised by her previous critical hermeneutic: the existential significance of the criticised object.⁵⁴ Job’s epilogue conveys symbolic wholeness, a world right with God, which the reader is invited to inhabit. The reader is offered stability and unity against the fractious and dissonant world that might otherwise engulf her. As Carol Newsom put it, she finds satisfaction for her “desire for a world that can be experienced as supremely coherent, a world of utterly unbreachable wholeness.”⁵⁵

Ricœur described the hermeneutics of second naïvety as a wager: “I wager that I shall have a better understanding of man [*sic.*] and ... of all beings if I follow the indication of symbolic thought.”⁵⁶ The value of this bet is verified when the world is consequently “saturat[ed]... with intelligibility.”⁵⁷ In Ricœur’s hermeneutical circle, the trusting wager leads to reflective discourse, which then validates the trusting wager.⁵⁸ In the prologue, God had placed a wager on Job, that he would continue to fear God when incoherence was cast on his universe. In the epilogue, Job places a wager on God, that in fearing God, in submitting to the symbolic logic of his religious world, the cosmos would be rendered coherent once more. When

⁴⁹ Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 257–58.

⁵⁰ Ricœur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 349.

⁵¹ In this article, I assume the conventional interpretation of 42:6, namely that it amounts to Job’s submission to God. However, the Hebrew is ambiguous (see, e.g., Thomas 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., *Abhandlungen Zur Theologie Des Alten Und Neuen Testaments* [Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2007], 217–29). It is possible to see a double meaning here, anticipating the double meanings I find in the epilogue, with evidence to suggest that Job is not submitting in 42:6, but protesting. See Balentine, *My Servant Job*, 511-513; John Briggs Curtis, “On Job’s Response to Yahweh,” *JBL* 98.4 (1979): 497-511.

⁵² Walter Moberly has suggested that second naïvety is “*the* key factor that enables a renewed Christian confidence in reading and appropriating Israel’s pre-Christian scriptures as Christian scripture” (*italics original*). R. W. L. Moberly, “Theological Interpretation, Second Naïveté, and the Rediscovery of the Old Testament,” *Anglican Theological Review* 99.4 (2017): 661.

⁵³ Ricœur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 350. Cf. 351 “we can, we modern men [*sic.*], aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism.”

⁵⁴ Cf. Moberly, “Theological Interpretation,” 656.

⁵⁵ Newsom, *Moral Imaginations*, 53.

⁵⁶ Ricœur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 355.

⁵⁷ Ricœur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 355.

⁵⁸ Or, put another way, “We must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand.” Ricœur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 351.

the reader views the epilogue with second naïvety, she submits to this logic too, and can make new sense of Job's God, restoration, and speech.

How, then, might she explain the “outrage” (נבלה) and “evil” (רעה) ascribed to *Job's God*? She might, with Walter Moberly, read with the narrative thrust. The prose framework does not try to interrogate God's character (but rather Job's character), and neither should the reader.⁵⁹ Furthermore, crucially, God does *not* commit an outrage, despite the suggestion he might (42:8). The possibility never translates to actuality. What, then, of the “evil” (רעה), which God explicitly brings (42:11)? The morally-charged translation here is unhelpful. רעה can refer to a “disaster” without moral overtones (or even with righteous justification; e.g. 1 Kgs 9:9; Isa 31:2; Jer 6:19, 19:15). Ascription of harm to the deity affirms his ultimate power (cf. Isa 45:7), and can provide a pathway to restitution: the one who brings disaster can correlatively end disaster. In his pious prologue trust, Job affirms God's רעה. Without sinning with his lips, he asks his wife “Should we receive good from God, and not receive evil (רע)?” To limit God's action to only side is to speak a “folly,” like “an outrageous woman” (באחת הנבלות; 2:10). Though God's giving is tempered by his taking, his name is nonetheless blessed (1:21).

What's more, the trajectory of divine action does not stop with רעה, but moves to *Job's restoration*. There are theological implications to Job's “U-shaped plot,”⁶⁰ where divine favour triumphs over divine harm. In broader canonical context, this plotline is repeatedly affirmed. Throughout the history of interpretation, exegetes have found God's providence, mercy, and justice in the epilogue.⁶¹ Such features are explicit in early transmissions of the text, such as 11QTgJob, which adds that “God turned to Job in mercy” (ותב אלהא לאיוב ברחמין), and the Septuagint, which demonstrate Job's ultimate vindication through a note on his resurrection.⁶² For John Calvin, though God's threat of נבלה may “seem verve strange... terrible & fierce,”⁶³ the epilogue is ultimately intended to show readers his mercy,⁶⁴ with Job's restoration standing as “a memorial of [God's] gracious goodnes.”⁶⁵

Indeed, Job's reconstituted world is one of coherence and fullness. With rhetorical harmony and balance, its language and plot proceed undisturbed, through straightforward narrative and *wayyiqtol* forms. The depictions of livestock (42:12), children (42:13), and old age (42:16) offer superabundant life, numerically expressed through the play (indeed the doubling) of the perfect numbers seven and three. The repeated semiotics of gift-giving (42:10, 11, 15) suggests bounty and generosity. A trusting hermeneutic spills into the textual gaps,

⁵⁹ Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 258–60.

⁶⁰ This plotline has given some scholars stimulus to view Job as a comedy. Katherine Southwood, *Job's Body and the Dramatised Comedy of Moralising*, Routledge Studies in the Biblical World (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 10; J. William Whedbee, “The Comedy of Job,” *Semeia* 7 (1977): 6.

⁶¹ Kenneth Ngwa notes that these features are central in, e.g., early rabbinic and later Medieval interpretation. Kenneth Numfor Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the “Happy” Ending in Job 42:7-17* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 44–45, 70–71.

⁶² After v.17, LXX adds “And it is written that he shall rise again with the ones whom the Lord shall raise up” (γέγραπται δὲ αὐτὸν πάλιν ἀναστήσεσθαι μεθ’ ὧν ὁ κύριος ἀνίστησιν). Resurrection becomes an important part of later theological interpretation of the text.

⁶³ Jean Calvin, *Sermons of Maister Iohn Caluin, Vpon the Booke of Iob*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, [Printed by Thomas Dawson for George Byshop and] Thomas VVoodcocke, 1584), 747.

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Vpon the Booke of Job*. See especially the opening of the sermon (p. 746), and its ending (pp. 750–51).

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Vpon the Booke of Job*, 749.

allowing us to imagine Job with restored health and healthy marriage.⁶⁶ And, as though quelling unease about possible disasters to come, the note on Job's death resolves Job into a paradigm of a full life well-lived (42:16).

What's more, Job is active in the unfolding of his fate. He decides against a world of trauma, to participate in a world of wholeness.⁶⁷ As Martin Copenhaver notes, "After all that Job has been through, the 'happy ending' to this story begins to look more like an extraordinary act of faith."⁶⁸ Job's status is affirmed, Moses-like, as God's "servant" (עַבְדִּי; 42:7-8), faithful in obedience. He prays for his friends' restoration, before he has any inkling of his own (42:7-8), trusting that sacrifice will be effective for them, while it was not for him (1:5). He sets aside their animosity – their worthless physics and windy words (13:4; 16:3) – to pardon them with God.⁶⁹ While still grieving, Job returns to his house, accepting comfort and consolation (42:11). He reintegrates himself into society, symbolically resuming normal life through communal eating. From his position of poverty, and presumably over many years, he tends and breeds his livestock (42:12), trusting their increase to a pastoral fertility beyond human control, ever aware of the precarity induced by natural disasters and marauding bands (1:13-17).

And Job decides to have a family again (42:13).⁷⁰ It is a brave thing to bring children into a world experienced as hostile and broken. Yet he permits the painstaking pattern of pregnancy-birth-childrearing not once but ten times. Where once he wished himself as a stillborn (3:2-26; 10:18-19), he now participates in Israel's symbolic structures of death transcendence, living on through generations of progeny (42:17).⁷¹ And against androcentric biblical tradition, Job celebrates the feminine. Instead of unidentified, unrecognised women; daughters acknowledged and named by their father (42:14). Instead of patrilineal property rights; inheritance for these daughters (42:15).⁷² Perhaps we see here a counter-cultural egalitarianism, an active working to create a more just world.⁷³

In all this, *Job's speech* contains no complaint and protest (in contrast to the dialogues), limited to his reported prayer and naming (42:7-10, 14). Indeed, he has denounced his former

⁶⁶ The Testament of Job, for example, details Job's physical restoration (see Schipper, "Healing and Silence," 18). Copenhaver's positive hermeneutic leads him to assert (despite textual silence) that "The epilogue tells us that Job reunites with his wife." Martin B. Copenhaver, "Risking a Happy Ending," *The Christian Century*, 111.28 (1994): 923.

⁶⁷ Of course, this may not be possible for many survivors of trauma. For Dan Mathewson, Job's traumatic experiences so profoundly disrupt the symbolic wholeness of the prologue that there is no possibility of a reintegration of experience or "resymbolisation" in the epilogue. Mathewson, *Death and Survival*, 166–70.

⁶⁸ Copenhaver, "Risking a Happy Ending," 923.

⁶⁹ He thus becomes in Christian tradition a forerunner to Christ's ultimate intercession. See Balentine, "My Servant Job," 503–7.

⁷⁰ According to an alternative stream of interpretation, Job's first set of children did not completely perish. They were taken captive by Satan and are released here (Malbim; see Gerald Aranoff, "Malbim on Job Chapter 42: The Happy Ending," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39.4 [2011]); or they died and are resurrected here (see Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* [New York; Oxford University Press, 1991], 32; 211–12 [notes 57-58]); or they died and await Job in the future life (Gregory the Great; Aquinas; see Ngwa, "Happy" *Ending*, 57, 66).

⁷¹ Williamson argues that this and other strategies of death transcendence characterise the book of Proverbs. Robert Williamson, "'In the Way of Righteousness Is Life': Symbolic Death Transcendence in Proverbs 10–29," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38.3 (2014): 363–82.

⁷² Note the difference here from the prologue, where the sons alone had houses (1:4). The only comparable biblical story is that of Zelophehad's daughters (Num 27), in which the daughters are given an inheritance, but only because there are no sons.

⁷³ Karl G. Wilcox, "Job, His Daughters and His Wife," *JSOT* 42.3 (2018): 303–15.

words: “I have obscured counsel without knowledge... uttered what I did not understand” (42:3). But God affirms the contrary: Job “spoke about me rightly” (דברתי אלי נכונה; 42:7-8) – how can this be? There is little consensus here. Perhaps Job is pardoned because he spoke from anguish (Baba Bathra 16a, Rashi),⁷⁴ or because his charges against God were less than they seemed (Ambrose, Gregory the Great),⁷⁵ or because his words – though “excessive and outrageous” – lay upon “good case” in renouncing strict retributive dogma (Calvin).⁷⁶ Or perhaps nuances in the Hebrew should be our guide. The usual rendering of the phrase דבר אל is not “speak about,” but “speak to.”⁷⁷ Thus, Job may be commended for bringing his anguish directly to God.⁷⁸ And this affirmation might implicitly affirm the “rightness” of a wager placed on Yahweh.

Or perhaps the words which are “right” are precisely those which denounced Job’s previous words (Chrysostom, Maimonides).⁷⁹ Indeed the literary proximity of Job’s self-denunciation (42:2-6) and Yahweh’s affirmation (42:7-8) might suggest as much. For Ricœur, it is precisely in these words, “In [Job’s] unknowing,” that he “has ‘spoken rightly’ of God.”⁸⁰ In the divine speeches, he has experienced the limits of his knowledge, being thrown into the chaotic expanse of cosmos, into “waste and desolation” (38:27), into unreason. And Job has no desire, it seems, to return to that “desert of criticism.” In second naïvety will he continue. The reader too may turn from critical deconstruction, instead accepting and inhabiting the epilogue’s vision of fulsome restoration.

An inconclusive conclusion

Does Job have a happy ending? Read in a critical frame: no. Read in second naïvety: yes. In the one reading, guided by the hermeneutic inculcated in the dialogues, we protest and resist, fracturing superficiality, calling for justice. In the other, formed by the hermeneutical cues of the epilogue itself, we wager on the coherence of the symbolic world, trusting we will ultimately find it whole and just. These readings, which both have warrant in the textual details, seem mutually exclusive. It is not possible to affirm both simultaneously or to harmonise them together. Like in the famous rabbit/duck illusion (fig. 1), we can see both options, but not at the same time.⁸¹ Our minds can only oscillate between them.

The broader canonical and theological context might help adjudicate. The dominant testimony of the Bible – both Hebrew Bible and New Testament – is that God is good and just.

⁷⁴ See Ngwa, “Happy” Ending, 61.

⁷⁵ See Will Kynes, “The Trials of Job: Relitigating Job’s ‘Good Case’ in Christian Interpretation,” *SJT* 66.2 (2013): 181–83, 187.

⁷⁶ Kynes, “The Trials of Job,” 184.

⁷⁷ This expression is very common, and only means “speak about” in rare instances (e.g., 1 Sam 3:12; Isa 16:13; Jer 27:13; 40:2,16; 50:1; 51:12).

⁷⁸ So Elaine A. Phillips, “Speaking Truthfully: Job’s Friends and Job,” *BBR* 18.1 (2008): 31–43.

⁷⁹ See Ngwa, “Happy” Ending, 55, 53–64. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Vol. 2, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 493. The problem with this approach, though, is that it does not explain why Job’s friends’ words are deemed not “right.”

⁸⁰ Ricœur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 320.

⁸¹ This analogy is used by Rimmon in here discussion of literary ambiguity as a “conjunction of exclusive disjuncts.” Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity*, ix–xi.

The overall trajectory of its storyline is towards restoration and salvation.⁸² As a whole, it constructs readers who trust in the goodness of the world it invites them to inhabit. This may suggest a theological preference for second naïvety.

And yet, we cannot dispense with the critical hermeneutic entirely. Indeed, relentless questioning may be unavoidable for individuals post-trauma, communities post-holocaust.⁸³ Equally, Israel's characterisation of her life and God cannot be resolved into neat positivity.⁸⁴ Its vision of wholeness is insistently punctuated by cries of brokenness. Dissenting voices sound in the book of Job,⁸⁵ in the broader canon, and in the ongoing theological tradition.⁸⁶ Hermeneutics and theology are enriched by living and thinking within this restless dialectic tension. Both sides remain active for Ricœur: "Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience."⁸⁷

And this, I think, is part of the brilliance of the book of Job: the conclusion is ultimately inconclusive. Canonically-minded readers may rest on an ultimate foundation of trust, but cannot ignore the submerged voices crying for justice. As the worlds of interpretive communities shift, are ruptured by traumas, and move towards healing, Job's epilogue may speak differently, providing resources for protest or restoration. The "ever after" is not forever, for – in this world – criticism and naïvety both play their part. Readers are forced into the breach between worlds broken and unbreachably whole, compelled to give Job, once again, its ever after.

⁸² Indeed, canon and theology up new imaginative possibilities, such as the figurations of Job as the redeemed Israel (e.g. in rabbinic interpretation) or church (e.g. in Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Gregory). See Ngwa, "Happy" Ending, 44–46, 50–58.

⁸³ The literature on post-holocaust readings of Job is vast. See, e.g., Dan Mathewson, "Between Testimony and Interpretation: The Book of Job in Post-Holocaust, Jewish Theological Reflection," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41.2 (2008): 17–39; David C. Tollerton, "Reading Job as Theological Disruption for a Post-Holocaust World," *JTI* 3.2 (2009): 197–212; Isabel Wollaston, "Post-Holocaust Jewish Interpretations of Job," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb et al., Oxford Handbooks in Religion and Theology (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 488–500.

⁸⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*.

⁸⁵ Cf. Newsom's interpretation of Job as dialogic and unfinalisable. Newsom, *Moral Imaginations*.

⁸⁶ The plurality of dialoguing voices in canon and tradition is particularly stressed in Jewish theology. See, e.g., Marvin A Sweeney, "Jewish Biblical Theology: An Ongoing Dialogue," *Interpretation* 70.3 (2016): 314–25.

⁸⁷ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 27.

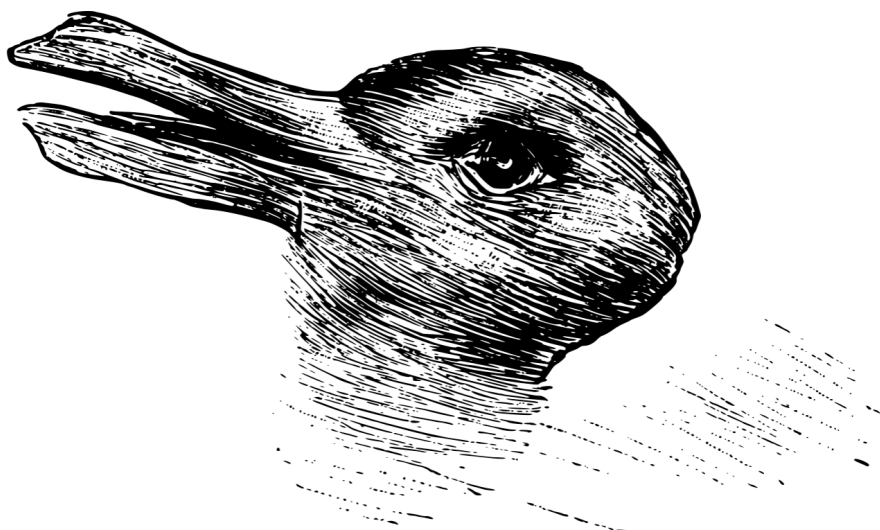


Fig 1. What animal do you see: a rabbit or a duck?⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Image in the public domain. This illusion first appeared in the German magazine *Fliegende Blätter*, 23 Oct 1892 (<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/fb97/0147>), and was discussed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1958), 194-95.