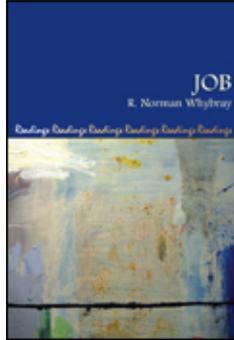


○ **REVIEW OF NORMAN WHYBRAY, *JOB. READINGS: A NEW BIBLICAL COMMENTARY***
(SHEFFIELD: SHEFFIELD PHOENIX PRESS, 2008)

Peter Miscall, Independent scholar



This is a reprinting of the original 1998 commentary without editing. Whybray has produced a very readable commentary that has a commendable balance between his reading of a given section or of the whole book and his discussion of the details and problems – textual, linguistic and literary – that beset any interpreter of Job. He views the book as the product of one author with some slight subsequent editing. He lays this out in his introduction particularly in relation to the integrity of the Prologue and Epilogue, the poem on Wisdom in chapter 28, the Elihu speeches in chapters 32–37 and Yahweh’s speeches to Job in 38–41 with Job’s first response in 40:3–5. But once proposed and defended in his introduction, Whybray does not then belabour the point in his commentary on the sections in question.

On these issues of literary integrity and on the many problems of interpretation involving individual words, phrases and passages, whether due to textual or grammatical difficulties, Whybray briefly notes and discusses other options before proposing his own approach and he freely acknowledges the tentative nature of his readings. For example, the Hebrew text of 16:18–22 is notoriously troubled and contemporary translations reveal a variety of solutions. Before presenting his reading, he notes ‘There can be no certainty about such passages’ (pp 90–91). Whybray makes frequent use of qualifiers such as ‘may,’ ‘perhaps’ and such to introduce his suggested reading of a troubled passage.

He has an extensive bibliography of other works on Job that he has consulted and refers to, but he does not include footnotes in his book. For him the format of the Sheffield Phoenix Readings requires a flowing commentary without the distraction of constant footnotes on details and secondary literature. Whybray’s reader can come away from the commentary with a solid grasp of the book of Job, of many of the problems that confront any interpreter and of Whybray’s own particular take on the book and its manifold challenges.

He regards Job as a narrative beginning with the prologue: the wager in heaven, the deleterious effects on Job and Job’s acquiescent response. ‘Yahweh gives and Yahweh takes; blessed be

Yahweh's name' (1.21). The narrative then plays out in the dialogues between Job and his friends – who are perhaps better termed opponents as we move through the cycle of speeches – including Elihu and in Yahweh's speeches from the whirlwind and it concludes with the epilogue. Whybray is clear that the dialogues are more like monologues with minimal reference to and interaction with the preceding speeches of the others. Job and his friends debate at some length how God is to be spoken of and thought of.

For Whybray the question of the proper concept of God is at the heart of the book. The friends maintain, often through monotonous repetition, the traditional view of a just God who inevitably will reward the righteous and punish the sinner. They reject Job's charge against God that he is unjust in his brutal treatment of Job since Job has committed no sin or sins commensurate with the attacks on his family, property and own body. For Job this is both an impersonal – 'God is unjust' – and personal – 'You, O God!, are unjust' – accusation. As the debate heats up the 'friends' turn the theological tables and accuse Job of sin even if its precise nature is unknown: if you're suffering then you must have sinned. Job never even hints at any possibility of his own sin as an explanation for his horrible situation.

Legal metaphors and imagery suffuse the debate: charge and countercharge, justice and injustice and Job's continual insistence on his innocence of any sin/crime. Central to any discussion of Job is Job's demand that he be given the opportunity to confront God as in a law court and to argue the case with him. Job is certain that he would win any such case if it were conducted fairly but he is just as certain that God would ultimately win by physically crushing Job: like human potentates God will not abide any challenge to his power.

After his Introduction Whybray's commentary proceeds chapter-by-chapter and then by verse or group of verses within each chapter. His book is self-contained and the presentation is easy to follow. His frequent references to literature, both biblical and non-biblical, beyond Job are clear and he cites significant parallels and doesn't leave it to his reader to track them down. His actual commentary briefly rehearses the content of the Joban text and then adds to this by noting problems, nuances and connotations that could easily be missed in reading Job. Whybray's treatment of the text and of other works is even-handed; even though he has his own interpretations of what the book of Job and each of its parts are about, he only presents it at relevant and occasional points. He does not force his own understanding on a problematic passage so that it will accord with his overall reading. Even though he defends authorial authenticity (see p. 14) he sees no need to harmonise Job and to make every part fit a predefined mold.

For Whybray, as for many but not all commentators, Yahweh's speeches in chapters 38–41 with Job's responses in 40:3–5 and 42:1–6 are the key to the book's ultimate view. As often noted, in his speeches God challenges Job's right to question him about anything since he has little or no comprehension of the divine power of creation and continuing providence. This is even less of a reply, or of a dialogue, than with the dialogues between Job and his friends. Yahweh not only says nothing about Job's specific charges and demands, he hardly mentions humans and the human sphere at all. He speaks at length about the creation of the world and of the creatures in it, both the mighty and the puny. Except for the war horse in 39:19–25 the animals are beyond the human realm dwelling in the seas, desert and mountain heights. This is an impressive manifesto of divine creative power and of divine care for creatures but a manifesto that says nothing about this care being just or unjust or being determined by the creatures' behaviour. And that most significantly says nothing about God's concern or care for humans.

Whybray notes the inherent irony here and in the Wisdom poem in chapter 28 that the poet reveals an extensive grasp of distant or deep regions and of strange, wild creatures that he portrays as beyond human comprehension. He could have noted that modern science, particularly geology and biology in this context, has produced even more far-reaching comprehension of the natural world that challenges this ancient, traditional claim that that world, as God's creation, is beyond our understanding.

In the epilogue Yahweh takes the friends to task for not having spoken rightly of him and commends Job for having spoken rightly. Whybray maintains that Job, in his replies, repents of or recants his accusations against God once he is faced with the manifestations of divine power. He now realises, that is, sees with an inward eye (p. 20), that his previous talk against God and the friends, was irreverent and irrelevant. Yahweh judges the friends and Job on the basis of their speech, on the basis of their concepts of God. As already mentioned, for Whybray this is the central issue of the book. In a sense both the friends and Job are wrong in that they assume they know who God is and especially how he acts in the world. Job, however, according to Whybray, never denied Yahweh's freedom to act, justly or unjustly, and maintained a trust in him.

The narrator openly states, in 42:11, that Yahweh did bring evil upon Job, but the treatment of Job or of any human is not the issue at stake. What is at stake is the right to question the divine will. Humans are in no position to make any confident pronouncements about God and his inscrutable ways, just or unjust; Whybray notes how close this is to Qoheleth. Job accepts this limitation in humility and the friends don't; therefore Job has to intercede for them in the prologue (see pp 21–22 and 191–92). Whybray closes his commentary on this note and so do I in my review.