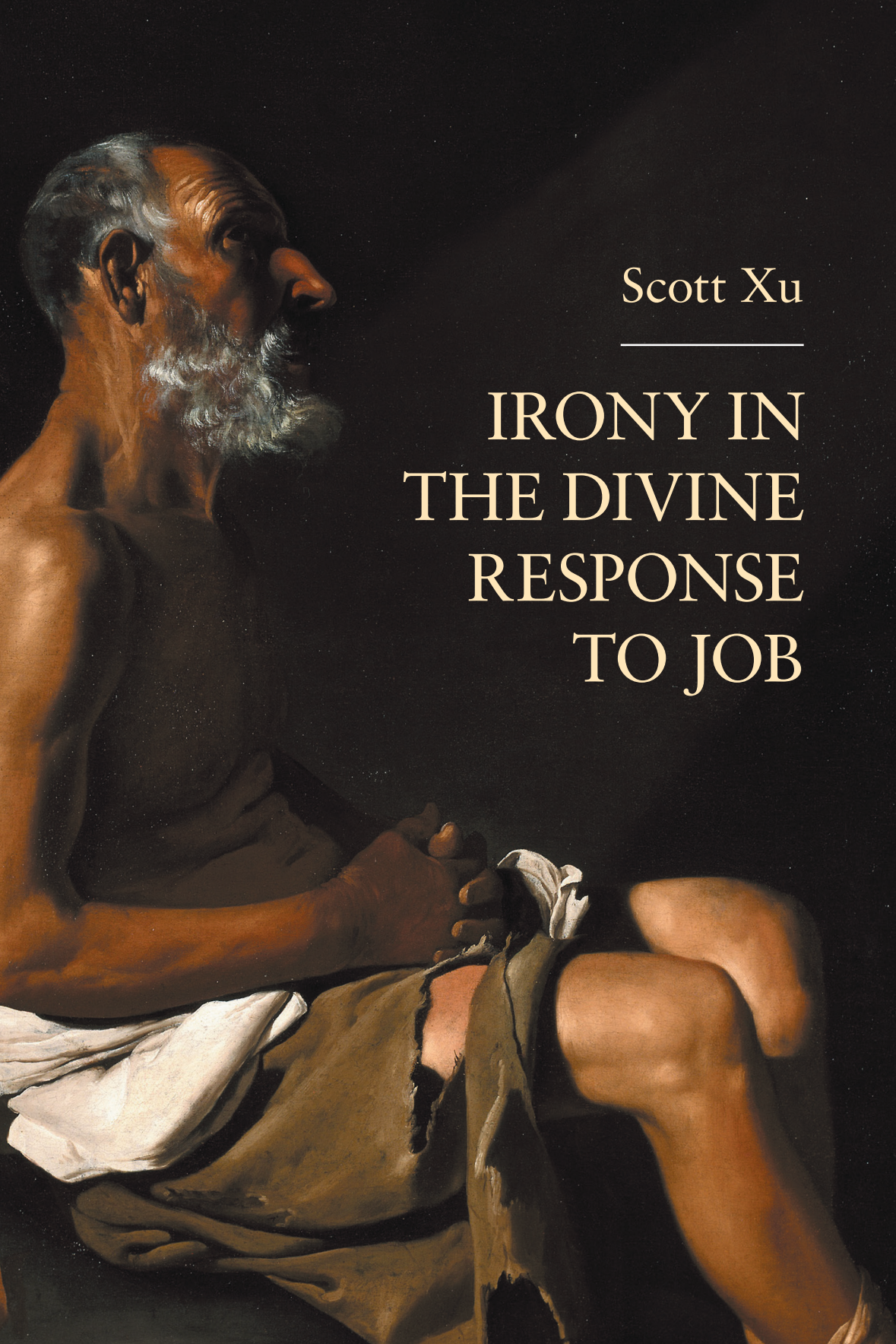




Scott Xu

IRONY IN
THE DIVINE
RESPONSE
TO JOB

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Hebrew Bible Monographs, 114

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Scott Xu



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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> (ed. David Noel Freedman; 6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992)
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
AJSL	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures</i>
ANE	Ancient Near East/Eastern
BCE	Before the Common Era
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAT	Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CE	Common Era
<i>CurTM</i>	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
HBS	History of Biblical Studies
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
ISBL	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature
JB	Jerusalem Bible
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
MT	Masoretic Text
NAS	New American Standard
NCB	New Century Bible
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary

NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTG	Old Testament Guides
OTL	Old Testament Library
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
<i>Sound</i>	<i>Soundings</i>
THOTC	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>USQR</i>	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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This monograph began as doctoral research at the Australian College of Theology. Through the course of my PhD candidature, I have always said that for a person like me, whose life journey resembles a perpetual spring, to write a volume on the book of Job is itself ironic. Now that the award has been attained, my sense of irony and gratitude is even more overwhelming. Since I have already written much on irony in this book, it is to my gratitude that I will give expression here.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the bewildering and ever-expanding cosmos of Joban studies, the study of irony has been quietly but definitely gaining momentum. Riding on the ascendance of the holistic literary approach in biblical studies and the attention given to irony by mainstream literary criticism of the last century (e.g. the New Criticism), the study of irony in the book of Job has developed from the moderate proposal of MacKenzie (1959),¹ which he called ‘old interpretations supported by new arguments’, through the bold attempts made by Williams, Pixley and Robertson in the 1970s,² via the insights of Good, Crenshaw, Hoffman, Zuckerman, Dell and Whedbee in the 1980s and 1990s,³ into

1. Roderick A.F. MacKenzie, ‘Purpose of the Yahweh Speeches in the Book of Job’, *BibInt* 40 (1959), pp. 435-45.

2. James Williams, “‘You have not spoken truth of me.’” Mystery and Irony in Job’, *ZAW* 83 (1971), pp. 231-55; ‘Comedy, Irony, Intercession: A Few Notes in Response’, *Semeia* 7 (1977), pp. 135-45; ‘Deciphering the Unspoken: The Theophany of Job’, *HUCA* 49 (1978), pp. 59-72.

Jorge V. Pixley, ‘La ironia, antesala de la teología de la liberación: El caso de Job’, *Cuadernos de Teología* 3 (1973), pp. 57-80.

David Robertson, ‘The Book of Job: A Literary Study’, *Sound* 56 (1973), pp. 446-69; *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic* (OTG; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

3. Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond, 1981); *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); ‘The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job’, in Leo G. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin (eds.), *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), pp. 50-69.

James L. Crenshaw, ‘Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel’, *ZAW* 83 (1970), pp. 180-95; *Old Testament Wisdom: an Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); ‘Theodicy’, in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *ABD*, VI (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 444-47.

Yair Hoffman, ‘The Relation between the Prologue and the Speech-cycles in Job: A Reconsideration’, *VT* 31 (1981), pp. 160-70; ‘Irony in the Book of Job’, *Immanuel* 17 (1983), pp. 7-21; *A Blemished Perfection: The Book of Job in Context* (JSOTSup, 213; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Katharine J. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (BZAW, 197; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991); *Job: Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (Phoenix Guides to the Old Testa-

the postmodern, multifocal endeavours of Newsom, Greenstein, Geeraerts, Ingram and the like in the twenty-first century.⁴

In this book, I wish to make a contribution to this study by means of a thorough investigation and analysis of the different levels and aspects of irony in Job, particularly in its closing chapters (Job 38–42), which can be called the divine response to Job. I will examine if and how the use of irony therein is designed to respond to the key issue in Job that has plagued readers and scholars over the ages, namely the issue of innocent suffering.

Not everyone will agree that this is the main issue in Job, and many alternatives have been proposed. However, for my argument to proceed with direction and focus, it is necessary to settle on one issue rather than divide attention between multiple issues. Hence, I will spend the first chapter identifying what I view as the book's main issue among other proposals and possibilities. My conclusion is that the issue of innocent suffering is the best option, as it is not only the background and occasion against which the book's drama unfolds, but is also *the* issue that ties all the other issues together and gives them existential and philosophical depth.

Then, in the second chapter, I will provide a critical survey of studies on irony in Job and see how they fare in addressing this main issue. Writers on closely related literary features such as comedy and parody will also be included and examined. The purpose of this survey is to indicate the critical gaps and show the need for the present study.

The third chapter is on methodology. There I will offer some preliminary definitions before proffering a theoretical framework for the analysis of irony, and most of my presuppositions will be revealed and argued for in this chapter. The system of Norman Knox will be largely adhered to, with supplements from other literary theorists like Douglas Muecke, Wayne Booth and Linda Hutcheon,⁵ along with some modifications of my own.

ment, 14; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013); Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes (eds.), *Reading Job Intertextually* (LHBOTS, 574; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

J. William Whedbee, 'The Comedy of Job', *Semeia* 7 (1977), pp. 1-39; *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

4. Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Edward L. Greenstein, 'Parody as a Challenge to Tradition: The Use of Deuteronomy 32 in the Book of Job', in Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes (eds.), *Reading Job Intertextually* (LHBOTS, 574; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 66-78.

Dirk Geeraerts, 'Caught in a Web of Irony: Job and his Embarrassed God', in E.J. van Wolde (ed.), *Job 28: Cognition in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 37-55.

Virginia Ingram, 'The Book of Job as a Satire with Mention of Verbal Irony', *St Mark's Review* 239 (2017), pp. 51-62.

5. D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969); *Irony and the Ironic* (The Critical Idiom, 13; London: Methuen, 2nd edn, 1970; repr., 1982).

Discussions on modern developments of the concept of irony will be inevitable at various points but will be limited to what will provide clarity and precision to my inquiry into the text of Job. In order to make the otherwise abstract theory somewhat digestible, I will illustrate these points from time to time with examples from Job and other biblical texts, thus acclimatizing the reader to my in-depth investigation of Job 38–42.

In the next two chapters, I will apply this methodology on the divine speeches (38.1–42.6) and the epilogue (42.7–17) respectively. I will seek to detect the ironies contained in these sections and analyse their various aspects and connotations within their literary contexts. The findings will serve as data for the critical examination in the final chapter, in which I will put the divine speeches and the epilogue together, correlate and synthesize the ironies I find in them, and relate them to the issue of innocent suffering in Job. Perplexing questions such as the following will be addressed along the way:

- What is the significance of the theophany in the whirlwind, and why does YHWH respond to Job in this way in the context of the debate?
- What is the message or messages of the divine speeches, and how are they relevant to Job's issue and the questions we have as readers?
- What do Job's two responses (40.4–5; 42.2–6) mean? What attitude do they convey? What do they tell us about the relevance and effectiveness of the divine speeches?
- After seemingly giving Job a dressing down, why does YHWH commend Job over his friends? In what way has Job spoken 'what is right' about God (42.7) in contrast to the friends?
- What is the significance of Job's intercession on behalf of his friends?
- What does Job's restoration tell us? Is it an anti-climax to the whole book? Does it not prove the Satan and the friends right after all, that no one fears God for any reason?
- How do the divine speeches and the epilogue contribute to the book as a whole, and how do they address the issue of innocent suffering in particular?
- Does the book of Job really *solve* the issue of innocent suffering?
- What do the ways in which YHWH responds to Job tell us about God?
- What is the author's attitude and view in all this?
- Does the divine response equate to the author's?

Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd edn, 1983).

Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985); 'The Complex Functions of Irony', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 16 (1992), pp. 219–34.

Is Job a sceptical or even a rebellious book?

Does the book of Job feature an amoral universe?

What exactly does the book of Job say about the doctrine of retribution?

How do we maintain faith in experiences of radical suffering?

How does the divine response to Job help us respond to the issues of the twenty-first century, particularly to the reality of inexplicable suffering?

An in-depth study of irony in the closing chapters of Job may not totally answer all these questions. In fact, it may inevitably raise some new issues as it attempts to solve some old ones. However, this book will hopefully offer an illuminating perspective on tackling these issues and even open up possibilities that have not been thought of or attempted hitherto. If it can contribute to our knowledge of God and to our living in this world of chaos and suffering, I will be satisfied.

As is inevitable, one cannot help bringing personal perspective and ideological bias into one's thinking and writing. I am happy to acknowledge my reformed evangelical Christian belief here, but I trust and pray that the discerning reader will receive this monograph by its analysis and argument alone.

1

THE ISSUE OF JOB: INNOCENT SUFFERING RECLAIMED

The Issue Defined

This book is concerned with the use of irony in the divine response to the issue presented in the book of Job, so it is necessary to first ask, ‘What is the main issue of the book?’ My claim is that the best answer is the issue of innocent suffering, namely why certain people suffer inexplicably or disproportionately, and how to account for and respond to this experience of humanity. It does not demand complete innocence or sinlessness on the part of the sufferer, but simply assumes a radical disproportion or lack of correlation between that person’s conduct and adverse experience. As the suffering of the innocent becomes an issue only when a presupposition of divine justice or a moral universe is in place, it becomes identical to the question of theodicy, namely the discussion or defence of God’s justice. Hence, theodicy and innocent suffering are usually seen as one and the same problem.

The book of Job is a classical treatise on this issue, as Matitiah Tsevat claims, ‘for the overwhelming majority of readers and commentators’, the suffering of the innocent ‘is, and always has been, the problem of the book (of Job)’.¹ For these readers and commentators, the present writer included, this book tells the tale of Job’s trial by inexplicable suffering, and all its arguments and proceedings revolve around this trial. Nevertheless, the fact that Tsevat needs to make this statement points to the disapproval this majority view has received in some quarters, and the alternative views that have been proffered. Hence, for my argument to proceed on firm ground, and for my later discussion on irony to have a justifiable focus, I have to briefly address some of these disagreements and alternatives.

1. Matitiah Tsevat, ‘The Meaning of the Book of Job’, in *Sitting with Job: Selected Studies on the Book of Job* (ed. Roy B. Zuck; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), pp. 189-218 (210) (my addition).

Arguments against This Issue

Most rejections of innocent suffering as the central issue of the book are based on the observation that the book does not provide a solution to this issue, and Andrew Steinmann presents a typical and comprehensive example of this kind of rejection. Steinmann's argument can be summarized in the following points: (1) If the book is about suffering, the prose frame of the book is only a utilitarian device to introduce the issue and provide closure; (2) the wisdom poem of ch. 28 would be either out of place or unimportant for it says nothing about the problem of suffering; (3) the divine speeches, especially the second one, add nothing to the problem of theodicy or suffering, which is why it is often excised by critical scholars; (4) the remaining parts of the book (3.1-26; 4.1-21.34; 29.1-31.41) that are unscathed from critical surgery can hardly justify 'Job's reputation as a masterpiece of literature that contributes in a unique way to the discussion of human suffering or theodicy'.² Hence, Steinmann argues that Job's suffering is merely a foil for a larger issue, which for Steinmann is about Job's struggle to maintain faith and integrity; and he proceeds to justify this approach through a structural analysis of the book.³

However, Steinmann's arguments can be refuted without too much difficulty. On point (1), the prose frame of Job can be a utilitarian device to introduce and provide closure for any other issue, including the one that Steinmann proposes. On point (2), if the problem of suffering is to be rejected as the issue because the wisdom poem says nothing about it, then the problem of faith and integrity does not fare much better. It is clear that the wisdom poem talks about the value and provenance of wisdom, but its relevance to faith and integrity is not clear until perhaps the last verse. However, judging from the text of 28.28 alone, hardly any human character in Job will deny this sapiential doctrine despite the intense debate up to this point. Then, why does this doctrine need to be stated? Hence, the relevance of this conclusion as well as the entire wisdom poem to the proposed issue

2. Andrew E. Steinmann, 'The Structure and Message of the Book of Job', *VT* 46 (1996), pp. 85-100 (86-89).

3. Steinmann's argument for a fourfold structuring of the book of Job is not without merit and insights, but as an argument for his proposed issue of faith and integrity it is hardly irrefutable. Nor can his quotes from Habel and Polzin really support his rejection of theodicy as the issue of Job, as one quote simply acknowledges the inadequacy of the legal metaphor in relation to understanding God and the other quote is just a counsel against critical subtraction. See Steinmann, 'Structure and Message of Job', p. 90. For the misunderstanding of what is subjective and what is objective in a structural approach, see Robert M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts* (ed. William A. Beardslee; Semeia Supplements; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 12. However, these are just vulnerabilities in Steinmann's own theory that should not concern this book.

of faith and integrity needs to be argued for as much as any other proposed issue, including the issue of innocent suffering.⁴ Before such arguments are made, the most we can say is that the wisdom poem seems to be pointing to the theological nature of the issue of the book. Without such arguments, the wisdom poem in and of itself does not favour one issue over another.

On point (3), the divine speeches say nothing directly about faith and integrity, and whatever issue one chooses to focus on, the relevance of the cosmology and zoology in the divine speeches to that particular issue would also be a point that needs to be argued for.⁵ One needs to demonstrate that the divine speeches are relevant to the issue of theodicy or suffering, as this book will endeavour to do; then this piece of the argument will dissipate. If the first three points do not stand as counter-arguments, then point (4) disappears as well. Besides, critical scholars have proposed textual surgeries of all kinds for the book of Job based on all sorts of reasons, and even if we focus on emendations based on Job's reputation for theodicy, Steinmann's version is hardly the only possibility.⁶ Hence, Steinmann's arguments against innocent suffering as the main issue of Job do not seem to be valid.

Alternative Issues Suggested

The scholars who refuse to accept theodicy as the issue of Job certainly do not do so for the sake of rejection only, but to clear a path for the alternative issues of their choice. The present book does not need to claim exclusivity for the issue of suffering. However, in order to demonstrate that this book can accommodate most alternative views, an overview of the main alternatives is called for.

For many, Job is not a book about theodicy but a book of protest. For example, Samuel Terrien has noted that many scholars, especially since the mid-eighteenth century, are disappointed that the divine speeches do not explain the mystery of providence, or solve the problem of evil philosophically, or publicly declare the innocence of God's servant. Hence, there was a trend among nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century commentators to see the book of Job as a humanist protest against the tyranny of a dead

4. Job 28.28 is very similar to the conclusion of Ecclesiastes (12.13), which is a book that is preoccupied with the reality of evil and suffering.

5. What Polzin calls the academic 'failure of nerve', which he uses to describe solving the problem of contradiction by subtraction of the text, may also be used to describe the tactic of changing the subject when a solution is hard to find. See Robert M. Polzin, 'The Framework of the Book of Job', *Int* 28 (1974), pp. 182-200 (182-83).

6. See, e.g., the differences between Fullerton, Sewall and Zuckerman in Chapter 2 of this book. See also Lindsay Wilson, *Job* (THOTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 12-13.

orthodoxy. Some went even further and condemned the *God* in Job as a cruel tyrant, more like a devil than a god!⁷

Terrien's own view of the purpose of Job is more positive than that, but he too says that 'the poet of Job did not attempt to solve the problem of evil nor did he propose a vindication of God's justice'.⁸ The problem of suffering or divine justice is used by the poet, according to Terrien, only as the occasion or the pretext to develop a theological hamartiology and 'finally to affirm the meaning of a faith which is a response to holy love rather than to the threats or inducement of material favor'.⁹ Terrien's existential interpretation is echoed by Georg Fohrer who gives it a more ethical slant, as can be seen in the following quote.

Als Hauptthema ergab sich sowohl für die als Rahmenerzählung verwendete Hioblegende als auch für die Hiobdichtung selbst das Problem der menschlichen Existenz im Leide. Es geht in erster Linie nicht um die Fragen nach Ursprung, Grund und Berechtigung des Leidens, sondern die Frage, wie man sich in ihm verhalten soll. Das existentielle Problem ist die Frage nach dem rechten Verhalten im Leide.¹⁰

Fohrer's distinction between the 'frame narrative' (*Rahmenerzählung*) and the 'Job autobiography' (*Hiobdichtung*) gives a hint as to the strand of thought that elevates the creative genius of the poetic middle over the narrative frame, which is thought to be folklore borrowed by the poet, the real author of Job.¹¹ Historical-critical scholars who trace the genesis of this book to the dominance of the Deuteronomistic school often hold the same view, because for them it is obviously the Deuteronomistic school's deeply

7. Samuel Terrien, *Job* (CAT, 13; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1963), pp. 37, 45. Terrien points out that this latter view is apparently not what Job himself expressed or thought (Job 42.5).

8. Samuel Terrien, *Job: Poet of Existence* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), p. 21.

9. See Samuel Terrien, 'The Book of Job: Its Origin and Purpose', *USQR* 25 (1970), pp. 239-42 (242).

10. 'The main topic was the problem of human existence in suffering both for the hymn legend used as frame narrative and for the Job autobiography itself. It is not primarily about the question of the origin, reason and justification of suffering, but the question of how one should behave in it. The existential problem is the question of the right behavior in suffering.' See Georg Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob* (KAT, 16; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1963), p. 549. In this book, all English translations of materials in foreign language are mine unless otherwise stated.

11. Terrien also says that 'the poetic discourses are the *raison d'être* of the book, and the popular narrative that surrounds them is only the occasion of the poem', even though 'it was in all likelihood the story of Job's patience which enabled the poem of his impatience to survive'. See Terrien, *Job: Poet of Existence*, pp. 23-24; cf. Steinmann, 'Structure and Message of Job', p. 87.

entrenched retributive interpretation of history that the author of Job takes issue with in the poetic dialogues.¹²

However, the denial of innocent suffering as the main issue of Job goes well beyond the prevalence of the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation. Many Joban scholars pursuing literary or holistic criticism continue to make the same assertion.¹³ Fohrer's ethical and pietistic interpretation is adopted by scholars as recent as C.L. Seow and Lindsay Wilson.¹⁴ Like earlier commentators, Seow bases his conclusion on the book's lack of solution to the issue of suffering.¹⁵ However, unlike the historical-critics who largely play down the narrative frame, Seow thinks that it is the prologue and the epilogue that give us the voice of the narrator, whose 'posed-challenge is not theodicy, but if piety can be disinterested, non-utilitarian, nor self-serving (Job 1.9, 21; 2.10)'.¹⁶

Another alternative, which is often mingled with other themes, is to see the nature of God as the key issue of Job. For example, Jewish and Christian interpreters have always seen Job as a book about divine providence as well as about divine justice or theodicy.¹⁷ Modern commentators like Terrien highlight the book's religious anxiety over God's intention for humans, whether it is one of love or hate, or worse, of unconcern.¹⁸ James Crenshaw argues that the contradiction between belief in a benevolent God and the experience of the 'dark side' of God results in a crisis of faith.¹⁹ Nor-

12. E.g. H.H. Rowley, *Job* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. edn, 1980), pp. 18, 22; E. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (trans. Harold Knight; London: Thomas Nelson, 1967), pp. clxvi-clxvii; C.L. Seow, *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Illuminations; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 106. Timothy Beal, however, has noted that the narrative frame of Job also contains key words that correspond closely to the themes of Deut. 28 and 30. See Timothy K. Beal, 'Facing Job', in *Levinas and Biblical Studies* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Gary A. Phillips and David Jobling; Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 65–74 (69).

13. E.g. MacKenzie (1959), Good (1981), Clines (1989), Parsons (1992), Steinmann (1996), Burrell (2008) and Ingram (2017), to name but a few. See the bibliography in this volume for publication details on these commentators.

14. Steinmann can be grouped within this school too.

15. Seow, *Job 1–21*, 105.

16. Seow, *Job 1–21*, 106. Cf. Wilson, *Job*, 10.

17. Most noticeably Moses Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. See Martin D. Yaffe, 'Providence in Medieval Aristotelianism: Moses Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas on the Book of Job', and Susan E. Schreiner, 'Why Do the Wicked Live? Job and David in Calvin's Sermon on Job', in *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (ed. Leo G. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), pp. 111–28, 129–43.

18. Terrien, *Job: Poet of Existence*, p. 50; Terrien, *Job*, p. 226.

19. James L. Crenshaw, 'Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel', *ZAW* 83 (1970), pp. 180–95.

man Habel interprets the book as presenting a paradoxical view of God.²⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez contends that Job is not so much about suffering as about ‘God talk’, namely how one may speak of God amid suffering.²¹ Gutiérrez’s assertion is repeated by Seow, who simply substitutes ‘chaos’ for ‘suffering’.²² David Clines favours the view that the book less concerned with the problem of suffering than with whether there is any moral order in the world, even though the question is centred on the doctrine of retribution.²³ Wilson notes that this emphasis on the divine nature is linked with the modern movement ‘to concentrate on Yahweh’s speeches and Job’s reply’.²⁴ Even Carol Newsom, who sees Job as a polyphonic book and attempts to hold multiple strands together, admits that ‘the fundamental continuity or alterity of the divine and the human’ is ‘the issue that lurks in the contrasting Rhetorics’, and ‘has an almost obsessive persistence in the different voice-ideas of the book of Job’.²⁵

The name of Newsom takes us to yet another alternative with regard to the main issue of Job, which is the tendency to interpret Job as a book dealing simultaneously with multiple themes or issues without giving primacy to any one of them. Newsom is the leading voice in advocating a Bakhtinian dialogism that allows for different voice-ideas, ‘embodied not only in characters but also in genres’ that ‘engage one another without privilege’.²⁶ Thus, the book of Job is, for Newsom, as the subtitle of her book suggests, ‘a contest of moral imaginations’. Before Newsom, this kind of approach to Joban interpretation was already heralded by Clines’s deconstructionism and David Penchansky’s emphasis on dissonance and the disparate text.²⁷ Using Newsom’s polyphonic interpretation as the starting point, Kenneth Ngwa proposes a hermeneutic that ‘should combine *both* the resonance and the dis-

20. Norman C. Habel, ‘Literary Features and the Message of the Book of Job’, in *Sitting with Job: Selected Studies on the Book of Job* (ed. Roy B. Zuck; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), pp. 97-123 (115).

21. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (trans. M.J. O’Connell; Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 11.

22. Seow, *Job*, 108.

23. David J.A. Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC, 17; Dallas: Word, 1989), p. xxxix. Cf. James G. Williams, “‘You have not spoken truth of me.’ Mystery and Irony in Job”, *ZAW* 83 (1971), pp. 231-55 (239).

24. Wilson, *Job*, 13.

25. Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 240.

26. Newsom, *Job*, pp. 234-35.

27. David J.A. Clines, ‘Deconstructing the Book of Job’, in David J.A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSup, 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 106-23; David Penchansky, *The Betrayal of God: Ideological Conflict in Job* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

sonance between the epilogue and the preceding sections' for understanding the complex nature of the divine–human relationship and for responding to suffering and chaos.²⁸ Ying Zhang, on the other hand, seeks to simplify Newsom's scheme and interpret Job as a dual rhetoric of divine justice and divine providence.²⁹ For these scholars, the interaction or inter-relationship between the multiple themes itself becomes one of the issues, if not *the* issue.³⁰

The multifocal tendency of these scholars may be classified in general terms as postmodern, while the previous ones may be variously called anti-theoretical, moral, existential, pietistic or theological. Whichever way we categorize them, these samples suffice to demonstrate the lack of consensus regarding the main issue of Job, except for their common refusal to give the issue of innocent suffering a premium status. However, a large number of contemporary scholars still base their theses on the premise that Job deals primarily with the issue of innocent suffering, and most of them do not feel the need to defend this position.³¹ The fact that all these alternative issues need to be argued for by their proponents is itself an indication of the continued dominance of the issue they relegate. Besides, none of the alternative issues can be maintained to the exclusion of other proposals. The fact that all these alternatives exist and can claim validity is itself a testimony to the complexity of this book and may confirm that it is 'a contest of moral imagination'.

However, for the purpose of this book, I need to focus on one issue rather than many, both for the evaluation (Chapter 2) and the exegesis (Chapters 4–6); and the issue of innocent suffering is chosen over others, for which I will offer three defences below: (1) it is what the book is set up to address; (2) it is able to accommodate various other issues and approaches; (3) it responds to the concerns of the majority of readers.

First Defence: The Book Itself

The prologue sets the scene for what follows and presents the main issue of the book. Right from the start of the book, there is universal appeal in the

28. K.N. Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the 'Happy' Ending in Job 42:7-17* (BZAW, 354; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), p. 7.

29. Ying Zhang, *Divine Justice and Divine Providence in Tension: A Dual Rhetoric in the Book of Job* (PhD diss., Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007).

30. Bakhtinian dialogue in Dostoevsky's artistic world is not just a means but an end in itself. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (trans. Caryl Emerson; Theory and History of Literature, 8; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 252.

31. E.g. Gordis (1965), Pope (1965), Tsevat (1992 [orig., 1966]), Janzen (1985), Mettinger (1992), Balentine (2006) and Crenshaw (2011) to name but a few. See publication details in the bibliography for these commentators.