

Usage of The Book of Job in the Revised Common Lectionary

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The Book of Job is not well represented in the Revised Common Lectionary, and this has theological implications within the context of Sunday worship for all of the major Western reformed churches in the English-speaking world.

Job challenges individualistic¹ and anthropocentric notions of justice, and alongside other texts in the Wisdom tradition, opens the door to a cosmic theology which witnesses God's care for the whole creation². As the world faces an ecological crisis, we must also address the underlying "deeper crisis of human values and culture, deriving from man's alienation from other human beings and the rest of creation"³. Taking the book of Job (and other Wisdom literature) seriously is one pathway to that objective.

The Book of Job is lengthy – some forty-two chapters – with a complex plot played out in three major movements⁴. These realities make it difficult to present the book seriously during the time available in Sunday worship⁵ within the liturgical calendar.

The Revised Common Lectionary is the product of ecumenical efforts during the twentieth century, which resulted in the use of common liturgical texts amongst most Christians in the English-speaking world⁶. In an Australian context, it is in use within the largest protestant denominations, the Anglican Church, Uniting Church, and Lutheran Church⁷.

The lectionary operates upon a three-year cycle, providing readings from the Scriptures to be used during Sunday worship. Each week a first reading (from the Hebrew Scriptures), a second reading (from the epistles, Acts or Revelation), and a Gospel reading are provided. While some lectionaries choose readings from the Hebrew Scriptures which relate directly to the day's Gospel reading, the Revised Common Lectionary allows for periods of semi-continuous readings over multiple weeks, outside of the period between Advent Sunday and Trinity Sunday – a period often referred to as 'ordinary time'⁸.

¹ R. A. F. MacKenzie and Roland E. Murphy, "Job," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Prentice-Hall, 1990), 466.

² Ekaterini G. Tsalampouni, "Like the Birds of the Sky and the Lilies of the Field: An Orthodox Eco-Exegetical Reading of Matthew 6.25-34 in an Age of Anxiety," in *A Testimony to the Nations: A Vegintennial Volume Offered to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (Thessaloniki, 2001), 860.

³ *Ibid.*, 844.

⁴ Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job : Commentary / by Norman C. Habel*, ed. Norman C. Habel, Cambridge Bible Commentary, New English Bible. (London ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 35. Ellen van Wolde, *Mr and Mrs Job* (SCM Press, 1991), 4.

⁵ Daniel J. Estes, "Communicating the Book of Job in the Twenty-First Century," *Themelios* 40, no. 2 (2015): 243.

⁶ English Language Liturgical Consultation, "The Reims Statement: Praying with One Voice," news release, 2011.

⁷ Common Texts, "Worldwide Usage of the Revised Common Lectionary," <http://www.commontexts.org/rcl/usage/>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

In total, seven passages from the Book of Job feature within the Revised Common Lectionary⁹. Of these, Job 14:1-14 is used only on Holy Saturday, and in direct Christological relation to the death of Jesus ("If mortals die, will they live again?" [14:14]). Two readings from Job – [19:23-27a] (in Year C) and [38:1-11] (in Year B) – are provided as "alternative first readings", for use by worshipping communities who prefer that the Old Testament and Gospel readings continue to be closely related¹⁰.

The remaining four passages represent the only attempt in the Revised Common Lectionary to provide a survey of the Book of Job over consecutive weeks. These readings are all assigned during the Season after Pentecost in Year B of the lectionary, and are¹¹:

Proper 22: Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Proper 23: Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Proper 24: Job 38:1-7, (34-41)

Proper 25: Job 42:1-6, 10-17

It is the expectation within mainline Western churches that the Sunday homily will, in usual circumstances, reflect upon the readings of the day¹². A preacher who wishes to take the Book of Job seriously is thus left with these four readings as the basis for their teaching.

In Christian usage, the Catholic tradition has focussed on the piety of Job; the Protestant tradition has focussed instead upon a rebellious Job, a human in conflict with God¹³. Neither of these interpretations represents a mature reading of the Book of Job, as by focussing upon the virtues of Job as an individual they miss the book's central challenge to individualistic and anthropocentric notions of justice¹⁴.

When evaluating the Revised Common Lectionary's usage of Job, we might then ask – can a series of four homilies addressing each of these readings support a serious interpretation of the book? Given that there is, in my experience, a tendency in Christian homiletics to focus on the New Testament over the Hebrew Scriptures, what are the likely interpretations of the book if these readings are presented to a congregation and not addressed in the homily, and what is the theological impact of those interpretations?

In order to address these questions, it is helpful to consider how each reading might be interpreted strictly within the context of the series of four passages provided by the lectionary. We can then contrast these interpretations with those provided by biblical scholarship, reading the passages within the unabridged text.

⁹ Vanderbilt Divinity Library, "Sunday/Special Days Citation Index in Canonical Order," <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/citationindex.php>.

¹⁰ Consultation on Common Texts, "The Revised Common Lectionary - Introduction," http://www.commontexts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/RCL_Introduction_Web.pdf.

¹¹ Vanderbilt Divinity Library, "Season after Pentecost - Year B," <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/lections.php?year=B&season=Season%20after%20Pentecost>.

¹² Texts, 5.

Anglican Diocese of Perth, "Liturgy and Prayers: Lectionary," <https://www.perth.anglican.org/resources/liturgy-and-prayers/lectionary/>.

¹³ Wolde, 1.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

This reading comes from the prologue to the Book of Job (defined as Job 1:1-2:13¹⁵); the beginning of the first movement of the book¹⁶. Job 1:1-5 establishes the character of Job and is set on earth before the setting shifts to heaven, a cosmic context.

The lectionary provides only the first verse of Job 1. This verse establishes that Job was a man, from the distant East; the “land of Uz” is possibly associated with Edom, but potentially intended to evoke through aural similarity the Hebrew word for “counsel, design”¹⁷. The verse also tells us that Job was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” The virtue and law-abiding nature of Job the individual is established, and through a reference to Proverbs 3:7 we also see that Job “is the model of the virtuous wise man who epitomises the advice of the sage”¹⁸.

The remainder of the first chapter is omitted by the lectionary. It is worth expanding on the meaning conveyed by each passage, as the omitted expository material is heavily relied upon by the rest of the text.

Job 1:2-3 establishes Job’s position as a wealthy patriarch, “the greatest of all the people of the east” (Job 1:3). Following directly after the assertion of Job’s piety and conformance with the law, these verses align Job’s status with his piety, in a relationship of direct consequence. This shows that the “traditional dogma that everyone is rewarded or punished in accordance with the moral quality of his or her actions”¹⁹ is in operation.

These two verses are thus critical to setting one of the central questions of the text – whether the belief and worship given by human individuals to God is *chinam* (disinterested), or conditional on the realisation of this traditional idea of justice²⁰. This question is then sharpened in Job 1:4-5; we see that Job wishes to assert some level of control, perhaps impinging on the role of God by judging the behaviour of his children; and, finding them wanting, taking corrective action in order to appease God²¹.

In [1:6-12], the setting shifts to heaven, and the first conversation between the Satan and YHWH is recounted. Returning to earth, [1:13-19] relates the consequences for Job’s children, servants and animals, and for Job himself. In verses [1:20-22], we see Job’s first response to his affliction.

The second chapter begins with a return to the cosmic setting, a further discussion between the Satan and YHWH amongst the heavenly host. [2:1-3] echoes [1:6-9] while acknowledging the YHWH’s victory in the first test of Job²². We see the subject of the

¹⁵ Michael David Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible : New Standard Version with the Apocrypha : An Ecumenical Study Bible*, Rev. 4th ed. / Michael D. Coogan, editor ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 727.

¹⁶ Habel, 27.

¹⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹⁹ Wolde, 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 138.

²¹ Ibid., 14.

²² Ibid., 94.

Satan's affliction shifted from Job's possessions to 'his bone and his flesh' [2:5], further probing Job's integrity²³.

Returning to earth, we see the consequences of this affliction [2:7], and Job's reaction – taking a seat outside amongst the ashes, while remaining within the community²⁴.

This provokes the response of Job's wife [2:9]. The wife, who is never named, introduces the element of Job's own death, suggesting that Job "curse God and die". In [2:10], she is rebuked by Job; in this verse, we also see the impact of her statement upon Job, in his shift from addressing God as YWYH to 'the Deity', a more distant entity; and speaking about God, rather than to God²⁵.

The verses [2:9-10] are problematic from a feminist perspective. A woman is placed in the role of the *diaboli adjutrix*, "Satan's unwitting ally"²⁶, re-emphasising a negative view of women that is also found in Genesis (Eve; the wife of Noah)²⁷.

Within the context of the lectionary reading, this impact is worsened. The reader is no longer aware Job's wife has also suffered – indeed, Job's first affliction affects his wife equally, for Job's children, prosperity and status are also his wife's. Instead, it appears that her angry reaction to Job's piety is motivated solely by the affliction upon Job's body – hardly the expected response of a wife to a husband suffering a severe illness.

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

The lectionary then moves forward through the book, skipping over some twenty chapters. It is worth noting the omission of Job's friends in their entirety; their introduction in [2:11-13], Job's monologue in [3], the conversations with Eliphaz [4-7], Bildad [8-10] and Zophar [11-14], and the second round of conversations [15-21].

This huge leap forwards in the text leaves us in the middle of the book's second movement, which in his introduction to the text Habel titles "The Hero Challenges God—The Conflict Explored"²⁸. Job is responding to the speech of Eliphaz in the preceding chapter, who has just accused Job of grave sins; sins which Eliphaz has no evidence of, but which he infers from Job's situation²⁹. The suggestion is made that all Job must do is repent, and within the framework of traditional justice, he can expect to recover.

Job's response to Eliphaz is both a defence against the charges levelled by Eliphaz, and an expression of his increasing sense of distance from God³⁰. The dismay of Job at his treatment, and his resulting desire to bring a complaint against his treatment by the deity in

²³ Habel, 95.

²⁴ Ibid., 96.

²⁵ Wolde, 25.

²⁶ Habel, 96.

²⁷ Wolde, 18-20.

²⁸ Habel, 29.

²⁹ John H. Eaton, *Job* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 15.

Wolde, 82.

³⁰ Habel, 348.

a heavenly court is voiced in [4-7]³¹. Job is still operating on the basis of traditional justice and believes that he can bring a case against his treatment, in which he will be “come out like gold” [10].

Job is hampered in this aim by the apparent absence of God, who Job cannot find any way he turns [23:8-9]. The English translations provide in the New International Version uses the compass points as its reference for Job’s search – “if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him” [23:8], whereas the New Revised Standard Version translates this verse as “If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him.” Both of these interpretations are possible from the Hebrew text, and both show the absence of God in totality upon the earth³², “a reversal of the traditional motif depicting the impossibility of flight from God to any point in the universe”³³.

When examining this passage within the context of the lectionary readings, several problems arise.

It is not clear to whom Job responds in the first verse. Job’s friends have not been introduced, and so the assumption of the reader may be that Job is responding to God. It is even possible that the reader could believe that Job is still where we left him in the previous reading – in conversation with his wife.

Without the accusations of Eliphaz, we do not have a context in which to understand Job’s anger, nor his defence of his character. This excision, much like the abbreviation of Chapter 1, impinges upon the book’s central investigation of the nature of justice, considering the problem of the suffering of innocents. Job’s response hangs upon his own belief in the binding nature of traditional justice; as this belief has not been established within the provided readings, Job’s response loses much of its meaning.

We are left with a shallow interpretation – Job is forgetting his place and turning away from his deity. The immediacy of Job’s complaint supports the protestant view of Job as rebel against God. 23:6b is particularly fruitful in justifying this reading, as Job appears to suggest that Job believes he could persuade God, if only he could receive a hearing.

Job 38:1-7, (34-41)

The third reading finds us fourteen chapters further on in the book.

A brief survey of the omitted material is helpful: chapters 24-27 represent the conclusion of the third round of dialogue between Job and his friends³⁴. In chapter 28 we have Job’s hymn to Wisdom³⁵, followed by a renewed lament and protestation of innocence in chapters 29-31³⁶. Chapters 32-37 see the introduction of a new character, Elihu, who has apparently

³¹ Ibid.

³² Carol A. Newsom, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 508.

³³ Habel, 350.

³⁴ Wolde, 82.

³⁵ Ibid., 88.

³⁶ Ibid.

been present, but silent, throughout all the dialogues between Job and his friends – these chapters are often seen as additions to the book by a later author³⁷.

Elihu's speech is notable for its ambiguity, and its foreshadowing of, but also contradictions with, YWYH's response to Job³⁸. Elihu answers Job's request for a legal proceeding in which Job can defend himself, by appointing himself "judge, jury and advocate"³⁹.

Elihu serves as a foil for God; a comic figure, who acts as an example of the foolishness of mortals who attempt to understand God's framework of justice, or act upon God's behalf.

The lectionary reading begins with the start of God's response to Job. Both the required reading [38:1-7] and the optional extension [38:34-41] come from the first part of God's speech⁴⁰, in which YWYH defends his cosmic design⁴¹. Habel provides us with a concordance between the responses of God and the corresponding challenges of Job; it is notable that none of these ([9:5-7] – "God overthrows the structures of the Earth"; [10:16-17] & [16:9] "God hunts Job like a lion"; [19:7] "God does not heed his cry")⁴² are found in the prior readings provided by the lectionary.

Lacking the context of the dialogues between Job and his friends, a member of the congregation listening to this speech might well interpret it as an angry rebuke of Job by a God who speaks from a position of power.

In [9:5-7] Job alleges that God capriciously overturns the structures of the world, acting as an agent of chaos rather than a guardian of order; this is the accusation to which God responds in [38:4-7]⁴³. Absent this context, the reader is left only to conclude that God's argument is simply that a mortal who did not witness the creation of the world should remember their place in the cosmic order. The book's expression of God's wider concern for creation, a concern which eclipses individualistic notions of justice or any purely human perspective, will likely be lost.

The optional reading of verses 34-41 does go some way towards mitigating this. As Habel puts it, "in his providence, Yahweh hunts for wild creatures when they cry."⁴⁴ Importantly, this brief introduction of God's care for non-human creatures creates a base from which a preacher might explore ecotheological issues, moving beyond an anthropocentric notion of justice.

³⁷ Newsom, 4, 561.

³⁸ Wolde, 100-01.

³⁹ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁴¹ Habel, 526-35.

⁴² Ibid., 530-32.

⁴³ Ibid., 190.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 532.

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

The remainder of God's response to Job is omitted, and the fourth reading consists of parts of the book's concluding chapter. Verses 1-6 are the whole of Job's second response to God. These verses have been subject to many different interpretations⁴⁵.

A key issue is the difficulty of translating verse [42:6], in which "almost every single word is susceptible of more than one interpretation"⁴⁶. Both the New Revised Standard Version and New International Version provide this translation: "Therefore I despise myself and repent upon dust and ashes"⁴⁷. Newsom suggests that this translation fits if God's speeches are read as a rebuke to a rebellious Job⁴⁸. If, instead, we interpret God's response as an explanation of justice within a cosmic context, Newsom provides an alternative translation of Job's response: "'Therefore I reject and forswear dust and ashes.' (i.e. the symbols of mourning.)"⁴⁹

The ambiguity of the Hebrew text, and the impossibility of precisely replicating that ambiguity in the English translation, requires that the translators commit to a particular theological interpretation of the text as a whole. This has an exaggerated effect for readers who only read those parts of the text assigned by the lectionary.

Habel suggests that Job's response could represent the reconciliation of Job with God, and "a new understanding of God's governance"⁵⁰.

As the lectionary has not provided material sufficient to support the book's discussion of traditional justice versus cosmic justice, it is unlikely that Habel's conclusion – or any alternative translation of [42:6] – can be supported by the reading. This lack similarly rules out two of Habel's other possible readings – that Job's confession is ironic or defiant, representing his triumph in exposing God as a "blind force" acting without justice⁵¹.

This leaves us with only one well supported reading of Job's response – that of "complete surrender"⁵². Rebuked by YWYH, Job repents of his "arrogant attitude"⁵³. We therefore conclude that Job has indeed been rebellious (the usual protestant⁵⁴ reading of the Book) but has chosen to repent and seek forgiveness. Job's return to closer relationship with God can be seen in his return to addressing God as "YWYH", rather than "the Deity" [42:1].

God's rebuke of Job's friends in 42:7-9 is omitted – unsurprisingly, given their complete absence from the assigned readings.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 577-78.

Newsom, 4, 627.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 4, 628.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 629.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Habel, 579.

⁵¹ Wolde, 88.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1.

The lectionary's series of readings upon Job then finishes with the entirety of the book's conclusion, which is written from the perspective of a narrator.

For a reader of the full text – who is thus able to consider the book as a reflection upon the suffering of innocents – critiquing traditional justice, and suggesting a more cosmic perspective – the conclusion is difficult and apparently contradictory. Job's apparent submission to God, which is immediately rewarded with divine gifts of status and wealth, appears at a first reading to challenge the answer we have just received to the book's central question⁵⁵. This contradiction might provoke further investigation, including into translation difficulties such as that seen in [42:6].

The lectionary spares the reader from any such concerns. Just as we are left with only one supportable interpretation of Job's response to God, we are left only with the view that Job's repentance for his rebellion against God's order has been rewarded with not just the restoration of, but an increase in his wealth and status.

Conclusion

The lectionary's effort to provide a survey of the Book of Job fails to support a mature reading of the text. It is difficult to see how even a learned and dedicated preacher, with a total of perhaps forty minutes to speak to the book, could address these issues through Sunday homilies.

If the readings are not addressed at all in any sermon, then a shallow reading of the text – Job as rebel, rebuked, repentant, and rewarded, naturally emerges. It is worth noting that the abridged readings paint a highly negative picture of Job's wife, and by extension womankind, and leave such views to be misogynistically projected onto women in the wider world.

To read the book in its entirety – forty-two chapters – would take more of “ordinary time” than exists within any single year in the liturgical calendar, displacing other material from the Hebrew Scriptures. How then can Job be included in the lectionary, while encouraging a deep reading of the text, allowing the reader to consider the nature of God's justice, and God's role as carer not just for individual people, but for all of creation?

It might be tempting to suggest that such a treatment isn't possible in any brief series of readings, and so Job is simply won't fit within the framework of the lectionary. Job could be removed entirely and left for bible study groups to investigate. Such an approach has the obvious downside of significantly reducing the book's audience.

Instead, perhaps the lectionary could embrace one of the Book of Job's principle attributes – ambiguity. If the lectionary provided the introduction (Job 1; Job 2), Job's first monologue (Job 3); and then perhaps a part of the dialog between Job and his friend Eliphaz (Job 4-8), the questions raised by the book would be established – and left unresolved. A preacher could expound upon the ambiguous nature of the readings provided and foreshadow the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 148-50.

cosmic nature of God's eventual answer. Perhaps then, some in the congregation would be drawn to investigate the Book of Job in its full depth and complexity.

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