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Communicating the Book of Job in the Twenty-First Century

— Daniel J. Estes —

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Abstract: In churches, seminaries, and in the scholarly literature, the book of Job is only rarely preached or taught in detail. This wisdom text has always been a difficult book to interpret, and to complicate matters it is increasingly counter to the assumptions and values of the contemporary culture. This article proposes six strategies for the effective communication of Job in the twenty-first century.

Although Job is one of the longer books in the Bible, in most churches today it is rarely taught or preached in a comprehensive way. To be sure, some familiar details of the experience of its protagonist have come over into common knowledge. For example, even people who have scant comprehension of the content of the Bible are aware of Job's words that the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away (Job 1:21). They may well recall the proverb of Eliphaz that humans are born for trouble as sparks fly upward (Job 5:7). Handel's brilliant aria in *Messiah* drawn from Job 19:25 has prompted the widespread presumption that Job's endurance was rooted in his anticipation of Christ as his redeemer. And the allusion in James 5:11 to the patience of Job is often the monocular lens through which the whole book is perceived, even though that approach fails to consider fully Job's agonized speeches throughout the poetic section that dominates the text that bears his name.

Nevertheless, in thirty years of surveying college students I have discovered that very few of them have ever heard in their churches a series of lessons or sermons on the book of Job. Their reported experience, which likely represents the general case, could be attributed to a number of possible factors. For the pastor committed to expository preaching, the challenge of working through such a long text is indeed daunting, and this could also explain why series on other lengthy books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deuteronomy are as rarely found. If the prevailing emphasis of the preacher is on evangelism or discipleship or mission, these subjects do not emerge as easily from Job as they do from other scriptural texts. If the homiletical text is drawn from the Revised Common Lectionary, only rarely does Job make an appearance.¹ For sermons that endeavor to move facily from a biblical text to three

¹John C. Holbert, *Preaching Job*, Preaching Classic Texts (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 149 observes: "The collectors of the Revised Common Lectionary have a neat solution for the would-be preacher of the book of Job. In four successive Sundays in year B—during "ordinary time" of course—the preacher is given the opportunity to tackle Job. She is to use the prologue (chaps. 1–2) on Sunday 1, one speech of Job's from chapter 23 on Sunday 2,

easy applications for the week ahead, Job's complexity stubbornly resists such simplification. For these and other reasons, those who preach the Bible too often fail to communicate the book of Job with any frequency or detail.²

To complicate the problem, it may not be too much of a stretch to allege that only rarely do we find a seminary graduate who has worked through the text of Job. Few programs at the master's level require more than a few class days in Job, and even elective courses devoted to the book are infrequent. More commonly, Job is grouped together with the other Old Testament wisdom or poetical books in a semester-long survey course. Perhaps there is a correlation here between the Job that is infrequently taught in the seminaries and the Job that is rarely preached in the churches. Could it be that we are sending into ministry the blind to lead the blind?

Added to this, a search for scholarly publications relevant to the preaching and teaching of Job yields an equal paucity of results. In my investigation of Old Testament Abstracts and ATLASerials, I have been able to identify only a handful of articles³ and one brief book⁴ that address the issue, and even these sources touch only obliquely upon the subject of how to communicate the book of Job effectively in the contemporary context. It is encouraging, however, to see that three recent books on Job have considered aspects of this topic.⁵

a bit of God's first speech on Sunday 3 (chap. 38), and Job's final response and his restoration by God on Sunday 4. To reduce Job to this sort of Reader's Digest version is sure to distort its meaning and to tame its anger effectively enough to make its impact minimal and those summer Sundays appropriately innocuous. Best stick with the gospel reading, I suppose."

² Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Job," *BSac* 151 (1994): 393 notes, "Job has often been presented as a model for modern-day believers to 'be patient' in the midst of trials. However, few expositors delve into the complex dialogue between Job and his friends. Preachers tend to skip over Job's cursing of the day of his birth (chap. 3), the intricate and often argumentative interaction between Job and his friends (chaps. 4–27), and other hard-to-understand passages. Sermons or lessons have mainly focused on Job's idealized faith and patience epitomized in the famous verse, 19:25. Yet this image of Job is a distortion of the overall story presented in the Book of Job."

³ M. Vernon Davis, "Preaching from Job," *SwJT* 14 (1971): 65–76; Clyde T. Francisco, "A Teaching Outline of the Book of Job," *RevExp* 68 (1971): 511–20; John Holbert, "The Book of Job and the Task of Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* 13 (1990): 13–22; Joan Penzenstadler, "Teaching the Book of Job with a View to Human Wholeness," *RelEd* 89 (1994): 223–31; Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Job," 393–413; C. F. Melchert, "The Book of Job: Education Through and by Diversity," *RelEd* 92 (1997) 9–23; and Samuel E. Balentine, "Preaching Job's God," *Journal for Preachers* 36 (2013): 22–27. In James L. Crenshaw, *Reading Job: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the Old Testament (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011) the author concludes with a brief, two-page postscript entitled "Why Read Job Today?" in which he offers the tentative statement that Job speaks to the tragedies and dilemmas of life today.

⁴ Holbert, *Preaching Job*.

⁵ David R. Jackson, *Crying Out for Vindication: The Gospel according to Job*, The Gospel according to the Old Testament (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 3–11; Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 17–23; and especially Lindsay Wilson, *Job*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), whose insightful section on Job and Theology (pp. 291–382) explores how the book is situated within biblical theology, systematic theology, moral theology, and practical theology. These recent treatments of the book of Job raise the broader question of the extent to which Job as an Old Testament text can be read appropriately through a Christological lens. Elsewhere in this issue of *Themelios*, I address this question as it pertains to the Song of Songs in my review of two newly-released commentaries on that book. In brief, I maintain that the exegetical meaning of the biblical text is properly

In this paper, I want to ask and answer one key question: How can communicators of the book of Job more effectively speak to people in the twenty-first century? To do that, I will discuss first why Job has always been a difficult book to communicate. Then, I will consider several factors that make Job especially difficult to communicate in the twenty-first century. That will lead into an investigation of how scholars, teachers, and preachers can respond to both the long-term and the contemporary challenges of communicating the book of Job. In conclusion, I will address why Job needs to be communicated effectively today; in particular, I will note what is lost if we do not and what is gained if we do.

1. Why Has Job Always Been a Difficult Book to Communicate?

For many reasons, Job is difficult to read, to teach, and to preach, so it is not surprising that it so rarely is. Throughout the history of its interpretation, within both the Jewish and Christian worlds, the book of Job has been construed in a variety of ways that have failed to account adequately for its complex content. Clines observes that Job has most often been viewed according to the ideals of the reader, so that succeeding generations of interpreters have found in the book the ideal patient human who fatalistically accepts suffering as God's will, or the champion of reason over dogma, or the heroic victim in the face of the cruelty and absurdity of the world.⁶ He concludes that these interpretations of Job are in fact misreadings that introduce into the text the values of the readers' hermeneutical horizons rather than accurately exegeting the textual meaning of the book.

For good reasons, beginning students of Hebrew do not often find their way into the book of Job, or at any rate not far beyond its prose framework. The Hebrew text of this book is among the most difficult of any in the Old Testament. Even the premier scholars of Job wrestle mightily with its frequent rare words, grammatical conundrums, debatable variants, and structural complexities. Working in this book is not for the novice or the faint of heart!

To complicate the interpretive challenge, the book of Job embodies a complicated literary form that defies easy definition of its genre. The frame of the book is narrative written in prose, but enclosed within that frame are thirty-nine chapters of poetry that must be duly considered. Francisco warns:

One of the greatest errors one can make about the book of Job is to think that when you have found out what happened to Job you have understood the book. You can discover the story simply by reading the prose in chapters 1, 2, and 42. The great poem comes between these prose accounts, which give the setting for it. One does not read Hamlet intelligently if all he does is ask what happened to the principal character. This is important, but more important is what Shakespeare himself is saying as he arranges the scenes and develops the conversation.⁷

connected with its theological significance, but the two must not be conflated. There is always the danger that the reader will suppose that what he or she sees in the text is its intended meaning, when in reality what is seen could be better explained by the theological or ideological lens through which the reader is viewing the Scripture.

⁶David J. A. Clines, "Why is There a Book of Job, and What Does it Do to You if You Read It?" in *The Book of Job*, ed. W. A. M. Beuken, BETL 114 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994), 15.

⁷Francisco, "A Teaching Outline of the Book of Job," *RevExp* 68 (1971): 511.

The poetry of the book of Job is intricate,⁸ with the speakers sometimes responding to the others, but more often indulging in rhetorical excesses that obscure rather than clarify their points.⁹ The diverse characters articulate a variety of positions, so the readers must be careful to discern what the book as a whole is endorsing, or they may wrongly conclude that it teaches what it does not.

In addition, even an initial perusal of Job indicates that the book frequently alludes to other biblical texts, but many of these intertextual links are startling. For example, Job 7:17–18 transposes the privileged status of humans in Psalm 8 into a minor key, and in Job 10:8–11 God’s fashioning of the human embryo is not at all the comfort it is to the psalmist in Psalm 139. Mettinger has demonstrated that the imagery in Job 16 and 19 draws from conventional language in the lament psalms, only “the poet depicts Job as standing in the place of the enemy whom God annihilates, that is, in the position conventionally assigned to evildoers under divine judgment.”¹⁰

Wisdom literature as a whole, and Job as a specific case, has often been omitted or diminished in treatments of Old Testament Theology and Biblical Theology.¹¹ Taken by itself, the narrative frame of Job could be read as congruent with the retribution theology that is prominent in Proverbs. However, the poetic dialogues feature Job’s vehement rejection of his friends’ attempts to condemn him as they reason from the effects of Job’s calamity back to what they presumed was the theologically necessary cause, that is, his personal sin. Yahweh’s siding with Job against the claims of the friends in 42:7–8 evidences that the book as a whole argues that retribution, though accurate in general terms, does not explain all that occurs in the world under divine control. This qualification of retribution is extant already within the book of Proverbs, which states several times that there is mystery in Yahweh’s ordering of his world, but this relatively minor motif in Proverbs becomes the prominent point in Job.

A final factor that has long made Job a difficult book is that it tends to leave many readers unconvinced or morally outraged. For many, the ending seems too contrived, as though Job lived happily ever after, even though observation would suggest that life after tragedy is not always or even often like that. In fact, severe traumas typically leave lifelong wounds and scars. Even more troubling, the book raises profound ethical questions: How could a loving and just God allow Job to be treated so badly? What about Job’s children and servants and animals—don’t they count for something? Are humans just pawns in a cynical cosmic debate between God and the adversary? As Katharine Dell asks in her recent essay, “Does God behave unethically in the book of Job?”¹²

In 1984 a sculpture formed from 83 sheets of aluminum was dedicated on the Charles River Esplanade in Boston. From a distance the visage of Arthur Fiedler, the longtime conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra, is readily discernible, but the closer one approaches the sculpture the more complicated his representation appears. Throughout the history of its interpretation the book of Job has been like

⁸J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 177–88 provides an insightful entrée into the poetry of Job.

⁹William P. Brown, “Introducing Job: A Journey of Transformation,” *Int* 53 (1999): 228.

¹⁰Trygve N. D. Mettinger, “Intertextuality: Allusion and Vertical Context Systems in Some Job Passages,” in *Of Prophets’ Visions and the Wisdom of Sages*, ed. Heather A. McKay and David J. A. Clines; JSOTSup 162 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 274.

¹¹Cf. Gary V. Smith, “Is There a Place for Job’s Wisdom in Old Testament Theology?,” *TJ* 13 (1992): 3–20.

¹²Katherine J. Dell, “Does God Behave Unethically in the Book of Job?” in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, ed. Katharine J. Dell, LHB/OTS 528 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 170–86.

that. This book that may seem so simple upon casual reading becomes ever more challenging the longer and the closer one scrutinizes it.

2. Why is Job Especially Difficult to Communicate in the Twenty-First Century?

The twenty-first century is a profoundly different context from that envisioned by the original author of Job, and people today bring to the book the questions, assumptions, and values that characterize our contemporary culture. Although commentaries most often do effective work in explaining the ancient world of Job, they do not always do as well in communicating to the present time with its distinctive concerns. In fact, the scholarly literature rarely addresses how the book of Job speaks to the world in which we live today. Consequently, as hard as it has always been to interpret Job, in the twenty-first century there are additional challenges that must be overcome when one teaches or preaches this book.

In their recent commentaries, Clines and Seow have compiled extensive bibliographies of the reception history of Job, including its influence upon literature, art, music, dance, and film.¹³ The prevalent artifacts within Jewish and Christian liturgy have tended to regard Job as a great hero of faith as they have concentrated on his portrayal in the narrative frame. Increasingly in the late twentieth century, however, the Job of the dialogues is featured, and as Balentine has noted, “the Job who lives on in the fiction, poetry, and drama of everyday life speaks with far less restraint and models a quite different sort of heroism.”¹⁴ In particular, the depictions of Job in the Pulitzer Prize winning play *J. B.* by Archibald MacLeish (1958) and in Harold Kushner’s bestselling book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1978) have influenced how the general populace is prone to conceive of Job, even without having personally read the book.¹⁵ MacLeish portrays Job’s three comforters as representing history, science and religion, all of which Job rejects as inadequate. Instead, Job finds comfort in the love of his wife, and the two of them resolve to build a new life together on that basis, apart from religious faith.¹⁶ In the final lines of the play, J. B.’s wife says memorably:

Blow on the coal of the heart.
The candles in churches are out.
The lights have gone out in the sky.
Blow on the candle of the heart
And we’ll see by and by. . . .

Kushner builds from MacLeish’s position to contend that all of the characters in the book of Job want to believe three ideas: that God is all-powerful, God is good, and that Job is good, and they could hold to all three so long as Job enjoyed prosperity. However, after Job’s profound adversity only two of these positions could be affirmed simultaneously, and the third must be denied. The friends chose to deny that Job is good, and Job denied that God was fair, but Kushner maintains that the solution comes

¹³ David J. A. Clines, *Job 38–42*, WBC 18B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 1377–1464; C. L. Seow, *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary*, Illuminations (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 153–66, 232–42.

¹⁴ Samuel Balentine, *Job*, SHBC 10 (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 23.

¹⁵ Archibald MacLeish, *J. B.: A Play in Verse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958); Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Aron, 1981).

¹⁶ MacLeish details his view of the book of Job in his sermon, “God Has Need of Man,” in Nahum N. Glatzer, *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 278–86.

in recognizing that though God is great, he is not totally in control of the world. The readers of Job, then, must forgive God for choosing not to create a perfect world, and they must resolve to make the right things happen by their own intentional actions. In the generation since the publication of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, its position has seeped into much popular thought, and in large part it has become the default view in the twenty-first century.

Another challenge in the contemporary context is that with the advent of continuous news coverage and the Internet people today are more aware than ever before of the adversities, calamities, and injustices in life throughout the world. The combination of economic uncertainty, political tension, international terrorism, criminal activity, and medical threats causes us to feel as though much of the world is sitting at the ash heap with Job trying to make sense of it all. Tollerton has written insightfully about reading Job for a post-Holocaust world,¹⁷ and since that time recurrent waves of atrocities in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia, cataclysmic destruction by Hurricane Katrina, nuclear disasters at Chernobyl and Fukushima, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and at the Boston Marathon, and the recent barbarism of Boko Haram and ISIS have brought suffering full force into the collective consciousness. Every person to whom we teach or preach this book will know at least one Job, and many of them *are* Job. For them, abstract theology and theoretical platitudes will not suffice, because they like Job are asking the hard questions, desperate to find satisfying remedies for the aches in their hearts. Their deep pain will not be relieved by the homiletical equivalent of taking two aspirins, with the empty assurance that they will feel better in the morning.

In many ways, the contemporary *Zeitgeist* finds the book of Job perplexing and even offensive. For those who accept the prevalent narcissism of the age, assuming that “it is all about me,” Job counters instead that life is all about God and his order for the world. People today place great faith in science and technology, confident that there must be answers to their questions if only humans would search hard enough. Job, by contrast, challenges the reader to accept that the Lord has knowledge that surpasses what humans can know, so that we must accept mystery and place our faith in the God who knows far more than he has revealed. Thus, Job calls upon humans to relinquish their pride and to bow humbly before the Lord, an act of surrender that most people today want to avoid at all costs.

3. How Can Scholars, Teachers, and Preachers Respond to These Challenges?

Given the numerous difficulties that have longed plagued the interpretation of the book of Job, as well as the additional contemporary factors that have arisen, how can scholars, teachers, and preachers effectively communicate this biblical text in the twenty-first century? I would like to present six general strategies as guides to follow.

First, it is vital to grasp the content of the whole book of Job, and not to reduce Job to a brief synopsis. Gustafson rightly says, “Any reduction of the issues to a two- or three-sentence conundrum captioned ‘the problem of theodicy’ will bleed the vitality out of the poetic, dialogic, and dramatic passions that pervade much of the book.”¹⁸ Too often a Cliff’s Notes version of the book is presented, which distorts both the character Job and the overall message of the biblical text. As Paul Harvey used

¹⁷David C. Tollerton, “Reading Job as Theological Disruption for a Post-Holocaust World,” *JTI* 3 (2009): 197–212.

¹⁸James M. Gustafson, “A Response to the Book of Job,” in *The Voice From the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job*, ed. Leo G. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 172–73.

to say, we need to hear the rest of the story, so that our theology is informed by it all, even the messy parts. In practical terms, this means that the communicator must work through the entire book before starting to preach or teach it. This enables one to develop the necessary interpretive framework for understanding the specific passages within the book.

Second, because the book of Job is so difficult, it is vital to make judicious use of exegetical commentaries that examine its text in detail. The standard seminary requirement of a year or two of Hebrew may be adequate for exegeting simple narrative passages, but it is not sufficient for the massive interpretive challenges of Job's poetry. As one of my mentors told me as I completed my doctoral program, the ideal way to come to terms with the full content of a book of the Bible is to write an exegetical commentary, because that process compels one to work through the entire text, rather than just parts of it. No doubt, that is an unrealistic expectation for the typical preacher or teacher, but there are some excellent resources both in commentaries and in journal articles on the book of Job, and these must be examined assiduously, lest the communicator perpetuate misreadings of the text by failing to comprehend its complexities.

Third, because Job is primarily poetry, the communicator must do more than just talk about the story line. The power of poetry comes in its ability to recreate an experience in the reader, rather than merely reporting the experience, as does prose. As Schreiber observes, "The poet's business in writing his poem is not to tell us that this 'moment of imaginative experience' has happened to him, but to make it happen to us as well."¹⁹ Therefore, the preacher and teacher must discover ways in which the poetry of Job can penetrate the hearts and touch the emotions of the hearer. One way to do this is to prepare for a series or unit on Job by inviting the congregation or class to read through the book in advance and to state the questions that it raises in their minds. By this means, the communicator will be able better to guide them in studying and reflecting on the book, thus prompting honest and candid dialogue.²⁰ Another idea is to employ a dramatic rendering of the book, either acted out or in the form of reader's theater. In the nineteenth century, James Stevens wrote a dramatization of the book of Job which is available online as a free download. His portrayal uses the KJV text, it has some questionable interpretive assumptions, and it takes nearly two hours to stage, so it might be better to employ someone with a literary or theatrical bent to compose a script more suitable for the occasion. If this were to cover the entire book in a condensed form within an hour, those who observe it would be better able to step imaginatively into Job's situation and feel what he experienced.

Fourth, it is vital to transport the audience back to the biblical text, explaining its setting, cultural references, and place in Old Testament theology. However, it is equally important to book them on a return flight to the twenty-first century to consider how the book of Job applies to life today. In other words, in the enthusiasm for acquainting the audience with what Job meant there and then, the communicator must also enable them to understand what Job means for the here and now. We do not have the luxury of communicating Job as abstract, academic theology alone; there must also be a pastoral dimension in our preaching and teaching. It would be regrettable if the homiletical or pedagogical journey were to leave the hearers "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" and not enable them get back home to where they live and work and play. The numerous literary and artistic artifacts cited by Clines and Seow in their compilations can serve as points of connection between Job and the contemporary scene. The effective communicator will endeavor to link the abstract theology of Job

¹⁹ Sybil Mary Schreiber, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1965), 25.

²⁰ Davis, "Preaching from Job," 66.

with concrete analogues in the present time. Literature, art, and current events can be useful tools for highlighting how the ancient book of Job speaks with relevance today.

Fifth, the thorny theological problems posed by Job must be addressed directly rather than being swept under the rug as though they do not exist. MacLeish, Kushner, and others have indeed surfaced important and difficult questions, and the widespread acceptance of their views indicates that they have given words to what many people think and believe. To pretend that these questions are irrelevant, or to suggest that to ask them is in itself sinful, is to yield the field without a fight. Rather, the preacher or teacher must raise and then respond to the queries that trouble people today: Why do bad things happen to good people in God's world? Is God really both good and great? How can God's people endure pain and minister to others in pain? How do humans live faithfully within the limitations of their knowledge? And, as many have asked since the horrors of the Holocaust, Where was God at Auschwitz? These are the kinds of questions that recur frequently in the lament psalms and especially in the imprecatory psalms, when God's people expressed with excruciating candor their raw emotions and anguished accusations, so there is ample biblical precedent for God's people to ask and discuss what most troubles them. Parsons notes well: "The temptation is . . . to ignore the many hard questions Job raised in facing the mystery of his innocent suffering. Yet the candid record that Job began to question God strikes a chord familiar to humankind. To ignore Job's question 'why?' and his search for God's answer is to ignore basic issues of life everyone must face."²¹

Finally, we must call people today to trust the Lord humbly and courageously even when they feel that life sucks, and God is silent. The literary and theological climax of the book occurs when Job comes to his realization in 42:5–6: What I now know is that I do not know, but that the Lord does know, and that is sufficient for me. Job, then, is a cautionary tale warning against rigid dogmatism, such as that articulated by the friends and even by Job himself, which refuses to accept mystery. Job and the friends all in their individual ways attempted to double-down on retribution theology, but functioning as the master teacher Yahweh in his series of rhetorical questions in chapters 38–41 brought Job into a deeper appreciation of divine omniscience. Within the book, Job never figured out what had happened to him, and there is no record that Yahweh ever disclosed it to him. Nevertheless, Job came to the place that he was content to accept that God's ways are higher than human ways, and God's thoughts are higher than human thoughts (Isa 55:9). Ultimately, the book of Job leads to the kind of courageous faith that continues to trust God "though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea" (Ps 46:2[3]).

4. Why Job Needs to Be Communicated Effectively Today

This article has assessed the long-term and the additional contemporary challenges in preaching and teaching the book of Job, and several homiletical and pedagogical strategies have been suggested to address them. One further question remains to be asked: Why does Job need to be communicated effectively in the twenty-first century? This will be answered both negatively and positively.

First must be considered what is lost if Job is not communicated clearly and well. In his book entitled *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey reflects on a conversation with a friend: "As I brooded over our conversation, . . . I kept returning to three large questions about God that seemed to lurk just behind the thicket of his feelings. The longer I pondered them, the more I realized that these questions

²¹ Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Job," 394.

are lodged somewhere inside all of us. Yet few people ask them aloud, for they seem at best impolite, at worst heretical.”²² Yancey goes on to say that the three questions no one asks aloud are “Is God unfair?” “Is God silent?” and “Is God hidden?” Educational theorist Elliot Eisner speaks of the null curriculum, those subjects that either intentionally or unintentionally are not taught. Eisner contends that “what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach . . . because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem.”²³ Relegating the book of Job to the null curriculum by neglecting to teach and preach it systematically, the church in effect is conceding that this biblical text is not relevant to life today. This regrettably leaves men and women in the twenty-first century without God’s answers to their unspoken but nagging questions, and as a result they have inadequate theological resources to face the inexorable contemporary challenges to their faith. Furthermore, it misses the opportunity to help people to know God more fully.

As Job 28, the literary integrative center for the book,²⁴ demonstrates, humans by their ingenuity and intelligence are not able to discover wisdom, but only the omniscient God knows the way to the wisdom that evades human discovery. When Yahweh spoke to Job in chapters 38–41, challenging him to answer seventy unanswerable questions, Job came to the realization of his own limitations before the omniscient Lord. Because humans are limited in their knowledge and understanding, they like Job must learn to trust the Lord for what they do not and cannot comprehend. Brown notes well, “By provoking issues and questions as forcefully as it does, Job leads the reader to self-discovery and, thereby, to knowledge of God of a different sort.”²⁵

It is also vital to consider what is gained when Job is communicated effectively. Our congregations and classrooms are full of people in pain, and the book of Job resonates with their emotions and gives words to their feelings and fears. By preaching and teaching through this book we identify with and enter into the real struggles that people have. Job’s anguished laments, his bitter frustrations, and his daring questions are all points at which contemporary men and women can say, “Amen.” Sad to say, these modern-day Jobs too often have heard only the same kinds of platitudes, accusations, and irrelevancies that prompted Job to dismiss his friends as plasterers of lies and worthless physicians. By contrast Holbert exhorts, “When we preach, Job must be with us, his painful life must speak to ours, for in him speak the voices of millions of our brothers and sisters in this world. We must become Joban preachers, open to the painful truth of our own lives and the lives of others.”²⁶

In the book of Job, theology crashed into experience, and in that collision faith was forged. What Job learned in the biblical text can also become true in the contemporary context. The Jobs who hear our sermons and lectures and who read our papers and books face a barrage that threatens to obliterate their beliefs. However, by guiding them along the course trod by Job, we as scholars, preachers, and teachers can direct them toward the enlarged and deepened faith in God that became his. For they will learn, as Job did before them, and as God’s people throughout history have learned, that the path from

²² Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 29–30.

²³ Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 97.

²⁴ Cf. Daniel J. Estes, “Job 28 in its Literary Context,” *JESOT* 2.2 (2013): 151–64.

²⁵ Brown, “Introducing Job: A Journey of Transformation,” *Int* 53 (1999): 229.

²⁶ Holbert, *Preaching Job*, 162.

untested belief about God to genuine commitment to God passes through painful experience. This is the message of the book of Job that we must communicate effectively in the twenty-first century.