

SUBTLE SARCASM?

A DEFENSE OF THE VERACITY OF JOB'S REPENTANCE IN JOB 42:1-6

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A RESEARCH PAPER

PRESENTED TO

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF

OT512 -- POETS

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MAY 13, 2019

## Introduction

While many facets of the book of Job have long stumped the Christian church, what has not been disputed is the character of Job. Indeed, Job is held up as a paragon of patience in the midst of unfathomable pain and suffering, an exemplar for all Christians who follow in his steps. While Job does his fair share of wrestling with the character of God,<sup>1</sup> he has long been considered to have emerged with his integrity intact, responding to God's chastisement with appropriate humility and repentance in 40:3-5 and 42:1-6. Matthew Henry's assessment typifies a standard interpretation: "He is here thoroughly humbled for his folly and unadvised speaking, and it was forgiven him. Good men will see and own their faults at last, though it may be some difficulty to bring them to do this.... thus we must all answer the calls of God."<sup>2</sup> In this view, Job's repentance is legitimate and a model for the godly. Recently, however, some scholars have taken exception to this common (common sense, even?) interpretation of Job's response to God's chastisement.

In this paper, I will defend Job's response to God's rebukes as indicative of true repentance and submission to God's sovereignty. In particular, the Hebrew of 42:6 will be examined, since the grammar of this verse is the hinge on which scholars hang their argument that Job is not actually repenting but either retracting previous statements about God or maintaining a defiant position against him.<sup>3</sup> While I will address these concerns regarding the language of verse 6, I will also ground my argument in the context of Job's response to God as a whole; not only 42:1-5, but also 40:3-5. Indeed, Job's response in 40:3-

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<sup>1</sup> For some of Job's lowest moments in his estimation of the character of God, see Job 3:23; 6:4; 9:16-17; 10:3; 16:9, 11; 19:6; 21:15; 30:19-23

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revel Company, n.d.), 3:229.

<sup>3</sup> Job's response in 40:4-5 is also analyzed in a negative fashion, but these criticisms will be addressed as well.

5 sets a trajectory of repentance that continues in 42:1-5 and finds its completion in 42:6. Any questions regarding grammar of 42:6 are in part clarified by Job's response up to that point. Following a subsequent examination of the grammar of 42:6, I will close with theological implications concerning the validity of Job's repentance.

### **Historical Context**

Job remains an enigma in the world of Old Testament scholarship. I will proceed on the assumption that the version we have is the original composition; hence, the quality of Job's final statement to God and the question of whether it constitutes repentance must be judged from the wide perspective of the book as a whole.<sup>4</sup> The question of dating is a complicated one<sup>5</sup> but ultimately is not germane to the subject matter of this paper.

Ultimately, the admittedly ambiguous nature of introductory matters is not concerning given the decidedly unambiguous nature of the book's theme and its focus on human suffering. After a two-chapter prologue in which God grants Satan the freedom to afflict Job, first by taking his possession and children, then by afflicting his health, Job and his friends engage in a repetitive, unproductive debate circling on whether or not Job is a truly innocent sufferer. The dialogue breaks down in the third cycle of speeches, evidenced in Bildad's shortened speech in chapter 25 and the absence of a third speech by Zophar.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a fair treatment of the question of the integrity of the book of Job from a conservative, evangelical perspective see Hywel R. Jones, *Job* (Webster: Evangelical Press, 2000), 16–17. Jones leaves open the possibility that the book expanded over time but points out that no single suggestion of such an expansion has any grounding in manuscript history or has commanded scholarly consensus.

<sup>5</sup> See Richard P Belcher, *Job: The Mystery of Suffering and God's Sovereignty* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2017), 13–14. Belcher argues that aspects of Job's life – that his wealth was measured in abundance of animals, that he acted as priest for his family, and the description of his death – indicate that the story is set in the patriarchal period, between 2000-1700 B.C. Belcher acknowledges that the question of dating is difficult, but he concludes that the sum of evidence weighs in favor of an earlier date, probably prior to the proliferation of wisdom literature during Solomon's reign.

## The LORD's First Speech and Job's Response in 40:3-5

After Elihu's lengthy speech in chapters 32-37 in which he attempts to correct Job while defending God's justice, the LORD appears out of a whirlwind in 38:1. Immediately God puts Job on the defensive, charging that Job "darkens counsel by words without knowledge" (38:2).<sup>7</sup> Though the LORD had spoken well of Job to Satan (1:8; 2:3), now he instigates a "fearful interrogation," in which Job is challenged to a greater degree than he was by his friends.<sup>8</sup> In his first speech, the LORD does not take up the question of his justice directly, but rather, he exposes the exceedingly limited scope of Job's knowledge of creation. This speech is broken down into two sections: the LORD's creation of the world (38:4-24) and his maintenance of the world (38:25-39:30); the two sections correspond to the LORD's identity as Creator and Lord.<sup>9</sup>

Though the LORD is direct and persistent in his interrogation of Job, at the conclusion of his first speech, he does what none of the friends did in their own speeches: invite a response from Job (40:2). Though the LORD invites Job's response, his invitation is directed towards a **יִסּוֹר** (a "faultfinder") and a **מוֹכִיחַ** (one who "reproves" or "reproaches").<sup>10</sup> Job is permitted to respond but his integrity has been called into question. In essence, the question is, "Will Job persist in this contending with God?"<sup>11</sup> Job's response will be indicative as to

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<sup>6</sup> Belcher considers the implications of the absence of Zophar's speeches, concluding that, rather than try to reconstruct the text to generate a complete third cycle, it is best to leave the text as it is and accept the incompleteness as pointing towards an impasse (*Job*, 167–69).

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotations are taken from the ESV.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, *Job*, 265.

<sup>9</sup> John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 489.

<sup>10</sup> William Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 134, 137.

whether he maintains his dissatisfaction with God's reign over the world and his life. His response is telling: "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further." (40:4-5).

What do we make of Job's response? Wilson calls it "ambiguous at best," noting that there is no admission of wrongdoing.<sup>12</sup> Janzen sees warrant to render יִן as "if," making the response intentionally ambiguous so that God can take it either way.<sup>13</sup> Janzen's case is both lexically and theologically unlikely. Job would not likely consider an ambiguous response to have any traction with God. It is true that passages in Job's speech in chapter 9 communicate that Job does not consider a case against God to be fruitful, but the inherent view of God found there<sup>14</sup> renders such double talk with God to be even more preposterous. Janzen's view also does not take into account the  $x + 1$  formula of verse 5, which is a tacit recognition that he had said more than he should have.<sup>15</sup>

Estes rightly notes that while Job refers to himself as "unworthy" (per his translation) and not guilty, it is clear that he feels the weight of the LORD's questions. He is moving towards humility – a step in the right direction.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the absence of a direct admission

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<sup>11</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 2:349.

<sup>12</sup> Lindsay Wilson, *Job*, THOTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 191.

<sup>13</sup> J. Gerald Janzen, *Job*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 242. In his interpretation, Janzen paraphrases Job's question as: "Suppose/if I am of no account [as your questions imply]; what shall I answer you?"

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Job 9:4: "If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times. He is wise in heart and mighty in strength – who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?"

<sup>15</sup> Robert L. Alden, *Job*, NAC 11 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 392.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel J. Estes, *Job*, Teach the Text (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2013), 243.

of guilt should not be pressed too far.<sup>17</sup> The substance of the LORD's first speech is that the illegitimacy of Job's contention with God is premised on his finitude. Job's admission to being of small account constitutes an implicit acknowledgement that the LORD is correct in his critique of Job. In this case, Job's commitment to silence does not reveal complete repentance but it does suggest (at minimum) subservient agreement with God.<sup>18</sup> When viewed in the broader context of the flow of the book – specifically that a second divine speech follows – we can perhaps surmise that Job is still wrestling with his desire to confront God.<sup>19</sup> Hence, a second divine speech is necessary. Though Job has not yet renounced his previous negative statements about God, his silence shows that he is in a more reasonable frame.

#### **The LORD's Second Speech and Job's Response, Part I (42:2-4)**

The LORD begins his second speech in a more direct fashion, asking Job whether he will put God in the wrong -- whether he will condemn God so that Job will be right (40:8). Some take this question as indication that God does not consider Job to have shown regret in his prior answer.<sup>20</sup> While there may be some truth in this assessment, a better way is to see this opening question as framing the content of the second speech. Whereas God's first

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<sup>17</sup> Most scholars read too much into Job's silence, either concluding it amounts to tacit repentance or a refusal to submit to God's argumentation. Belcher strikes a proper balance by taking Job's silence to mean that while Job does not make any renunciations, he has felt the impact of the LORD's speech and has been reduced to silence [Job, 292].

<sup>18</sup> Wilson argues that Job's decision to remain silent probably implies that he will not continue to press his protests further or add an additional argument -- not that he is admitting to wrongdoing or wrong speech (*Job*, 192). However, this interpretation does not take into account Job's persistence in defending himself in the rest of the book. That 40:4-5 marks the first time Job backs down from a challenge indicates that the LORD's questions have pierced through his self-righteous armor.

<sup>19</sup> Marvin E. Tate, Jr., "Job 32:1-42:6," in *Esther-Psalms*, vol. 4 of *Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press), 144.

<sup>20</sup> Tremper Longman, *Job*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 439. See also Roger N. Whybray, *Job*, Readings (Sheffield: Sheffield Acad. Press, 1998), 166.

speech centered on his creative power and wisdom, his second speech focuses on his sovereign control of the world as he executes justice. The heart of the issue is responsibility:<sup>21</sup> is God capable in administrating the universe in a just, orderly fashion? Job had implied in his speeches that God was not, which is why the LORD's second speech centers on two large, terrifying animals: the Behemoth and the Leviathan. The subject of this paper does not require us to be concerned with debates regarding the nature of these animals; what is pertinent, though, is the meaning of the extended descriptions of these animals, which is that only God is capable of subduing these creatures.<sup>22</sup> If Job cannot control even these brutes (though large and terrifying ones they may be!), then it is foolish for him to suppose himself to be more capable than God of governing the universe as a whole.

Job's response in 42:2-6 has been met with wide disagreement. Habel lays out four different ways to interpret it: (1) total repentance as Job surrenders his will to God's (2) reconciliation as Job comes to a deeper understanding of God's ways (3) a "tongue in cheek" confession to pacify God (4) outright rebellion against God whom Job now sees as a cruel tyrant.<sup>23</sup> Views 1 and 2 might on the surface have a fair degree of overlap, but the key difference is that in the second view, Job does not admit to any sin; he rather walks back his previous statements about God having come to a better understanding of God. The third view has been touched on previously and does not hold water given the larger context of the book and the way Job is presented; if Job has been so outspoken in his criticisms of God, why would he now resort to underhanded dealings?<sup>24</sup> Apart from support for the ironic view

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<sup>21</sup> Francis I Anderson, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 286.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, *Job*, 277.

<sup>23</sup> Norman C Habel, *The Book of Job*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 578.

strongly rooted in the grammar of Job’s response, there is little reason to consider it. So the first and fourth view, positive and negative, will be taken into consideration.

There can be little debate that the statement of verse 2 constitutes an acceptance of the LORD’s argument.<sup>25</sup> Habel views Job’s use of מְזִמָּה to be a friendly barb, on the grounds that it is often used to imply evil and devious scheming.<sup>26</sup> This assertion, though, is an overreach. The noun can at times refer to evil plans of man, but when used of God a better sense is that of deliberations or plans.<sup>27</sup> Job’s two quotations of the LORD’s speeches (38:2 and 40:7) also indicate deference to God.<sup>28</sup> He is admitting that he fits the bill – that it is he who has obscured speech without knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Wilson, who takes a less positive view of Job’s second response, considers his words, “Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,” to be the closest he comes to a legitimate confession.<sup>30</sup>

Not to be missed is Job’s utterance that he failed to understand נִפְלְאוֹת. The root is פִּלַּה, and in the niphāl it means “be treated differently, be distinguished.”<sup>31</sup> Usually it is used in the Old Testament to refer to “a distinctive dealing revelatory of God’s presence and

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<sup>24</sup> Belcher, *Job*, 310.

<sup>25</sup> Hartley notes that the formula יָדַעְתִּי often begins a supplicant’s response to an oracle that came in response to a prayer or lament. He goes on to say, “Job’s concession means that he believes that everything occurring on earth takes place within the framework of the divine wisdom” (*Book of Job*, 535). Jones sees an allusion to Job’s confident declaration, “I know that my Redeemer lives,” in 19:25 (*Job*, 283). See also Habel, who considers Job’s יָדַע statement a recognition of God’s superior wisdom (*Book of Job*, 578-79).

<sup>26</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 581. Delitzsch takes מְזִמָּה to refer to Job’s realization is no “monstrous injustice” but “profoundly elaborated,” a well-digested, wise עֲצָה of God” (*Book of Job*, 380).

<sup>27</sup> Holladay, *Hebrew Lexicon*, 189.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, *Job*, 284.

<sup>29</sup> Longman, *Job*, 449.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, *Job*, 202–3.

<sup>31</sup> Holladay, *Hebrew Lexicon*, 292.



power” though in the psalms it works off the root פִּלַע, which has the connotation of wondrousness.<sup>32</sup> It is likely that this specific nuance is in play here as well. That Job would use this word to refer to the knowledge of God does not cohere well with the notion that his response should be taken as caustic, sarcastic, or rebellious towards God. Rather, it is a humble recognition that God’s wisdom is beyond Job’s ability to grasp, marking a stark turn from his previous assertions that God had been unfair to him.<sup>33</sup> Lawson observes, “Where previously the ways of God were disturbing to him, the knowledge of his sovereign ways was now wonderful to his soul.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, we have strong evidence in verses 2-4 that Job has experienced a change of mind regarding the character of God; this change of mind comports well with our argument that Job enunciates repentance in verse 6.

### **Job’s Response, Pt. II (42:5-6)**

The continuation of Job’s response in verses 5-6 must be treated separately. The presence of עַל־כֵּן reveals a tight logical connection between the controversial verse 6 and the seemingly more straightforward verse 5. There are two main views of Job’s declaration that now his eyes have seen God. Arguments that Job comes short of expressing repentance in verse 6 are based in part on this exclamation. Wilson suggests that Job’s chief wish was for God to present himself. Now that God has done that very thing, Job’s needs have been met, and he can move on.<sup>35</sup> Given this understanding of verse 5, Wilson then sees Job’s

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<sup>32</sup> Elmer A Martens, *NIDOTTE*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 9. print. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 3:620.

<sup>33</sup> Hartley, *Book of Job*, 536.

<sup>34</sup> Steven J. Lawson, *Job*, Holman Old Testament Commentary v. 10 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 365. Whybray, too, notes that this phrase reveals a noticeable change in Job’s understanding of God (Job, 171).

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, *Job*, 203.

words in verse 6 as a retraction of his legal suit against God (see Job’s use of אָנֹכִי in the context of a legal suit in 31:13): “now that God has come he wants to turn aside from what is no longer appropriate.”<sup>36</sup> Habel agrees with this assessment – that to see God, for Job, is to have his challenge answered.<sup>37</sup> But more is present in verse 5; in line with verse 4, it signals a paradigm shift in Job’s view of God, not just an expression of satisfaction that his desire for God’s presence had been granted. Some question why Job would use the language of “seeing” God, since strictly speaking, Job did not actually see God. The key is the contrast between hearing and seeing. The Hebrew שָׁמַע denotes a report – though not necessarily a true one. That Job had gone from merely hearing reports about God to now having seen God with his eyes signals that he now understands God’s true nature in a way he didn’t before.<sup>38</sup> This new understanding of God is not that of a mortal recognizing a deity for the horror that he really is, as is argued in the negative view, but that of a believer embracing that God’s ways are more “wonderful” than he had previously conceived.

No small amount of ink has been spilled concerning the proper translation and consequent interpretation of verse 6. Morrow reviews what he considers to be three valid options<sup>39</sup> and concludes that there is ultimately an insoluble ambiguity, intentionally

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>37</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 582. Moreover, Habel contends, “For Job, however, Yahweh’s appearance in person was sufficient vindication of Yahweh’s integrity and clear evidence of his goodwill. Job therefore decides not to ‘answer’ and press his suit but to ‘retract’ his case.” Framing Job’s response in this light fails to take into consideration the relatively harsh nature of the LORD’s appearance. The content of the LORD’s speeches suggests his purpose was more to confront Job than to pacify his frustration or provide reassurance.

<sup>38</sup> Whybray, *Job*, 170.

<sup>39</sup> William Morrow, “Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105.2 (1986): 211–12. The three options are (1) “Wherefore I retract (*or* I submit) and I repent on (*or* on account of) dust and ashes” (2) “Wherefore I reject *it* (implied object in v 5), and I am consoled for dust and ashes” and (3) “Wherefore I reject and forswear dust and ashes.”

constructed so that it can be interpreted in multiple ways according to the reader's theological inclinations.<sup>40</sup> His apprehension to come to a firm conclusion, however, is not shared -- though to be sure, there is disagreement. The difficulty begins with what to make of the Hebrew verb **סָנַן**. The meaning of the verb is sufficiently clear (reject or despise or something similar). What is problematic, though, is the absence of a direct object. The KJV and ESV translate the verb reflexively, but nowhere else in the Old Testament is **סָנַן** used in a reflexive sense.<sup>41</sup> Various other potential objects are suggested, including an attitude of self-righteousness,<sup>42</sup> his words spoken about God,<sup>43</sup> Job's former lawsuit against God,<sup>44</sup> or even possibly God himself.<sup>45</sup>

The question of why **סָנַן** lacks an object is important, but Pope reminds us of a relevant exegetical principle: "When the object of the verb is clear from the context it does not need to be expressed."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the context suggests that what Job rejects or despises, while not himself, strictly speaking, is his own misapprehensions about the character of God. Suggesting that Job rejects this God whose wonder surpasses him (v. 4) simply doesn't compute. Alden is right to see a progression from Job's confession of unworthiness in 40:4.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Morrow, "Consolation," 225.

<sup>41</sup> Dale Patrick, "Translation of Job 42:6," *Vetus Testamentum* 26.3 (1976): 369. On the other hand, Hartley sees a connection between the verb and the dust and ashes referenced at the end of the verse. In this view, Job accepts that he is no better than the dust and ashes on which he stands (*Book of Job*, 537).

<sup>42</sup> Lawson, *Job*, 366. He takes **סָנַן** to mean "despise."

<sup>43</sup> Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, AB 15 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 290. In Pope's view, Job's words (supplied as the object in JPS), stand for his former attitude and utterances.

<sup>44</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 582. Belcher also prefers to take the object of **סָנַן** (*Job*, 311).

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, *Job*, 205.

<sup>46</sup> Pope, *Job*, 290.

A fair conclusion to draw is that, since the content of God’s second speech is organically related to his first speech, taking Job’s words here as a radical breach from his expression of humility after God’s first speech is simply not reasonable.

The remaining question is what to make of the final phrase **וַיִּתְּנֵם עַל-עָפָר וָאֵפֶר** in 42:6b. The ESV renders the phrase, “and repent in dust and ashes.” Almost all other English translations translate the Hebrew similarly. Many commentators object to translating **נִחַמְתִּי** as “I repent,” saying “relent” or some similar variation concerning the changing of one’s mind is more appropriate.<sup>48</sup> If “relent” is the proper translation, the sense would be that Job is simply abandoning his desired litigation against God and is willing to return to life as normal.<sup>49</sup> This interpretation is supported by the fact that **נָחַם** is most frequently used with God as the subject (who has no cause to repent), and thus that repentance cannot be in view. This lexical observation is important – and it is true that the more common Hebrew verb for “repent,” **שׁוּב**, is not used – but repentance is well within the range of acceptable glosses for **נָחַם**.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the cases of **נָחַם** with God as the subject cannot be applied as a hard and fast rule to its uses with human subjects.<sup>51</sup>

The broader context of Job’s response would indicate that he is in fact expressing remorse and repentance. It is objected that if Job had sin to confess, the whole story would

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<sup>47</sup> Alden, *Job*, 408.

<sup>48</sup> Whybray, *Job*, 171. See also Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 537.

<sup>49</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 583.

<sup>50</sup> In addition to “repent,” Holladay also lists “regret” as an acceptable term, which, though not as strong as “repent,” is still oriented towards contrition (*Hebrew Lexicon*, 234).

<sup>51</sup> 1 Samuel 15:29 says as much: “The Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man that he should have regret.”

collapse, since Job is intended to be presented as the innocent sufferer.<sup>52</sup> However, proponents of the view that Job is repenting do not argue in such way. Job is not repenting of any sin that led to his suffering, but he is confessing a change of mind about God – a change from a mindset characterized by bitterness which Job now regrets.<sup>53</sup> God did essentially accuse Job of sin in charging him with foolishness and faultfinding (38:2, 40:2).<sup>54</sup> Any lexical difficulties surrounding the precise sense of אָנַח can be solved by this widening of the scope. On the other hand, Patrick argues that the larger context of Job’s response indicates the reverse: that Job would not be expressing repentance giving the largely positive view of God in his prior response: “If all the declarations in Job’s final speech are praises of God, we would not expect him to express his desire to recant and show remorse in verse 6. God has changed Job’s lament into praise, and this last bistic expresses Job’s intention of abandoning the posture of mourning.”<sup>55</sup> Patrick’s view, though, amounts to a false dichotomy of praise and repentance. In fact, it was Job’s new vision of God which led to the contrition behind his repentance.<sup>56</sup>

There is the remaining question, though, of how the phrase עַל-עָפָר וָאֵפֶר figures into the issue of what Job is saying. Various translations have been submitted, given the many possible meanings of עַל. Wilson suggests the proper translation is “repent *concerning* dust and ashes,” (emphasis mine) meaning that Job is ready to move on from his present status as

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<sup>52</sup> Anderson, *Job*, 292.

<sup>53</sup> Alden, *Job*, 409. See also Longman, *Job*, 450.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, *Job*, 286.

<sup>55</sup> Patrick, “Translation of Job 42,” 371.

<sup>56</sup> Belcher, *Job*, 312.

lonesome sufferer and complaining mourner.<sup>57</sup> A more probable understanding is that “dust and ashes” refers to Job’s state of humiliation. What, though, is the nature of this humiliation which Job speaks of? Proponents of both sides (repentance or some other sort of response) cite the phrase as a piece of evidence in their favor. Thompson argues that it stands merely for the inherent weakness of the human condition: because Job has become aware of his low finitude compared to the vast grandeur of God, he “changes his mind” (the sense of **נָחַ** that Thompson takes) about his previous positions.<sup>58</sup> But the context of Job’s extreme suffering suggests that more is in view than the mere human condition; at minimum it refers to the social degradation of Job’s situation.<sup>59</sup> More than this, it indicates the veracity of Job’s repentance, that he will submit to God even while he is still cast down.<sup>60</sup> This interpretation is grammatically sound<sup>61</sup> and comports with one of the pressing questions of the book’s introduction: will God’s people worship him even if they are stripped of all his blessings? Is God worthy to be worshipped simply because of who he is?<sup>62</sup> Job willingness to repent and submit even “in dust and ashes” is a resounding yes.

### **Theological Implications and Conclusions**

Perhaps the most pertinent question for those who take Job to be anything less than repentant in 42:6 is what becomes of the message of the book. Jones points out what should

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<sup>57</sup> Wilson, *Job*, 206–7.

<sup>58</sup> David L Thompson, “Yet Another Try on Job 42:6,” *The Asbury Journal* 72.2 (n.d.): 141.

<sup>59</sup> Morrow, “Consolation,” 217.

<sup>60</sup> Belcher, *Job*, 313.

<sup>61</sup> Contrary to the efforts of commentators to substitute an alternate translation, the standard “repent in dust in ashes” of most English translations is grammatically satisfactory. Translating **עַל** as “in/on” is entirely appropriate.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Job 1:11; 2:5.

be blatantly obvious: “The very suggestion that Job was despising God is unnecessary and destructive of any harmony in the book, and therefore of any spiritual benefit to be derived from it.”<sup>63</sup> The place and value of Job in the canon comes into question if the book of Job ends with the titular character shaking his fist at God. But problems also arise for views that place Job somewhere between rebellious and repentant. If Job does not submit with contrition to God’s pointed objections in 38:2 and 40:2, 8, then the book ends in something of a stalemate. Job walks back his complaints but leaves with his righteousness and integrity intact. He concedes to God but does not bow the knee. Only if God’s challenge to Job really does end with Job repenting in dust and ashes can God alone get all the glory. When Job repents in dust and ashes, God’s people are compelled to join him, as all alike fall short in grumbling and complaining against God and his mysterious ways (Rom 3:23).

Nevertheless, the notion of Job ultimately being reduced to confession of sin is not inconsistent with his status as a righteous sufferer. James is right to commend the steadfastness of Job as a model for those enduring trial (James 5:11). No Christian is perfect in their response to suffering; indeed, “we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2). What establishes Job as a righteous sufferer is his persistence in seeking the Lord despite losing so much. When he stumbled into sin by speaking rash words amidst his grief, he “spoke of [the LORD] what is right” (42:7) – he turned from his error and repented.<sup>64</sup> Let all God’s people adopt Job as their model for perseverance and prayer amidst times of deep anguish, even as they look beyond Job to the truly righteous sufferer, whose devotion to his Father knew no fault or imperfection. Let us all echo Christ’s prayer: “Not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

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<sup>63</sup> Jones, *Job*, 286.

<sup>64</sup> Longman, *Job*, 459. See also Jones, *Job*, 293. For the view that the LORD’s vindication of Job centers on Job being right on the issue of his innocence, see Belcher, *Job*, 318.

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