Speaking Truthfully:
Job's Friends and Job

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One of the critical challenges of the book of Job lies in the apparent discord between the strident declarations of Job in the course of the poetic dialogues and God's affirmation of Job's words at the end of the book. Equally puzzling is the precise nature of God's stinging rebuke of the three friends. A resolution to these conundrums might rest in an alternative interpretation of the Hebrew in Job 42:7,8.

Key Words: retributive justice, Job's friends, Job, advocate, mediator, prayer

I. Introduction

Job's friends are often summarily dismissed as having little concern for the depth of his suffering and as being far too quick to condemn him on the assumption that his afflictions were the result of sin. While it is true that their theological pronouncements did not fit Job's circumstances, it is equally true that they all shared a basic traditional sense of divine justice without which the whole moral nature of the universe would be upended.1 The friends manifested an abiding concern to defend that system of divine retributive justice which, in their minds, was under attack with every utterance of Job. For his part, Job uttered such shocking words that numerous scholars have separated the poetic chapters from the narrative framework in which Job's integrity and piety were noted by God himself.2

Nevertheless, God threatened to unleash his anger against the friends for the way they spoke. He commanded them to bring a sacrifice and seek prayer offered by Job, while declaring that Job had spoken correctly (Job

The objective of this paper is briefly to explore the truths articulated both by the friends and by Job, and to suggest reasons for the strength of God’s rebuke of the friends as the narrative closes.

II. THE LITERARY CONTEXT

It is important at the outset to lodge these issues within the wider context of Job studies. As noted above, there are a number of literary features that have caused a majority of scholars to see this work as a composite of some sort. Most notable is the aforementioned incongruity between the narrative framework and the poetry, some of the finest but most difficult in the Hebrew Bible. Job’s character as described by God (Job 1:8 and 2:3) seems inconsistent with his turbulent speeches. In addition, apart from Job 12:9, the covenant name, Yahweh, does not appear in the cycle of dialogues. There is an apparent contradiction between God’s speeches in chaps. 38–41 which effectively put Job in his place and God’s affirmation of Job at the expense of his friends in the final chapter (Job 42:7–8). It is claimed that the final two-fold restoration of Job’s property and family subverts the entire point of the dialogues. Finally, why Satan, the real adversary of Job, did not appear in the cycle of dialogues.

3. While it might be suggested that Job’s “correct” speech is limited to his “repentance” in the preceding verse (42:6), that is not sufficient to explain the contrast with the friends. This must refer to the comprehensive contents of the soliloquies and the dialogue. See in this regard Duck-woo Nam, *Talking About God: Job 42:7–9 and the Nature of God in the Book of Job* (SBL 49; New York: Peter Lang, 2003). Fyall’s solution to this enigma was that Job’s utterances consistently acknowledged the supernatural cosmic realm, whereas those of the friends did not (Robert S. Fyall, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You: Images of Creation and Evil in the Book of Job* [NSBT 12; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002], 87–97).


5. Tryggev N. D. Mettinger, “The Enigma of Job: The Deconstruction of God in Intertextual Perspective,” *JNSL* 23, no. 2 (1997): 6–9, suggested that the author of Job is in dialogue with three different aspects of the traditional understanding of God and undermines each one of them.

6. See Dhorme, *Job*, Ixv–Ixxii, on the principles governing the use of the divine names in each section of the text. In this regard, Duck-woo Nam (*Talking About God*, 30 n. 56) observed that translating Job 42:7 as “… you have not spoken correctly about Me,” ties Yahweh together with El, Eloah, and Shaddai of the dialogues.

7. Polzin (“Framework,” 198) indicated that God’s choice to restore Job’s possessions and family confirmed what God had said concerning His sovereign power in chaps. 38–41. Job’s uprightness and God’s power were thus both confirmed by divine action. Furthermore, the restoration of Job’s physical health and social standing was the evidence that the trial was over
not reappear fully vanquished is likewise troubling. Instead, Job appeared to be subdued by his own Adversary whom he perceived to be God. 8 

Even within the poetic materials, there are complications. What appears to be the dissolution of the dialogue in the third cycle has prompted numerous commentators to reposition segments of those chapters. 9 The utterances of Elihu, characterized by distinctly different structural, stylistic, and linguistic features, are thought to be a later addition. 10 God’s speeches are also scrutinized and the second one sometimes fails to pass muster. 11 

Rather than representing a composite text, however, these literary complexities are indicative of the richness and depth of the characters as well as the knotty issue at hand. Already in the narrative of chaps. 1 and 2, the reader discerns Job’s profound fear of God that placed him in the role of an intercessor (Job 1:5) and his affirmation of God’s sovereign hold over all circumstances of life (Job 1:21; 2:10). These are convictions that continue to manifest themselves through the rest of the book. Reading the text as a whole, the anticipated tensions that would accompany long-term grief and suffering are echoed in the lengthy poetry; the dialogue is necessary for Job to work through the crisis. 12

III. Sound Doctrine Misapplied: Job’s Three Counselors

Job’s initial outburst in chap. 3 sets the stage for the counsel of Eliphaz and the ensuing dialogue. Eliphaz and Bildad the Shuhite each spoke three

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8. That is the case only if Leviathan is read solely as a natural creature. See, for example, Robert Gordis, The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 569–72. If, on the other hand, God’s description of Leviathan is intended to unmask the true source of evil, then there is closure. Fyall indicated that Leviathan is, in fact, revealed as “the adversary who has been masquerading as God throughout the book” (Now My Eyes Have Seen You, 167).

9. See S. R. Driver and George Buchanan Gray, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Book of Job, vol. 1 (ICC; New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1921), xxxvii–xl. Janzen suggested that perhaps the author deliberately dissolved the last cycle into a “confused tangle of incoherent voices—a formal way of paralleling the argument of Job that the hedge against chaos had given way and that disorder and evil in the world make clear understanding impossible” (J. Gerald Janzen, Job [IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1985], 172). For an overview of possible reconstructions of the third cycle of speeches, see Hartley, The Book of Job, 24–26, and Rowley, Job, 170–79.

10. Driver and Gray, Job, xl–xlviii, declared that the speeches were destructive to the developing dialogue. See also Pope, Job, xxvi–xxvii; Rowley, Job, 12–13; and Hartley, The Book of Job, 28–30.


12. See Janzen, Job, 24, 55, 59. The literary issues regarding the Elihu speeches and the second divine declaration are beyond the scope of this investigation.
times; Zophar limited himself or was limited to two speeches.\textsuperscript{13} The magnificent poetry of their discourses reveals the personality of the individuals.\textsuperscript{14} Their peculiar quirks were exacerbated as the frustration level rose with each outburst of Job. All were galled at the fact that Job did not respond “properly” to their wisdom and Job was equally frustrated that they had not really heard him (Job 21:2).

1. \textit{The Cycles of Dialogue}. In the first poetic cycle, the main focus of the friends was the defense of God’s justice as it “ought” to be. Eliphaz reaffirmed the stability of the moral realm: those who are innocent do not perish and those who are evil will reap its fruits. Bildad raised the tone to a harsh and personalized statement of the doctrine of retribution. “When your children sinned against [God], he gave them over to the penalty of their sin” (Job 8:4). When his turn came, Zophar acknowledged that Job had not been adequately answered by the declarations regarding God’s retributive justice because wisdom is complex and God’s ways are unknown (Job 11:5–9). Following that assertion, however, Zophar called Job to repentance, promising him the security that seemingly attended those who walked with God.\textsuperscript{15} There is an irony in his affirmation that God’s ways are hidden followed by his own clarity in speaking for God.\textsuperscript{16}

In the second cycle, each friend waxed eloquent on the terrible end awaiting the wicked, the intent being to scare Job into a proper attitude of repentance. Eliphaz boldly questioned Job’s wisdom, piety, devotion, and general integrity, and then built the next segment of his case, a fearsome description of the fate of the wicked (Job 15:20–26). Likewise, Bildad, after another rebuke to Job for his excessive speeches, devoted his entire discourse to the darkness, terrors, and calamity that await those who are truly wicked. Equally faithful to the pattern, Zophar also indulged in a long recital about the godless, covetous, and proud people who have oppressed the poor and grown rich at their expense. The devastating end of every evil person is sure (Job 20:11–29).

Because they could not scare Job into a confession by more oblique descriptions of “sinners in the hands of an angry God,” Eliphaz took it upon himself to accuse Job directly of grievous social sins (chap. 22). It was likely this false litany that compelled Job to his own self-defense in chaps. 29 and 13. Janzen (Job, 185) suggested that both Bildad and Zophar were so predictable by the time the third dialogue began that Job simply interrupted Bildad and sarcastically spoke his piece for him (Job 26:5–14), doing likewise with Zophar (Job 27:13–23). Another way of resolving the issue without dissecting the text is to propose that Job himself explored the vast complexities of God’s dealing with wicked people.

14. Newsom (The Book of Job, 130–31) noted that all three of the friends used language with great facility and their words demonstrate fluency with a rich tradition. Job’s language, by way of contrast, is brilliant poetry, but also broken.

15. As Hartley noted, Zophar took the final logical step in the doctrine of retribution, presuming Job was suffering for hidden sin (The Book of Job, 204).

31. Bildad refrained from any further direct comment on Job and simply reminded his audience that, in light of God’s sovereign dominion in the heavens, humankind has the status of a maggot (Job 25:6). Zophar said nothing at all.

2. Evaluating the Friends’ Responses. Job’s ongoing commentary regarding his friends was blistering. They added to his torment (Job 19:2) and they pursued him as badly as God did (Job 19:22). They were liars and would be best off if they kept silent (Job 13:4–5). He nailed the problem inherent in each attempt to counsel him: “Will you speak wickedly on God’s behalf? Will you speak deceitfully for him?” (Job 13:7). This is an adumbration of God’s rebuke to Eliphaz at the end; indeed, they had not spoken truthfully because their words for Job’s context were false. They erred in consistently slipping Job into their moral formulas, subtly at first but egregiously at the end. All of this, in effect, constituted “false testimony” because it ran counter to the public witness to his character (cf. Deut 19:16–19). The friends had to be held accountable for what they did know, Job’s long-term reputation and his own testimony. In keeping with Deuteronomy 19:19 regarding false testimony, punishment would be forthcoming and, in the end, God required of them a penitential sacrifice.

On another level, the friends not only spoke falsely about Job, but their words failed to acknowledge the dynamic cosmic dimension of what was happening. Job felt and expressed the reality of evil and its presence in the universe (Job 26:5–14). While the inherently moral nature of the universe does necessitate a basic sense of retributive justice, the friends inhabited a “flat deistic universe” and they failed to perceive and/or acknowledge the vast complexity of the powers and principalities in the heavenly court.

IV. The Patience of Job?

Robert Polzin declared that within the eighteen chapters of Job’s speeches are “some of the most anti-Yahwist sentiments of which we have any record in literature . . . [replete with] . . . audacity, defiance, and self-righteousness.”

1. Job’s Initial Outburst (chapter 3). God had set a boundary for Satan: he could not take Job’s life. At the precipice between life and death, Job’s torment was excessive and seemingly interminable. His very existence was anathema to him and he implored night, darkness, cloud, and deep shadow to overwhelm the light and the day of his birth. His agony and despair led him temporarily to the realm that he knew was aligned against God. In his sovereign act of creation (Gen 1), God had brought light and

17. Newsom (The Book of Job, 160) additionally linked this matter of false testimony with the command not to show partiality (Exod 23:2–8).
order from darkness and the void, but Job sought to undo the very order of the cosmos.\textsuperscript{20} Job ventured farther into the shadows by calling upon those who would raise Leviathan in the process of cursing days.\textsuperscript{21}

2. Job Wrestled with His Mortality. In anguish, Job oscillated between a strong desire for death and a fierce will to survive, to confront God, and to find hope in vindication. Job's testimony to God's gift of life (Job 10:12) gave way to his wish that he had not lived following his birth (Job 10:18) and a plea that God turn away from him so that he might have a fleeting moment of joy before the utter darkness of death (Job 10:21–22).

Job also searched for the reasons for his predicament, repeatedly returning to the very real possibility of his own sin (Job 13:23–26). He was at a loss to know whether he was guilty or innocent because shame was so bound up with his suffering (Job 10:15). Nevertheless, his conviction grew that he had been wronged, especially in light of the evidence that his life presented (Job 23:11–12; 27:1–6; chaps. 29 and 31). It was this desire to realize justice that turned his attention from the allure of death to the demand for vindication, moving the focus from his own suffering to his claims before his sovereign God.

3. The Implications of God's Sovereignty for Job. Although Job repeatedly expressed his disappointment with his friends (Job 6:14–27; 12:2–5; 13:2–12; 16:2–5; 19:2–6, 21–22; 26:2–4), most of his words were either addressed to God or protested the horrifying condition into which God had brought him. Job referred to God as Almighty (Shaddai) but not benignly so; instead, the Almighty's arrows were in him and the terrors of God were arrayed against him (Job 6:4). In tones of perplexed outrage, he questioned why the One who shaped him so carefully would destroy that product of his creativity (Job 10:8–12). God had wronged him, had devastated every aspect of his life, and had driven Job from the very social structures that defined his own identity, extended family, household servants, and intimate friends (Job 19:6–20). His former closeness with God (Job 29:2–5) not only changed to silence (Job 23:8–9); there was now apparent hostility (Job 23:14–17; 30:16–23), and Job anguished over his lost relationship with God.\textsuperscript{22}

Nevertheless, the deeper Job's darkness and the more dreadful his perception of God's sovereignty, the greater was his faith. In the midst of his strongest declarations of God's responsibility for his own plight (Job 9:30–31; 16:7–14) and the comprehensive evil in the world (Job 9:24; 21:1–

\textsuperscript{20} Hartley, \textit{The Book of Job}, 91.

\textsuperscript{21} μwy might also be read as μy (sea), indicating the poetic complexity and the levels of meaning woven into this context. Both meanings fit well.

\textsuperscript{22} The perplexity with which Job faced God's apparent disinterest is captured by Andersen: “Job . . . faces the agony of getting along with a God over whom he has absolutely no control or even influence” (Job, 124). Janzen (Job; 54) noted that the use of El, Eloah, and Shaddai in the dialogues along with the absence of Yahweh may represent Job's agony and doubt about God's covenant and parental relationship.
Job longed for a mediator, advocate, and intercessor (Job 9:33–34; 16:19–21)—one who could and would restore the lost relationship. Initially, his words were uncertain about the possibility of an arbitrator, even though he needed one so desperately. The tone of Job 9:33–35 is not hopeful: “There is no arbiter,” or “Would that there were . . .” The last line of v. 35 betrays his confusion; it literally reads “for I am not thus with me.” Because there was no recourse to a sufficient human arbitrator, Job knew that his witness and intercessor had to be found in heaven (Job 16:18–21). That meant that God was both Advocate and Adversary and Job’s faith had to be big enough to hold both of those truths.

Of all Job’s pleas for a mediating figure, none is better known, more beloved, or more ambiguous in the Hebrew than 19:25–27. What is clear, however, is Job’s confident expectation that his living Redeemer would rise up on his behalf and that he, Job, would see that event at some point with his own eyes. The term הָג (kinsman-redeemer) is carefully chosen, especially in light of the preceding verses that describe how Job’s literal kin had deserted him. Even though Job lived outside the Israelite context, his story was infused with the spirit and worldview of the people of Israel. Their foundational experience was the Exodus on which all the other references to redemption build. As Job saw it, God would defend and deliver him even as it was God who afflicted him. That is the paradox with which Job wrestled throughout and his expressions were founded in his knowledge of the vastness of God’s sovereignty.

4. Distinguishing Job from His Friends. Given the brief summaries above, what can be said about the distinctive tone and contents of the friends’ counsel and Job’s speeches? The friends spoke very passionately about what they believed. Job’s words burst forth from his experience of the God in whom he believed. Each was deeply emotional, and often the passion rose from feeling assaulted or offended. When Job rejected the counsel of the friends, their pride was threatened and their attempts to defend God were increasingly attempts to bolster their own confidence. Job, too, responded from wounds to his person and pride. Everything he was had been reduced to nothing.

What is a most striking difference, superficial as it might seem, is that the friends talked solely to Job about God in the most pious terms, admonishing him to pray to God in repentance lest the dismal fate of the wicked
in a moral universe overtake him as well. Job, on the other hand, talked frankly about God as he attempted to understand the horror that had overtaken him, but he also appealed again and again to God and to evidence of his intimate relationship with God. In fact, this pattern had emerged long before the dialogue began. Job's practice of offering sacrifices on behalf of his children demonstrated at the outset that he was in the habit of directing his attention to God. It may be this long-standing character trait of Job that lay behind God's response to Eliphaz, part of which was the call for Job to intercede for the friends, just as he had done for his children.

V. God's Responses to Job and His Friends

God answered Job with words—lots of them—which served to silence Job, affirm God's absolute jurisdiction over the entire created order, and rebuke the friends who had so maligned both Job and God. In addition, God acted. He restored to Job all the sources of his physical well-being and social standing and, in keeping with Torah stipulations in the case of theft or inadequately guarded property, paid back double (Exod 22:4–9).

The exquisite structure and content of God's verbal tour through His created order in chaps. 38–41 are beyond the scope of this paper. The same is true of the wide-ranging interpretations of Job's final response to God and whether it constituted an about-face from his adamant demands for vindication, repentance from what he now perceived to be sinful words, or ongoing disdain for and rebellion against God. The primary focus here is on the implications of 42:7–8 in light of what each of the participants said in the course of the soliloquies and dialogues.

26. Andersen noted this distinctive, stating that it makes Job the only "authentic theologian in the book" (Job, 97–98, 221). Dale Patrick, "Job's Address of God," ZAW 91 (1979): 269, made the same observation, noting that fully 54 verses in the dialogue chapters are addressed by Job to God whereas the total for the companions is zero.

27. Underlying God's verbal response are the assumptions that there is a Designer who knows and binds together all of life's processes and that life on earth is not chaotic. Further, the power of God holds in check those emblems of evil, Behemoth and Leviathan (Fyall, Now My Eyes Have Seen You, 167–74; Mettinger, "The Enigma of Job," 10–14). Equally important, the universe does not revolve around humankind. There is a profound sense of God's transcendence and utter majesty; His ways are inexplicable. Tsevat resolved the interpretive conundrum of the book by concluding that God's response at the end is a definitive declaration that the principle of retributive justice is not the foundation of reality in the universe, even though it is a societal ideal. Once that principle is given up, the problem of the book disappears. "...the complex world of matter and ideas, unlike the simple world of pure matter, is not governed by the category of cause-and-effect..." (Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," 28). Nevertheless, Tsevat's case seems to fail with his declaration that justice is an ideal to be realized in society. If it is not part of the moral fabric of the universe, there is no foundation for imparting it as an ideal.

1. The Interpretation of 42:7–8.

After Yahweh spoke these words to Job, Yahweh said to Eliphaz the Temanite: My anger has burned against you and your two friends because you have not spoken to Me in the right manner as my servant Job has. Now, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer a burnt offering for yourselves, and Job my servant will pray for you. Only then will I accept him [his prayer] and avoid doing harm to you, because you have not spoken unto me in the right manner as my servant Job has.

There are three lexical and syntactical issues in this set of verses that must be addressed. They are evident in the translation I have presented, and the first two possibly have implications for the interpretation of the entire text of Job.29

First, while modern translations uniformly render this dual testimony about Job’s friends and Job as a matter of speaking the truth about God, the Hebrew is simply which, in its most general usage, indicates motion or direction toward, either physical or mental.31 It is quite clear that a preposition that is so extensively used as this one has a wide range of nuanced meanings and “with regard to” can be one of them.32 It might, however, not necessarily be the best rendition here.

A survey of the usage of plus in the Hebrew Bible indicates that 435 times it clearly means “speak to . . . ”33 There are only seven instances where this combination must be translated “speak about . . . .”34 An additional thirteen passages might be best interpreted if both “unto” and “concerning” (or “against”) could be embedded in the translation.35 The case is

29. See Stanley Porter’s summary of the various interpretive resolutions in “The Message of the Book of Job: Job 42:7b as Key to Interpretation?” Evangelical Quarterly 63 (1991): 291–304. Porter favors interpreting this commendation of Job’s speeches as referring only to 42:2–6 and his repentance particularly with regard to his previous speeches in the dialogues. He adds, however, that Job was correct in protesting and questioning as well as in his repentance.

30. See the NIV, NASB, ESV, KJV, JPS, NRSV as representative examples.


32. Driver and Gray, Job, 2:348, claimed that the text should be emended to read instead of (1 Sam 3:12; 1 Kgs 16:12). See also Gordis, The Book of Job, 494, who noted that the two prepositions, and , frequently interchange. Dhorme, Job, 648, makes a case for translating it “speak on the subject of” based on Jer 40:16b.

33. Most of these are third person, masculine, singular forms in either the perfect or imperfect with waw-prefix, or they are imperative or infinitive construct forms. In fact, the second person, masculine plural form appears only here in Job and in two other passages (Exod 12:32 and Num 14:28). Neither of those is followed by .

34. 1 Sam 3:12; Isa 16:13; Jer 27:13; 40:2, 16; 50:1; 51:12. Jer 40:2 might be best translated “against.”

strengthened by consulting the earliest translations of this text. The LXX reads ἐνώπιον μου in v. 7 which means “facing, to the front of, face-to-face, in person," it leaves the phrase out of v. 8. The Targum on Job reads, with the clear meaning of “unto.” Sa’adiah Ga’on, a Jewish commentator from the tenth century, noted that the Hebrew has “for you did not speak to me that which was true,” declaring that because the friends impugned Job’s character, theirs was an ethical, not theological sin. One additional literary point may be added at this juncture. These two declarations in Job 42:7, 8 are “framed” by the same grammatical structure meaning “speak to.” Job 42:7a reads “After the LORD spoke these words to Job . . .” and Job 42:9b indicates that the friends “did as the LORD commanded them . . .” (רבד אליהם). In sum, Job repeatedly addressed God while the friends never made any appeal, whatsoever, on behalf of Job to the God whom they were defending. Perhaps God’s rebuke started with that crucial omission. That does not rule out the discussion of the rightness or truth of what each party was articulating. In fact, as demonstrated in the previous two sections of this paper, that is eminently important. Nevertheless, intrinsic to the Hebrew expression could well be both meanings. It is only in the process of translation that a decision must be made regarding which of several nuances to select.

The second challenge is to determine just what לְנֵהַ נְכָה (a niph'al feminine singular participle) means in this context. This is the crux of the perceived tension between this affirmation of Job and God’s accusation that Job darkens counsel with ignorant words (Job 38:2). The issue is how the substance of Job’s speech could be both ignorant and correct. The verbal root means “to be set, established, or fixed.” In Ps 5:10 [Hebrew; 5:9 English], לְנֵהַ נְכָה clearly refers to “that which is right.” Here it might also be used substantively with the implication that the friends have

36. See Duck-woo Nam, Talking About God, 14-15, for a thorough presentation of the early versions.
38. Marcus Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (New York: Pardes, 1950), 701. The significant clause reads "אתה לא חלחת את נחלהם (v. 7). The passage is not in the fragments of the Job Targum from Qumran.
40. It is of interest that this fits with the observations of Andersen to the effect that this was a distinguishing feature between the friends and Job, even though Andersen did not draw that conclusion into his translation and interpretation of these verses. See above n. 26.
41. See n. 35.
42. Duck-woo Nam claimed that לְנֵהַ נְכָה has to do with the “constructive” nature of Job’s speech rather than its specific content. This interpretation helps to smooth the irregularity between Job 38:2 and Job 42:7. Job’s speeches were not destructive. Rather, he took a new look at the God of power and freedom rather than simply the God of justice and mercy (Talking About God 23-25, 189).
43. BDB, 465.
not spoken to God what is right. It is equally possible, however, to read this participial form adverbially, meaning “to have spoken correctly.” In Biblical Hebrew, a participle used substantively after a verb may describe more precisely the manner in which an action takes place. Putting these first two matters together, it may be that God declared unequivocally (two times) that speaking correctly meant speaking to him, and in the process properly representing both Job’s situation and God himself. Job did so; the friends did not, suggesting that, in addition to their limited view of the situation, they completely lacked the relationship that infused Job’s every utterance.

Finally, the third clause of v. 8, beginning with צוה, is syntactically awkward and could be potentially troubling if it suggests the possibility that God might consider “doing with them folly” (Work of the hands). While צוה generally introduces an exception to a preceding negative clause, here it seems best to translate it as “only.” In other words, it was only because Job would pray for them that God would restrain his anger to which he referred in the preceding verse. צוה means “senselessness, disgrace, or disgraceful folly.” The idiom, צוה, appears frequently with the sense of doing a morally reprehensible thing. In regard to Job 42:8, the prospect of God as the subject of this activity is unnerving. Thus, translations and interpretations are inclined to preserve God’s integrity by putting the force of צוה on the friends. God would “expose you and punish you as צוה because of your utterances about me.” An equally paraphrastic interpretation has God threatening to deal with the friends according to their folly, assuming an absent pronominal suffix on “folly.”

Nevertheless, reading the plain meaning of צוה, God himself was taking responsibility for potentially doing something in the realm of

44. The term rendered “truth” in 42:7 then refers to what is correct and consistent with facts (cf Deut 17:4; 1 Sam 23:23). In other words, Job’s words correspond with reality. In this regard, the LXX is of interest. Rather than precisely repeating the same clause as we find in the Hebrew, there is an interpretive development in v. 8. Note the significant clauses of both verses:

V. 7 οὐ γὰρ ἔλαλησαν εἰς ἡμᾶς τὸν λόγον μου ἢ τὴν φρονήσιν μου Ταφ
V. 8 οὐ γὰρ ἔλαλησαν τὴν φρονήσιν κατὰ τὴν ἡμᾶς τὴν φρονήσιν Ιάβ

In the first declaration, God contrasts their lack of speaking truth to Him with the fact that Job had done so. In the second, the focus seems to be on their failure to speak truth concerning or on behalf of (κατὰ) Job.

45. GKC §118m, pp. 374–75. See also GKC §100c, p. 294 and BHIS 10.2.2e, which states that the accusative of manner describes the way an action is performed.

46. GKC §163d, p. 501; BDB, 475. Dhorme, Job, 648, modified the expression to צוה and simply translated it “then.”

47. BDB, 615.


folly if prayer and sacrifice did not intervene. And this “folly” would have been the punishment of well-meaning defenders of God’s justice. How could this be? Perhaps because God’s justice ultimately does ensure appropriate and measured punishment for sin, the wrong done to Job by their words necessitated an equivalent punishment for them, extraordinary and disgraceful as it might have seemed.

2. What Kind of Response Was This? How are we to understand these words of God, especially with respect to the audacious things Job had actually said to God in contrast to the apparent orthodoxy of the friends? The investigation thus far suggests two parallel avenues, those of content and relationship. Clearly, the content of each contributor to the dialogue is crucial. “[T]he friends demonstrate . . . the folly of arguing from a limited theological perspective on reality and pursuing that argument to its logical absurdity.” On the other side, God’s endorsement of Job’s words silences those who say that we ought not articulate those difficult truths about the apparently gratuitous evil infesting our fallen world. That had been implicitly the position of the friends who were unnerved by the force of his protest. It is evident that God welcomes the exercise of moral judgment that was the focus of Job’s verbal quest. What Job said represented reality, although it was an incomplete picture, as is that of any human observer. Job’s expressed anguish and his refusal to back down were what prompted the unparalleled revelation of God in the whirlwind, and what God said at that point was only that Job spoke in ignorance (38:2).

That leads to the matter of relationship. Job was audacious and honest and his deepest concern was his life with God—not his wealth or health. The honest confrontation of ambiguity, fear, and injustice occur only in a personal relationship. Toward that end, Job spoke to God. What’s more, Job had sought an advocate, one who would speak on his behalf, also to God. Intercession had been a pattern in his own life but no human intercessor was found for him even though he repeatedly expressed his long-
ing for one. That is where the friends failed so miserably and that is what prompted God's rebuke and declaration that, in the great irony of the closure, Job, so greatly in need of their intercession, would pray for them lest they be destroyed.

Even so, that failure meant that Job would articulate his belief in the greatest Advocate, the Kinsman-Redeemer whom he would see with his own eyes and who would fully restore the shattered relationship (Job 19:25–27). In the rich interweaving of adumbrations throughout this text, here is the culmination. That perfect Advocate, the sinless Word of God, would and does speak as Intercessor on behalf of his friends.