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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

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Is God good? A Study on the Person and Work of Yahweh in the Book of Job

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In one of last century's most loved stories, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis writes of Susan and Lucy getting ready to meet Aslan the lion, who is the Christ-figure. Two talking animals, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, prepare the children for the encounter. "Oh," said Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie," said Mrs. Beaver. "And make no mistake, if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most, or else just silly."

"Then isn't he safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you!"¹

Today, scholarly debate rages over Yahweh's goodness. There seems to be no challenge over whether or not God is safe, but there is much debate over the question: is He good? The traditional evangelical position, as given by C. S. Lewis above, is a resounding 'yes, God is good'. But more and more lately, God's goodness is being questioned, and no place is God's goodness questioned more than His person and work in the Book of Job.

Many question Yahweh's roles as creator, sustainer, helper and friend due to the way He interacts with Job. Likewise, many question the goodness of God's power, knowledge and personal interest in people.² A conclusion may be difficult to fathom at different points of the book of Job, but nevertheless, there is a truth which cannot be hidden in the end. The concluding statements of God (chs. 38-41), and Job (42:1-6) and his restoration (ch. 42) reveal a God who is good for the basic truth that God is gracious, life-giving and healing-restoring and faithful.

Many readers of the book of Job find the opening two chapters (the prologue) disturbing. We first read of the righteousness and faithfulness of Job (1:1-5).

The next scene takes the reader out of this world and into the heavenly courts where Yahweh rules (1:6). It is here that the character of God is questioned. We read in Job 1:8 how Yahweh is proud and boasts about His servant Job. Here is a great picture of God lovingly looking down upon His servant Job whom He has blessed and cared for (1:2-3).

“Is Job righteous because he is blessed or is he blessed because he is righteous?” (Job 1:9)

Answering this question goes a long way to understanding the book of Job. God’s response to Satan is to prove that Job is blessed because he is righteous which is done through a series of tests. However, in the process of testing Job, another character of the book of Job is tested: God Himself. Is God good?

The Immorality of God?

The result for many is a resounding no! For biblical scholars such as Whybray, God’s character is summed up through the chapter heading in his article on Job—“The Immorality of God.”³

The first reason some scholars such as Whybray come to this conclusion is the way in which Yahweh responds to the Satan’s taunting challenge (1:9). They see Yahweh presented as weak and easily persuaded by a subordinate with the result being Yahweh committing evil on Job.⁴ According to Whybray, the powers of evil seem to have developed since the fall of man (Gen. 3). In Genesis 3:1-7 the serpent tempts man to rebel against God and thus unleash evil upon the world. In Job 1–2 the Satan’s challenge to Yahweh exposes Yahweh’s weakness and turns God against faithful man in Job. Evil is again unleashed, but not by man as one could have expected. No, evil is unleashed by the God who is meant to be the epitome of faithfulness. Here is the key to many scholars’ ideas of God’s immorality. Both times the Satan questions God, God gives in (1:12; 2:6) and what makes the matter worse is the trivial motivation behind the act.⁵ Yahweh’s omnipotence is never in doubt; He could have forbidden the attack upon Job by the Satan but chose not to.⁶

Whilst there must be time given for a defence of Yahweh’s actions here, the realisation of the horror that was imposed upon the faithful and righteous Job must not be neglected. We must see that Job, the faithful servant of Yahweh experienced the death of his children (1:18), followed by the loss of wealth and

position (1:13-17) and excruciating physical suffering (2:7-8, 12)⁷ poured upon him by the God that he trusted for providence and guidance.⁸ This in itself, to say the least, is difficult to fathom.

Job: God is Indeed Good

However, Job's response to these trials (1:21; 2:10) vindicates God's view of Job (1:8; 2:3). Job, having seen and felt the devastation that has happened to him and everything precious to him in this world, responds that God is sovereign and worth trusting, serving and even praising in response (1:21; 2:10). If we are truly to understand God's character as good, Job's response should be our obvious starting place. Job, in the prologue, effectively says, 'yes God is indeed good'. But Job, you don't know all the details!

Whybray's response to this view is somewhat different though. He states that Job only saw half the story and therefore highlights the possibility that Job might have responded differently to God had all the facts been available to him.⁹ Job did not see the interaction between Yahweh and the Satan in heaven. It is this interaction which leads to Yahweh being branded not as a beneficent ruler but power hungry and tyrannic (a 'cosmic thug'), who hunts down non-conformists like prey for destruction.¹⁰ For scholars like Mettinger and Whybray, God has gone berserk in Job's life and the sadness is that Job responds to God favourably when he is ignorant of the whole truth.

Perdue comes to the conclusion that the prologue in the book of Job presents the perspective that human beings, as illustrated in Job's case, are not cared for by a kindly creator but are humiliated slaves (not servants) experiencing oppression and cruel treatment. God sentences humans to lifelong slavery from which there is no reprieve.¹¹ God is an anarchist, a violent anarchist and to call this God wise would be absurd.¹² Job describes God's virtues not as positive but used for harming humans: that a powerful God can easily be a bully; a knowledgeable God can be a meddler, a judging God draconian, and an exalted God irrelevant.¹³ God abused justice by what He did to Job and therefore He should be brought to trial.

Although Job's immediate response to the hardship of suffering that was imposed by God upon him was one of obedient submission in chapters 1–2, this somewhat changes in chs. 3–37. Job 3 begins a continuous movement for

Job between bleakness to hope and then bleakness again.¹⁴ It is a cycle that continues to the end of the book. Yet Job never retracts from His position of absolute trust as stated in 2:10 (e.g. 13:15-16).¹⁵ God's power and God's goodness do clash in Job's mind and it is here that we read of Job's complaints, his questions of God, his laments and even accusations against God of unfairness.

The key issues behind Job's speeches (chs. 3–37) are why God allowed him to suffer. Job knew he was righteous and blameless in God's sight and wanted a chance to defend himself before God (6:10, 29-30; 27:1-6; 29:14). Habel believes that Job can only ask these questions because of God's failure to reveal the truth to Job. Habel states that God destroys human creation such as Job's possessions and position; makes them impotent and then makes them stupid by preventing discernment, fostering darkness instead of enlightenment. God activates chaos and lets it loose on the world which humans have no way of understanding.¹⁶ In 10:1-7, Job's words should be seen as the words of a very sick man. He reflects with puzzlement at his situation and cannot see how God allowed him to end up in such a state.¹⁷

Nevertheless, he does not show arrogance against God. Job is a perplexed man who cannot make sense of knowing that God cares tenderly for His creatures, especially those who are cast down, yet calling for help and hearing nothing from God.¹⁸

One reason given for God's seemingly distant stance to Job is that God is not omnipotent. Brenner defends God's character and goodness by saying that God is not omnipotent as He does not have control over evil. This means that God wants Job to be free from the pain and devastation of suffering, but is impotent to do anything to help.

However, as Habel rightly states, chaos is not out of God's control but kept within bounds like a child in its playpen (40:15–41:26). God is sovereign over both good and bad (1:21; 2:10) and limits them for the good of the community, not as unfair impositions as Job alleges (3:23; 7:12).¹⁹ How God channelled destructive forces for constructive patterns and purposes²⁰ will be our next point of focus.

Getting the Big Picture Right

According to House, an incomplete theology of the biblical scholars that hold the view that God is immoral has placed Yahweh's reputation at risk. Those who do not believe that God is worth serving in the book of Job do not try to resolve the 'contradictory' ideas of the book,²¹ nor the subsequent contradictions found in their own work. All the above perspectives contradict the view of God in the rest of Scripture. There is an alternative reading of Job, which is both appealing and convincing as it deals with the book as a whole. This view regards the prologue as necessary in correcting a cause and effect understanding of divine operations.²²

Without an appreciation of the fact that Yahweh allows suffering as a means of showing that God is good under all conditions,²³ Job's friends misunderstand Job's situation and many current theologians misunderstand God.

Getting to the heart of the matter

From one angle, the book of Job is about the question of what it means to speak rightly in the face of suffering.²⁴ The book does not seek to solve the problem of suffering, but what it means to be a human before the Sovereign God. In Job 9:1-4, Job is aware of the difficulties in relating to God but is not daunted; he continually presses on in the knowledge of and relationship with his God. The book of Job is about the intimate connection of God with His world, and God's careful and detailed superintendence even in the face of human crisis.²⁵

The discourse section of the book (chs. 3–37) finds God's character at stake because He is the only God and He tests His faithful servants with trials.²⁶ The book of Job is entirely monotheistic, as many critics of Yahweh in the book of Job agree. This means that the God who is responsible for pain is also the only God to whom sufferers can turn to for healing or relief.²⁷

Therefore, the litigation from Job against his God is not simply a cry against God's injustice but a cry to prove God's justice in His care for His people. This is vastly different to Whybray and others who profess Job as simply pointing out God's failures and subsequently view God as immoral in His dealings with Job. Volf pertinently states that 'to speak rightly about God in the world of innocent suffering requires argument, complaint and accusation. Their absence

would not only entail the hypocrisy of false reverence instead of worship, but it would also entail the hopelessness of merely putting up with suffering instead of seeking to overcome it'.²⁸ So Job argues, complains and accuses, but he also knows he will get an answer and will be vindicated (14:14-17; 19:23-27; ch 38-41).²⁹ Job's litigation against God leads to him finding greater faith in the God who he has served in the past (19:27; 42:2-6). It is a dogged faith which reveals that God is bound to His creatures.³⁰

The Centrality of Prayer in Job

One of the great reasons why God is good as presented in the book of Job is the way His people are invited to call out to God. This calling out to God does not necessarily mean praise and worship, but also lament, cry for help and even questioning God's actions.³¹ One of the dilemmas for Job is the apparent silence of God when he continually cries out to Him for help (19:7; 23:8-12). However, the book of Job presents a good God who can take our cries for help and protest and even invites us to cry out to Him.³² Although Yahweh rebukes Job in 38:1 for his lack of knowledge, He nonetheless approves of Job crying out to Him and vindicates Job's words (42:7).

Job's cries are to the only God who he knows can help him. He needs external help and his friends are far from helping (19:2; 21:34).³³ Job believes, although at times shakily, that those who take their laments to the one God who creates, sustains, hears and heals find the Lord worthy of complete commitment (3:15-16; 16:19-21; 19:25-27).³⁴ Essentially, here is a God who is inherently good.

The Vindication of God by God and Job

Job's situation represents all Old Testament figures that were caught in history between harsh reality and fuller revelation of God's ways.³⁵ God's response to Job's speeches in chapters 3-37 commences with a defence of His person and work by pointing to creation and showing how He is not an anarchist or a God of disorder but a God of stability and precision.³⁶ His first speech (38:1-40:2) compares Job's insignificant power and God's omnipotence. Yahweh declares that the world is not as disorderly as Job supposed. His second speech (40:7-41:34) highlights God as the great Creator and sustainer who has the strength to overcome chaos and maintain order.³⁷

The tenor of God's speeches is that of the overwhelming power and majesty of God as compared with the frailty and ignorance of Job.³⁸ God's questions of Job were aimed at exposing Job's ignorance of God's ways and re-establishing the Lord's trustworthiness: 'who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?' (38:2; 42:3). Some biblical scholars have argued that God did not answer Job's questions. However, God's speech was adequate for Job to declare that Yahweh is right in His actions, and worthy to be served (42:2-6).³⁹

God: you must think of me rightly!

God's speech not only answered Job but also his friends. They did not convince Job of their theology (32:3-5, 42:7-9).⁴⁰ Retributive theology is thoroughly rejected as being the cause of both Job's suffering and God's action.⁴¹ They did not speak rightly about God, whereas Job who challenged them had (42:7). Here we find another key issue as found in the book of Job: the crisis of wisdom. Job's experiential wisdom was shattered on the reality of his suffering. Yet no new rules are put in place: what happened to Job was not in the end seen as a mistake. The outcome was Job (and his friends) given new knowledge (42:5).⁴² It is God's business and not ours to know the order of the world and rules of divine action, so man must be dependant on divine instruction (42:4).⁴³

Mark Strom believes that the issue which brings Job comfort and resolve to trust in God (42:2-6) is the realisation that he had dwelt in the gap between divine wisdom and human understanding.⁴⁴ Hartley agrees that people cannot find wisdom, whose dwelling place is known only to Yahweh, save in the fear of the Lord (Job 28:28). It is this fear of the Lord which first gave Job his righteousness (1:1) and later re-established it (42:2-6).⁴⁵ For Job, the re-establishment also meant the blessings of re-enjoying life in abundance (42:12-17).⁴⁶ The epilogue illustrates the basic truth that God is gracious, good, life-giving and healing, restoring and faithful.⁴⁷

God is indeed good

In Yahweh's design, He may permit a faithful servant to suffer for a period of time, but in due time the book of Job gives its reader the truth that God seeks after the welfare of His servants.⁴⁸ It must not be denied that Job went through a horrendous ordeal. We read in the book of Job that he was indeed blessed because he was righteous and not righteous because he was blessed. As for

God's goodness, the book's conclusion reiterates Job's statements in 1:21 and 2:10. God is worthy of service and worship because of His sovereignty over all things, His faithfulness to His people (even when it does not seem so), and His wisdom which He alone has and gives to His people.

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ENDNOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Collins 1998) p146
2. Paul House, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 431.
3. R. N. Whybray, "The Immorality of God: Reflections on Some Passages in Genesis, Job, Exodus and Numbers," *JSOT* 72 (1996): 103.
4. Whybray, "The Immorality of God," p. 105; it is clear from Job 1:6 that the Satan is a subordinate to God—he must approach God and ask permission to act and without Yahweh's authority for the Satan to act, there is clearly nothing the Satan can do (1:11; 2:4).
5. *Ibid.*, 105; God's testing of Job is seen by Whybray as trivial because Job was already seen as righteous in God's eyes—what else was there to prove and why does Yahweh need to prove Job's faithfulness to a subordinate in the Satan? However, as we shall see, there is more to God's testing of Job than simply to prove Job's righteousness to the Satan.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
7. L. G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville, TN; Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 130.
8. As I have argued, it is impossible to place blame solely on the Satan for Job's suffering. It could be argued that God's responsibility could be reduced to what may be called His permissive will. That is, Yahweh did not actually carry out the tests on Job but He allowed the Satan to do so. No matter what semantics are used, God was ultimately responsible for Job's trials.
9. Whybray, "The Immorality of God," p. 106.
10. *Ibid.*, 106, 111; Mettinger, "The God of Job: Avenger, Tyrant, or Victor," 42, 44.
11. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, p. 144, although one must ask if 42:7-17 acts as a reprieve to health and abundant living which it certainly looks like; Whybray asks the question 'did the author of Job intend to warn His readers that they live in a universe presided over by a deeply flawed God who does not measure up to their own standards

of what is right?' Whybray says nothing but chs. 1–2 can answer this question as chs. 3–37 sees Job charging God with wanton cruelty (p. 108); the speeches of Yahweh in chs. 38–41 do not give an adequate defence of Yahweh's righteousness but only His power and order in creating the universe (p111); Job's surrender to Yahweh in 42:2-6 only shows that Job submitted to Yahweh's overwhelming firepower and not His righteousness and faithfulness; and the epilogue (42:7-17) only highlights Yahweh's bringing of evil or misfortune onto Job in the first place as well as the return of blessing (p. 108), "The Immorality of God," pp. 108-11. One must question Whybray's overwhelmingly negative methodology in his reading of the book of Job in this article. The negative reading seemingly glosses over any purpose that God could have had for Job's suffering as either null or void; instead, with an incomplete theology Whybray looks at Job from a humanistic perspective and misses the big picture of righteousness and faith in God despite difficult circumstances.

12. N. C. Habel, "In Defence of God the Sage," (ed. L. G. Purdue & W. C. Gilpin) *The Voice from the Whirlwind* (Nashville, TN; Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 30.
13. C. Chin, "Job and the Injustice of God: Implicit arguments in Job 13.17–14.12," *JSOT* 64 (1994): 101.
14. An example of this is Job 14. Here we read in vv.1-12 of Job's despair; then vv. 14-17 we read of hope, and then vv. 18-22 as Job returns to despair.
15. W. J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), p. 257.
16. Habel, "In Defence of God the Sage," p. 29.
17. F. I. Andersen, *Job* (Tyndale OT Commentaries: Leicester; IVP, 1976), p. 151.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
19. Habel, "In Defence of God the Sage," p. 35.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
21. House, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 435.
22. Dumbrell, *Faith of Israel*, p. 261.
23. House, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 435.
24. M. Volf, "Taking God to Court," *Christian Century*; Vol. 115, Issue 35 (1998): 1222.
25. Dumbrell, *Faith of Israel*, p. 259.
26. House, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 430.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 430.
28. Volf, "Taking God to Court," p. 1222.
29. Dumbrell states that Job's protests, laments, calls for justice, and demands to see God have all been right, *Faith of Israel*, p. 261.
30. House, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 432; Eichrodt, cited in House, *Old Testament*

Theology, p. 433.

31. J. Dickson, *If I were God, I'd end all the Pain* (Kingsford, Sydney: Matthias Media, 2001), p. 35.
32. J. Goldingay, *Walk On* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), p. 35.
33. House, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 433.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 438.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 435.
36. Habel, "In Defence of God the Sage," p. 34; this statement of Habel's contrasts to his statement as referenced earlier that God is an anarchist who cannot be considered wise. Habel's declaration that the God found in Job 1–2 is an anarchist can therefore be seen to be an inadequate, even plainly wrong view of God as seen in the light of the whole book.
37. House, *Old Testament Theology*, pp. 436-7.
38. J. Briggs Curtis, "On Job's response to Yahweh," *JBL* 98/4 (1979), p. 497.
39. House, *Old Testament Theology*, pp. 436-7.
40. R. Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (London; SCM Press, 1985), pp. 252-3.
41. The idea of retributive theology as seen in the speeches of Job's friends does not defend God's goodness and justice and righteousness. On the contrary, they pigeon hole God into being a God who interacts in a cause-and-effect manner instead of the unique, mysterious and faithful God which His and Job's speeches declare (chs. 38-42). Retributive theology is one major aspect of God's revelation in the book of Job which He wants rejected.
42. Rendtorff helpfully shows how new knowledge is being presented by Yahweh to Job through identifying the root word 'to know' appearing four times in Job's answer in 42:2-4, and another four times at the beginning of the divine speech in 38:2-5, and also in 38:12, 18, 21 and 33:39ff. Yahweh wants Job to re-orient his thinking from that which darkened God's counsel (38:2) to God's own perspective on the events (42:5); *The Old Testament*, pp. 252-3.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 252-3.
44. M. Strom, *Days are Coming: Exploring Biblical Patterns* (Sydney, Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), p. 106.
45. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, p. 44.
46. Habel, "In Defence of God the Sage," p. 33; Dumbrell states that the act of restoring Job to a position twice as prosperous as he occupied was an act of grace. What is being offered in the epilogue is the generosity of God, *Faith of Israel*, p. 255.
47. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, p. 540.