On Reading Job

How do we read Job? For many, this is a non-question. Reading is reading, right? You open the book and you read the words. But this assumes that words come in books and that books are available to ordinary people—neither of which was true in the world that produced the “book” of Job.

Fact is, reading (like everything else) has a history. If you are like me, you may have gone through much of your life never thinking very deeply about that, but it has come to the forefront for me now for many reasons, including not least our ongoing conversations about the future of this journal. Readers may note that with this issue we have a new position on the Word & World editorial staff: Online Editor (in the able person of Mary Hinkle Shore). Our online presence is minimal at present, and we are not certain where it will go, but we know we need to think about it, even as many of us continue to be committed to a print journal—and to the importance of tangible texts more broadly. There are physical components of reading: touch, smell, feel, size, heft, format, binding—all of which play a role in determining the reality and the significance of what we read and how it impacts us. And, like everything, that too has a history.

In antiquity, few actually read Job (or other parts of the Bible). If they knew it, it was because they had heard it, heard it read orally, most likely in a communal setting like worship. Among other things, this means that questions that plague and divide us today—like “Do you read the Bible literally?” or “Was Job a real person?”—couldn’t or didn’t exist in the way they do now. Job was simply part of “our” story, “our” identity—part of the reality in which “we” (an ancient we) lived. But now, Job is available as a book, so we can and do pore over it and ask our historical and literary questions. We can use that opportunity to enter the book in new and creative ways or we can become all too certain of the “right” answers and all too dismissive of those who see things differently.

People will see things differently, of course, especially perhaps with Job, precisely because of the profundity of its questions and its refusal to capitulate easily to orthodox answers. This first became clear to me as a college student when Archibald MacLeish’s play J.B. appeared (1958)—putting Job’s story, its haunting questions, and its questionable “comforters” in a modern setting. Is it okay to do this, I wondered? Had I been majoring in religion or philosophy or literature rather than chemistry, I might have known long before that people had been playing around with Job, puzzling over it, commenting on it, analyzing it, rewriting it,
rejecting it for its heresy or embracing it for its honesty pretty much forever, but for me MacLeish’s new genre for Job (a contemporary drama) allowed me to hear (and wonder about things) in a new way.

And now? How do we read Job? The “did it really happen” questions won’t help, because they matter as little to hearing Job as trying to capture the historical identity of the Good Samaritan matters to Luke. What it meant then will always matter for those of us who regard biblical faith as rooted in history rather than just in spiritual experience; but so will what it meant in the various thens between antiquity and now (because our story has a tradition that matters) and what it means now (realizing, to be sure, that there are as many nows as there are cultures, hearers, and readers who continue to wonder at this provocative book). More, what will it mean that in, with, and under this book of narrative, poetry, drama, and debate we claim to hear a word of God? Maybe we should just revel in the unrest created by the picture of Job’s God, seeing it as a kind of forerunner of the unrest that such a God will be willing to unleash on us with the gospel story of an incarnate and suffering Messiah. We can “fix” the latter as little as we can the former, so all our easy orthodoxies will be called into question—which may be precisely what the book of Job or any word of God is meant to do.

We read and hear the book of Job differently than did our ancestors—physically differently as well as culturally differently—and our digital-age children hear and read differently than do we of pre-digital times (recognizing, of course, that many of you readers are already those “children”). MacLeish made the story new for me in his drama. It will be up to today’s preachers and teachers to make the story new for those for whom they bear some responsibility—and to those who overhear them in the many ways the new media now make possible. Can you “tweet” Job? Deep philosophical and theological issues in 140 characters? Probably not (my opinion), but how might we tweet provocative messages that say, “You have to read this book!” with the same enthusiasm we use in saying, “You have to watch this video on YouTube!”? Or how might the pastor/preacher start a blog for a congregation that is willing to entertain Job’s terrible questions, realizing that they are as real for this generation as they were “then”?

Serious theological essays, serious in-depth conversation, serious and imaginative preaching—none of these can or should go away, and we will use them all to continue to probe the depths of a book like Job. But we need to invite the “kids” into the conversation as well. It’s hidden somewhere in our letters of call.

F.J.G.