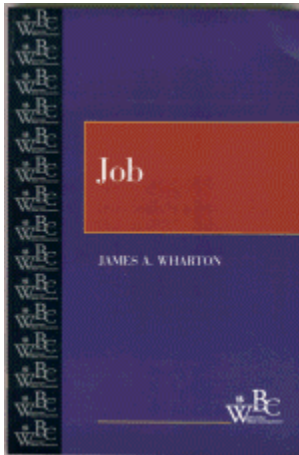


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Wharton, James A.

Job

Westminster Bible Companion

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J. A. Wharton's recent contribution to the Westminster Bible Companion shares the series' stated aim of sustaining and guiding the Christian "community of faith," by "opening the Word of God to all the people." This is, of course, an ambitious objective and one that is sure to evoke discussion and controversy. In my judgment, Wharton's exposition of Job has succeeded in introducing Job's controversial aspects where many other attempts to bring biblical books to "the people" have not been able to advance beyond a banal "devotional" quality. Wharton also steers clear of many of the pitfalls that have dogged the steps of many academic interpreters of Job throughout history.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Wharton's presentation is the notion that "the function of Job, from the time of its inclusion among the Holy Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, has never been to provide answers to the questions it raises." Instead, Wharton suggests, Job has been a constant source of questions, reanimated questions about how people of faith should relate to God in the light of the reality of suffering.

Wharton's overview of the structure of Job sidesteps the primrose path on which comprehending the true meaning of a text consists of nothing more than reconstructing original, authentic, authorial intentions. The discontinuities in Job are acknowledged, but the traditional facile escape from confronting its meaning "as it is" is not explicitly offered to the reader. By way of introduction, Wharton also takes up the question of Job's deviation from the Israelite norm in its use of divine names. Rather than settling the matter, Wharton leaves it open, suggesting several possible reasons for Job 3:1-37:34's

predominant use of Elohim, Eloah, El Elyon, El Shaddai (though here it should be noted that the form Shaddai is the form found in Job). After outlining several possible interpretations of this usage of divine names, Wharton notes that Job provokes people of faith to confront YHWH specifically rather than some generic deity.

After dealing with these and other isagogical issues the book proceeds through Job, at times in a somewhat novel fashion. Wharton deals first with the Prologue (chaps 1-2) and then with "Job's cry of pain" (chap 3). He then turns to a presentation of "the entire case of Eliphaz against Job," a discussion of chaps 4-5, 15 and 22 which does not directly consider the intervening responses of Job or the speeches of Bildad and Zophar. This tactic, Wharton suggests, allows the reader to give Eliphaz "a sympathetic hearing at the outset."

Wharton asserts that Eliphaz takes issue with Job's insistence on his innocence and integrity. This insistence, and not some particular infraction on Job's part, is the central problem for Eliphaz. Eliphaz urges Job to abandon his protestations of innocence and thus to abandon the very quality that YHWH is counting on him to uphold. This sets up the essential contrast between Job and the "friends" that Wharton exploits throughout his exposition of the book.

Wharton then deals with Job's responses to Eliphaz and then with the exchanges between Job and Bildad and between Job and Zophar. The "third round of discourses" is of special interest to readers of Job for its complexity and the apparently disturbed state of the transmitted text. Wharton notes the standard views of the state of the text but suggests that the scholarly quest for the original text or the original author is not a primary imperative for communities of faith. The "tattered and cluttered" present form of this third round of discourses "shows that the long disputations between Job and his friends do not come to a successful conclusion." If Job or his friends, or even we ourselves, could resolve the questions raised by the book of Job on a theological or philosophical level, Wharton asserts, "God would be reduced to an idea, and there would be no need for a faith community or its Holy Scriptures" (100). Here again the emphasis is placed on the notion that the book of Job is not a theodicy, not a reasoned defense of the justice of God in light of ever-present and looming evil.

The ineffectual nature of the dispute between Job and friends leads naturally into the independent poem in chap. 28 and sets the stage for Job's "magnificent affirmation of his integrity in chapters 29-31." Wharton notes the legal dimension of Job's asseverations of innocence in chap. 31, but suggests that contemplating Job's personal integrity may convey the intended impression to the reader than focusing on a litigious Job. Wharton's treatment of the speech of Elihu is fairly straightforward: "When Elihu says 'I am full of words' (32:18), the reader can only concur. The young man is not only on the point of

bursting with words and ideas (32:19), but he also harbors an inordinately high estimation of his own worth (32:21-22; 33:, 7)."

On the interpretation of "God's 'Answer' and Job's Response" (38:1-42:6), Wharton notes the modern absurdist approach and several traditional accounts. Wharton deviates from these interpretations, in large measure on the grounds that they do not take adequate account of the importance of Job's insistence on his proven integrity. In the end, Wharton argues, the integrity of God and the integrity of Job remain intact in the wake of the decimation of the friends' traditional perspectives by both Job's protestations and divine proclamation. Job never "[knuckles] under to the display of God's incomprehensible wisdom and power" (177). The universe is inscrutable to Job, but Job has gained an enduring confidence in God's ultimate control and in the awareness that "God stands irrevocably on the side of human life that is authentically devoted to God and people" (177).

Wharton's treatment of Job distinguishes itself for its lack of insistence on particular interpretations and this approach rightly, I think, highlights the mutability of the meaning of Job and the indeterminate, exploratory character of its handling of one of the most perplexing questions of human existence. This is a most welcome contribution, especially given the intended audience of the work. An even-handed account of the alternative meanings of a biblical book is not so easy to introduce to a community of faith dedicated to biblical faith and practice. The temptation to tidy up the mess sneaks in all too easily and, surprise, the author's pet theory wins the day. Some works of contemporary biblical scholarship begin with literary-theoretical indeterminacy and end in absolute certainty. This book does not.

At several points, Wharton's case should be strengthened.

The litigation metaphor: Wharton's emphasis on Job's integrity is well-placed but it has the potential of detracting from the pervasive presence of Job's wish to see God in court. Wharton does mention the idea that Job wishes to see God in court, but the problematic nature of Job's stance is not given the prominence that it has in the book. Perhaps this because we unconsciously read in the light of long-established reading traditions; the Samaritan in Jesus' parable is the good guy, and Job is the patient hero. The original, provocative force of the work dissipates with time and cultural distance.

Interaction between the narrative frame and core debate speeches: Wharton acknowledges that the frame and core are related, no matter what their literary prehistory happens to be. At numerous points the treatment of these connections is insightful, proposing novel and fruitful readings. However, Wharton's treatment of the "resolution" of Job's litigation in 42:5-6, leaves the impression that the tension between the frame and the core debate speeches is no longer an issue. However, Job's charge that God is a tyrant

and a criminal is included in YHWH's repeated affirmations of the correctness of Job's assertions in 42:7, 8. The range of questions raised by the paradox-generating structure of the book of Job is vast, unsettling and challenging to faith. Perhaps the quest for comfort and faith here overwhelms the call to struggle with God.

Job in cultural and historical context: The historical context of the composition of Job is not given much weight in Wharton's deliberations about the meaning of Job. Yet if the author/compiler of Job is weighing in against the Deuteronomistic movement of the post-exilic period, for example, its question-raising function can be framed in a compelling social context. We thus grasp the contemporary force of the book of Job's paradox-generating structure, as God explains to Job in Frost's "A Masque of Reason":

*You realize by now the part you played
To stultify the Deuteronomist
And change the tenor of religious thought
My thanks are to you for releasing me
From moral bondage to the human race*

In conclusion, this book will be well-used and appreciated by its target audience. Admirably clear, well-constructed and thought provoking, it will serve readers in communities of Christian faith well.