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Reception History and the Book of Job The Long and Short of It

Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary, by C. L. Seow
Illuminations | Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013 | xxvii + 971
pages | ISBN 978-0-80284-8956 (hardback) \$95.00

The Book of Job: A Biography, by Mark Larrimore
Lives of Great Religious Books | Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 2013 | x + 286 pages | ISBN 978-0-69114-7598 (hardback)
\$24.95

IN MANY RESPECTS these two books could not be more different from each other. Seow's is the first half of a massive commentary that will, when completed, cover approximately 2,000 pages. Although reception history plays an important part in its design, it is a full philological, historical-critical, and to a certain extent theological commentary on the book of Job. Larrimore's book, which focuses exclusively on reception history, is even shorter than its page count might suggest, since the elegant book design is a diminutive 5 x 8-inch trim with wide leading and pleasing margins. In style, as well as in scope, it may be thought of as an extended essay on the reception of Job.

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Despite the striking differences, these books invite a comparison both in the way they make the case for the significance of the reception history of Job and the way in which they go about the task.

To do justice to Seow's book it is important to give due consideration to how it conceives and responds to its tasks as a scholarly commentary. Seow is not only the author of this commentary but also the general editor of the Illuminations commentary series. The series' guidelines make the claim that "Illuminations redefines the genre of the biblical commentary" (Guidelines (12/2010), 1). What the press envisions as the "redefinition of the genre" of the biblical commentary has to do with a rearrangement of its parts in an effort to "illuminate the biblical text for different audiences, from lay persons to scholars" (Guidelines, 1). The guidelines note that "standard research commentaries typically begin with textual criticism, philological discussion, and sundry notes before getting to the broader literary and theological issues" (Guidelines, 2). Such a presentation can be intimidating for the non-specialist reader. But commentaries that dispense with technical materials in order to address the non-specialist reader often deprive these readers of information that they do need when they are studying a particular passage in depth. The Illuminations series attempts to provide a commentary that is usable by a wide range of audiences by reversing the presentation, foregrounding the section entitled "Interpretation," which presents an integrated discussion of literary, theological, and ethical issues of the chapter in question. Provision is also made in this section for a "brief discussion of the history of consequences," that is, the *Nachleben* of the passage (Guidelines, 2). These materials are intended to address the needs of the non-technical reader. The needs of the scholarly readers are served further by a second section, entitled "Commentary," which contains a phrase by phrase discussion of more specific and often quite technical issues of interpretation. This is the vision of the press for the series. Seow's realization of the model is, as anyone who knows his work might expect, rather more radical in its understanding of what it means to redefine the genre of the biblical commentary, in particular in relation to the impact of reception history on his commentary.

Before returning to this issue, however, it is appropriate to give some sense of the commentary as a whole. Seow brings an extraordinary set of scholarly competencies and expertise to the production of a commentary on Job, from text criticism to Semitic philology to ancient Near Eastern comparative literature to an unparalleled knowledge of the reception history. His translations do not smooth over or duck the difficulties of the text. Indeed,

an apparent infelicity in the translation, as in 5:5b (“one who is constrained will take it away by baskets”), is generally an indication that the reader should check the commentary for a learned discussion of the textual problems. Even if one still might quibble with the translation, the issues leading to Seow’s choice will be fully explored there. The “Interpretation” section of the commentary consists largely of a guided reading of the passage, indicating its literary parts, and the major exegetical issues, including alternative approaches to the resolution of problems. Seow is always fair-minded and never idiosyncratic, though, of course, not all readers will be persuaded by his resolution of thorny interpretive dilemmas. The “Retrospect” section, which the Guidelines suggest “is to help the reader think about the ‘so what’ question” (Guidelines, 2), is, unfortunately, often a bit perfunctory and so seldom gets very deeply into the theological and ethical dimensions of the text.

For the specialist reader the most impressive part is what is entitled “Commentary.” Here one has to marvel at the extraordinary reach and scope of Seow’s scholarship and the thoroughness of his attention to problems large and small. This section is largely dominated by textual, grammatical, and philological discussions, though it also ranges into comparisons with ancient Near Eastern literature and the history of interpretation in its efforts to clarify the meaning of particular phrases and lines. In his introductory discussion of medieval Jewish commentaries on Job, Seow discusses the preferences of different medieval scholars for philological, philosophical, and midrashic/homiletical commentaries. In his development of this section of the work one senses that the medieval Jewish philological commentators are his role models.

Seow’s understanding of the overarching interpretive issues of Job are laid out in the extensive (248-page) introduction, though over half of the introduction is devoted to the History of Consequences, Seow’s preferred term for the history of reception. Following a thorough account of the text and versions, Seow considers the linguistic features of Job in relation to its dating. He judges the archaic-looking grammatical forms in the poetry to be archaisms, just as the foreign and foreign-looking words appear to be literary features rather than indications of an exotic origin. While the late features of the prose are not individually conclusive for dating the composition, Seow concludes that the evidence overall points to a date in the sixth century BCE or a bit later for the composition of the book, probably in the province of Yehud. Seow’s extensive discussion of ancient Near Eastern literature with similar thematic or literary features, however, reaffirms the general consensus

of the familiarity of the author with a wide range of literary traditions from the broader culture of the ancient world.

On the much vexed issue of the literary unity of the book Seow argues for the unity of the book as we have it, with prose and poetry stemming from one composer, chapter 28 as belonging to Job's speech in chapters 27–31, and Elihu as an intentional part of the literary design. The third cycle is not disturbed or disarranged but reflects the dissolution of the dialogue. While these judgments are similar to those of those who, like Norman Habel, opt for final form readings on literary grounds, Seow's judgments may have a different source. It appears to me that his long engagement with pre-historical-critical scholars has given him sympathy with their sense that the text makes quite good sense as a coherent discourse as it stands.

The most striking re-envisioning of Seow's practice of commentary is his commitment to the significance of the history of reception. The impact of this commitment is evident in three loci. The first and most visible is the massive survey that appears in the introduction, which is divided into "Jewish Consequences," "Christian Consequences," and "Muslim Consequences." The long Jewish and Christian sections are subdivided by chronology, with subsections devoted to visual arts, literature, music, and liturgy, as appropriate. A series of thirty-one illustrations throughout the commentary enhances the discussion of reception. The second locus is in the text-box sections accompanying each chapter on the reception of that part of Job. One might think that the history of reception is still being marginalized by being treated separately. But that would be to overlook the third locus. As one reads Seow's Interpretation and Commentary on each section of the text, one sees that at almost every point where some textual ambiguity arises, Seow incorporates references that illustrate how this ambiguity has been addressed, from various perspectives, in the history of interpretation. It is remarkable what a difference this practice makes to one's sense of being embedded in a much longer tradition of interpretive activity, a challenge to the ordinary sense of most scholars that our line of predecessors goes back only to the nineteenth century. To be sure, some of the issues Seow raises would literally not have been conceivable to biblical interpreters of the pre-historical-critical period, but his practice of including these figures in the interpretive work of the commentary naturalizes them in a new way. They emerge as an important, even vital, part of the interpretive community.

Seow's coverage of the history of interpretation is extraordinary, ranging from obscure medieval texts to contemporary popular music (which many

scholars will find even more obscure). Although he attempts in the introduction to locate these pieces in relation to an unfolding conversation about the interpretation of the book of Job, the amount of material covered means that a fair number of the figures are mentioned with not much more than a hint about the nature of their engagement with Job. From time to time Seow slows down the discussion to pursue the intellectual significance of a commentator on Job, as he does with Saadia Gaon, but the format of the commentary and its competing demands prevents a sustained hermeneutical engagement.

Larrimore's *The Book of Job: A Biography* is also part of an innovative series, the Lives of Great Religious Books. The editor, Fred Appel, described the origin of the series as the fortuitous outcome of a conversation he had in 2005 with the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit. Margalit remarked that there were too many memoirs being published. What he would really be interested in reading was a biography of an important book. Appel's vision for the series is innovative and inclusive, including already published titles on Augustine's *Confessions* (Gary Wills), *The I Ching* (Richard J. Smith), *The Book of Mormon* (Paul G. Gutjahr), *Genesis* (Ronald Hendel), and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Martin E. Marty), to name just a few.

The book of Job was an obvious choice for such a series, and Mark Larrimore has done a superb job with the discipline demanded by the small size (less than 60,000 words) stipulated for the series. Larrimore's goal, as he describes it, is to give an account of the biography of the book "as it was read and used, fought over, defended, and reimagined" (5) by means of a variety of different interpretive strategies. Thus the story of Job as he tells it comes to be "not only about the book of Job but about the work of interpretation itself" (6). That is the key to what makes this brief volume work. Given the limitations of space, Larrimore has to choose examples from across the spectrum of time that make vivid the changing ways of reading Job—and yet make a case that these readings are not, in the end, arbitrary. The text of Job provides the common ground upon which readers from different ages can—if they exercise sufficient charity—meet. Larrimore plays the role of the genial host, introducing different ways of reading so as to suggest that they have mutually relevant concerns.

One of the first challenges, which he takes up in chapter 1, is the fact that the modern notion of the bounded "book" is alien to the way in which Job was encountered in antiquity and in the medieval period. Both reading

practices and the very presentation of the text created an approach to Job that was populated by a variety of other texts and interpretive voices. Midrashic and allegorical interpretations were not concerned with the linearity of the text that is so privileged by modern readers—or often with what seems so obvious to the modern reader—the plain sense of the text. Though he acknowledges what often seems like a *tour de force* in ancient interpretation, Larrimore opens a bridge by reminding modern readers that all interpretation has its allegorical dimensions. “What they’re doing is just a more explicit version of what we all do in interpretation. Every story exists in several iterations. Every story has openings that allow different interpretations. And every story is read in terms of other commitments, beliefs, and expectations” (76).

The second chapter organizes engagements with Job from late antiquity through the medieval period and into the early modern period in both Jewish and Christian traditions that engage the “philosophical discussion of divine justice, evil, and human experience” (79). This is not, as later philosophical engagements would have it, an enterprise in “theodicy,” but rather a reading of Job as an effort to show “how—and how not—to engage in philosophical discussion on providence” (81). Thus begins the traditional effort to align the different participants in the dialogue with different philosophical positions. Though these authors operate with the assumption that God’s providence is to be trusted, the engagement with the book of Job pushes the conversation ultimately to “the edge of paradox” by the time one reaches Calvin (112).

The third chapter on liturgy focuses on the Christian reception of Job in the Lenten, Holy Week, and funeral liturgies. Here Job’s words live in their articulation of pain and grief, dimensions that were notably absent in the philosophical engagements with Job. The rebellion of Job remains difficult to engage, however, and in literary treatments, such as the medieval *La Patience de Job*, the most bitter comments are transferred to other characters. The issues raised by Job, however, were also deflected into a surrogate narrative, that of Griselda, which in its varying versions in Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer begins to raise the question of capricious and abusive authority and the appropriate stance toward it.

In chapter 4, Larrimore associates the religious conflict and secularization of the early modern and modern periods with the emergence of the issue of theodicy. In these new changes the book of Job plays a critical role. As Larrimore formulates the difference, “the premodern wondered how God worked in creation ... the modern wonders *whether* God works in creation

at all—and, even if so, whether this work renders God worthy of worship” (155). Here the modern reader finally recognizes a familiar discourse about Job, indeed the one that has set the stage for what continues to be most contemporary discussion, both in the philosophical questions raised and in the argument that the sublimity of the divine speeches in Job offers an alternative to a rational framing of the issues.

The final chapter, “Job in Exile,” begins with the historical critical engagement with Job that has dominated the scholarly approach to Job since the mid-nineteenth century. This approach is both relentlessly historicizing and skeptical about the unity of the book. Its unique contributions to the history of reception have been its recovery of the radicalness of the various voices in the text and the positing of a dynamic process in the composition of the book. The twentieth century, however, was not just the century of historical criticism but of historical atrocities beyond all imagining. And so religious and artistic appropriations of Job found common ground in “Job’s experience of confronting God on his own, without the support or mediation of a religious community or its rituals” (230).

Larrimore does not conclude by awarding the wreath of victory to the best interpreter but rather by noting the common ground of aspiration and failure that has characterized the entire history of reception. “In every case readers and users struggle to make a *book* of Job, to articulate his story’s meaning” (241), when, in fact, the story resists such finalization. Once one grasps the humility of interpretation that Larrimore articulates, then one can begin to engage earlier interpreters, not simply in their strangeness but as differently situated colleagues who may be able to see aspects of the book that one’s own perspective blocks (not that that eliminates the possibility of vociferous disagreement with them. But at least the disagreement tends to lose its edge of condescension.)

So how do Seow’s learned academic commentary and Larrimore’s elegant intellectual essay come together? In significant ways I think that Seow could be viewed as the ideal reader of Job that Larrimore attempts to construct—one who is firmly located in his own time and place but who engages the whole history of reception with intellectual sympathy and respect. And yet, given the constraints of their respective series, neither Larrimore nor Seow is able to truly reap the hermeneutical harvest that their approaches call for. What remains to be done is the enactment of an asynchronous dialogism between different figures in the history of the interpretation of Job. There are potential “spaces” in the book of Job—or, to use more traditional Lati-

nate terms—“loci” where ideas from different eras might come to meet and mate. These loci are where hermeneutically rich conversations across the history of reception may take place. My model for this vision of the history of reception is, of course, Mikhail Bakhtin, who praised Dostoevsky because of his ability to “place [an] idea on the borderline of dialogically intersecting consciousnesses. He brought together ideas and worldviews, which in real life were absolutely estranged and deaf to one another, and forced them to quarrel. He extended . . . these distantly separated ideas by means of a dotted line to the point of their dialogic intersection” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 91). Seow anticipates such a conversation in his discussion concerning Saadia’s interpretation of Elihu’s speeches in relation to two different schools of Muslim thought on the issue of free will. Saadia is thus engaged with both a temporally vertical conversation (with Elihu) and a temporally horizontal one (with his Muslim contemporaries). If contemporary readers wish to engage them both, then our conversation must also be vertical (with Elihu and Saadia and the Muʿtazilites and Ashʿarites) and horizontal (with the intellectual contexts that frame our own discussions about free will, e.g., new research in neuroscience). This is a tall order, and certainly not every aspect of reception history is amenable to such a rich dialogical encounter. Some issues of great importance to one generation truly are of no interest to the next. But it does suggest that hermeneutically focused reception has as its task (1) the framing of certain issues grounded in the originating text that are recognizable (though far from identical) in many different historical and cultural interpretations of the originating text and (2) providing sufficiently thick descriptions of the different texts and contexts from the history of interpretation that allow for a non-simplistic symposium among all of the voices. For those purposes, of course, a genre other than commentary or historical summary is needed. Indeed, much of the richness of the history of interpretation strains against the restrictive formats that scholarship has heretofore envisioned for its engagement. As scholars and intellectuals, we should cheer the accomplishments of Seow’s and Larrimore’s works. But we should also begin to construct new forms of scholarly discourse in which to embody the intellectual agendas that these two works challenge the field of biblical studies to embrace.