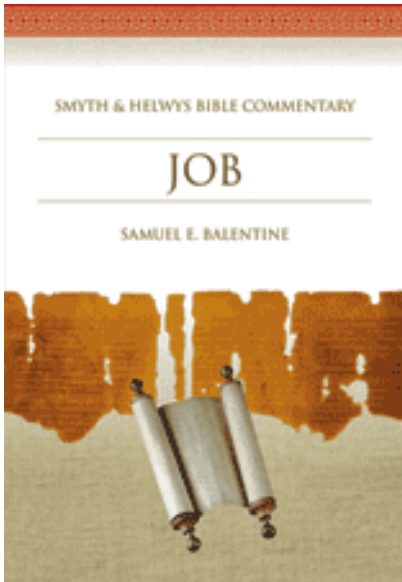


RBL 11/2007



**Balentine, Samuel**

***Job***

Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary

Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2006. Pp. xviii + 750.  
Hardcover. \$65.00. ISBN 1573120677.

Willem A. M. Beuken  
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven  
Leuven, Belgium

The commentary opens with “advance praise” by some distinguished scholars who do not hesitate to use phrases that will scare off some senior colleagues, at least in Europe, who, as the present reviewer, are less used to marketing their products. Honesty obliges to relate the sequel to my first impression: the design of the book made me curious enough to immediately start browsing, and this led me to the tentative conclusion that a magnificent, user-friendly model of commentary was in front of me. The “series preface” announces a multimedia layout that has specifically been developed in order to bridge the gap between the scholarly insights and the needs of lifelong readership: students of all levels, pastors in search of critical biblical instruction at whatever activity, and local communities seeking to animate their spiritual and liturgical meetings. Both the faithful perspective (Christian and Jewish) and the general interest in religion and philosophy have been godparents for this undertaking, while literature and arts did not stay aside. An accompanying CD-ROM contains the commentary text, sidebars, and other material digitally reproduced, indexed, and searchable.

The “introduction” to the book of Job lives up to these promises while providing the usual information. In its full length (40 pages) it sets the tune to the reading by its clear division in the sections “Job before the Bible” (with an elaborate description of the ancient Near Eastern “Jobs”), “Job in the Bible” (the relation between the frame and the corpus and

between the various cycles of speeches), and “Job beyond the Bible” (Jewish and Christian readings), followed by a section “abiding theological issues and lingering Joban perspectives.”

With regard to the explanation of the text itself, although the book of Job, as far as language and purport goes, ranks as the most difficult of the Scriptures, its structure can hardly be determined in another way than by the shift of speakers. Therefore the usual pattern is followed: (1) the prologue (chs. 1–2) and Job’s cursing of his birth (ch. 3); (2) the three cycles of discussion between the friends and Job (chs. 4–14; 15–21; 22–27) with the praise of wisdom (ch. 28); (3) Job’s final address (chs. 29–31); (4) the speeches of Elihu (chs. 32–37); and, finally, (5) God’s answer with Job’s reply (38:1–42:6) and the epilogue (42:7–17). The sequence of individual speeches provides the segmentation of these larger book parts into portions of one or more chapters.

In order fully to profit from the new design, one must make a serious effort to familiarize oneself with the structure of the explanation. Each portion is split up into two sections: “commentary” and “connections.” In the former the literary genre, various aspects of the language, the history of the text itself and behind the text, the theological purport, in short, all the indispensable elements of literary-historical exegesis, are discussed. The latter focuses on potential applications relevant for preaching, instruction, spiritual guidance, and reflections on worldview and human life. Obviously, this part is the most risk-bearing component of the overall design. How to avoid sermonizing based on inevitably limited, personal religious experiences, how to bring up subject matter that really bears on the purport of the passage and has validity beyond the horizon of the commentator and his constituency, whether Christian, Jewish or humanistic? It needs a broad religious and philosophical culture as well as courage for a scholar to take up this gauntlet. In the case of this commentary, the result is most gratifying, not in the least because the style of the author is clear, restrained, mature, and literary, as suits the extraordinary language of the book of Job itself.

If the pair “commentary” and “connections” forms one pattern of the design, the other one consists of groups of so-called “sidebars.” These provide additional insights of various sorts on the background: historical information (charts, lists, maps, etc.), graphic outlines of literary structure, definitions of terms and issues, quotations relevant to the passage, notes on the history of interpretation and illustrations (pictures of landscape, archeological objects, and pieces of art). These sidebars occur as a sort of Masora (“hyperlink”), mostly at the appropriate page; they are printed in color and headed by icons that indicate their subject matter: ΑΩ for questions of language, an open book for interpretation, and a chapter of a column for cultural context. Selected sidebars are located on the accompanying CD-ROM only. A detailed index helps to find them quickly.

The realization of this hyperlink format merits great praise: its illustrative and didactic potential is stunning. All the sidebars are based on thorough research; they open the biblical text to the broadness of the ancient Near East and offer leads to the widespread *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the book of Job. Just one thing will be a difficulty to many readers: it requires some effort to read the brown color of the sidebar lettering. Especially if a sidebar covers almost a full page, the overview is difficult (e.g., 53, 244, 446). The weak color may also be the culprit of the fact that apparently during the proofreading some printing errors in the sidebars have been overlooked (likewise in the notes and bibliography, esp. in German words, e.g., 45, 727 [under “Wahl”], and in non-English expressions, e.g., p. 631: *mutatis mutandis*). In the main text I did not find mistakes.

The foregoing description of the design was necessary, not only because it makes the commentary into something revolutionary in its genre, but also because it determines the content to a great deal. The first question, of course, with regard to the latter is: Does the design allow an up-to-date exegesis? Does a critical explanation not go hidden under a light-show of literary and artistic impressions that profile the distinctive features of the monument Job while underrating its cohesive and architectural strength? The answer to this question is twofold:

(1) Prof. Balentine appears to be highly acquainted with the present-day research of this biblical book, both its linguistic and literary problems (cf. the ΑΩ sidebars!) and the manifold interpretations of its purport. Yet he was well aware of the fact that the larger public that the commentary series has in view would not be served by surveys of opinions for their own sake. Therefore, the scholarly discussion is integrated in the explanation of the text. Meanwhile, the author’s own in-depth interpretation relies upon carefully weighing the variety of contemporary trends in Joban exegesis that have laid bare several strata of meaning underneath this fascinating text.

(2) A postmodern, integrative reading of the book allows Balentine to combine insights deriving from distinct hermeneutical approaches. A striking example of this is the narrative analysis of the prologue of Job. By paralleling “the land of Uz,” situated “in the East” (Job 1:1, 3), with “the garden of Eden, planted in the East” (Gen 2:8), the story of Job and his wife can be viewed as “the creation story: part two” (41–42). Against the background of Genesis, a number of verbal and thematic analogies (seven scenes minus one!) is described in the “commentary” part. They show that Job’s world, in spite of his righteousness, turns from being in harmony with God’s cosmic design into one that, by lack of righteousness at God’s side, no longer functions as a habitat for humankind, be this his greatest creature. Subsequently, the “connections” part elaborates all this in three sections: “What kind of world do we live in? What kind of God is God? What kind of relationships, with God and with others, are we created for?”

With regard to the exegesis of the cycles of speeches, it is not feasible to trace the interpretive decisions taken here. Yet the following general conclusions may be stated. (1) The rhetorical structure of each “speech” lies at the basis of the explanation, which itself focuses on major expressions from the semantic field of lament, jurisdiction, morals, and anthropo-/cosmology, often elaborated in the sidebars. It is based on a thorough perusal of the scholarly literature.

(2) The hyperlink excursuses couch the description of the progress or development of thought and irascible atmosphere throughout the four cycles (Elihu included). By pointing to what is new in each address as compared to the preceding discussions, the author avoids readers becoming annoyed by vague repetitive descriptions of lament and accusation.

(3) The series expects authors to pave the way from academic exegesis to didactic and ministerial applications. In this regard, the distinction between “commentary” and “connections” makes sense. One can skip the latter section, although in that case one deprives oneself of a theological synthesis that remains close to the text. However much this exercise in exegesis is under discussion, the way in which it is carried through here justifies the genre.

(4) The “connections,” moreover, lead from Joban theology into the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the book at large. It would be splitting hairs to hold against the author that this section draws particularly on Anglo-Saxon sources. Although readers from another cultural background will often not be familiar with authors and their works quoted here, the references are enthralling. Likewise, the Lutheran background is often perceptible, but the main perspective is certainly on topics of the *condition humaine*, from which Christians are not excluded.

The review of a commentary that counts 750 pages (apart from the contents on the CD-ROM only) should discuss at least how passages that play a crucial role in the overall structure of the biblical book are explained. Therefore I propose now to take a look at the exegesis of God’s speeches in Job 38–42 (625–725). The spectrum of theories on the place and purport of these chapters is abundant, but for the benefit of the readers they are not surveyed in their *forschungsgeschichtliche* sequence but integrated in the introduction to the basic problem of this section: Do God’s discourses constitute a real response to Job’s desperate call for justice, and if so, how? Prof. Balentine skillfully argues from the very rhetorical development of the book that the final answer to this hermeneutical question necessarily lies with the readers, that is, with their interpretation of the preceding four cycles of discussion. This exegetical approach, however, does not end up with a blank bill. The author puts the readers on the way to find an answer by comparing this new address

of God to what the same God has said the last time he spoke, in the prologue (2:6). He does so in respect of the following modes of language—poetry versus prose, theophany versus deliberation (with Satan!), questions versus statements—but also in respect of the contents, “the ethos of the cosmos.” If it is true that some “design” (38:2: *’etsah*) and “governance” (40:8: *mishpat*) can be ascertained in the world order, Job (and the readers) might be left with more than the scant consolation that the cosmos is not blind for the destiny of individual human beings. Plausibly, these themselves are invited *to search and find* their irreducible yet planned place in the cosmos, in the same manner as Behemoth and Leviathan are allowed to live their unassailable existences. In this regard, the literary fact that God speaks twice and leaves the last word to Job plays a not negligible role in the interpretation of these chapters.

Some people may mistrust a commentary that expressly declares to speak primarily to Christians. They may have a need to check whether it is of any use at all to other and nonbelievers. In that case the famous passage of Job 19:25–27 can function as a standard weight. Does the commentary conclude that even critical exegesis should envisage these verses as a reference to the resurrection of the dead by the intercession of a savior (as is already the case in the LXX)? The introduction to chapter 19 anticipates the purport of this passage as follows: “it is Job’s hope for ‘something beyond’ that makes this speech far more than just another response to one of the friends” (286). This engages the readers to look for a contextual interpretation. In the run-up to the explanation of the verses at stake, much attention is paid to the fact that lament terminology of shame and guilt, social isolation, and “smell of death” presents Job as arriving at perplexity precisely in this chapter. In other words, the immediate context designates his act of hope as framed by persecution: “A full appropriation of Job’s hope for a redeemer depends on recognizing with him the abiding tension of living between *what is* and *what might be*. The temptation is to weight *what might be* so heavily that *what is* no longer factors into the balance of faith’s equations” (293). This basic outlook is subsequently elaborated in an accurate literary analysis and supported by sidebars on the literary structure and the term “redeemer” (*go’el*) before the commentary arrives at the arduous issue whether the Christian perspective of Job’s vindication “at the last” is an embryonic witness to resurrection.

With regard to this, Balentine makes it unequivocally clear that the immediate context of the chapter and the course of the discussion in the cycles of speeches so far do not favor such a hermeneutical leap. A vindication after death cannot fulfill Job’s longing for justice in his lifetime. The passage is based on the discrepancy between what Job expects for the remote future (vv. 25–26a: a redeemer will vindicate him after his death) and what he desires for the crushing present (vv. 26b–27: to see God doing justice to him). This chasm is surprisingly bridged over in the confidence of Job’s final sentence: “There is a

judgment” (v. 29). The section “connections” elaborates this fundamental statement under the heading “Something more to believe in than injustice: a redeemer, a judgment and work to do.” Job’s utterance has a provocative (“pragmatic”) character that is not an appendage to the intrinsic, primary meaning of the text but belongs to its very heart. It engages the readers to search after that judgment that will create justice in this world. In the aftermath of this exegesis, it is clarified that the interpretation whether the agent of God’s redemption will be God himself or someone else, that is, Christ, transcends the purport of the passage, becomes a task of the reader’s own choice, and remains, of course, open to challenge (305–7).

This résumé of the author’s skilful investigation into the tenor of Job 19:25–27 may help to dispel any suspicion against the Christian outlook of this volume. Users will enjoy its exegesis of a high academic level, which is at the same time oriented, by means of a broad range of carefully selected testimonies, toward the religious, philosophical, and cultural *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the book of Job.

Some appropriate indices facilitate using the commentary. The bibliography is very short; the literature referred to is mostly Anglo-Saxon, which is understandable in view of the public intended. Other literature, however, plays its due role in the argument.

One final question haunts the present reviewer: Which English translation of the book of Job is referred to here? I did not come upon a mention of it. It would be very convenient, moreover, if a translation in continuous form and in agreement, of course, with the author’s interpretation of all the contested places were available, if not in the book itself then at least on the CD-ROM (instead of some not quite pertinent pictures there!). This remark, however, takes nothing away from the excellent quality of this commentary.