David Clines once famously asked, ‘Why is there a book of Job, and what does it do to you if you read it?’¹ This chapter will ask a different yet related question: What is the book of Job, and how does that affect how you read it? For the last century and a half, the answer to this question was fairly simple and relatively uncontroversial: Job is Wisdom Literature, along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Therefore, it should be read as a product of the same Wisdom tradition that produced those texts, which aimed to provide universal answers to universal questions on the basis, not of Israel’s particular history, law, or covenant, but of the analysis of the world by human reason. However, an undercurrent of discomfort with that classification of the book has coursed beneath this consensus for several decades, slowly wearing away scholarly confidence, such that alternative theories are beginning to bubble up into mainstream interpretation. This difficulty in categorizing Job actually accords with early interpreters’ struggles to find a consistent place for it in canon lists and the wide range of texts with which they associated it in their exegetical efforts. Each of these readings, both ancient and modern, involve a different conception of what the book is, and therefore how it should be read.

These attempts to identify what Job is inevitably involve comparing it with other texts and grouping it with those with which readers in various times and places perceive it to share one

or more significant affinities. In other words, readers have attempted throughout history to understand the book through reading it in various genres, which act as formalised shorthand for such intertextual comparisons. Genres are vital for interpretation because they provide a horizon of expectations that make interpretation possible, though still inescapably provisional. However, because this intertextual analysis is performed by readers (even authors can only write in a genre by comparing their work to earlier texts), it is culturally contingent, shaped by the cultural location of those readers, including their knowledge and interests. This means that it is inappropriate to speak of the genre to which a text belongs, as the essentialist approach long dominant in biblical studies would have it. Rather than static and absolute categories determined by a text’s essential characteristics, the nominalist approach, which has only recently filtered into biblical studies from literary studies, considers genres to be dynamic and contingent groupings that illuminate particular features of a text in relation to others. Texts participate in multiple genres as readers recognise different affinities they share with various other groups of texts, and thus, genres enable readers to comprehend the meaning of texts, but a single genre can never comprehend a text’s meaning.

The Basic Contours of the Book

The various genre groupings in which Job is read each tell the book’s story differently, emphasizing various aspects of its plot and explaining their relationship to one another distinctly. However, the basic contours of the book are as follows. Job is introduced as a paragon of

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wisdom and righteousness, ‘blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil’ (Job 1:1). The narrator’s positive evaluation of Job will be repeated twice by God (1:8; 2:3), which reinforces its fundamental importance for understanding both Job, the character, and his eponymous book. The former pair of traits, blameless and upright, appear together in descriptions of God (Deut 32:4) and of David, linked to his complete obedience to God’s commands (1 Kgs 9:4), as the ground of the psalmist’s confidence before God (Ps 25:21; cf. 37:37), and repeatedly in Proverbs, where they are associated with protection (2:7; 2:21), guidance (11:3, 5), and the target of the wicked (28:10; 29:10). The poem about wisdom later in Job will proclaim the other pair of traits, fearing God and turning from evil, the very definition of wisdom (Job 28:28).

The genuineness of Job’s piety, however, is questioned by a celestial figure called hassatan. Though this is often translated ‘Satan’ (e.g., NRSV, NIV), the definite article (ha) indicates that the term refers to a role, such as ‘adversary’ or ‘accuser’ based on the meaning of the Hebrew verb satan, rather than a proper noun. Fulfilling his accusatory role, ‘the Adversary’ (JPS) questions the genuineness of Job’s piety (1:9-11) by suggesting that it is motivated purely by self-interest. He claims that if Job were to lose the blessings God has bestowed on him, Job would ‘curse’ God (the euphemism barakh ['bless'] is used repeatedly in chs. 1-2 to avoid mention of cursing God). God agrees to this challenge, and Job loses his ten children, his wealth, and subsequently his health, and yet he maintains his piety and refuses to curse God (1:21; 2:10).

However, Job’s response to his suffering changes in ch. 3, and the literary form of the book changes with it, moving from sparse prose to complex poetry. Job curses the day of his birth with a vehemence that expands into a wish for the unmaking of creation itself. Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who had come to comfort him (2:11), respond to Job’s
laments in three cycles of speeches, in which Job alternates with each friend in turn. Though they initially treat Job with sympathy and respect (e.g., 4:2-6), his persistent declaration of his innocence (e.g., 10:7) and accusations of divine injustice (e.g., 16:11-17) lead them eventually to turn on him (e.g., 22:5). The third cycle, which may be dislocated, since Bildad’s speech is uncharacteristically short, Zophar’s is missing, and Job says things (27:13-23) that seem to fit the friends’ position better than his own. An extended poem on wisdom (ch. 28), which declares it beyond human grasp, follows. The speaker of this poem is not clearly indicated. It fits somewhat uncomfortably with the tone and content of Job’s speeches, so some have attributed it to the narrator or one of the friends. Job then delivers a final monologue, which concludes with an extensive self-curse (ch. 31) through which Job declares his absolute confidence in his innocence, and thereby demands a response from God, declaring ‘Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!’ (31:35).

Instead of a divine answer, a young man named Elihu, previously unmentioned, steps into the debate. Having deferred to his elders throughout the dialogue, he can no longer resist, and intervenes to correct Job for justifying himself at God’s expense and the friends for failing to answer Job adequately (32:2-5). The derivative nature of Elihu’s arguments, which repeat much

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from both Job and the friends, combined with his absence from both prologue and epilogue, lead many to conclude that his speeches are a later addition to the book. The debate over the originality of these chapters (32-37) is dwarfed, however, by that over their meaning, which is thoroughly ambiguous. While some, including medieval Jewish interpreters and John Calvin, see Elihu’s speeches providing the answer to Job’s conundrum, others consider him an ‘irascible, presumptuous blowhard’, whose main contribution is to anticipate the divine speeches by demonstrating the complete failure of human wisdom.⁵

The storm brewing in the imagery Elihu uses in his final speech (37:2-13) does indeed foreshadow the appearance of God, now referred to as YHWH, in a whirlwind to answer Job. How and whether these divine speeches (chs. 38-41) actually respond to Job’s accusations or even address his situation is another area of significant interpretive debate. God unleashes a barrage of rhetorical questions at Job intended to convey to him God’s complete and intimate engagement with creation, from the origin of the cosmos (38:4-11) to the care of baby ravens (38:41) and birthing mountain goats (39:1) and control of the mighty Behemoth (40:15-24) and Leviathan (40:25-41:26; ET 41:1-34). God’s words are understood variously as an evasive change of subject, an attempt to bully Job into submission, and an indirect attempt at comfort and consolation.⁶ This interpretive decision is related to how one understands Job’s response to the

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divine speeches (42:2-6), particularly its final verse, which is also fraught with interpretive difficulty. The meaning of nearly every word in this verse is disputed, as is the various possible relationships between them. Traditionally, the verse has been understood as Job’s repentance (see, e.g., Vul, KJV, NRSV, NIV), though the verb nichamti, which inspires that translation, could also be translated ‘recant’ (e.g., JPS), or even to ‘find comfort’ or ‘accept consolation’, which is the meaning words from the same root have throughout the book.\(^7\)

After Job’s response, the book returns to simple prose similar to that in the prologue to describe Job’s restored relationship with God and his community. God delivers a judgement on the friends for not speaking of the deity what is right, while approving Job’s speech (42:7), though a substantial sacrifice and Job’s prayer delivers the friends from divine punishment (42:8-9). God blesses Job with twice as much as he lost, as well as with ten new children, including three daughters of incomparable beauty. Job also receives fellowship, comfort, and gifts from his friends and family. The book ends with Job dying ‘old and full of days’ (42:17).

**Date**

Though the apparent patriarchal setting of the book traditionally led it to be considered one of the oldest in the canon, its date of composition has become yet another disputed aspect of the book. Since the text lacks any explicit reference to historical events, efforts to identify a plausible period for Job’s composition rely primarily on inner-biblical parallels, linguistic evidence, and theories about the development of Israel’s religion. However, conclusions based on evidence in

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each of these categories are tenuous. Inner-biblical parallels can often be interpreted in either direction. Arguments built on linguistic evidence and the development of Israel’s religion both rely on the assumption that Israel’s language and theology developed in a linear chronological fashion, but distinctions between texts can also be explained sociologically, geographically, or even stylistically. Discussions of the inconclusive nature of the evidence for Job’s date are, therefore, standard fare in commentaries. As Clines writes, ‘Of [Job’s] author or date of composition I frankly know nothing, and my speculations are not likely to be worth more than the many guesses that already exist’. Throughout history, suggestions have ranged from the Mosaic age to the Maccabean period, but in recent scholarship, the book’s date is generally placed between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. based primarily on its language, mention of a Satan figure, and challenge of a developed view of retribution, though the occasional argument for a seventh-century date also appears. Within this larger uncertainty about the date at which

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the book reached its final form are disputes over which sections of the book (prologue, dialogue, ch. 28, Elihu speeches, divine speeches, epilogue) are secondary and the relative dating of each.13

What Is the Book of Job?

As this brief overview makes clear, Job is a remarkably open text, which leaves ample room for interpretive conjecture and debate. The book’s meaning is so underdetermined, even down to the crucial word *nichamti* in 42:6, that it is difficult not to see this as the result of authorial intent.14 This openness inspires the search for a genre classification that might solve the book’s mysteries, and yet, simultaneously, invites it to be placed in a wide range of genre groupings.

Job as Wisdom Literature

As the essentialist approach to genre has been applied for more than a century in biblical scholarship, the defining genre for Job (as for Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) has been considered Wisdom Literature. John Barton, for example, uses the development of the Wisdom Literature genre as an example of the way ‘modern critical study has made it possible to read with understanding texts which previously had to a greater or lesser extent been misread, because they


were seen as something they were not'.

Barton points to a combination of formal characteristics, such as parallel proverbs in metrical form, and shared subject matter, primarily related to human social life, as distinguishing Wisdom Literature as a genre. Job does indeed include a small number of proverbs (e.g., 18:5; cf. Prov 13:9) among other similarities in form with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, though its thematic connections with them are stronger. Most notably, the three books share a distinctive emphasis on wisdom, using the Hebrew word for ‘wisdom’, hokhmah, more often than any other texts in the Hebrew Bible (with the exception of 1 Kings 1-11, in which the word appears at a slightly higher rate than in Job). Their reflections on wisdom are tied into universal questions of humanistic relevance, while explicit references to Israel’s law, history, covenant, or cult are vanishingly rare. In Ecclesiastes and the dialogue section of Job, even the divine name of Israel’s God, YHWH, is studiously avoided (with the exception of Job 12:9), and more general terminology, such as Elohim (‘God’) or Shadday (‘Almighty’), is preferred. Further, grouping Job with the Wisdom Literature has highlighted tensions between it and other books in regard to wisdom, such as the challenge Job, like Ecclesiastes, poses to the general confidence Proverbs displays in the blessings of wise living.

The primary appeal of an essentialist approach to genre in biblical studies is the way it facilitates extraction of historical information from a text’s literary form. Identifying a text’s genre (which is used interchangeably with its form) is a means to discern its Sitz im Leben, a

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16 See Dell, Book of Job, 63-83.

17 Stuart Weeks, ‘The Limits of Form Criticism in the Study of Literature, with Reflections on
conception of its original ‘setting in life’. For Wisdom Literature, this involves a distinct class of ‘wise men’, who composed the texts and used them for instruction. Job, therefore, is considered a product of a purported ‘crisis of wisdom’, as these sages reflected on the failure of wisdom to guarantee success. Job’s three friends represent the older traditional wisdom, with its confidence in the doctrine of retribution that consistently rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, while Job raises questions for this doctrine’s reliability in both his speeches and his experience.

Problems with Wisdom Literature

The affinities between the three so-called Wisdom books cannot be denied. The gains it has provided for understanding Job are also worth acknowledging. However, genre designations (‘Gattungszuweisungen’) are also reading instructions (‘Leseanweisungen’) that restrict a reader’s interpretive horizon. The texts that various genre designations draw into comparison with Job depict its essence and cultural profile differently; a drama reads differently than a philosophical dialogue, a lament differently than a sapiential disputation. Therefore, Markus Witte argues, interpreters must take into account, not merely questions of Sitz im Leben (‘setting in life’) and Sitz im Buch (‘setting in the book’) when evaluating Job’s genre, but Sitz in der Welt


18 Dell, Book of Job, 168.

des Lesers (‘setting in the world of the reader’) as well.\textsuperscript{20} In this regard, classifying Job as Wisdom Literature is not without its problems, in terms of both the category itself and its application to Job.

Job is not grouped in a separate collection with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as Wisdom Literature until the mid-nineteenth century. Johann Bruch is the first to draw together earlier suggestions along these lines in preceding decades into a comprehensive and systematic presentation of a distinct group of texts affiliated with ‘the wise’ in Israel, and to describe the distinct ideas which characterise these texts and the tradition behind them.\textsuperscript{21} The date of this ‘discovery’ would not in itself be problematic (many of the axiomatic principles of biblical scholarship were developed during this time) if it were not for the suspicious correspondence between Bruch’s characterisation of ‘the wise’ and their literature and the philosophical ideas prominent at his time. He speaks, for example, of the ‘non-theocratic spirit’ of the wise, which ‘found no satisfaction in the religious institutions of their nation’ and thus sought ‘the way of free thinking’ to answer life’s questions.\textsuperscript{22} Though Bruch was eventually all but forgotten in biblical scholarship, his work’s widespread influence in the latter nineteenth century created a trajectory for the interpretation of the concept of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible and the three texts primarily associated with it that, over time, has acted both as a ‘mirror’ reflecting the ‘image of

\textsuperscript{20} Idem, ‘Gattung des Buches Hiob,’ 122.


\textsuperscript{22} Bruch, \textit{Weisheits-Lehre}, ix–x.
the scholar painting her portrait’, and an echo chamber, magnifying the type of post-
 Enlightenment concerns, such as humanism, individualism, universalism, secularism, and
 empiricism, that led Bruch initially to associate them, while muffling their connections with the
 rest of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, the ‘most striking characteristic’ uniting the Wisdom
 Literature still remains ‘the absence of what one normally considers as typically Israelite and
 Jewish’, notably reference to Israelite history and covenant.

Problems Wisdom Literature Creates for Reading Job

Though comparing Job to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes within the genre category Wisdom
 Literature has illuminated various features of the book, exclusively classifying Job this way has
 also distorted its interpretation. Providing the answer ‘Wisdom Literature’ to the question of
 what the book of Job is necessarily affects how the book is read. The horizon of expectation the
 genre provides also limits a reader’s field of vision. First, focusing attention on similarities
 between Job and other Wisdom Literature has led recent interpreters to overlook its connections
 with other texts across the canon. For example, before links between Proverbs and Amenemope
 popularised the Wisdom category in the 1920s, Job’s airing of the doctrine of retribution drew it

23 James L. Crenshaw, ‘Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel,’ ZAW 82

24 For these traits as continuing to distinguish Wisdom Literature, see Douglas B. Miller,
 ‘Wisdom in the Canon: Discerning the Early Intuition,’ in Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New

25 Roland E. Murphy, The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature, 3rd ed.
 (Grand Rapids: 2002), 1.
into scholarly conversation with texts across the Hebrew Bible that emphasised that doctrine, rather than primarily Proverbs’ act-consequence relationship. While discussing Job, nineteenth-century scholar W. T. Davison associates the doctrine with the Deuteronomic covenant, which became ‘the traditional teaching of law-givers, wise men, and prophets,’ and Edouard Dhorme claims that retribution is ‘everywhere characteristic of Israelite theology.’ However, as Wisdom Literature became established as a category, Proverbs became Job’s main dialogue partner and the book’s links with retribution across the canon were limited. Clines, for example, acknowledges Deuteronomy as the preeminent exponent of retribution, but takes Job’s questioning of the doctrine as a confrontation of ‘the ideology of Proverbs.’

Second, this canonical separation has contributed to theological abstraction, which is required to justify a category that can include Job with the other so-called Wisdom books with which it differs substantially. Alistair Hunter provides a straightforward example of how this process works. Though he acknowledges that his efforts to identify the Wisdom Literature on formal linguistic grounds has left Job as a ‘glaring omission’, he attempts to satisfy the ‘effective unanimity among scholars that it belongs in this category’ by considering ‘the underlying perspectives which emerge from a consideration in broader terms of what these books are

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These, he claims, are the books’ common universalism, humanism, naturalism, and intellectualism. This list fairly well summarises the post-Enlightenment approach to reality in which Job was first associated with Wisdom Literature, and, when applied to the book, directs attention to an abstract philosophical plane. Thus, according to Claus Westermann, Job’s classification as Wisdom ‘has clearly exerted a pervasive, perhaps even controlling, influence upon nineteenth- and twentieth-century exegesis’, such that Job has been increasingly read as the philosophical treatment of a ‘problem.’

Reading the book as a philosophical reflection on a question, such as ‘How is the suffering of a just man to be reconciled with the existence of a just God?’ obscures its contribution to existential questions, such as ‘Why must I suffer?’ as Westermann argues, or even, ‘How should one speak of God in the face of chaos?’

Third, theological abstraction combined with canonical separation has led to hermeneutical limitation in the book’s interpretation. As Wisdom Literature, the book’s interpretation has been ‘hedged in’ and ‘unduly restricted’. David Wolfers complains of the

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30 As Westermann cites Ernst Sellin and Leonard Rost (Westermann, *Structure of the Book of Job*, 1).


way the ‘relatively modern imposition’ of the Wisdom classification ‘imposes an estoppal on particular lines of thought’. This ‘arbitrary’ classification, which relies on ‘perfectly circular’ reasoning and reflects only ‘our own decisions as to which works to place into which categories’, is, he argues, ‘invalid for imposing restrictions on content or form.’ Job, he claims, bursts the bounds of the category in content and form, including ‘too much beside’ to be assigned to Wisdom Literature. Representing a ‘whole new intellectual universe’ in its content, it borrows broadly from Hebrew literary tradition, combining ‘wisdom, prophecy, psalm, drama, contest, lament, theodicy, history, and allegory’. The Wisdom classification obscures the contribution of the book’s ‘bewildering diversity of literary genres’ to its meaning.

Other Genres for Job

Bewildered by this diversity, many conclude that the book is best categorised as sui generis, in a class of its own. Already in the eighteenth century, Robert Lowth argued that the book’s ‘single and unparalleled’ status in the canon indicated that it had ‘little connexion with the other


34 Wolfers, Job, 50-51.


36 E.g., Pope, Job, xxx; Seow, Job 1–21, 61.
writings of the Hebrews, and no relation whatever to the affairs of the Israelites.³⁷ Harold Rowley similarly claims, ‘It is wiser to recognise the uniqueness of this book and to consider it without relation to any of these literary categories.’³⁸ However, though the *sui generis* classification is right to recognise that we cannot cram the complexity of Job into a single genre, it offers no guidance for interpretation, leaving the book ‘unreadable’.³⁹ In fact, if Job is *sui generis*, this results not from the book’s isolation from other texts, but its connections with so many of them, and, therefore, its uniqueness is better recognised in its relations with so many other genres rather than its exclusion from them all. As James Crenshaw says, ‘Like all great literary works, this one rewards readers who come to it from vastly different starting points.’⁴⁰ Therefore, Brevard Childs is on the right track when he argues that the book’s ‘proper interpretation depends on seeing Job in the perspective, not only of wisdom traditions, but also of Israel’s liturgy and historical traditions’, though, we need stop there.⁴¹ Drawing together the ‘vastly different starting points’ readers have brought to Job throughout its history of interpretation will illuminate various features of the book without forcing it to conform to the standards of a particular culturally contingent perspective of what wisdom should be.

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Early Jewish and Christian interpretation offers evidence of several different conceptions of what Job is. It may be the most variably placed book in both Jewish and Christian canon lists, ranging from the beginning of the histories (e.g., Bryennios Manuscript) to the end of the prophets (Josephus, Rufinus). In Jewish lists, Job generally appears in the larger Writings collection, which is unified only by the idiosyncrasy of its contents, which do not fit in the Law or Prophets or form a clearly identifiable category on their own. Job’s inclusion therefore highlights its distinctiveness within the canon. However, within the Writings, Job is grouped in a subcollection with Psalms and Proverbs known as the Sifrei Emet. Though the logic behind this grouping is unclear, it does underscore how Job in many ways stands between Psalms and Proverbs (as the book does in the lists in b. Baba Batra 14b and the Leningrad and Aleppo codices), and how it, like the other two books, emphasises the contrast between the righteous and the wicked, referring to both at a disproportionately high rate compared to the rest of the canon.42

By encouraging Job to be read with the Psalms, the Sifrei Emet collection reflects the close connections interpreters have long noticed between the two books.43 In addition to a range of significant allusions to the Psalms in Job (e.g., Ps 8:5; ET 4 in Job 7:17; Ps 107:40 in Job 12:21, 24), interpreters have noted that Job appears to ‘dramatize’ the lament genre so prominent


in the Psalter.\textsuperscript{44} Even those who are wary of using these similarities to determine the book’s genre acknowledge that recognizing this connection is ‘helpful’ for highlighting the complaint motifs in Job and the ‘numerous formal, thematic, and lexical affinities between parts of the book of Job and the laments of the Psalter and Lamentations.’\textsuperscript{45} Thus, this intertextual comparison provides new exegetical insight into the book, such as the way the lament is ‘subverted’ to make God, not the deliverer from enemies, but the enemy himself (e.g., 13:24; 16:9; 19:11).\textsuperscript{46} It also invites Job to be read in other groups of texts that share similar traits, such as the lament psalms and Ecclesiastes, which are characterised by \textit{Unglück} or ‘misfortune’,\textsuperscript{47} or Lamentations, the Confessions of Jeremiah, and Psalms 73 and 88, which all wrestle with the failure of divine justice.\textsuperscript{48}

This type of comparison need not be limited to the biblical canon. The dramatised lament interpretation was inspired by affinities between Job and a Babylonian text, Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi

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\textsuperscript{45} Quotations from Roland E. Murphy, \textit{Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther}, FOTL 13 (Grand Rapids: 1981), 17 and Seow, \textit{Job 1–21}, 57, respectively.

\textsuperscript{46} Seow, \textit{Job 1–21}, 58.


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(‘I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom’), in which a man similarly laments to his god about his suffering. With Job, Ludlul fits into a broader group of ancient Near Eastern texts in which individuals wrestle with unexplained suffering (e.g., Ludlul, II.33-38), which includes the Babylonian Theodicy, and two texts, one Babylonian and one Sumerian, both labelled Man and His God (the latter sometimes referred to as ‘the Sumerian Job’). All of these ‘exemplary-sufferer texts’ share more features with biblical laments, or perhaps, in Ludlul’s case, hymns of thanksgiving, than with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and therefore discourage the exclusive classification of Job with those so-called Wisdom books.

_Poetry, Drama, and Controversy Dialogue (Streitgespräch)_

In the Greek canon lists adopted by the Christian tradition, Job is predominantly associated with the Poetry collection, which directs attention to its poetic form. As Robert Lowth concluded, ‘It is of little consequence whether it be esteemed a didactic or an ethic, a pathetic or dramatic poem; only let it be assigned a distinct and conspicuous station in the highest rank of the Hebrew poetry.’


50 See Seow, _Job 1–21_, 51.


52 Lowth, _Sacred Poetry_, 281.
In addition to supporting the connections with the Psalms discussed above, the Poetry collection also invited comparisons with Song of Songs, which, like Job, was at times interpreted as a drama. This view apparently dates back to Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428 CE), since the Fifth General Council (553) condemned his view that Job was composed in imitation of Greek tragedy. Nevertheless, it found a number of prominent supporters in the sixteenth century, such as Johannes Brenz, Johannes Oecolampadius, and Theodore Beza, and was widespread from the seventeenth into the nineteenth century. Recently, the book’s association with drama has been resurrected, with interpreters noting similarities with both tragedy and comedy. Whether or not the book’s limited character development and action merit a dramatic classification,

53 E.g., Lowth, Sacred Poetry, 249; Franz Delitzsch, Das Buch Job (Leipzig: 1864), 11–13.
54 Seow, Job 1–21, 48.
comparison with other dramatic texts serves heuristically to draw the audience into the impassioned ‘intellectual action’ of the book and accounts well for its dialogic character.

The strongest dramatic element of Job is its use of dialogue, a feature it shares with several other ancient Near Eastern texts, which consist of a debate between two friends on a single specific issue. Some of the texts in this Streitgespräch or ‘controversy dialogue’ form, such as the Babylonian Theodicy, the Akkadian Dialogue of Pessimism, and an Egyptian text known as ‘A Man and His Ba’ or ‘The Man Who Grew Tired of Life’, engage similar questions as Job. Though this genre comparison fails to encapsulate the book, these texts do offer an apt parallel for the form of a major section of Job and its impassioned struggle with issues of justice.

History, Epic, Didactic Narrative, and Torah

Though the Poetry and Sifrei Emet collections primarily illuminate features of the poetic section of the book, in some ancient canon lists Job appears with the histories, which draws attention to the narrative features of its prose frame. Many Christian Peshitta manuscripts and the four canon lists recorded by Epiphanius place Job directly after either the Pentateuch or Judges, potentially following an addition to the book in Greek (Job 42:17 LXX), which identifies Job and his friends

59 Seow, Job 1–21, 48.
with figures in the genealogy of Esau’s descendants (Genesis 36). Origen, on the other hand, puts Job with Esther in a historical subgroup at the end of his canon list, and two of the three canon lists recorded in Codex Amiatinus and Cassiodorus’s Institutiones, Augustine’s and ‘the Septuagint’, also include Job on the later end of the histories. In fact, Job was widely considered historical in the West into the medieval period, and even in the eighteenth-century, a definition of ‘sapiential’ from Chambers’ Cyclopaedia acknowledges ‘Historical Books’ as a potential classification for Job. However, Job does not have to be considered historical to be connected with Israel’s history. Wolfers proposes that the book be read as a politico-historical allegory of the nation’s trials similar to Jonah, Esther, and Dryden’s Absalom and Achitophel, which attempts to justify God’s involvement in the eighth-century Assyrian invasions. Others consider it a potential allegorical reflection on the exile.

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64 Wolfers, Job, 67–70.

Nahum Sarna sees in the prose tale an ‘epic substratum’ with close parallels in Ugaritic epics. The epic interpretation of Job, which may go back to Jerome’s (mistaken) characterisation of the book’s poetry as dactylic hexameter commonly employed by Greek epics, was prominent in Christian interpretation from Gregory the Great, Isidore of Seville, Bede, and Rabanus Maurus to no less than Milton himself. However, in this reading, which understood Job as a heroic paragon of virtue in the face of crushing adversity, the book was compared, not to Ugaritic parallels, but Homer’s epics, or, more often, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, which similarly wrestles with theodicy, while depicting, not military exploits or adventures, but an ‘epic of inner life’ full of ‘struggles and adventures unknown to sense but real to faith’.

Others associate the prose tale with other ‘didactic narratives,’ such as the Joseph story, Esther, Daniel, Aḥiqar, and Tobit, which attempt to inculcate virtue by depicting a virtuous individual earning a reward for conquering a test of his character and any who oppose him. However, following the rabbinic suggestion in b. Baba Batra 16b that Job is a mashal, others argue that the prose narrative evokes a ‘prophetic example story,’ such as Nathan’s parable in 2

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Sam 12:1-14,\textsuperscript{70} or a ‘philosophic fable’ like Jonah.\textsuperscript{71} The latter suggestion introduces further extra-biblical parallels with philosophical novels such as \textit{Zadig}, \textit{Candide}, or \textit{Robinson Crusoe}.\textsuperscript{72} All these proposals focus interpretive attention on how the book conveys its message through story.

Beyond associating Job with Israel’s history, the book’s connections with patriarchal figures in Genesis 36 made explicit by the addition in the Greek version, combined with the rabbinic traditions that Job was a contemporary of Moses and that Moses wrote the book (b. B. Bat. 15a-16b), potentially inspired by those connections, encourage interpreters to explore parallels between Job and the Torah. Indeed, some canon lists place Job immediately after the Torah. Further, at Qumran, a Job manuscript (4QpaleoJob\textsuperscript{c} = 4Q101) employs a paleo-Hebrew script only otherwise used for the Pentateuch and Joshua, and Targumim were only found for Job and one of the books of the Torah, Leviticus.\textsuperscript{73} Despite the ‘paradigmatic assumptions’ about the separation of Wisdom Literature from history and Torah which have discouraged study on this question, Witte argues the rabbinic association of Job with the Torah, followed by several church fathers, is reinforced by the ‘almost self-evident’ literary and theological relationship between

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\textsuperscript{70} Carol A. Newsom, \textit{The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations} (Oxford: 2003), 41.
\textsuperscript{72} Mies, ‘Le genre littéraire,’ 339.
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Job and Deuteronomy. Not only does the book wrestle with the Deuteronomic understanding of retribution, Witte argues it alludes to Deuteronomy itself. The influence of the Torah on Job also includes the ‘conscious adaptation’ of Genesis 1–3 in the prologue, Job’s self-curse in ch. 3 as a ‘counter-cosmic incantation’ reversing Gen 1:1–2:4a and aspects of Exodus, the divine speeches (Job 38–41) as a rival description of the creation in Genesis, and connections with the broader Priestly tradition in all of the book’s major sections. Torah is itself a rather ungainly genre designation, but to the degree that it describes a common constellation of traits related to creation, covenant, patriarchal history, and priestly order, the Joban star is not as distant in the canonical sky as readers commonly assume.


Prophecy, Lawsuit, and Apocalyptic

Early interpreters similarly highlight connections between Job and the Prophets, with Job grouped together with them in Ben Sira’s Praise of the Fathers (49:8-10), James’s praise of their shared ‘endurance’ (Jas 5:10-11), Josephus’s canon list (Contra Apionis I, 8), and the rabbinic debate over Job’s prophetic status (b. Baba Batra 15b-16a). This underscores common traits extending from the heavenly council in the book’s prologue to the divine speeches at its end. Thus, in light of the stylistic and theological influence of prophecy on the book, ‘the continuity between Job and prophecy cannot be denied.’ Susannah Ticciati, for example, notices several indications of the book’s ‘indebtedness’ to the prophets, including Job’s legal dispute (rib) with God, his desire for a prophetic mokiakh to intercede between God and humanity (9:33), and the foundational role of the Deuteronomic Covenant in his arguments. James Harding, however, argues that, like Jonah, Job is a ‘metaprophecy,’ which ‘draws on themes and ideas present in the prophetic books, in order to wrestle with the assumptions underlying them’, such as the ‘nexus between divine revelation and theodicy’ that grounds the prophetic confidence in entering the

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divine council and hearing the word of God. Others have joined in drawing prophetic parallels into their interpretation of Job, such as those with Isaiah 40-55, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, and Habakkuk.

The prophetic rib takes the form of a lawsuit. The lawsuit form plays such a prominent role in Job that some have used it to categorise the entire book. Legal features are evident in vocabulary, metaphors, and the judicial complaint in Job 31; legal language appears in 444 verses, outweighing the 346 that deal with wisdom. As with lament, some argue the book dramatises this genre to create a ‘lawsuit drama’ or ‘trial narrative’. Though the ‘mere occurrence’ of the legal genre, like the lament genre, is insufficient to determine the book’s genre as a whole, it similarly has interpretive value in directing attention to the legal features in

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83 Harding, ‘Metaprophecy,’ 528. See also Schmid, ‘Schriftdiskussion,’ 253–58.

84 See the chapters on Isaiah (Kynes), Jeremiah (Dell), Ezekiel (Joyce), Joel (Nogalski), and Amos (Marlow) in Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, eds. Reading Job Intertextually, LHBOTS 574 (New York: 2013). For Habakkuk, see Donald E. Gowan, ‘God’s Answer to Job: How Is It an Answer?’ HBT 8 (1986): 85-102.


the book, which ‘make the reader aware of the strong claims made by Job.’ Grouping Job with lawsuits and laments (like other genres) illuminates certain features of the texts and obscures others, just as reading it with other texts concerned with wisdom does.

Finally, Timothy Johnson has proposed that Job be read according to another genre associated with prophecy: apocalyptic. He argues that the book ‘is marked by such core apocalyptic features as revelation, plot, heavenly conflict, perseverance in the midst of persecution, and otherworldly mediator and reward due to faithfulness.’ Johnson argues that Job is ‘an early, undeveloped form of apocalypse’, which lacks some features, such as belief in immortality, in later apocalyptic texts. Even without agreeing with all of Johnson’s conclusions, his apocalyptic comparison still offers a valuable new perspective on Job’s perseverance and the role of revelation in the book, which illuminate the prominence of these themes in the later Testament of Job.

Parody, Citation, and Polyphony

Finally, several genre groupings focus on a prominent meta-generic literary technique that explains the book’s incorporation of so many features of other genres. First, Katharine Dell claims that the consistent intentional ‘misuse’ and parody of these smaller genres or ‘forms’ throughout Job indicates that the book as a whole is a parody, and therefore ‘sceptical

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88 Murphy, Wisdom Literature, 17.

89 See Dell, Book of Job, 89–93.

90 Johnson, Job, 11.

91 Idem, Job, 71.
literature’.\footnote{Dell, \textit{Book of Job}.} Exchanging form criticism for intertextuality, another approach focuses on the book’s allusion to and critical reflection on so many texts from across the Hebrew Bible.\footnote{E.g., Melanie Köhlmoos, \textit{Das Auge Gottes: Textstrategie im Hiobbuch}, FAT 25 (Tübingen: 1999); Schmid, \textquoteleft{}Schriftdiskussion\textquoteright{}; Dell and Kynes, eds., \textit{Reading Job Intertextually}.} Due to the prevalence of this technique, Job could be considered a \textquoteleft{}citational text\textquoteright{}, in which the author expects readers to recognise his widespread use of allusion as relevant to the work’s interpretation.\footnote{Kynes, \textit{Obituary for ‘Wisdom Literature’}, 174.} Second Isaiah\footnote{See Patricia Tull Willey, \textit{Remember the Former Things: The Recollection of Previous Texts in Second Isaiah}, SBLDS 161 (Atlanta: 1997); Benjamin D. Sommer, \textit{A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66} (Stanford, CA: 1998).} and Revelation\footnote{See Steve Moyise, \textit{The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation}, JSNTSup 115 (Sheffield: 1995).} would be other biblical examples of this technique, while the poetry of T. S. Eliot and the novels of James Joyce are modern parallels. Third, Carol Newsom combines redaction criticism and Bakhtinian dialogism to argue that the author intentionally creates a polyphonic dialogue between the various genres incorporated into the book. Each genre provides a different \textquoteleft{}perspective on the world\textquoteright{}, and they together demonstrate that the idea of piety transcends \textquoteleft{}the bounds of a single consciousness\textquoteright{} and \textquoteleft{}can only be grasped at the point of intersection of unmerged perspectives\textquoteright{}.\footnote{Newsom, \textit{Book of Job}, here, 15, 30.} These meta-generic proposals recognise Job’s connections with texts from a broad range of other genres, but, unlike
the *sui generis* classification, they draw those other texts into the interpretation of Job, whether through shared forms, allusions, or genre affinities.

How Does Genre Affect How You Read Job?

Each of these meta-generic approaches reinforces what the various genre groupings in which readers have explicitly or implicitly placed Job throughout history demonstrate: there is no simple or single answer to the question, what is the book of Job? As Marvin Pope observes, ‘[Job] shares something of the characteristics of all the literary forms that have been ascribed to it, but it is impossible to classify it exclusively as didactic, dramatic, epic, or anything else.’


Or as Crenshaw puts it, ‘No single genre can explain all the facets of the book, and several have certainly contributed to it’. Properly interpreting the book, therefore, involves incorporating the insight each comparison between Job and other texts contributes to its meaning, as each highlights different significant features of its meaning, from the various themes it addresses to the range of literary forms through which it presents them.

Like the Wisdom Literature category, each of these intertextual comparisons was also influenced by culturally contingent presuppositions. Newsom, for example, acknowledges that her interpretation is motivated by ‘the desire to read Job as a book of our own age,’ in accord with the inescapable postmodern, multicultural reality of diverse, situated perspectives on


meaning. The book’s internal dialogue between genres, she argues, draws in the various reading communities that encounter it, including her own, as its ‘complex and elusive nature allows interpreters to see mirrored in it perspectives congenial to the tenor of their own age’. Job’s radical hermeneutical openness draws readers into its roiling dialogue over the proper wise response to suffering; what readers believe about God, justice, humanity—even, I would add, hermeneutics—is what they are likely to find it teaching.

However, as long as interpreters acknowledge, like Newsom, the contingent, subjective, and partial nature of their proposals, those readings can together provide a fuller and more objective understanding of the book, which multiplies perspectives on its meaning to transcend the limited viewpoint of any one of them. When Wisdom Literature is treated as a taxonomic category that defines what the book of Job is, it prevents this. This is why the category should be discarded, even as the value of a more limited comparison of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (along with other texts) regarding their shared interest in wisdom as a concept is acknowledged. Job is far more than a Wisdom book. It defies attempts to restrict it to this or any other single genre. And yet the partial insight of each illuminates some shadow cast by the book’s craggy inscrutability.

Read in this multiperspectival way, Job appears as a text which raises important philosophical questions of universal significance, yes, but also one that tackles those questions

100 Newsom, Book of Job, 261.

101 Idem, Book of Job, 3.

102 Gowan, ‘God’s Answer,’ 86.

103 See Kynes, Obituary for Wisdom Literature, 139-41.
with the language of worship, living out lament, expressing its message with poetic power, dramatic passion, and acrimonious debate, drawing history within itself even as it explodes out of it, teaching through a story of epic conquest over unexplained and unjust suffering, wrestling with divine covenant and law, meeting the deity in the prophetic realm to accuse him for his absence, initiating a trial between humanity and God, persevering with the help of divine revelation, which is cited and parodied, and placing this all in polyphonic dialogue.

Select Bibliography


