

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY

THE VINDICATION OF GOD IN THE BOOK OF JOB

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## Introduction

In the book of Job, God is put on trial.<sup>1</sup> The book's primary purpose is not to explain why good people suffer,<sup>2</sup> how there can actually be a righteous person in the earth,<sup>3</sup> or what a proper relationship of man to God is<sup>4</sup>—although these themes, and others, are essential to understanding the book. Rather, “the drama of the book of Job...revolves around a conflict, not primarily between Job and God or Job and the Satan, but directly between the Satan and God.”<sup>5</sup> That conflict, at its core, is whether God is good, worthy to be served and trustworthy in His ways.<sup>6</sup> The narrative and dialogue both ascends the heights and plumbs the depths of human philosophy, natural law, and earthly religion, but ultimately, when all has been said, God is vindicated as worthy of worship and trustworthy in all His ways—over Job's friends, over Job, and even over Satan.

Many studies have been done on the book of Job vindicating the authenticity of a single author, the textual form, Elihu's speeches, and the epilogue, but this paper will assume that the

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<sup>1</sup> David R. Jackson, “Cosmic Bully or God of Grace? The Book of Job as Māšāl,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 1 (Spr 2016): 73. Jackson Cosmic Bully 73

<sup>2</sup> As argued by Elmer B. Smick, “Job,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 878.

<sup>3</sup> As Anderson rightly says, “God's authority and credibility are now placed into question; thus, it is not Job's integrity that lies at the heart of the narrative conflict, but God's.” Braden P. Anderson, “The Story of Job and the Credibility of God,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 34, no. 2 (2012): 109.

<sup>4</sup> As argued by Gregory W. Parsons, “The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138, no. 550 (June 1981): 142.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, “The Story of Job and the Credibility of God,” 103–4.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson says that “the main conflict of the book concerns whether God's claim regarding Job's righteousness can be trusted.” *Ibid.*, 103. He also writes, “Satan's charge, at its core, is that God's claim cannot be trusted. This gives the implied reader pause, because God already has been established as a character with reliable judgment. By challenging God's declaration about Job, the Satan is directly challenging God's credibility.” *Ibid.*, 109.

book of Job is reliable in its current form, the work of one author, and consistent with the rest of Scripture's teaching on the righteous God of the Jews. This paper will follow the structure of the book by seeing the accusations against God and His vindication through (1) the prologue, (2) the dialogues, and (3) the epilogue.

### **Prologue (1:1-2:13)**

The prologue establishes the foundation of the entire book. It sets up the conflict of the narrative, introduces all of the characters (except for one), and introduces the pertinent questions and themes. Most pertinently, in the prologue, God is accused of wickedness by Satan and subsequently vindicated through Job in two rounds. Court is in session.

#### Accusation and Vindication, Round 1

The book begins by asserting Job's blamelessness (1:1). God Himself holds up Job as a paradigm of blamelessness and uprightness (1:8). Yet Satan contradicts God and "insinuates that Job's allegiance is hypocritical"<sup>7</sup> and "motivated by self-interest."<sup>8</sup> Satan's asserts that Job only fears God because he wants God's physical blessings (1:9-11). By this, he insults Job, but more importantly, he insults God, claiming that God is a fool to be deceived by such a charlatan as Job.<sup>9</sup> What's more, Satan says that God "has secured Job's devotion by bribery."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the "attack is on God through Job,"<sup>11</sup> that God is not worthy of worship in and of Himself (1:20), but only for His stuff.

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<sup>7</sup> Smick, "Job," 880.

<sup>8</sup> Francis I. Andersen, *Job*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Inter-Varsity, 1976), 85.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson, "Cosmic Bully or God of Grace?," 67-8.

<sup>10</sup> Andersen, *Job*, 14:89.

<sup>11</sup> Smick, "Job," 880.

Inherent to Satan’s accusation is the assumption of what has been called the dogma of divine retribution, a *quid pro quo* religion in which the worshipper serves the deity only to receive what the worshipper desires—health, wealth, prosperity.<sup>12</sup> In this religious system, the operative principles are reciprocity and payment.<sup>13</sup> In other words, if one is righteous, God will be bless him; if one is wicked, God will punish him. Satan asserts that Job follows this dogma, and thus raises the major questions of Job:

Could any human being fear God and relate to him with integrity in a relationship that is not motivated by reward, protection, or prosperity? Is there such a thing as a human being for whom God is more important than self? Is God a fool who cannot see through the dishonesty and manipulation of a sycophant?<sup>14</sup>

Thus, God allows a test to assay Job’s heart. If Satan takes away all of God’s blessings from Job, would Job still worship God? At Satan’s doing, Job loses everything—oxen, donkeys, sheep, camels, servants, housing, children (1:13-19). But, contrary to Satan’s accusation, in 1:21, Job responds with “the noblest expression to be found anywhere of a man’s joyful acceptance of the will of God as his only good.”<sup>15</sup> The narrator says, “Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God” (1:22).

Thus, “Satan’s jibe proved false. Job did not worship God for the side-effects of prosperity.”<sup>16</sup> Rather, Job proved that he worshipped because God is intrinsically worthy of worship, even without God’s blessings (1:21). By such words and deeds, Job shows himself the

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, “The Story of Job and the Credibility of God,” 108.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, “Cosmic Bully or God of Grace?,” 68.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Andersen, *Job*, 14:92.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 14:93.

righteous man, and vindicates God’s word concerning him; his survival of the test declares that God is completely righteous and truly trustworthy.

### Accusation and Vindication, Round 2

But Satan’s attack is not done. Verses 2:1-3 is almost an exact redux of 1:6-8, except God accuses Satan of injustice, inciting God against Job “without cause” (2:3).<sup>17</sup> “Satan’s experiment was all for nothing”<sup>18</sup> for it revealed nothing that God did not already know—that indeed, Job was blameless.

Yet Satan had another flaming dart to throw. In 2:4, he insists that Job’s profession “was only a ploy by which he was purchasing his personal well-being... [that, in fact, he] was even willing to sacrifice the skin of his loved ones to save his own.”<sup>19</sup> So Satan again maligns Job, calling him a self-interested charlatan. Satan insists (2:5) that if “Job’s body, *his bone and his flesh*, feels the touch of God, he will show his real character by open vituperation of God himself.”<sup>20</sup> Again, God agrees to such a test; this time, the only thing off limits to Satan is that he cannot kill Job (2:6).

At Satan’s doing, Job is tormented with inconsolable physical agony (2:7-8). Would he curse God now? In the first test, Job was tempted to deny God by tragic, but only external, circumstances. In this second test, he was tempted to curse God by personal pain *and* by his closest relationship: his wife. His wife’s “question [in 2:9] could be a taunt. ‘Do you still insist

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<sup>17</sup> “In 1:9 Satan used the same word to accuse Job of having an ulterior purpose for serving God. Now God taunts the Accuser with the counteraccusation that Satan himself is the one who wants to see injustice done. The translation of this key word (*hinnām*) as “without any reason” is good at this point. It means there was no immediate sinfulness in Job that called for punishment.” Smick, “Job,” 884.

<sup>18</sup> Andersen, *Job*, 14:95.

<sup>19</sup> Smick, “Job,” 884–85.

<sup>20</sup> Andersen, *Job*, 14:95. Emphasis in original.

on maintaining your integrity? What good has it done you?”<sup>21</sup> Her advice is poison: “Curse God and die!” (2:9) This is rightly categorized as a Satanic temptation because it is the exact thing Satan swears Job will do against God (1:11, 2:5). Indeed, to “curse God was essentially a way of denying he is God.”<sup>22</sup>

God’s righteousness hangs in the balance at the end of 2:9. If Job listened to his wife (c.f. Gen 3:17), he would make Satan’s accusation true and make God’s boast a lie.<sup>23</sup> If Job compromises, God would be made a rash fool. But Job does not capitulate. He holds fast his integrity and appeals to God’s divine right to do whatever He pleases, to give both “good” and “adversity” (2:10). The narrator again vindicates Job and says, “[He] did not sin with his lips” (2:10).<sup>24</sup> Thus, through Job, God’s own righteousness is vindicated again over Satan.

### **Dialogue Part 1: Job and the Three Friends (3:1–31:40)**

But Job’s story does not end at 2:10. Although God has been vindicated through two cycles of Satan’s attack, the thorn has now gone more than skin deep. There are forty more chapters of discourse and suffering before Job—and Satan—learns the fullest extent of God’s worthiness. The next movement in the book incorporates the three friends.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 14:98.

<sup>22</sup> Smick, “Job,” 886.

<sup>23</sup> John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 84.

<sup>24</sup> “Some rabbi, splitting verbal hairs, inferred that, because he *did not sin with his lips*, only his speech was blameless; his thoughts had already begun to waver ... This is a specious distinction, and takes sides with Job’s friends in condemning him for insincerity; and it contradicts the text. ... If Job felt different from the way he spoke, he did sin with his lips. Job’s religion was more than outward propriety. He knew that to curse God in one’s mind was a grievous sin (1:5). If Job’s fine words were not honest and from the heart, the Satan had already corrupted him.” Andersen, *Job*, 14:99.

### The Three Friends Indict Job

While much can be said about the friends' speeches, their thesis is simple: Job is suffering because he is unrighteous.<sup>25</sup> According to their worldview, "since God, who is an impartial judge, did not punish the upright man nor preserve the evildoer, Job's suffering was a sign of hidden sin (see 4:7-11; 5:8-16; 8:3, 11-22; cf. 18:5-21)."<sup>26</sup> They were so convinced of their theology that they even harangued him with groundless accusations (22:5-9).

However, this prosecution is exactly the opposite of the truth (1:1, 8, 20–22; 2:3, 10). "Ironically, while Job's friends make compelling speeches to him that seem to defend the honor of God, in so doing, *they perpetuate the Satan's charge that God's claims are not credible.*"<sup>27</sup> Unwittingly, the friends align themselves with Satan and malign God, calling Him a liar. This reveals that their worldview is also one of divine retribution.<sup>28</sup> But they apply the inverse of Satan's instance: if one is *not* blessed by God, that one is *not* righteous; instead, he is wicked, and thus deserves punishment from God as his just desserts. While Satan ceased to speak in the narrative in 2:4, his charges against God's worthiness find new life in the mouths of these three friends.

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<sup>25</sup> "For Job's counselors, all five of these statements cannot be true: 1. God is righteous. 2. God is sovereign (nothing happens except by his decision). 3. Job is blameless. 4. God cares for people. 5. The calamities afflicting Job are real. For all of the speakers in the book of Job the sovereignty and righteousness of God are beyond question as is the reality of job's suffering. Job's friends make the logical jump to conclude that Job's assertion of his integrity constitutes a denial of the justice of God." Jackson, "Cosmic Bully or God of Grace?," 68–9.

<sup>26</sup> Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," 144.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, "The Story of Job and the Credibility of God," 112–13. Emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," 144.



### Job Vindicates God

According to the two previous cycles, the reader expects Job to again vindicate God. He does; he “maintains his claim of righteousness and thus, albeit unknowingly... defends the credibility of God’s claims in the first chapter.”<sup>29</sup> There are many passages in which Job protests his innocence to his three friends in the dialogue, but the climactic summary comes in chapter 31, in which he swears, under pain of punishment and guilt (31:8, 10, 22), that he is truly blameless. He declares himself innocent of what Hartley identifies as fourteen categories of sin,<sup>30</sup> thus emphasizing “his faithful adherence to the entire moral law.”<sup>31</sup> “Assuredly, Job demonstrates that God’s confidence in him has been well-founded.”<sup>32</sup>

### Job Indicts God

But the dialogues are more complex than the prologue, not least because even while Job vindicates God by maintaining his integrity, he also challenges God, sometimes in the very same breath. As Barrick aptly summarizes, “Job did not suffer because he had sinned, [but] he ended up sinning because of his suffering.”<sup>33</sup>

While Job was right to protest his innocence, he erred and asserted his blamelessness even over the Almighty’s perfections. Job maligned God’s character, accusing Him of being abusive (9:17), unjust (9:20), cruel (9:22–23, 30:21), and an obscurer of justice (9:24). He calls

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<sup>29</sup> Anderson, “The Story of Job and the Credibility of God,” 113.

<sup>30</sup> “Those 14 categories are lust, falsehood, covetousness, adultery, mistreatment of servants, lack of concern for the poor, failure to clothe the poor, pervasion of justice, trust in wealth, worship of heavenly bodies, satisfaction at a foe’s misfortune, failure at hospitality, concealment of sin, and abuse of the land.” Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 408–9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 426.

<sup>33</sup> William D. Barrick, “Messianic Implications in Elihu’s ‘Mediator Speech’ (Job 33:23-28),” 2003, 5.

God a terror (9:34), oppressive (10:3), irascible (10:14–17), merciless (16:13), a persecutor (30:21). “In 19:6-7, he goes so far as to say that God has wronged him in regards to his suffering without explanation... and in 27:2, he laments that God has taken away his right (for a hearing or an appeal) and thereby made his soul bitter.”<sup>34</sup> While such charges fall short of cursing God to his face, they are surely blasphemy. “For a mortal to presume himself guiltless and to impugn God’s just governance of the world approaches the sin of presumptuous pride.”<sup>35</sup> Job’s words do not merely *approach* sin; he has arrogated to himself to be judge over the Judge of all! In his own mind, Job is so exalted that he can demand that “the Almighty answer [him]” (31:35)!

Ironically, even while repudiating his friends, in these accusations Job reveals that he himself holds to some form of divine retribution.<sup>36</sup> He believes he is righteous and thus deserves to be blessed. But because he perceives that he is being punished unjustly, he thus desires an audience with God to argue his blamelessness (23:3-9, c.f. 10:1–7), even going so far to accuse God of being not good.

### A Recap

Thus, after 29 chapters of discourse, Job and his three friends sit in silence, for Job “was righteous in his own eyes” (32:1). God had now been indicted by Satan, the three friends, and even Job himself. Who would answer the charge?

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<sup>34</sup> Anderson, “The Story of Job and the Credibility of God,” 113.

<sup>35</sup> Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 519. Quoted in Barrick, “Messianic Implications in Elihu’s ‘Mediator Speech’ (Job 33:23-28),” 5–6.

<sup>36</sup> “...because Job accused God of injustice in order to maintain his own righteousness (see 40:8) — operating on the assumption that God was punishing him for sin, though unjustly — he was unconsciously retaining the dogma of divine retribution.” Parsons, “The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job,” 144. Anderson agrees: “Job retains the retribution theory of his friends: only within such a retributive framework would a hearing make sense, i.e., that he is being wrongly punished for non-existent sin.” Anderson, “The Story of Job and the Credibility of God,” 113.

## Dialogue Part 2: Elihu and God (32:1-42:6)

Job's demand for an audience with God make the reader expect God to speak—and that fearsome confrontation will come. However, before that, a previously unknown character unexpectedly steps to the fore. He serves as an “opening act” for God's own speeches, and shifts the conversation in the right direction.

### Elihu Speaks for God

There have been many interpretations of Elihu's speeches, both condemning his discourse as well as commending it—and everywhere in-between.<sup>37</sup> However, it is best to understand Elihu as one who defends God. He understand Job's sufferings in a fundamentally different way. “[The friends] said that Job was suffering because he had sinned. Elihu says that Job has sinned because he was suffering.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, he does not impugn God like the friends do, for he does not contradict God's evaluation of Job's blamelessness in the prologue.

Elihu evidently listened to Job (33:8-11, 34:5–9; 35:2-3, 14) and “responded well to Job,” for he addressed Job's true concern: God, not suffering.<sup>39</sup> Whereas the friends said that Job's suffering must be because of his wickedness, and Job said that his suffering must be because of God's injustice, Elihu provides an alternative understanding: Job's suffering may be “an expression of God's mercy more than his wrath.”<sup>40</sup> This understanding both explains Job's suffering as undeserved and allows for God's righteousness.

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<sup>37</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 243–45. And Smick, “Job,” 998–99. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 28–30.

<sup>38</sup> Hywel R. Jones, *Job* (Darlington, U.K.: Evangelical Press, 2007), 226. Quoted in Christopher Ash, *Job* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 328.

<sup>39</sup> Marvin E. Tate, “Speeches of Elihu,” *Review & Expositor* 68, no. 4 (Fall 1971): 492.

<sup>40</sup> Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 427. See also Job 33:19–30.

In addition, Elihu argues for God's superiority. "God is greater than man" and doesn't "give an account" to man (33:12-13). God sees all and has no need to reevaluate man (33:21-23). No one can condemn God for silence (34:29). God judges with righteousness (36:5-15). No one can understand His mighty works of nature (36:26-37:24). Thus, Elihu's speeches introduce the Creator-creature distinction so prevalent in God's coming speeches.

Elihu's answers are good. But they are ultimately not enough. God Himself must speak.

### God Vindicates Himself Over Job

Finally, God Himself answers the indictments made against Him. He begins with a withering inquisition of Job. It is as if God is "pretending to believe that [Job's] criticism and challenge... can come only from a rival God. Thus, He interrogates him about [the secrets of the universe], or (in 40:10-13) invites him to demonstrate his power."<sup>41</sup> Job had demanded a court trial with God, and God was going to give it.<sup>42</sup> But this was no ordinary trial between two equal parties. Rather, God shows "the absurdity of Job's attempt to manipulate God by a "lawsuit," ...Consequently the Lord virtually ignored Job's allegations of His injustice."<sup>43</sup> He says, "Will you really annul my judgment? / Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" (40:8) God challenges Job, "No one is so fierce that he dares to arouse [Leviathan]; / Who then is he that can stand before Me?" (41:10) Such is God's argument: I am the Almighty, and you have no right to contend with me (c.f. 40:1).

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<sup>41</sup> Roderick Andrew Francis MacKenzie, "Purpose of the Yahweh Speeches in the Book of Job," *Biblica* 40, no. 2 (1959): 441.

<sup>42</sup> Smick, "Job," 1030.

<sup>43</sup> Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," 149-150.

God does not vindicate Himself by explaining His ways to Job. He gives Job no insight into the heavenly events of chapters 1 and 2. Rather, He vindicates Himself by teaching Job the beginning of wisdom: “the fear of the Lord” (Prov 1:7, c.f. Job 28). In the divine speech, there is

“a clear Creator-creature distinction.”<sup>44</sup> As a creature, Job must accept the way that Yahweh has made and subsequently maintains his world, without fully understanding God’s purpose in all of this. ...[For] the Creator is never in debt to his creation, but is the One who gives all things to His [sic] creatures. Nor is [God] beholden to a creaturely understanding of how his world should work, but instead exercises his kingly freedom over the world that he has made.”<sup>45</sup>

Ultimately, Job gets the message. God showed Himself as the Almighty, inscrutable, “too wonderful” for man (42:3). In light of God’s majesty, and recognizing his own fault in demanding an answer from the Almighty, Job retracts and repents (42:6). Thus, he drops his charges against God, accepts the verdict of “No contest,” and vindicates God’s righteousness.

### **Epilogue (42:7-17)**

Having humbled Job, and obtained satisfactory repentance (42:1-6), God moves to vindicate Job over the three friends and over Satan; in doing so, He vindicates Himself over the same.<sup>46</sup>

#### God Vindicates Himself Over the Friends

In His second speech, God answers the three friends indirectly by dismantling the doctrine of divine retribution; He says, “Who has given to Me, that I should repay him?” (41:11,

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew Prideaux, “The Yahweh Speeches in the Book of Job: Sublime Irrelevance, or Right to the Point?,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 69, no. 2 (August 2010): 84.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, “The Story of Job and the Credibility of God,” 115.

c.f. 35:7-8) In other words, man's righteousness is not legitimate currency in the economy of heaven; it cannot *purchase* divine blessing.

In the epilogue, God answers the friends directly. His wrath "is kindled" against them, and He commands them to make sacrifice (42:7-8), for their "error is no mere trivial verbal fault, but a fundamental wrong, which needs the most strenuous sacrificial effort to expunge."<sup>47</sup> Their sin was a fundamental wrong indeed, for they had "sided with the *satan* [by] denying Job's integrity, [thus] impugn[ing] the Wisdom of God."<sup>48</sup> God Himself says that their sin was that they had not understood Him rightly as Job had (42:8).

By God's words, "Job is vindicated...[for] his understanding of his own righteousness before God (and therefore of God's allowance of such a possibility) is [declared] reliable over against his friends' understanding."<sup>49</sup> And, as was demonstrated in the prologue, if Job is vindicated, so is God's trustworthiness, for His judgment about Job was right.

### God Vindicates Himself Over Satan

In what could be considered a third round of accusation and vindication, Satan again lost. Job "demonstrated that his heart is set on God, not on His gifts,"<sup>50</sup> thus displaying to heaven and earth that God was worthy of worship and trust. Even though he lost everything, even his own health, he did not curse God. He surely sinned, yet repented, and was thus restored by the Lord (42:10, 12, 17).

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<sup>47</sup> David J. A. Clines, *Job 38-42* (Dallas: Word Books, 2011), 1231. Quoted in Jackson, "Cosmic Bully or God of Grace?," 72.

<sup>48</sup> Jackson, "Cosmic Bully or God of Grace?," 72. Emphasis in original.

<sup>49</sup> Anderson, "The Story of Job and the Credibility of God," 115.

<sup>50</sup> MacKenzie, "Purpose of the Yahweh Speeches in the Book of Job," 445.

God gave, and He took away (1:21), but His name is still blessed in righteousness. And after the third cycle was complete, He again gave and restored Job to a place of honor (42:10-17), “not a reward or payment but a free gift based solely on God's sovereign grace.”<sup>51</sup> “Finally, the Satan’s challenge is undone, not only by Job’s vindication, but by Job’s restoration and by reparation for his suffering at the Satan’s hands (42:10-17).”<sup>52</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The book of Job starts and ends in the same way: with a blameless Job and a righteous God. Job emerges from the trial not as a sinless man, but a repentant and ultimately vindicated-by-God man. God emerges as the Almighty—irreproachable, indisputable, incomprehensible—who evaluated Job’s character rightly, and thus vindicates Himself over all. As the psalmist says, He is good, and does good (Psa 119:68). When the court closes, no words are better than the apostle’s: “...let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, “That You may be justified in Your words, and prevail when You are judged”” (Rom 3:4).

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<sup>51</sup> Parsons, “The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job,” 145.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, “The Story of Job and the Credibility of God,” 116.

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