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Dissent in the Bible: Job and Ecclesiastes

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Introduction: Reverend Jim Belcher introduced Robert Alter on behalf of the Temple and the Presbyterian Church which has been meeting at Temple Bat Yahm for 4-5 years. Introduction by Reverend Jim Belcher:

Let me introduce our speaker. Robert Alter has taught at Berkeley since 1967, has twice been a Guggenheim scholar, has written widely on the European novel and modern Hebrew. He has written on 22 volumes of the Hebrew Bible. The most recent of his commentaries is on the Book of Psalms.

Robert Alter's two most recent translations from the Bible were of a foundational text of Scripture, the Five Books of Moses, and of a text central to Jewish and Christian liturgy, the Psalms. In his current project, he has turned to Job and Ecclesiastes, two late Biblical texts that pose bold challenges to the biblical theological consensus and which explore new frontiers of thought. In one case, the text utilizes an extraordinarily powerful poetry and the other a mesmerizing, rhythmic prose for the exploration of new frontiers of thought. This lecture will investigate the relationship in these two books between innovative literary form and philosophic or theological reflection.

Robert Alter:

My books are not quite as impressive as they sound; some of the titles are very long. I am going to talk about two rather strange books of the Bible, very strange and riveting. I will begin by teaching the Hebrew name for one, the correct name is not Ecclesiastes -- most scholars refer to it as *Quoheleth*. *Quoheleth* is normally translated as "preacher." It seems to mean somebody who gathers and assembles, but the grammatical form is rather strange. It seems as if the panels on the wall of this temple were prepared especially for my presentation today since the Hebrew on the panels is the famous chapter of *Quoheleth* which begins "there is a time to be born and a time to die....."

I think both Job and *Quoheleth* are later biblical; early and late books are normally divided by whether the works were composed before the Babylonian exile, well into it, or after the exile. That *Quoheleth* is a later work is almost certainly the case. In *Quoheleth*, there are many cues in the language that it was written in 4th century BCE. It is probably late Persian period because in works written in the late 4th century BCE, after Alexander's conquest, you'd expect some Greek loan words. This is because Greek entered Hebrew massively in the last 200 years before the Christian era.

Job is harder to locate chronologically. I had better warn you, however, that the dating game is even more dangerous for biblical scholars than young singles. The disagreement about chronology spans several centuries and some scholars still who want to claim that Job is an early biblical source, perhaps maybe 7th century contemporary with Isaiah. I, however, find this unpersuasive because I see certain signs of later biblical Hebrew. In particular, there are quite a few Aramaic loan words in Job, which you would not expect to see in the earlier period since it wasn't until around the 5th to the 4th century that the use of Aramaic began to spread. By the time of Jesus, it was the vernacular of Palestine.

I will not spend more time on the historical, but I suspect that the dissidence we see in these two books may be a reflection of the length of time the editing went on. That is, there is a centrifugal and centripetal movement in Judaism after the Babylonian exile. The centrifugal movement, which involved shoring up the text upon which the faith is built, is expressed in the final redaction of Moses. In contrast, the centripetal movement seems to be a fleeing from the center, a movement of circles of individuals who are exploring different takes on the tradition and raising questions about the tradition.

If you take this centripetal movement to the 2nd or 1st century of the common area and the life of Jesus, most are aware there are vehemently competing groups within Jewry. There were the "authentic" line, the Sadducees, Essenes, dead scroll people, Pharisees, political groups, revolutionaries, terrorists -- going every which way until it settles down into two great historical takes with different interpretations; these interpretations are rabbinical Judaism and Christianity.

I look at these books, Job and *Quoheleth*, as the beginning of questioning the tradition and moving in a different direction. Both belong to a category engineered in literature called Wisdom literature. We can think of Wisdom literature with a capital "W." Sources of Wisdom literature originated in Mesopotamia, Egypt and in the Bible, There are three books at least in the

Bible which became canonical for Jews – Job, *Quoheleth* and *Proverbs*. It is a speculation, but I don't think there is hard evidence for a wisdom school of disciples around a teacher where problems were discussed. Wisdom literature is characterized by being universal in character; there is no covenantal relationship with God and Israel – it is not negated -- but it does not appear. In fact, there is not a pronounced Israelite character to the Wisdom books. They raise a pragmatic philosophy regarding how shall we live our lives. The two I will be discussing go in different directions from Proverbs.

Proverbs is mainline wisdom. The dominant trend in wisdom literature, where no one is rocking the boat, is that there are certain assured truths; if you follow the right path, lead an honest life, instruct your children diligently, you will inherent the good life. In contrast, Job and Quoheleth are dissident wisdom texts.

In Quoheleth, the main dissident is in the line of thinking which has to do with rethinking of the nature of time in human life and history and the nature of purposefulness and fulfillment. In Genesis in the first chapter, there is a beautiful model of how the dominant thinkers in Israel configured time, a progression, first day, 2nd day, and then more things created and everything culminates in the Sabbath. This becomes a model of history, you move up and down in history in the creation story, but in the end history moves to a grand fulfillment. Protestant theology calls this *salvation*.

Quoheleth thinks differently; in this text, things go round and round, events are cyclic and you do not get anywhere. You can see what a radical challenge that is to conventional biblical thought. In the case of Job, the challenge is to the moral calculus that governs most of the biblical books that precede him. I mean in Proverbs if you lead the good life it is its words. In Psalms, a famous verse declares, "I was a lad also grown old. I have never seen a righteous man hungry or his feet seeking bread." That is not easily to digest in the light of human experience. If you push this line of thought as far as Job's so-called comforters and walk down the street and see someone in rags asking for a handout, you have to conclude he is not righteous. In Psalms and also in the words of the debate in Job with the three friends, you see a person you know is wicked. A cheat and crook and beats his wife and yet has millions of dollars but his success is an illusion. The success of the righteous is gone in a moment. Job challenges this: "I have been a good man; I lost everything." Job says it does not make sense.

I do not have a good answer to such a question. How did these books get into the Bible? The makers of the canon think that such radical thinking challenges the central view that belonged in the canon. I would suggest two

explanations for their inclusion, although these are rather literary reasons. Job contains the greatest poetry in the whole Hebrew Bible. When I reread the poetry in the original, there is Donne, Shakespeare, then there's Job as poet. *Quoheleth* may be a little less spectacular, but still it is mesmerizing, I think, to begin with, that the ancient formers of the canon did not want to give up these two because they are such great literature. Of course, there were some theological/ideological criteria, but there may have also been a literary set of criteria.

In terms of the viewpoint, perhaps this is too generous, but it could be that the people who formed the canon had a notion the truth about human beings and God's justice. Perhaps they understood that reward and punishment were too complicated to be reduced to one linear account, that they could be dialectical. Perhaps, they reasoned, the canon could accommodate opposing views that could be confronted and debated in tension with each other.

I'd like to spend the rest of my time reading the text and commenting.

I will begin with *Quoheleth* with a translation of the first verses in the words of Quoheleth. The nearest translation is "breath." The writer is saying that all is *mere breath*. "What is there for man under the sun? A generation comes and goes, the sun rises and sets, it rises goes to the south swings around and round...all the rivers go to the sea and the sea is not full, to the rivers they turn to go, all things are weary. A man ...that which was is that which will be, that which we have done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun. See if it is new, it was already before...there is no remembrance of the first or last things..."

Let me go back to the top with commentary. Traditionally I am sure you are aware *Quoheleth* is attributed to Solomon, but the name Solomon never appears in the text. He says son of David. I think the philosophical writer created the character *Quoheleth*. He needed a king, as we will see in the 2nd segment; somebody was needed who had all the resources to explore all of human life, who could order whatever he wanted and he did, to find out what human life is all about.

I translated it as *mere breath*. I think that is how *Quoheleth* conducted his philosophic thinking; he is a true philosopher. KJB translates it as 'vanity of vanities' based on the Latin Vulgate. Some modern translations render it as futility or 'absurdity of absurdity.' They are not wrong, but each is too restricted. I propose in keeping with a kind of inner logic of the ancient Hebrew language and the thought that the author *Quoheleth* used concrete images where we would use abstractions. The Hebrew word means breath

or vapor that comes out of your mouth, the vapor which is invisible except on a cold windy day and then it immediately dissipates. This is a concrete metaphor that embraces true concreteness in a range of abstract concepts. Vanity, in the old Latin is an "emptiness," suggests futility, suggests transience, insubstantiality and elusiveness. To select one abstraction and nail it down that way is to diminish the means, so I prefer to follow the logic of the Hebrew.

"What gain is there in man for all this toil, that he toils under the sun." This is mercantile language; this is not my original idea because a number of scholars have said this. Israelite culture of the first Temple period was agrarian and pastoralists; thus, most of the concepts were rendered, such as the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, originate from a pastoralist culture. "Withers like grass" is also from an agrarian culture; as such, these concrete images were immediate to the people

By the time of 4th century before the common area, Palestine became a trade center, so in this text there is a bookkeeping theme again and again. Another example we will come to in Quohemoth is when he is speaking in book keeping terms. In the bottom line, is there a plus sign down there? Do we go into the black, does man go into the black with all his toil? His conclusion is pessimistic. Then he looks at nature and he sees cyclicity, round and round. So every morning, the sun rises and goes down in the evening. He takes that as an emblem of the way our lives go round and round individually and generation to generation and they do not get anywhere.

As Marshal McLuan has observed, the medium is the message; thus, repetition is essential to *Quohemoth's* prose. For example, a passage from *Quohemoth is translated into English in a way that sounds odd* "...all the rivers go to the sea, and the sea is not full, to the place the rivers go they return to go." In the same passage in Hebrew, the insistent repetition of the language reinforces and replicates the insistence of repetitious existence.

From there the writer moves into an introspective mode, moving on to an introspective account of human life, for all things are weary. Returning to the last verse of this segment, one of the most radical things is that there is no remembrance of the first or last things that will be. We will have no remembrance of those in latter times. Elsewhere, Biblical literature is preoccupied with leaving a remembrance: The greatest curse is to wipe out the remembrance in Exodus. Male progeny is one way to leave a remembrance. *Quohemoth* says all of this is a delusion in the eons of time; eons of time that cycle onward in everything is ultimately a scary idea for this culture to articulate.

Just one brief segment on the next six verses in the first chapter. "I, *Quoheleth*, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem and I set my heart not seeking through wisdom all that is done under the sun. Knowledge is an evil business...I have seen all the deeds under the sun, all is mere grass. The crooked can't turn straight...my heart has seen much wisdom, and I set my heart to know for this too is herding the wind, much flurry, he who adds wisdom, adds pain."

The phrase "herding the wind," is rendered in the KJB as "vexation," a translation I think is off the mark. It uses the same root meaning as to shepherd the sheep. I think a recurring device in *Quoheleth* is the use of a powerful concrete image: futility is like somebody herding the wind. One cannot keep the wind; to attempt it is make a fool out of oneself, ending up in desperation. Here we see *Quoheleth* making a second move, empirical investigation, a strategy uncharacteristic of the Bible.

For all his speaking, there are two different channels of truth, one is revelation, the other is investigation. You can read through all of Genesis and the prophets both early and late and you do not see any indication of empirical investigation. *Quoheleth* says "I set my heart to inquire and seek, but it is an evil business." This is a late biblical terminology which does not occur in the early Bible, such phraseology reflects a mercantile culture. The bleakness comes out in that harsh sentence... "the crooked can't turn straight and the lock made good." Isaiah 40 asserts that the crooked shall become a straight level place,." Here, however, the word for crooked is not the same. This this word is twisted, a direct reversal of the redemptive hope from Isaiah.

There is one phrase in *Quoheleth* that laments "I set my heart to know wisdom, but it is revelry, folly, this too is herding the wind." The autobiographical sections of *Quoheleth* give an indication that the writer explored the full gamut -- sensual gratification, intoxication, revelry, partying or something more extreme -- as well as the words of the wise, reflections on human experience and still he could not come out with a neat program for how to make sense and meaning out of human life.

The last verse ... "in much wisdom is much worry and he who has wisdom adds pain" tells us much about the literary form. This is an anti-proverb, which has parallel statements again and again in Proverbs, and it sounds in its formulation very much like a proverb. Nonetheless, it is saying the opposite of Proverbs: Wisdom does not lead you anywhere, makes you worry, leads to more pain.

In chapter 7, we come upon the verse: "better to have a good name than goodly oil.... the day of death is better than the day one is born." The first half of the sentence is unexceptional, to Proverbs, better a good name than goodly oil. Oil represented the hedonistic good life in the ancient world; it was somewhat the equivalent of the spa, saying that if you have money to get the best masseuse, that is good oil, but not nearly as good as a good name. That makes sense, but 2nd half inverts this into the observation that the day of death is better than the day one was born.

I would like to add I do not think that *Quoheleth* is unrelentingly lethal; it employs a fluctuating philosophic method. There are brief statements such as "better to be dead than alive," "life is mere emptiness, you go into a dark hole," but these alternate with approbations of insistence such as that which admonishes one to enjoy life with the woman one loves. "This is your share in toil under the sun." I believe the profundity of *Quoheleth* lies precisely in that it does not simply express a linear doctrine, but a kind of oscillating take on what we're supposed to make out of life. If it doesn't give us great consolation, it does give us the tonic effect of looking at things shorn of delusion. I have the feeling that it was this quality, rather than the pious four verses which were added at the end by an editor, that led the canonists to keep it.

With Job I am not going to talk about the story, which is problematic. It is probably an old folk tale adopted by the poet to frame the story. No one is very happy that Job loses ten children and gets 10 children back at the end or twice as many flocks. Obviously, what he lost was irreplaceable, but the poetic debate has its own importance. I will talk instead about what the poetry has to do with what is being said and the answer Job gets at the end. Let me read at least the first part of Job's first poem. If you have not reread it recently, remember that at this junction he has lost all his children, servants, property and then he has a hideous skin disease. He speaks in poetry before getting into debate with three so-called friends. Job opened his mouth and cursed "this day, that day I was conceived let darkness shadow it, ...that night ...not join in the days of the year, let that night be barren, no song of joy, curses hex it, let its twilight go dark, let it not see the eye of dawn, it did not ...why did I not die in the womb? Now I would be still with sleep."..... "Life to the wretched and deeply embittered, will be glad when they find the grave...what I dreaded came upon me."

That breathtaking poem should not be interrupted. The poetry works in this way, most lines have two halves, A and B, some have three parts ABC. This poem has quite a few lines with A BC, the B half parallels in meaning the A half, but not it doesn't just parallel the A half, it steps it up, intensifies and concretizes it.

I will show you with Deuteronomy 32: how could one ...thousand...and 10,000, one, two, ten thousand. With that principle, we can see what happens in Job's poem. There is day to night, a common pairing in biblical poetry.

Job expunges the day he was born, the night he was conceived, then in his reference to "that day," then "that night," he builds up a sequence of darkness that swallows light.

There are many words in Hebrew which are synonyms for darkness. He utilizes an amazing vocabulary for an ancient poet. This is one of the great poems in literature through its structure and the intensification intrinsic to biblical poetry. As Job laments that night, he expresses existential anguish, an anguished core of shrinking in which he wishes he had never existed. He refers to the mythical, Leviathan, the monstrous sea beast who in some versions has seven heads. Job reaches out to Canaanite mythology with his reference to Baal, the Leviathan. He is saying in essence "I need those day cursers in the tradition, a hexed Leviathan, put a curse on Leviathan, to curse the night."

"Twilight stars go dark." This probably refers to early morning twilight wherein the hope for the day invades. As the poet waits through the night for that moment of that first crack of dawn while one is looking at the stars, he says *no I do not want the dawn or the delight of the stars in the early morning twilight*. This is an astounding metaphor and Job is the master of metaphor with metaphors such as "let it not see the eyelids of dawn." This passage refers with originality and daring to the initial crack of light on the eastern horizon coming up in darkness, darkness in the crack of light the eyelids of the dawn, and at same time, the eyelids of an observer opening and perceiving the light .

After so many expressions of the death wish, there is a kind of a panorama of human life which is full of futile effort. The mood is a little like that of *Quoheleth*: people build great edifices which will only crumble to ruin. There is a pattern of exploitation, the task master crying, the prisoners, people who are suffering at hands of others in power, in the grave there will be rest from all that.

An important passage in Job is the voice in the whirlwind. Three friends challenge and respond, each of them speaks, then a mysterious figure delivers himself, for at that point God speaks to Job thru the whirlwind. What I would like to propose, built on the check. [Martha, I don't exactly know what this reers to.]

Many people object to the God speech which seems to be saying something like "I have a bigger club than you do, who are you to question me, when I am the Creator of all creation." Some think that in this speech God is kind of a cosmic bully who bullies Job into submission. While I do not think that this is wrong, I propose it has to do with the poetry in that the poetic genius is making a move here. Only a poet supremely confident of his own genius would be able to make such a poetic move. He is saying something like *I have given Job great poetry, the greatest in the language but now give God still greater poetry that is going to trump Job's poetry. It will open his eyes to a different vision of creation, a different vision of human existence.* In my old translation, it is the first part of voice from the whirlwind.

"Who is this darkened ...gird up like a man ...Where were you? Who said its measures, who stretched the loin, who made its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together...when I made clouds, its clothing...thus far come no farther. Did you ever muster the morning to rise...life is withheld from the wicked. ...the gates of gloom...have you taken the breath...where is the way that life dwells and darkness, where is its place."

Compare this to *Quoheleth* talking about rain and snow in the last four verses of this first segment. "Wilderness without human soul...does the rain have a father, from whose belly did the ice come forth, who gave birth?"

The poem proceeds in a narrative logic, from cosmology, the creation of the world, to meteorology with all the forces over the face of the early wind, snow, rain. And then it goes to zoology. These culminate in the two great poems at the climax of the poem; all embody creation that is beautiful and cruel beyond Job's ken. The God poem at the end of Job begins point to point to answer to Job's death wish poem at the beginning of the poetic structure. God's poetry invites him to envision the world another way. How does he span, all these images of darkness blotting out the light, let it not see the eyelids of the dawn. God begins who is this "darkening counsel," a strategic word choice. God goes on to talk about "the morning stars sang together, sons of God shouted for joy." Job does not want to see morning stars, and sing with joy. The Hebrew verb is the same verb stem that Job used in his "night let there be no song of joy in it," so God counters that desire to erase joy, erase the song, erase life, the birth of the world in song, then he uses a term hedge the sea in...

"Birth, you hedged my paths of escape, you imprison me." God from the whirlwind describes another kind of hedging, the chaotic power and primordial from the dry land where human life takes place. You recall Job's anti-verse where he wants the womb to be the tomb? In response, God says He "hedged the sea where it gushed forth from the womb, the womb of

the sea, the womb of creation of life, when I made this cloud clothing depending on midst, a swaddling band," this shows another instance of the breathtaking mastery of Job over the Hebrew language.

"Before diverse, like a cloud painting, these strips of white cloth you wrap around the midsection of the baby, the image strips of morning midst floating over the primordial sea." This image links up with womb image; it counters Job's vision of desire to wipe out life with God's vision of light emerging wherein life is picked up where is the light life dwells. God has an encompassing dialectic of both light and darkness, an uncanny rhythm of harmony between the two. This is reflected in the last two verses.

"Does the rain have a father who sired the dew," The language is all metaphorical and bristles with birth imagery; God is creator is representing himself to Job as the source of the dynamic productive principle of life which he invites Job to contemplate, something to celebrate, something to embrace. And on the poem goes to illustrate this life principles through zoology as Job, the poet, subtly makes the poem for the whirlwind answer the bleak death wish at the beginning. When Leviathan is described, he is a scary creature, an impregnable creature. As with Melville's *Moby Dick*, cast as Leviathan, there is no way to control or hunt him down. He speaks like stubble, but he is also beautiful. The poet makes a very daring move here for Leviathan's " eyes are like eyelids of the dawn;" at the heart of terror is exquisite beauty, reflecting that same remarkable phrase Job used in the opening of the poem.

I think transcendent poetry answering poetry is the closest we come to an answer of undeserved suffering that Job raises; what God in His revelation in the truth of the poem there is this vast teeming creation full of contradiction, paradoxes, full of cruelty, the vulture feeding its young. This is a very unsentimental image of nature, but by making Job see all this, God conveys to him that there is a creation out there of a paradoxical order that has its own structure of harmony and this you can accept. In Job's famous recantation, the choice of verbs very important: "up till now I heard your rumor, the rumor of God and his work, but now I have seen with my own eyes." God gives a vision of creation that transforms his consciousness, the best, although not fully an approximation of the answer of suffering that Job has raised. We see how daring both the books of Job and Quohelth are -- both intellectually, theologically, and in terms of literary form, which is why I think they are so meaningful and why the Bible would be very impoverished without them ...

At the end of *Quohelth* there are a couple of terse verses that say this is what you have to do, you have to fear God, show reverence for Him, that is

all the wisdom man needs. While some contemporary scholars, a few in the minority, say that was original, it seems to me there is a certain element in this passage that does not sound like *Quoheleth*. I agree with the majority of scholars who think that an editor, who was nervous about the radical viewpoint expressed in *Quoheleth*, tried to tame it a bit by putting in a pious epilogue.

Alan Watts once said there is no answer, all the stuff he goes through is pointless. I believe that one can take that one step further, for *the answer is that there is no answer*. Perhaps *Quoheleth* and Job both are suggesting that is no answer.

I will try to distinguish the two books, Job and *Quoheleth*. It is possible that the formulators, the framers of the canon, may have had this feeling that they needed to incorporate question marks within the canon. Along with a lot of solid doctrine, guidance what we should do, perhaps there should be the suggestion that not everything has a pat answer. There is a difference between the two books, however, insofar as *Quoheleth* seems not to have an answer, unless you think the pious conclusion is integral. He has a few provisional answers such as everything goes round and round and does not go anywhere, so we end up in the grave, but while we are here, we wear clean white garments, have good food, and delight in the love of those we love. That is kind of a provisional answer.

On the other hand, with Job I think it culminates in an act of revelation, a different kind of revelation, different from Sinai or the prophets. But since revelation which you do not have in *Quoheleth* is so essential to the biblical mindset, I think this is meant to be a kind of answer. It is not the kind of answer, however, that everyone will be happy with. The big difference in this revelation from all the other biblical revelations Ezekiel, the Sinai epiphany, with the exception of beginning of Genesis, or the 8th Psalm, man is the pinnacle of creation. Here, however, man is somewhere on the sidelines of this vast panorama, dislodging the whole notion of anthropocentrism and yet this is a revelation.

I wonder if Job's poet by giving God a monologue and a human figure, is saying my God is speaking in terms of your language, but you cannot speak in terms of His. In essence, this summarizes in different terms that God's poetry trumps Job's poetry.

Why are Leviathan's speeches ignored at the end? Again you will find biblical scholars who accept the book of Job like a baby Yeats. Although there are a few scholars have argued the speeches are intrinsic to the book, it seems to me as if they were added for the obvious structural reason, ...

there are three friends at the beginning and the end. Then there are three cycles of debates, and in each one, and the last one some parts are missing, but in each cycle, each of the three friends speaks in turn and Job responds, then all of a sudden somebody -- my God, the center of scorn, where did he come from? He rattles on for 5 chapters. So it looks suspect.

The first part of Job, where Satan is speaking, we have Satan fallen from heaven, although he has access to God, and makes a bet with God; it is really bizarre. This character who appears in the beginning is not Satan. A tricky thing about reading the Bible is that it is hard for us to read it without looking through the lenses from later tradition. I will give you a later example and then the non-presence of Satan.

Angels, I translate that word as "messenger" and the reason I do that is that when we think of angels we imagine somebody nine feet tall with wings, glorious raiment and a halo. There are many great and wonderful paintings of angelic themes, but in the book of Genesis, the angels look like you or me when they come to Abraham's tent Gen 18, as wayfarers. The word used is also found in secular texts and it means "messenger." Satan does not appear as a proper name in Job, a *satain* is a trouble mark, a spirit of opposition, an adversary, the adversary. So in Job he is not yet the fallen angel, not the Lucifer of *Paradise Lost*. He is part of an entourage, a sort of suspicious cynical bad-spirited member of his court, but not yet demonic or the principle of evil or a fallen angel. What happened in the next 200-300 years after Job, on the basis of the bad actor he shows himself to be in Job, he then becomes the fallen angel the Prince of evil. Scholars think that this reflects a Persian influence, because of the deities of light and darkness. The Adversary of Job still has access to God because he is not yet Satan.

The dialectic in Job is reflected in rabbinic thought by these two opposing principles, the good inclination and impulse and the evil impulse. While I do not see that playing out directly in Job, I've said nothing about the story is schematic and legendary. You can see this in the language; it is stylized, the flocks, possessions, the numbers tens or multiples of ten's, there are studied repetitions like a fairy tale. The story sets all kind of problems; Why would God agree to this? Just to prove that Job was a good and righteous man; why would He allow the adversary to inflict this on Job? The frame story is never mentioned in the body of the poem. What I think is it was a convenience for the Job poet, probably was a well known story; this gives it a narrative excuse as to why suffering is inflicted on a good man. Why is it that your best friend had cancer and dies in 3 months?

Once the frame story is done with and we get into the poem proper and the debate between Job and the friends, then we get into something that is

philosophically and theologically powerful and very sophisticated. There is a long argumentative contemplation of what do we do with the fact that we see so much unjust suffering in the world and, on the flip side, we see people who are positively evil who prosper? That is the real heart of Job, and I would not lean too heavily on the frame story.