

## JOB: REPENTANT OR REBELLIOUS?

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Although differing in their views about a number of issues with regard to the Book of Job, in general scholars have agreed that Job's replies to Yahweh in 40:4–5 and 42:2–6 indicate that Job repented, or at least relented and changed his attitude. Even scholars such as K. Fullerton, C. G. Jung, and D. A. Robertson, who reject the possibility that Job could have repented, nevertheless agree that 42:2–6 in particular indicates that he did. K. Fullerton maintains that 42:2–6 is absolutely opposed to the content of the dialogues and could not have been written by the author of that section, hence he rejects the whole of 40:6–42:17 as a gloss. C. G. Jung and D. A. Robertson see Job's replies as hypocritical. C. G. Jung says that most probably Job prostrated himself before God as if he were a defeated antagonist, realizing that God was a being who could not be judged morally. D. A. Robertson says it is only a "tongue-in-cheek" confession, made to calm God's whirlwinds.

A few scholars do not believe that Job is expressing remorse or regret in any sense in his final reply. For example, M. Tsevat says that Job only acknowledges in 42:2–6 that he now knows, from the content of God's speeches, that justice is not an integral part of the universe and that one cannot, and should not, expect anything for one's behavior. Freed from that misconception, Job is then prepared to live a truly pious and moral life with no such false hopes or claims. Dale Patrick translates 42:6, "Therefore I repudiate and repent of dust and ashes," and interprets vv 2–6 as Job declaring that, because of the wonder of God's ways, he will change his speech from lament and accusation of God to praise and rejoicing. Although not seeing Job as repentant in the usual sense, these views nevertheless agree that Job changed his attitude, speech, and behavior, and that he worshipped God.

In 1979 J. B. Curtis presented a radically different translation and interpretation of Job's responses. He argued that Job did not repent, but totally and unequivocally rejected Yahweh. This represents a complete reversal of the traditional interpretation. He paraphrases 40:4 as follows:

Although I dealt with matters that to you are trivial when I spoke earlier, I will now with contemptuous revulsion cease speaking altogether.

He sees Job here sarcastically expressing his hostility by saying it is useless to try and talk to a god who is so concerned with great things that he is not even aware of the existence of such small problems as the suffering of the innocent. He views 42:3a and 4 as Job "daring to hurl back in God's teeth his own words," and "sarcastically attacking the god who thinks that his might answers all questions." J. B. Curtis adds that 42:4–5 indicate that God had wanted to question Job, and he did, but about irrelevancies. The experience of seeing God had confirmed the reports Job had heard about God and had proved his injustice. So, according to J. B. Curtis's translation of 42:6, Job, "totally disenchanted with this god," said:

Therefore I feel loathing contempt and revulsion

(toward you, O God);

and I am sorry for frail man.

Job thus totally and finally rejects this unjust, unfeeling, and irrelevant deity.

The variety of opinions about Job's response to Yahweh and especially the radically different translation and interpretation by J. B. Curtis demand that we reexamine and reevaluate this portion of the text of Job. That is the purpose of this article.

To understand the meaning of Job's responses, we need to consider them within their context. So, before focusing on the Hebrew text of Job's replies, we shall first consider relevant factors from the literary context of the Book of Job (ancient Near Eastern parallel literature), and then the immediate context (the meaning and intent of the Yahweh speeches to which Job responded).

### 1. *Ancient Near Eastern Literary Parallels*

The date of composition of the Book of Job is much debated, nevertheless its setting is generally considered to be in the second millennium b.c. Archaeology has provided from that era several other wisdom texts that consider the issue of human suffering. These texts are commonly referred to by scholars as the "innocent sufferer" texts and are often considered to be a subgenre within the Wisdom Literature.

Although these "innocent sufferer" texts originated in Mesopotamia, they, as with other Mesopotamian literature, were probably known throughout the Near Eastern area. The findings of archaeology have demonstrated that economic and cultural exchange took place. In the field of literature, a fragment of the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh Epic from about the thirteenth century b.c. has been found at Megiddo in Palestine. Mesopotamian wisdom texts have also been found at Ugarit. Among them is one J. Nougayrol has called "Juste Souffrant" because it presents an innocent man struggling with the problem of his experience of suffering. The suggested date for this text is ca. 1300 b.c. Similarities of literary format, poetic style, and certain theological concepts (e.g., divine retribution according to man's behavior) as well as of theme, indicate that these texts may constitute part of the literary context of the Book of Job. So, we shall examine these texts to see what attitudes they present as acceptable in a sufferer. If these documents do not allow for attitudes of revulsion and rejection of the deity as their conclusion, then it is less likely that Job responded thus to Yahweh. That would lessen the likelihood that J. B. Curtis's interpretation is correct. Conversely, if repentance and submission are found consistently in the sufferers, more likely Job's attitude would be similar and the historical/conventional interpretation correct.

The oldest extant text which deals theologically with the problem of human suffering is from Sumer. Its title is "Man and His God" and it is often referred to as "The Sumerian Job." The "hero" is a righteous man who nevertheless is stricken with severe sickness and bitter suffering. He describes his suffering, then laments over it. He concludes with three pleas for deliverance alternating with two confessions of sin. The first is just a general confession of his sinfulness as a human being, but the second is a confession of the sins his god made known to him. His lament and repentance are accepted by the god who then restores his health and prosperity. The Sumerian "Letter to Enki" shows this same pattern—the need for confession of sin and repentance so that the god would end the man's sufferings and restore his happiness.

Three Babylonian texts, AO 4462, "Ludlul bēl nēmeqi" ("I will praise the Lord of Wisdom," often called "The Babylonian Job") and "The Babylonian Theodicy," resemble the Book of Job thematically. The attitude considered to be correct for a sufferer is clear from these texts. He should examine himself to see if he had committed any errors, and if he had he should repent of them. Whether or not his own sin was the cause of his suffering, he should accept the suffering and not complain, rebel, or blaspheme his god. He should continue to serve his god faithfully and seek his god's compassion. The Akkadian "Righteous Sufferer" text found at Ugarit demonstrates the same concept of the correct attitude in a sufferer.

If we accept the consensus of scholarly opinion which holds that the Book of Job is also one of the "innocent sufferer" texts, then we expect to find this same attitude from Job. After the theophany, Job's wrong attitude would change, and he would praise and worship God once more. He would no longer complain, nor would he rebel against God and reject him. Conversely, he would repent of any sin God showed him. This, I maintain, is what did occur.

The general interest in "the fear of the Lord" found in Wisdom Literature introduces another factor relevant to Job's response to Yahweh. At the beginning of the Book of Job, Job was a man who feared the Lord and shunned evil. The book's genre as Wisdom Literature requires that Job repent and return to fearing the Lord when at the end of his suffering Yahweh charged him with wrongdoing. He would not rebel.

## 1. *Immediate Context*

Understanding and interpreting Job's responses in the light of their immediate context involves taking account of the specific content and purpose of Yahweh's speeches to which he was responding. To understand the purpose, and hence the meaning, of the Yahweh speeches, we must see them, too, in context. They are addressing specific statements, questions and attitudes of Job in the preceding dialogues.

Actually, Job's speeches in the dialogues exhibit a mixture of features, e.g., questioning, agony, faith, hopelessness, perplexity, and confidence. He argues with his friends, defending himself against their accusations and maintaining his righteousness. He addresses God, and speaks about him, as he wrestles to reconcile his theology and past experience of God with his present experience of suffering and the wickedness he sees about him. Job believed God was the sovereign Lord, and he recognized no second causes. So, as he wrestled to reconcile this with his loss and suffering, he concluded that God had changed from being his friend (29:2–4) who cared for him to his enemy who persecuted and maltreated him (10:8–12; 13:24–27; 30:21).

Throughout the dialogue, as he wrestled to reconcile his theology with his experience and to refute the accusations of his friends, Job accused God of a number of things. He said God oppressed him while he smiled on the schemes of the wicked (10:3), attacked him in anger and shattered him (16:9, 12), wronged him and counted him an enemy (19:6–11), denied him justice (27:1) and maltreated him ruthlessly (30:19–21).

Although he may not have been conscious of the full implications of what he was saying, Job was actually passing judgment upon God by thus accusing him. Job also passed judgment on God for not fulfilling his duties as a ruler when he allowed the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the needy to be oppressed by the wicked and did not intervene on their behalf (24:1–12). In thus judging God, Job was in fact exalting himself above God and implying that he would be a better ruler.

However, we need to remember that these things were said within the context of Job's wrestling to reconcile his beliefs about God with the reality he was experiencing and witnessing. Alongside the above statements we find others that reveal Job's continued faith in God and in his righteousness and justice (e.g., 12:13; 13:15; 14:15–17; 17:3; 19:25; 23:6, 7, 10–12). In all that he said, Job does not appear to be spurning God but rather Job is seeking God and his answers.

In Yahweh's speeches every pericope except one begins with a question. That one, the behemoth pericope, closes with a question. The use of questions is a very effective teaching method. They involve the "learner" by calling forth from him a personal response. So, Yahweh's use of them may indicate that his speeches were not designed to be merely a display of his power and authority, but also for a relationship purpose. They were designed to teach Job about God and about himself, and to draw forth a response.

In his speeches Yahweh brought three accusations against Job, all of them relating to Job's words and attitudes in the dialogue with his friends. In his first speech Yahweh charged Job with using words without knowledge (38:2), contending with God and accusing him of wrongdoing. Job had done all of this, thus, as it were, putting himself on at least equal footing with God. Yahweh dealt with Job's sin here by asking him a series of questions centered around his work of creating and sustaining the universe and some of the animals that inhabit it. Yahweh asked Job repeatedly what his part was in this work, both past and present, and whether he had the knowledge, power, and authority to perform it. Each question was so framed that Job could only answer that he did not possess those qualities, only God did.

As well as thus emphasizing that he is infinite in wisdom, power, and authority, God also spoke to Job of his care of and concern for his creation, both animate and inanimate. He sends rain on the dry land, provides food for lions and ravens, and cares for other animals. All of creation is shown to be in the control and care of God. At that point, Yahweh challenged Job with "Let him who accuses God answer him" (40:2), and Job makes his first response (40:3–5).

In his second speech Yahweh focuses on his third charge against Job: “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” (40:7). Job was guilty of this too, so that, though he may have been unconscious of the implication, it was as if he were a rival god.

So, Yahweh challenges Job to take over the administration of justice on earth in his stead, if he can (40:9–14). It is clear he cannot. Yahweh then confronts Job with behemoth and leviathan, creatures and/or chaos forces before whom Job as man was helpless and over whom he had no control. Once again Yahweh revealed Job’s weakness and inadequacy and at the same time showed his, Yahweh’s, power, authority, and control, not only over the natural creation but also over chaos forces and evil.

Yahweh stated explicitly that no man had a claim against him that he must pay (41:11). Yet God had come to Job and spoken to him, to teach, rebuke, correct, and enlighten him. All of this, from God’s own initiative, was not because of some “claim” but of grace. To this God, Job responded.

### III. *Job’s Responses*

Now we shall consider the text of Job’s responses in 40:4–5 and 42:2–6 to establish a translation and an interpretation of them. We shall, of course, establish word-meanings that are in line with the meanings of those words in other parts of the OT, and interpreting Job’s replies in the context described above.

As we examine the text of Job’s responses, we find that the LXX and the Qumran targum of Job (11QtgJob) differ from the MT in some verses. However, the nature of the LXX translation of Job causes most careful scholars to agree that great caution is needed in the use of it for textual criticism. Certainly with regard to the text of Job’s responses the weight of evidence is not in favor of the variant translations found in the LXX.

11QtgJob is, on the whole, a sober, literal translation, supportive of the MT. However, some divergences from the MT are found in Job’s response in 42:1–6. The most significant of these is the replacing of 42:3 by 40:5. We cannot consider this as proof, though, that originally Job made only one response to Yahweh. Although in the targum 40:4–5 is illegible, in 40:6 Yahweh answers Job, thus indicating clearly that Job must have spoken in at least v 5. Also, Job’s expressed intention in 40:5 to say no more seems to better fit the interpretation that his first response ends there rather than continuing for a number of verses more.

For the translation of 42:6, 11QtgJob has “Therefore I am poured out and boiled up (or dissolved), and I am become dust and ashes,” a translation differing from both the LXX and the MT. The translator has taken different roots for both of the verbs—*mss* instead of *m’s*, and *hmm* (Nifal) instead of *nḥm*. Whereas divergences from the MT are not common in this targum, the accumulation of divergences in these verses witnesses to the difficulty the translator was having here. His obvious difficulty and his choice of roots that would not yield the words in the MT without some emendation decrease the value of his translation for determining the meaning of the MT in these verses.

#### 1. *Job’s First Response, 40:4–5*

*hēn qallōtī māh ’āšībekā yādī śamtī lēmō pī*

*’aḥat dibbartī wēlō’ ’e’ēneh ūštayim wēlō’ ’ōsīp*

The translation I suggest for these verses is:

Indeed, I am worthless (of no account). What (How) shall I answer

you? I put my hand to (over) my mouth.

I have spoken once, but I shall not reply (again)

even twice, but I shall not add more (I shall not continue).

Scholars agree that the relevant basic meaning of the root *qll* is “to be light, to be small, to be of little account.” M. Tsevat draws our attention to the fact that the root *qll* is antonymous to *kbd*. Used of a person, the noun *kābôd* can mean “weightiness, splendor, distinction, honor.” Job had spoken of his *kābôd* in 29:20 (also 19:9). In 31:37 Job had said he would approach God like a “prince,” and a prince would be a man of *kābôd*. But after Yahweh’s first speech, which brought Job to realize his finitude and his lack of knowledge, power, and authority, Job responded that he was the opposite of *kābôd*, i.e., he was without intrinsic honor and worth. The LXX has *outhen òn*, “(I) being nothing,” which is the same basic idea.

Two scholars give different translations for *hēn qallōtî*. E. Dhorme translates, “If I have been thoughtless,” although he too states that the basic meaning is “to be light.” He chooses that translation to suit the interpretation he gives for the meaning of Job’s responses, i.e., he has spoken out of ignorance. His translation does not really convey the meaning of the Hebrew word.

6. B. Curtis translates v 4a as “Although I was too light in what I answered you.” He considers that “this is bitter sarcasm, slashing out against a god who is irrelevant.” His argument for translating *hēn* as “although” cannot be sustained. Also, the Hebrew here does not require the translation he gives. He states that v 4a should be rendered in this way so that it is in keeping with the meaning he proposes for 42:6. He then suggests as a paraphrase for v 4a, “although I dealt with matters that to you are trivial when I spoke earlier.” This paraphrase moves further toward subjective interpretation.

The expression “to put the hand to the mouth” is found six times in the OT. There is some variation in the Hebrew expressing this phrase, but the variations are not significant. In Judg 18:19 the expression follows immediately after a command to be quiet, and is really a repetition of that command. It appears to add emphasis. The writer of Prov 30:32 says “hand to mouth”—a verb is not used. Again it is a command, apparently emphatic, to be silent.

In Job 21:5, having asked his friends to listen carefully to his words, Job then says, “look at me and be astonished, and put your hand over your mouth.” Here too the expression indicates that they should be silent, probably because of feeling astonishment and horror. When describing the respect paid to him in his presuffering days, Job says that “the chief men refrained from speaking and covered their mouths with their hands” (29:9). Again the expression means that they were silent but this time because of a feeling of deep respect. Mic 7:16 describes how, as a result of seeing the Lord’s wonders, nations will be ashamed, lose their power, “lay their hands on their mouths and their ears will become deaf,” and then (v 17) they go on to fear the Lord. Once more this expression indicates that the nations become silent, apparently because of feelings of shame and awe, and possibly as a sign of submission.

Two ancient reliefs contain scenes which portray the placing of the hand to or upon the mouth as a sign of respect and in one of them possibly amazement. One of those reliefs shows a man being carried skyward on a lion-headed eagle. To our left of that eagle is a man with his hand up towards his mouth. This gesture could be because of amazement or because of respect. In the other relief, King Darius is seated on his throne with Crown Prince Xerxes, attendants and guards standing behind him. In front of King Darius is a Median dignitary who is bowing slightly from the waist and with a hand upon his mouth.<sup>32</sup> Clearly this posture shows respect and homage.

In summary, the five biblical uses examined above all indicate that a person putting the hand to the mouth signifies silence. With the usages in Judg 18:19 and Prov 30:32, no emotional involvement is evident, though they may be considered emphatic. In the other three usages, the person is silent because of a feeling of astonishment, shame or awe, or as an indication of deep respect or even submission. The association of

this gesture with respect and homage, and possibly with amazement, is confirmed by the reliefs described above.

So, as we consider Job's use of that expression in 40:4, we expect it to mean that Job is saying he will be silent. This certainly fits the immediate context as Job emphasizes in v 5 that he is not going to speak. Also the question "what (how) shall I answer you?" indicates that Job is not going to speak. Job uses this expression in responding to Yahweh's first speech. It follows Job's acknowledgement that he is "worthless, of little account." So, to say that with this gesture Job was conveying his feeling of unworthiness, shame, awe, reverence, and even submission to Yahweh, accords well with both the context and other usages of the gesture.

1. B. Curtis gives a different interpretation of this expression. He agrees that its basic meaning is "to become silent" but says this meaning is usually "overlaid with strongly emotional overtones." Although he mentions the feelings of awe, profound respect, and remorse as the emotions seen in other biblical uses of the expression, yet apparently he feels free to suggest any feeling as long as it is a strong emotion. He says that the emotion Job feels here would be that of "profound revulsion." So, he paraphrases v 4b as "I will now with contemptuous revulsion cease speaking altogether." By interpreting the gesture in this way, J. B. Curtis has introduced an emotion which is the opposite of feelings associated with the expression in all other places extant. To do thus is to contravene sound exegetical procedure.

Scholars agree about the basic meaning of 40:5, although they differ about the interpretation of it as part of Job's response. Some scholars would emend 'e'ēneh to 'ešneh which means "I shall repeat it." However this emendation is unnecessary. The idea of repetition is frequently left unexpressed in Hebrew. For example, in both Ps 51:20 and Isa 9:9 *bnh* only is used to mean "build again." In the same way, 'e'ēneh in the MT can mean "respond again."

The use of ascending numeration, such as "... once ... twice ..." in v 5, is common in biblical and Semitic poetry. It is particularly a feature of Wisdom literature. It may simply mean "several" as it does here. See, e.g., Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; Eccl 11:2.

How do we interpret this first response of Job's? First, Yahweh's speech to which Job was responding was designed to teach him his lack of knowledge, power, and authority—i.e., his finitude—and at the same time remind Job of God's omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence. This purpose was accomplished and Job responded, "indeed, I am worthless [of no account]." As Job was confronted by his Creator, he recognized once more, and in fuller measure (as seen from his second response), his "creatureliness."

Secondly, Yahweh accused Job of speaking "words without knowledge" and of "accusing God." Job responded to this accusation by what he said in vv 4b and 5. I would suggest that by putting his hand over his mouth he was acknowledging the truth of God's accusation and expressing shame for this. In v 5, also, Job was acknowledging that he had indeed spoken as God charged, but he would not do so again. Job repeatedly expressed the desire to come before God so that God should present his charges against him, and Job was sure he would be able to answer those charges. Then God would declare him not guilty. Now God has confronted Job, he has presented charges (though not those Job expected), and Job has no answer. He is guilty of these charges, and he thus acknowledges it.

## 2. *Job's Second Response, 42:2–6*

Most scholars now recognize that vv 3a and 4 are virtual quotations of Yahweh's challenges to Job in 38:2–3 and 40:7. However, some regard them as misplaced variants.<sup>37</sup> I concur that they are Job's words quoting God's challenges in order to respond to them.

In the Kethib of the first word in 42:2, we find a defective spelling of the first person singular form of the verb. The yod is missing from the end of the word. The Qere gives the full spelling. The text itself clearly

requires the verb to be in the first person and not the third. Also, both the LXX and 11Q<sup>t</sup>gJob translate it “I know.” The same type of defective spelling is found in other verses, e.g., Ps 16:2; 140:13; Ezek 16:59. So, we do not hesitate to accept the Qere form.

The translation of 42:2–5 presents no problem. Verse 6, however, contains three problems which we shall examine in some detail. I suggest the following translation for 42:2–5.

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

“Who is this obscuring counsel without knowledge?”

Indeed I have spoken, but I did not understand, of things too wonderful for me (which) I did not know.

“Listen, now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you answer/inform me!”

(By hearsay) my ears had heard of you, and now my eyes have seen you.

These verses indicate that Job now reaffirms his belief in God’s omnipotence and sovereignty. In Yahweh’s second speech, Job was confronted with situations he could not handle. God, however, could handle them. As a result of both speeches Job acknowledges that, as Yahweh said, he has spoken from ignorance and lack of understanding. God revealed to Job something of his ways and purposes in creation, in the functioning of the natural elements that he controlled, and in his care of the animals. Job had not understood these—they were too wonderful and difficult for him. As a result of Yahweh’s second speech Job realized that he did not understand God’s mercy in judgment. He had not comprehended the exaltedness and might of God the Creator. And he did not understand God’s restraint of chaos powers. He confesses here that he had indeed spoken from ignorance and lack of understanding.

God came and spoke directly to Job. God began each of his speeches, “I will question you, and you answer me!” God did question Job. Job summarizes his answer in vv 5 and 6. Formerly, Job knew of God only by hearsay. Yet he believed in God and lived for him, fearing, worshipping, and trusting him. Now Job has had a personal, direct encounter with God. God has revealed himself to Job. What Job’s physical eyes saw we do not know—that was not important. Undoubtedly the storm from which God spoke gave some physical impression of God’s presence. But Job’s increased knowledge of God from what God said to him and the awareness of the immediacy of the divine presence as God spoke were such that Job said “now my eyes have seen you.” Verse 6 begins with “therefore” and hence is a result of Job’s “seeing God”:

*‘al kēn ’em’as wēnihamtî ‘al ‘āpār wā’ēper:*

Before I propose a translation for this verse, it is necessary to investigate the usage and probable meaning of the verbs *m’s* and *nḥm*, the object of *m’s*, and the significance of the phrase associated with “dust and ashes.”

(1) *m’s*. In Holladay’s *Lexicon* (p. 180) the meaning is given as “refuse, reject.” In BDB (p. 549) the meanings “refuse, reject” are given and also the meaning “despise.” An examination of seventy-three usages of this word in the OT shows that in the vast majority of cases its meaning is “reject.” In twelve verses the meaning “despise” is preferable. In a number of places an element of both meanings seemed to be involved, though one or the other is prominent. In the verses where it means “reject” the “rejection” is due to a variety of causes.

24. B. Curtis mentions fourteen verses in which he says *m’s* is used with great emotional depth. He says nothing about the other fifty-nine verses. On the basis of the few verses he mentions, and the emotion he sees in them, he concludes that *m’s* “has a fundamental meaning like ‘to feel loathing contempt and revulsion.’ ” However, his argument cannot be sustained. In a number of the verses

he mentions the word simply means “reject” (e.g., Ps 15:4; 36:5; 118:2; Isa 7:15–16; 33:15). Other connotations he mentions are only his subjective speculation, e.g., that in Judg 9:38 and Jer 4:30 “*m*’s connotes malicious hatred with intend to kill.” In any case, one cannot take an emotion that may accompany an action and substitute it for the action itself. They are not synonymous. Many other usages of *m*’s are not related to an emotion at all. See, e.g., Isa 7:15–16; 33:15; Jer 31:37; Ezek 5:6; 20:13, 16, 24.

Although it is clear that *m*’s means “to reject” and/or “to despise” there is still a problem in Job 42:6 because the object of the verb is not specified. In four verses in the OT the Qal of this verb does not have its object expressed. All of these verses are in Job—7:16; 34:33; 36:5 and 42:6.

A comparison of Job 9:21 with 7:16 confirms that in 7:16 Job is despising and rejecting his life of suffering which he described in the preceding verses, so that he wants no more of them. This meaning is also clarified by the statement that follows *m*’s, “not forever would I live.”

In 34:33 also, the context makes it clear that the object of *m*’s is what has just been described in the preceding verses, i.e., to repent. So, Elihu is saying of Job “when you refuse/reject to repent.” Similarly with 36:5, the context indicates what the object of *m*’s should be, but this time from the verses that follow it, not those that precede it.

(2) *nḥm*. Before we can understand what the object of *m*’s in 42:6 may be, we need to consider the meaning of the verb *nḥm* in this verse. It is in the Nifal. Holladay’s *Lexicon* (p. 234) gives as its meanings, “to regret, have a change of heart, relent, turn from a former attitude, and hence repent; to allow oneself to be sorry; to comfort or console oneself.” The meanings given in BDB (pp. 636–37) are similar.

The Nifal form of *nḥm* is used forty-eight times in the OT. God is the subject of thirty-four of those occurrences; man is the subject of the other fourteen. Sixteen of the verses in which God is the subject speak of his relenting, and a change of action or situation takes place as a result. Thirteen other verses speak of God’s feeling grief, sorrow, regret, pity, or compassion, and again there is action to change the situation.

Eight of the verses in which man is the subject are concerning his being comforted after bereavement and are not relevant to our concern. In Judg 21:6 and 15 *nḥm* indicates sorrow (“grieved for”) over a situation such that the sorrow instigated action to change the situation. Exod 13:17 indicates as its meaning, regret that produced a change of mind which was followed by a change of plans. The context of both Jer 8:6 and 31:19 indicate probable sorrow or regret because of doing wickedness or straying from the Lord, accompanied by the change needed to remedy the situation, i.e., turning from wickedness or returning to the Lord. Hence in both of these verses *nḥm* is translated “repent.”

So, in Job 42:6 we would expect *nḥm* to have a similar meaning. This means that Job would feel sorrow or regret over something and that he would either turn from the cause or make necessary changes.

From the above investigation of the usage of *nḥm* we see that it is the quality of feeling, be it compassion, grief, or regret, that is either accompanied by change-generating action, or which instigates it. It does not necessarily mean “repent.” However, it may do so. Whenever *nḥm* is caused by sin or by turning or straying from the Lord, it means “repent.” The connotation of *šûb* is more particularly that of “returning” to the Lord, without any necessary designation of emotion. On the other hand, *nḥm* meaning “repentance” implies sorrow and regret because of the sin together with the action of leaving sin and resulted in turning to the Lord.

1. B. Curtis denies that *nḥm* ever means “repent,” maintaining rather that it means “to be sorry.” On the basis of Gen 18:27 and Job 30:19 where Job says he has become like dust and ashes (but note: because he says God has thrown him to the ground!), he says that the expression “dust and ashes”

has the idiomatic meaning “man in his utter frailty before the divine.” So, he translates Job 42:6 as follows:

Therefore I feel loathing contempt and revulsion

[toward you, O God];

and I am sorry for frail man.

Once again his conclusions are based on too little evidence and reveal a strong subjective bias. An example of this is his statement that “there can be little doubt that the unexpressed object of the loathing is God,” with only brief and speculative suggestions as support for his statement. His translations cannot be sustained, therefore his argument that Job did not repent collapses.

Dust and ashes, separately or together, were often associated with mourning or with humbling oneself in the OT. When Job’s friends came, they wept, tore their robes, and sprinkled dust on their heads (2:12). Joshua and the elders of Israel tore their clothes and put dust on their heads as they humbled themselves before the Lord (Josh 7:6). See also Lam 2:10. After Job was afflicted he sat among the ashes (2:8). The wearing of sackcloth and ashes when mourning and humbling oneself is mentioned in 2 Sam 13:19; Esth 4:1, 3; Ps 102:9(10); Isa 58:5; 61:3; Jer 6:26; Dan 9:3; and Jonah 3:6. The use of both dust and ashes together is mentioned in Ezek 27:30. So, strong support exists for seeing this connotation in Job 42:6 also and for translating *‘al ‘āpār wā’ēper* literally, “upon [or with] dust and ashes.”

So, I would translate Job 42:6 as follows:

Therefore I will have nothing more to do with (i.e., despise and reject) the sins of which you charged me which I committed by my speaking without understanding, and I repent upon dust and ashes.

From the examination of the text of Job’s responses that I have presented, I believe it is clear that Job did respond to Yahweh’s speeches as Yahweh desired. Job recognized that he had sinned and he repented of that sin. This sin was not committed prior to his suffering—it was not the cause of his suffering. Rather, his sin was in the words he spoke, accusing and condemning God, though in measure unconsciously, as he justified himself. He also sinned in thus exalting himself as a “rival god.”

Job’s responses also reveal that he came to a deeper, more intimate knowledge of God and relationship with him. He reaffirmed his confidence in the supreme power and sovereignty of God. He accepted the fact that he could not understand God’s works and his ways.

Job’s relationship with God was renewed by his repentance, and enriched and strengthened by God’s self-revelation to him. Now, not only did Job know that God is sovereign, but also he knew, intimately, the God who is sovereign. In that knowledge and that relationship is the resolution of life’s problems.