

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – October 21, 2018

## [Job 38:1-7, 34-41](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com).)

### Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### Commentary on Job 38:1-7, 34-41

(From *Homiletics*; “Deep Work”, October 21, 2018)

The book of Job stands as one of the great testimonies in human thought to two questions: (1) Is there such a thing as disinterested piety? (“Does Job fear God for nothing?” at 1:9), and (2) What have I done to deserve this? Today’s reading is the beginning of the divine answer to those questions — sort of.

For 37 chapters, Job, his wife, three of his friends and a pretentious young man named Elihu have wrestled primarily with the second of these two questions; the first was posed by the Satan (note the definite article, which is in the Hebrew, and which points more toward “prosecuting attorney” than pitchfork, horns and a tail), and the book is largely an extended attempt to see if Job will abandon his faith under the anguish of suffering. The crux of the matter is not the suffering but the faith, expressed in Job’s question to his wife, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10). Job’s faith posits divine sovereignty — his God is in ultimate control of the universe — and his religious tradition posits a system of strict moral retribution: the good are rewarded and the evil punished. Job, however, seems to be suffering the punishments of the wicked without having done the deeds to deserve it; the moral universe has gone topsy-turvy, and the book is an attempt to sort it out again. God’s response from the whirlwind is the beginning of God’s contribution to that attempt.

It is “the Lord” who answers from the whirlwind (v. 1). Throughout the book of Job, two divine names alternate: “the Lord” (Yahweh), the proper name for the god of Israel, and “God,” the generic Hebrew word for God (or “a god,” “gods” or even “divine beings,” as the form is plural). The proper name is not used in the dialogue between Job and his friends (chapters 3-31) or in the speeches by Elihu (chapters 32-37), but only in the prologue and the epilogue. This is one of the several clues suggesting to scholars the composite nature of the book. (See further on this, and many other questions about the book of Job, Marvin H. Pope, *Job* [The Anchor Bible, vol. 15; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982], 290.)

The person addressed by the Lord’s response is Job, not Elihu, who has been the most recent speaker in the back-and-forth of the book (37:24). This is another indicator to scholars that the Elihu speeches, ill-fitting in their context and largely void of new ideas, were interpolations inserted in the book at some point in its compositional history. Job had challenged God to speak several chapters earlier (in 31:35).

The Hebrew word translated “whirlwind” (or “storm” or “tempest”) is found also at 40:6, and it is not the same word that describes the more famous theophanic storm in which Elijah found himself (1 Kings 19:11) or the “great wind” that knocked down the houses of Job’s children (1:19). Natural upheavals were a regular accompaniment of divine revelations (e.g., Psalm 18:7-15), and the imagery, which pervades the OT, is derived from the various ancient pre-Israelite cults of weather deities, most notably the Canaanite storm-god Baal, with whom Yahweh was locked in a centuries-long battle for Israelite loyalty.

The opening words of the Lord’s response take the form of a rhetorical question (v. 2), and this will be the style of the bulk of the divine answer. The phrase “darkens counsel” means “obscures [the divine] plan” or “confuses divine truth.” Elihu had earlier accused Job (in 34:35) of speaking out of ignorance; that same accusation will be leveled against him by God in layer after layer of verbal assault. The same question appears at 42:3 (translated slightly differently in the NRSV), where it is usually considered a misplaced fragment.

The image of girding up one’s loins (which occurs again at 40:7 as part of the second divine speech in 40:6–41:34) occurs regularly as metaphoric (and sometimes literal) preparation for any serious undertaking (e.g., Exodus 12:11; 1 Kings 18:46). The image may derive from the warrior’s girding his sword onto his thigh (Psalm 45:3), or (as in Isaiah 11:5 and the Kings passage) it may refer to the belting up of a warrior’s kilt to allow greater freedom of movement. Naturally, the term is gender specific: it is never applied to women (and Job here is called “a man,” v. 3, but the Hebrew word *gever* means more than that; it means “warrior” or “hero”).

The response of the Lord is a series of rhetorical questions which Job cannot begin to answer, and no answer is expected. The purpose is not to demonstrate the Lord’s righteousness within the moral framework proposed by Job and his friends, but rather to shift the terms of the debate completely. By demanding that Job articulate his participation in the ongoing fact of creation, the divine response makes the point that the human self cannot serve as the point of reference for the moral universe. The divine speech is a direct refutation of the view attributed to (among many others) Protagoras of Abdera (c. 480-410 B.C.) that the human being is the measure of all things. Whether the author of Job had this particular philosopher’s views in mind is doubtful (although not impossible, as the book of Job has been dated as late as the third-century B.C.; see Pope, xl), but the idea was widespread even in the ancient world. The purpose of the first divine speech is not to demonstrate Job’s innocence, but rather his ignorance, and the role that ignorance plays in constructing a functional morality.

Eliphaz (in 15:7-8) and Elihu (in 37:18) had both asked Job the same sort of ironic question put to him in verse 4a by the Divine: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” The question (stretching through vv. 4-6) reflects ancient Israelite cosmology, in which the earth was conceived not as a sphere suspended in limitless space, but rather as a rectangular plane with four corners (Isaiah 11:12), supported by pillars, which were, in their turn, resting on a solid foundation of unfathomable depth and substance.

The second half of verse 4 is literally, “Tell, if you know understanding,” which may reflect an ancient mythological personification of Understanding akin to the personification of Wisdom found in the book of Proverbs.

The “cornerstone” of verse 6b may be the foundation stone or it may be the capstone of the earth’s highest mountain-tower. The laying of a foundation (Ezra 3:10-11) or the positioning of a capstone (Zechariah 4:7) was an occasion for great liturgical and secular celebration, occurring at either the start of an important undertaking or at its successful completion.

Although the celestial bodies were frequently mythologized in the OT as heavenly armies under the command of Yahweh (giving rise to the common title “the Lord of [the heavenly] host”; cf. Isaiah 40:26), they were also part of the heavenly court (1 Kings 22:19-23), and as such, their responsibilities included hymning the praises of their liege (e.g., Psalm 19:1-4; 29:1-2; 148:1-4).

Verse 34b is identical with 22:11b, but the contexts are completely different.

The words translated in verse 36 are, as the NRSV note indicates, uncertain, and the translations have ranged widely. Some indication of the vast territory explored by translators with the difficult text can be seen by comparing the NRSV translation with the rendering in *Today’s English Version (The Good News Bible)*: “Who tells the ibis when

the Nile will flood, or who tells the rooster that the rain will fall?” (See Pope, 302-3). Regardless of the specific translation, the sense is clear and the point is made: Job knows little of what he speaks when challenging the Divine.

The image of the heavenly or terrestrial waters being gathered into a waterskin or bottle (v. 37) is found also in Psalm 33:7, as are the images of young lions and ravens seeking their food from God (vv. 39, 41; cf. Psalm 104.21; 147:9). The chapter ends, as it began, completely ignoring the narrow morality with which Job and his friends have approached the problem of his suffering and points the argument in an entirely new direction, toward the God whose actions in creation beggar human comprehension.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

## Reflection Questions on Job 38:1-7, 34-41:

1. If you have not read the preceding chapters of the book of Job, it can be very difficult to put these verses in context. But it is absolutely essential in trying to understand them. This is the first time God speaks since the first two chapters of the book, and one question on which one could long reflect is this – what question of Job’s is God really “answering” in these verses?
2. With what “mood” do you hear these questions put to Job by God? Is God “putting Job in his proper place”? Answering Job’s questions? Challenging Job’s understanding? Trying to reassure and comfort Job? Something else?
3. What do these verses say about God? About the world? About our place in it?
4. From Karla Suomala (*Commentary*, [workingpreacher.org](#), 10/18/2015): *How do these chapters, though, with question upon question, serve as an answer to Job? They are clearly not a response to Job on Job’s terms or to his particular concerns. In fact, God’s many questions seem to be a pretty straightforward way of showing, according to biblical scholar Carol Newsom in The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations, that “God is God, and Job is not.” But is this the only point that the biblical writer is making about the relationship between God and humanity in this book? Are God’s questions intended to batter Job further, showing him how insignificant he truly is in the scheme of things and that his concerns are irrelevant?*

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?**