

BOOK REVIEW

Have You Considered My Servant Job?: Understanding the Biblical Archetype of Patience, Samuel Balentine, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2015, 312 pp. Reviewed by Michal Porath-Zibman.

This new book in the Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament series is often refreshing and thought provoking. Balentine skillfully shares the extensive research that he has done, while adding fresh insights.

Each chapter of the book deals with either one of the themes of the Book of Job or one of the characters, however minor, introduced in Job. This is one of the book's great advantages. For example, it is rare to find a chapter devoted solely to Job's wife, a character who has all of 6 words devoted to her in the entire book. The author presents years of attempts at understanding this rather enigmatic character who should have played a larger role in the story of her husband and children. For example, the LXX gives her a long lament, showing us a woman who suffered alongside her husband, and only after much time passes, expressed her grief at the loss of her children. The chapter about her adds creative and original insights regarding who she may have been, and what she may have been like.

What I enjoyed most about this book was reading the history of interpretation of the Book of Job. It is truly amazing to see how various writers, theologians, scholars, artists, and poets spanning both centuries and continents dealt with some of the very serious issues that the Book of Job brings to our awareness. Of particular interest I found the chapter on God and the Satan. The author weaves together various approaches as to the relationship (or lack thereof) of God and the Satan into a coherent and cohesive unit. His writing guides us to a better understanding of how the 'bet' between God and the Satan could have taken place in the first place. In the opinion of this reader however, it is inexcusable that he only brings the opinions of two Jewish commentators: Saadia Gaon and Maimonides. This question has been raised by many other Jewish theologians, and it would have added a lot to the discussion to include Jewish works that have been written over the past 800 years on this topic.

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The author approaches extremely heavy subject matter in a very light way. At times this book is almost even a 'fun' read. And here is where it gets tricky. In the introduction to the book, Balentine opens with an elaborate discussion about an episode of an American television medical drama series, "House". The point of this very detailed description of characters and a scene is to show "That a twenty first century television drama can script the ancient story of Job into an hour of prime time entertainment speaks to our continuing identification with its abiding truths" (pg xv, Introduction). Is prime time entertainment, however realistically portrayed, the best way to identify an abiding truth and our continued identification with the subject matter?

Another unusual point of reference that the author uses is in the first chapter, "The Job(s) of the Didactic Tale". The chapter itself is a very interesting discussion of the history of how Job himself was portrayed throughout generations and throughout the world, sometimes as a hero, a saint, neither or both. He concludes the chapter with the following piece: "In today's world a Google search on "hero" produces 172 million results in a few seconds; type in "Saint" and you get almost 5 million results. A quick glance through the first dozen or so entries suggests that the first things the words 'hero' and 'saint' are associated with in modern culture are pop music, such as the lyrics of Mariah Carey's 1993 hit song "Hero" (pg 47-48). In other words, since when you Google the word 'Hero' you don't necessarily come up with Job's name, the author concludes, history has not rendered Job a hero. This might be an interesting look into how modern society views the concept of a hero, but has nothing to do with an understanding of Job's character traits. The conversation itself is interesting, but to conclude the chapter with a defining source from Google somewhat takes away the ability to take any previous part of the chapter seriously.

The central question regarding this book is exactly the question of the title: "Have you considered my servant Job?" Who is the one considering? Who is the intended reader? If the reader is a scholar of the Book of Job seeking depth of understanding, additional scholarly sources and intellectual conversation points, then the referencing of television shows, movies, and other such 'sources' are its greatest failure. If the reader is a curious individual without a serious academic background who is looking for ways to understand the complex Job storyline- then these references may be of value.