

Writing a *Job* Commentary

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1. *A Report from the Workbench*

When I was invited to contribute to this volume I readily agreed because of my long-time friendship with the estimated honoree, John Hartley, whom I first got to know during a year-long residence in California in 1974–75 and with whom I often shared at SBL meetings over the years something of the joys and tribulations of the long-distance *Job*an commentator.¹ But I was also intrigued by the proposal of the editors of this volume to include articles ‘that reflect upon personal experiences in the production of a biblical commentary’, which I have long thought a neglected form of writing. We are sensitive today to the social location of other scholars in our field, but largely ignorant of the processes and mechanisms and lived realities that have shaped, facilitated or constrained their academic works.

There is the ‘human interest’ aspect of other scholars’ lives, of course, the attraction of gossip about our friends and rivals, which never ceases to entertain and which we crave even if we would never admit it. But there is also a deeper desire to understand our colleagues as more than the written products of their lives, but as human beings with an yen, if not an addiction, for learning that we recognize in ourselves. How they are motivated to consign great swathes of their lives to vast scholarly projects, what sustains them during the countless solitary hours, what satisfactions they derive, what regrets they must endure—these things we want to know of *for ourselves*, to know of in reference to ourselves. For we need to assure ourselves all the time that we are normal (even if at the further reaches of normality), that we are not deranged, that we have peers who would understand us and not disapprove, at least not entirely, of what we have been doing with our lives.

It has never been enough to rely on the scrappy information we pick up from Prefaces, replete as they so frequently are with conventional and clichéd words of gratitude to neglected spouses and family pets. We would like to know more of what it means to be a scholar, what it does to one’s days and years, and, deep down, how the addiction is to be managed.

So I thought I would break the habit of a lifetime and write some lines on my experience of writing a commentary on *Job*. I remembered that one day, a long time ago, nearly 20 years, *in medias res* of my commentary, I had written such a piece, not to be published but for the sake of capturing for myself the daily experience of commentary-writing. Now that I read it over, I would judge that when I wrote it I was inordinately enthusiastic about the joys of composition, but at least I do believe I did feel the way I describe on that particular day:

I have 55 books on *Job* on the shelves behind me, and about 80 volumes of

¹ John’s *Job* was finished more than 20 years before mine, which meant that I envied him for more than 20 years.

dictionaries, grammars and encyclopaedias. There are 13 English versions of the Bible on the desk to my right, 27 commentaries on the mahogany dining room table that is my main desk (the solidity of that mahogany is very important to me); these are all within hands' reach, but beyond them, on another table, are photocopies of 16 older commentaries—together with all the bills and departmental files and literary magazines I am banishing to the corners of my world.

Of the English versions and 27 commentaries I read every word. Every morning I open on my Mac my two files for the day, one with *Translation and Notes* for the chapter in progress, one for the *Comment*. Before long, I also open the Bible search program Accordance, which will display all the occurrences of a word I am considering, in Hebrew and English in parallel columns. Whenever I need to look up a verse, I will use Accordance rather than a printed Hebrew Bible, since it will show me the verse in English and Hebrew, in half a dozen English versions as well if I want, and with the Septuagint and Vulgate for good measure. I can ask for a wider context if I want it, or, if I have typed a row of biblical references in the *Comment*, I can copy and paste them into the search box and I can check that all my references were correct, and note all the verses where the English and the Hebrew numeration differs (since I must give the Hebrew numbering with the English in parentheses).

For the extreme right of my screen, I have a list of commentators, in chronological order, so that when I list their adherence to a particular view their names will appear in the correct date order.

When I start my commentary on a new passage of the Joban text, a strophe of four or five lines, let us say, I will begin by making my own provisional translation of the Hebrew, looking up in the dictionaries not only the words I do not know or know well but also the common words to see if I can find support for the exact rendering forming in my head. Then I will study each of my thirteen English versions, and, whenever I am disposed to differ significantly from one of them, make a footnote to the text of my translation; sometimes their rendering will bring me to amend my own provisional translation. The differences among the translations will usually hang upon disputes over philology, text criticism or interpretation, so later, when I get into the commentaries, I will be able to discover the reasons for all the variations.

Now it is time to work on the philological notes. Typically, I begin with Driver and Gray in the ICC, incorporating in the *Notes* to the translation any points that interest me, and move on to Dhorme, Gordis, Pope, de Wilde and Fohrer, usually in just that order. When I see that an emendation was earlier proposed by Siegfried or Duhm or some other older scholar not among my desk companions, I note the fact in the appropriate place with two exclamation marks before the author's name so that I can confirm it later when I am reading them (rather than break off my routine to check immediately).

When I have read all the more philological commentaries, and got together a fair draft of the *Notes* section, it is time to start writing the commentary proper. First I try to write a paragraph about the strophe as a whole, what I think it is saying in general and how it connects up with what went before. This is the most difficult part of all, and sometimes I will have to read in other commentaries before I can see what I myself want to say. Fohrer is the best at giving me a kick start into this general paragraph.

And now I am ready for the verse by verse commentary (the

Comment). I read just as much in the commentaries as I need to get me started, surveying the kinds of issues they have taken up, and then I begin to write my own commentary. Almost always, I will start by saying what I think the verse as a whole is about, as well as how it connects with what has preceded or with the general context. Then I will consider the words and phrases themselves, explaining precisely what they mean, what their resonances are and how they contribute to the sense of the present verse. When I have done writing my own commentary on the verse or the strophe, I will then read systematically through all my 27 desk companions, incorporating as I go any points or thoughts I have learned from them that I feel I should include.

When I get to the end of the chapter or the speech there is of course still a lot of busy work to be done. First I shall have to search the whole of my files for double exclamation marks, so as to find the items I still need to check. Some of those I can check now, if they are older commentators like Dillmann or Hitzig, whose books I have in my pile of photocopies; others I shall have to save up for a library visit, since they may be monographs or journal articles. But I know from experience that I shall be able to despatch most of them pretty quickly, and I expect that on the whole they will not greatly subvert what I have already written. Sometimes, though, a little article in a journal will entirely undermine my whole train of thought, and I will have a lot of revision to do.

There is still the *Form/Content/Structure* section to write. It is a bit boring, but I have devised a set of questions to ask systematically, about strophic structure and literary forms and the like, and I think it is worth doing. The best bit is left till the very last. It is the *Explanation* section that comes at the end of each unit of text (typically a chapter), where, as I say in the Preface to Volume 1, I try hard to stand a little way off from the text to ask what has been going on and what it all means, or, as I say in the Introduction, I try to savour what has been going on in the speech, evaluate it as warmly and respectfully as I can, and then make no secret of what I myself think about it (I am under no obligation to agree with everything in the text, if only because we all know that the friends, and Job himself to some extent, are in the wrong on many issues). To write those concluding paragraphs, which will occupy only a page or two of the printed book, I will have to reread the whole of what I have written on the current chapter(s), put some Mahler on (it was Bach for the philological notes), go into a free associative linguistive mode—and just write (trying not to repeat what I have already said in the commentary proper).

At the end of each day, I should add, I ask my Mac to count the words in each of my writing files, and I will enter the new word counts and the minutes I have spent (average about 4 hours a day) into my spreadsheet called Writing Record 1996 (or whatever the year was), so that I can see how many words I have written in the day (average about 1300), what my hourly average was, what my cumulative daily average now is (c. 325), how many words of the commentary I have written so far, what proportion of the commentary is now finished, how many pages it will be when it is done, and at what date, at the present rate of progress, I may expect to have completed it. The day I have finished will not be better than the thousands of days I was just writing.

That was, as I say, quite some time ago (1996), and written while I was in the throes of composition. Today, I am looking back on the whole process and

ruminating. My reflections are organizing themselves into two groups: pleasures and perils.

2. *The Pleasures of Commentary*

a. *A Defined Task*

Compared to writing a monograph or a journal article, writing a commentary is a pretty clearly defined task. Especially if you are writing for a series of commentaries, the format, audience, shape and scope are predetermined. You know where to start and where to finish. The commentator can be confident about what the work is to look like in the end, not agonizing over the whole even while struggling with the particular.

It may seem very mechanical to be able to estimate every day how many words you still have to write and when you may expect to be finished, but I have found that I need rewards and incentives to keep going at a large task, and these little signs of progress gave me most of what I needed.

b. *Avoiding Blank Page Syndrome*

Because you know what lies before you in the text, you always know, in general at least, what your next move must be. It is bliss to sit down in the morning not dreading the blank page or screen, or lacking any idea of which out of hundreds of potential sentences you should begin with. With a commentary, if you are at verse 12, you can be confident that your next horizon will be verse 13. Mind you, I still have found it a good idea to attempt banishing blank page syndrome altogether by finishing work for the day in the middle of a paragraph, or even of a sentence, so that there can be no question of how the next day should begin.

c. *In the Presence of a Great Mind*

For the most part, works that call for commentary are master works, works that repay commentary, works that are rich, complex, profound. No doubt, not all biblical books are equally profound, but in most cases the commentator is aware of following and exploring the work of a superior mind. This is always a pleasurable and rewarding experience, even if the commentator is not always in total sympathy with the author. I count myself very fortunate that I was invited to comment on *Job*, which must be one of the most intellectually rich books of the Bible. I don't know that I ever formed much of an image of the poet as a person, but I never failed to admire the inventiveness and delicacy of his mind.

d. *An Educational Premium*

One of the greatest pleasures of commentary writing, especially as distinct from other scholarly writing, is the constant demands of the text that you launch yourself into new fields and topics that you would otherwise probably never have touched. I recall getting into ancient metallurgy and astronomy, and, especially in commenting on the divine speeches, into the lives and habits of various living creatures (including referencing video clips of crocodiles). I suspect mine may be one of the first large-scale biblical commentaries written with constant reference to Wikipedia. I had such a sense of the immense variety of knowledges the poet draws upon that I compiled for my commentary (taking the idea from A. de Wilde's commentary) a 'Classified Index of the Book of Job',

listing, with references, the animals mentioned, the birds, aspects of the earth, the sky and the weather, language about farming, emotions, manufactures, warfare and weapons, and so on, under 42 headings altogether, over nine pages of small type. All these matters are largely incidental to the main purposes of the book, of course, but they show an artist at work who is hugely sensitive to the multiplicity of the world and of its human inhabitants.

e. Companionship

Most commentaries, not just commentaries on biblical books, are written on texts that have already been commented on. So today's commentator inevitably works in the presence of a commentatorial cloud of witnesses. I called my predecessor commentators my 'desk companions' because I enjoyed their characters and their individuality, and came over the years to feel I knew them and their minds very well, though I had never met most of them. Shut in my study, I was surrounded by human contact. They had travelled for many of the years of their lives on the same journey that would occupy me for a quarter of a century, and I came to admire their fortitude and the twists and turns of their minds as I turned to them day after day.

f. Efficiency

I love to be efficient. This is not a heartless quest and I hope I do not fetishize it. But I am very conscious of how much of our scholarly lives are wasted on the business of organizing ourselves to the point of becoming productive, and I have tried to streamline the busy-work as much as I can. Early on in writing the *Job* commentary, I realized that accessing the relevant scholarly literature, even when one has located references to it, threatens to delay if not prevent getting on with the primary task. Especially because I had made it my personal goal to review the literature of the past 100 years, considering all the philological proposals and textual emendations of *Job* I could lay my hands on (a task that needs to be done every generation, I believe), and envisaging a very comprehensive bibliography, I saw that I needed a database to record all the items I came across. In the database I would also note what I had read and what I had still to see, and it would arrange the items in the libraries I visit (usually Sheffield and Cambridge) according to their position on the shelves.

I taught my relational database Helix the location of every volume of all the journals I use, so once I had entered *JQR* 21 as the reference for a journal article, for example, it would know that we did not have that volume in Sheffield, and I would have to consult it in Cambridge, and at shelfmark P7.c.1 on the South Wing, Floor 3. All the other items for that location would be printed out before my visit to the library, including the books, for which I had looked up the shelfmark in the electronic catalogues. Very occasionally I managed through this system to consult 100 items in a single day, but more often no more than 40.

Each item was classified as I entered it as a record according to its destined place in the commentary, whether for the bibliography at the head of each chapter, or for the General Bibliography at the end, so that by exporting the data I had all the items under their appropriate heading and in alphabetical order by author. It was a pleasure to me to be able to control so much data without overwhelmed by it. and I am happy to accept any judgment made about my character that can be inferred from that fact.

3. *The Perils of Commentary*

a. *Mistaking the Horizon*

Commentary writing is fine work, which must always be attending to particulars. The commentator has to make a conscious effort, many times in the course of a working day, to stand back from the detailed work on the words and phrases to consider the impact of decisions about their meaning on the whole book. Balancing the needs of the micro-exegesis against those of a total perspective on the book, in a perpetual interplay between the part and the whole, is one of greatest pleasures of commentary writing, but also a realm in which it is all too easy to go astray. I think of the great commentary of Édouard Dhorme (1926; English translation, 1967), which almost never considered a wider horizon than that of the individual verse; I cannot agree with the commonly expressed opinion that it is the greatest of all biblical commentaries of our time. I came to think that Fohrer's was the most successful of *Job* commentaries at combining exact exegesis with the larger issues. The peril for the commentator is failing to blend the microscopic and the panoramic.

b. *Brainwashing*

If one labours for month after month at understanding a complicated text, and feels one has succeeded at last in making a tolerable sense of it, it is almost forgivable for a commentator to accept, explicitly or implicitly, the views of one's author. In fact, with the Book of *Job*, that is the default position of commentators. Hardly ever have I encountered someone saying, This is what I think the passage says, or, the book as a whole says, and personally I do not believe it. At the same time, there is very little consensus on what the Book of *Job* actually says; but no matter, we commentators differ greatly from one another, but whatever we think the book means, that is what we ourselves affirm.

The situation has only to be stated like that for us to realize its absurdity. Especially with the Book of *Job*, where—unlike almost every book in the Bible—contrary points of view are expounded at length, one might have thought that commentators would have felt themselves encouraged to sit loose to any or all of the ideas propounded in the book, since most of them must in some sense be 'wrong'. It could even be argued that the divine speeches are not necessarily the last word on the matters that the book deals with, all the more because they systematically avoid the primary question that *Job* has everywhere been raising, the question whether there is justice in the divine governance of the world.

Even if one is personally disposed to accept statements in the text, it surely behooves a critical commentator to consider counter-evidence and counter-arguments to what the text presents (e.g. where and how does *Job* or *Yhwh* differ from other parts of the Hebrew Bible?). I tried to do that myself in the *Explanation* sections of my commentary, but I am sure I did not range widely enough in my evaluations of what the speakers in the book were putting forward. The peril for the commentator is allowing oneself to be brainwashed by sustained closeness to the text and over-familiarity with it.

c. *Hyper-Professionalization*

The commentator is typically a professional scholar, whose work will be read and reviewed by one's peers, who are experts in the academic study of the biblical book in question. The bibliographies with which major commentaries these days have to be festooned are the commentator's first line of defence against criticism that the work is insufficiently deep and inadequately researched.

There is nothing wrong with displaying the resources for interpretation, but the peril lies in overlooking some of the crucial sources. I said in the Introduction to the first volume of my *Job* commentary:

I became increasingly dissatisfied with restricting my horizon to the so-called 'scholarly' works. Scholars quote scholars and create their own canon of approved literature on the Book of Job. Those writings that are not cited by previous commentators do not generally get cited by subsequent commentators ... Of course, when it comes to technical questions about philology, unscholarly remarks can be safely ignored. But when it is a matter of large-scale interpretation, of the meaning of the book as a whole and not just of a particular word or verse, one does not need to be a technically trained scholar to have valuable insights. So my 'undiscriminating' bibliography, which includes sermons and works of popular devotion alongside vast works of erudition, is meant as a kind of atonement for the principle of scholarly apartheid which reigns elsewhere in the commentary.

4. Conclusion

I call commentary-writing the quintessential form of biblical scholarship. Despite the plethora of commentaries, good, bad and indifferent, that publishers insist on setting before us, I would argue that we can never have too many commentaries. Except for commentaries that are mostly derivative, every commentary represents one person's tangling with the biblical text, and every such engagement is at the least interesting and at best profitable. I have heard commentary-writing disparaged as no more than a matter of copying from other commentaries, but I resist that criticism vigorously as simple ignorance of what goes into the creation of a commentary.

We need commentaries because we need commentary writers. The field of biblical studies needs a sizable cadre of commentators, that is, persons who have submitted themselves over a sustained period of time to the discipline of following a text, in all its windings, and grappling with questions of meaning on the large scale and the small. No other form of biblical scholarship trains the mind in the same way, or creates a sense of humility vis-à-vis the text and its author and vis-à-vis other scholars. Not all our colleagues are equally suited for commentary-writing, and it is no crime not to have written a commentary. But I must confess to asking myself about one or another esteemed colleague, who turns out not to have been perhaps of the first rank, Well, have they written a *commentary*?