First I want to thank Richard Middleton for his reminder that a book like Job, despite its ancient origins, has relevance in our present time. Even though, as he states, the book has fascinated readers for over two millennia, its special attraction in our contemporary world is the refusal of its hero to accept easy answers to suffering, and, more than that, to be willing to ‘be upset with God’. This perspective has always made sense to those who have undergone personal crises, but even if a contemporary reader has not yet experienced such disorientation, the context that none of us can escape is the global suffering now brought to us daily through world-wide 24/7 media.

The audacity and bold speech that characterizes the book of Job has long inspired those of Jewish faith. On 28 September 2016 Shimon Perez, the former President of Israel, passed away. Knowing that the seminar planned for Middleton’s visit that was held a few days later was focusing on the lament genre, a student sent me this quote attributed to Perez: ‘The Jews’ greatest contribution to history is dissatisfaction! We’re a nation born to be discontented. Whatever exists we believe can be changed for the better.’

Dissatisfaction is well expressed in the Yiddish word ‘chutzpah’—with its connotations of both audacity and courage. I think this is why even ‘speaking impiously’, as Job is said to have done, is not anywhere perceived as a sin.

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Middleton’s study argues persuasively that in fact a ‘seemingly impious and insistent demand upon God to answer’ is actually ‘faithful speech’.

Middleton’s article, like the book of Job itself, is about speeches, words, and the appropriateness or otherwise of our interpretations of them. It is good that he reminds us, therefore, that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, Job’s three friends, start out by sitting with him in silence: ‘They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great’ (Job 2:13). This silence prefaces many spoken words, of course, but it does highlight the value of the silence of solidarity. I think the symbolic significance of the number seven is suggestive of completeness. Grief can only be healed in the fullness of time. Undoubtedly individual experience of suffering varies greatly, but one commonly hears that in the immediate aftermath of tragedy very little can be said to fill the void created by the loss of death or disaster.

Once the speeches begin, however, there is much speech about God, concluding with Job’s impassioned request to be declared innocent (Job 29–31). So it is interesting to contemplate exactly what God’s speeches addressed to Job in response to all that has been said are communicating. The key idea in Middleton’s paper is that God, rather than rebuking Job, is expressing desire for a worthy dialogue partner. This discussion raises the imago Dei theme that has long been close to Middleton’s heart. What exactly is the nature of the relationship between God and humans? The suggestion that Job 7:17–19 echoes Psalm 8 reminds me of the slight uneasiness I have felt when contemplating how a personal God would relate to us ever since I first watched The Truman Show. Remember the scene where Christof (played by Ed Harris), creator and director of ‘The Truman Show’, breaks into Truman’s consciousness with the booming voice from the clouds, assuring him that from the day of his birth he had been watching his every move and caring for his every need. It reminded me of Psalm 139 and I found it a rather menacing metaphor for God’s omnipresence and omnipotence (or should I say ‘surveillance’ of humanity?). So I was relieved that Middleton’s essay stresses a more equal relationship that is possible between God and Job, even verging on playfulness, with the delightful suggestions that God is boasting about the creation of Behemoth and Leviathan, describing the sea as a ‘rambunctious infant’ approaching the ‘terrible twos’ and challenging Job to ‘gird his loins’ like a man and rise to the challenge of the dialogue.
Middleton’s careful reading of the section relating to Behemoth and Leviathan is convincing. They are not there to diminish Job’s significance nor are they metaphors for Job’s own beastly outbursts; rather, they underscore a renewed appreciation of humans as the *imago Dei* who are expected to take up the challenge of using their created freedom wisely.\(^6\)

In the God speeches in the book of Job, YHWH invites a response several times. In Job 40:1 we hear ‘Anyone who argues with God must respond’ and twice we hear a challenge to Job, ‘I will question you, and you shall declare to me’ (Job 38:3; 40:7). I am especially interested to notice Job’s return challenge using exactly the same words in Job 42:4,\(^7\) as I am reminded of the challenge the prophet Habakkuk throws to God in Habakkuk 2:1. Admittedly the verbs of the challenges in each book are different, but the meaning is similar. Habakkuk says, ‘Let me keep watch to see what he says to me, and what I will bring back concerning my rebuke’ (my translation). I have followed the Masoretic Text in my translation, whereas the NRSV follows the Syriac version and translates ‘what he will answer’. But dialogue is implied in the Masoretic Text, and in Habakkuk’s case it is the *prophet* who demands the dialogue rather than the deity. Middleton’s linking of Job with Abraham is intriguing, and during Middleton’s visit to Australia I was privileged to hear another paper by him focussing more specifically on that intertextual connection,\(^8\) but I think one can also make a case for intertextual links between the books of Job and Habakkuk. Both books begin with a context of suffering, both have protagonists who question God’s justice and demand answers from God, and both use sarcasm by twisting creation language. Middleton refers to Job’s speech that parodies Psalm 8:

What are human beings, that you make so much of them,  
that you set your mind on them,  
visit them every morning,  
test them every moment?  
Will you not look away from me for a while,  
let me alone until I swallow my spittle? (Job 7:17–19)

The prophet Habakkuk claims that YHWH created humans like *remeš*, the creeping rodents and reptiles that were classified as unclean in the Priestly law (Leviticus 11:44):
God comes to Job

You have made humankind like the fish of the sea,
like a lowly sea-creature with no-one ruling over it.
(Habakkuk 1:14, my translation).

Perhaps most importantly, in both books the protagonist’s earlier complain-
ing and suffering stance gives way to a confession of faith in the wake of a
theophanic experience of God.

I would like to suggest it is God’s presence that is the key factor in this
‘conversion,’ and God’s presence is the reason that suffering can be reoriented
to faithful trust. Recently I went to the Sydney Opera House to watch My
Fair Lady. That is a musical play all about the right use of words: the Ascot
scene demonstrates that correct pronunciation of the English language is
not quite enough to transform a guttersnipe into a lady. But the defiant song
Eliza sings to Freddy called ‘Show me!’ begins with ‘Words, words, words,
I’m so sick of words, I get words all day through, first from him, now from
you, is that all you blighters can do?’ Words must always be matched by
experience or they remain hollow.9

In the book of Habakkuk, the first two chapters are often described as
a dialogue between the prophet and God. But after Habakkuk’s first com-
plaint that injustice is rife and the law impotent (1:2–4), there is a speech,
presumably spoken by YHWH although no definite identification is given,
which is unrelated to the complaint (1:5–11).10 So the prophet offers a second
complaint, accusing YHWH God of ignoring the plight of his people (1:12–17),
and then takes a defiant stance to wait for a proper answer to the complaints
(2:1). The answer that does come from YHWH is ambiguous (2:2–5), but this
is followed by five woe oracles spoken against the arrogant (2:6–19). The
second chapter ends with a doxology (2:20). Although a ‘dialogue’ is not
readily seen, there does seem to be some resolution for the prophet since
complaints have turned to worship by the end of chapter 2 and the third
chapter opens as a prayer. But it is clear from 3:16 that the ‘day of calamity’
has not been removed but is still coming—the crisis that opened the book is
still a reality. Yet complaint has given way to faith. Chapter 3 largely describes
a theophany experienced by the prophet, with an emphasis on both hearing
(3:2, 16) and seeing (3:7, 10).

The book of Habakkuk concludes with a stunning statement of trust:

If the fig tree does not sprout,
and no produce is on the vines,
if the yield of the olive tree has failed
and fields have not produced food,
the flock has been cut off from the fold,
and no cattle are in the stalls,
yet I will exalt in YHVH,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
YHVH my Lord is my strength.
He places my feet like the hinds'
And on my high places he makes me walk.
(Habakkuk 3:17–19a, my translation.)

In Habakkuk, although the crisis is not resolved, God’s presence has allowed a reorientation to faithful confession.

In Job the first clue to a similar reorientation from suffering to trust is a shift from third person address to second person address. In most of Job’s speeches and in all those of his friends, God is spoken of in the third person. But when God addresses Job in the first person (‘I will question you and you will declare to me’), we see Job responding in like manner, using first-person verbs (40:3–5; 42:2–6). Speech to God is very different from speech about God.

Middleton’s article addresses the meaning of Job 42:6, and I concur with his comment that most translations are unsatisfactory. The suggestion that Job is sorry he had not had the courage to converse vigorously with the divine Ruler of the cosmos seems a very plausible way to read the Hebrew.

But for me the key verse in Job’s last speech is 42:5: ‘I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.’ Words are not enough; rather, it is presence that makes the difference. Yes, Job is encouraged to move from silence to speech, but the move from despair and abandonment to peace and acceptance, I believe, comes because Job has finally been made aware of God’s presence with him. We should remember that this speech takes place before Job is publicly vindicated and before his health and fortune is restored.

The book of Job, like the lament psalms, takes on new significance when one has experienced suffering. Teaching the book of Job after the experience of being widowed in my early forties resulted in a much more personal and existential interpretation. Looking back on the time of darkness and grief in my own life, it was not words that brought about healing but the deep
and certain knowledge of God’s presence with me, intangible though that may have been.

In my response to this extremely stimulating and thought-provoking essay, I have appealed to the significance of presence, experience, and embodiment within Old Testament texts. The witness of the Christian story reiterates these emphases, insisting that the word has become flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).

Endnotes

2. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the NRSV.
6. The speeches of God are so significant in Job that I am reminded of the devastating absence of the voice of God in the book of Lamentations.
7. Most commentators notice that Job is quoting YHWH here, but tend to see it as Job conceding to YHWH rather than throwing a challenge back to YHWH.
8. See J. Richard Middleton, ‘Unbinding the Aqedah from the Straightjacket of Tradition: An Inner-biblical Interpretation of Abraham’s Test in Genesis 22’ (unpublished seminar paper). Both that paper and this are part of a larger project of Middleton’s with the working title, The Silence of Abraham, the Passion of Job: Explorations in the Theology of Lament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming).
9. In his paper Middleton speaks of the priority of experience when he claims that his understanding of Job has been primarily shaped by teaching the book in both church and academy. In addition, during his public lecture in
Canberra he referred to his own personal crisis of faith which contributed to the shaping of his understanding of lament.

10. As a result of performing my own script of Habakkuk, Peter Perry has recently argued that it makes more sense to understand God’s speech as taking up only Habakkuk 1:5–6a, with the prophet responding in horror to the announcement in 6a: ‘for behold, I am raising the Chaldeans’ with a question in 6b: ‘that hurtful and hasty nation?’ See Insights from Performance Criticism (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 95–96.