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### God-talk in the Book of Job

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: the Book of Job and the Issue of Theodicy

### 1.1 Introduction

#### 1.1.1 Introduction

The Christian community of faith uses the bible in order to give state of affairs in the world and events in people's lives a context. In biblical texts, the very language used helps people to make sense of existence and to orientate themselves in their lives. The bible provides the community of faith with material which helps them to react to existential questions. It is for this reason that this present study consults a biblical text –the book of Job– in order to explore the issue of how to deal with the presence of evil in this world.

The presence of evil in the world is a mystery for many human beings. It represents the hard reality of existence and appears to lack any sense. *Evil* can be defined as harm that is caused to sentient beings without justification.<sup>1</sup> The fact that a specific, painful, horrifying, or distressful event can not be justified by an obvious reason makes this event evil. Two broad categories of evil can be distinguished. On the one hand, we speak of *natural evil* if the evil is caused by natural processes or impersonal forces; incurable diseases, death, and becoming the victim of a natural disaster are examples of natural evil. On the other hand, the category of *moral evil* contains evil which is the result of wrong or hurtful actions performed by free human beings. People can be held morally accountable for these things.<sup>2</sup> For example, atrocities in World War II belong to this category. Those who suffered in concentration camps were the victims of morally wrong actions by free human beings. Awareness of such evil in this world or actually experiencing evil in one's personal life is frequently disconcerting to people. It makes them question how it should be dealt with.

At the same time, the existence of evil may challenge a person's relationship with God. Theism, for instance, says that God is almighty, omniscient and perfectly good. It describes God as the Creator of this world.<sup>3</sup> If someone is faced with evil,

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<sup>1</sup> See also §8.4.2.

<sup>2</sup> M. Peterson-W. Hasker-B. Reichenbach-D. Basinger (eds.), *Reason and Religious Belief. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Oxford 2003, 129.

<sup>3</sup> See also §8.2.1.

the question arises of whether a God with these divine attributes should have prevented the existence of evil; is it not morally reprehensible that God permits the possibility that human beings might suffer innocently? Furthermore, to what extent is such a God still reliable or worth worshipping if a legitimate reason justifying the existence of natural or moral evil can not be formulated?<sup>4</sup> So, God becomes the subject of debate because of the phenomenon of the apparently unjustified suffering of sentient beings. This debate centres around the question of how God's involvement in the existence of evil should be understood. This is what I call the *issue of theodicy*. A *theodicy* is a specific kind of answer to this question. It is a defence of God's justice in spite of the existence of evil in his Creation.<sup>5</sup> The issue of theodicy more generally asks which role God plays in relation to evil.

Reading the book of Job makes one recognise several elements in it which are also matters in the issue of theodicy. The leading character, Job, suffers innocently. He wrestles with his miserable fate, questions God's righteousness and looks for reasons which can explain God's role with regard to his blameless misery. The book as a whole casts doubt on a specific form of theodicy, which was broadly found in the Ancient Near East. This is the view that God acts according to a strict relation between a person's actions and what befalls them. According to this theodicy, God rewards upright behaviour with prosperity and punishes wickedness with misery. Furthermore, the prologue of the book suggests the alternative that suffering might serve in order to test one's loyalty to God. Some of Job's friends suggest that evil has a pedagogical or warning function. Among other things these clues indicate that the book of Job somehow deals with aspects of the issue of theodicy.<sup>6</sup>

This impression is confirmed by a survey of theological as well as non-theological literature. When authors deal with the topic of (innocent) suffering, they frequently refer to the book of Job. Obviously the debate between Job and his friends, God's words from the whirlwind, and the scenes of the framework of the book have inspired them. However, their way of dealing with the book of Job, the topics to which the authors refer or which they use, and the interpretation of particular passages, differ considerably. Here are some examples which

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<sup>4</sup> If one draws the conclusion that this God is indeed not perfectly good, this frequently leads to the inference that God does not exist at all (see §8.2.2).

<sup>5</sup> According to Sarot, the term 'theodicy' has been given three different meanings in the course of the history of research: 1. philosophical study of the relation of God and evil; 2. the defence of the justice of God in spite of the evils in God's creation; 3. rational theology (M. Sarot, "Theodicy and Modernity. An Inquiry into the History of Theodicy", in: A. Laato-J.C. de Moor (eds.), *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, Leiden-Boston 2003, 2-4). This study uses the term in the second way.

<sup>6</sup> Müller also points out several clues in: H.P. Müller, "Theodizee? Anschlußerörterungen zum Buch Hiob", *ZThK* 89 (1992) 249-279.

demonstrate the diverse uses of the book and the different interpretations of particular passages<sup>7</sup>:

- 1 The view that an individual's sufferings are a divine punishment for his sins is repudiated in the book of Job.<sup>8</sup>
- 2 God's answer makes it clear that God's omnipotence is restricted. According to Kushner, God admits that he does not have absolute power and that therefore he is not always able to prevent bad things happening to good people.<sup>9</sup>
- 3 God's answer argues that God's ways are unobservable for human beings and that it is therefore impossible to formulate a theodicy.<sup>10</sup> For example, Miskotte says that God's answer particularly manifests that God is the hidden one who reveals himself as the very powerful one, who can be trusted. From this, he concludes that each attempt to formulate a theodicy ignores God's elusiveness.<sup>11</sup>
- 4 God acknowledges in the epilogue that he has acted unjustly in the case of Job.<sup>12</sup>
- 5 God's actions as depicted in the prologue are seen as demonic and amoral and as the actions of someone without any conscious reflection.<sup>13</sup>
- 6 The ordeal is a key for explaining Job's position in relation to God.<sup>14</sup>
- 7 The book of Job serves to show how one should behave in times of suffering.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, A. de Wilde, *Das Buch Hiob. Eingeleitet, Übersetzt und Erläutert* (OTS XXII), Leiden 1981, 32-37.

<sup>8</sup> J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, London-Melbourne-Toronto 1966, 179.

<sup>9</sup> H.S. Kushner, *Als 't kwaad goede mensen treft*, Baarn 1983, 44-47 [= *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, New York, 1981; transl. by R. Vink]. Kushner bases this view particularly on 40,9-14. In several translations of Job 38-41, the numbers of the verses differ from the numbering of the Masoretic text in the BHS. In this study, I use the numbering of the BHS.

<sup>10</sup> So for example D.Z. Phillips, "On not Understanding God", in: D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, New York 1993, 154-159 [originally published in AF 56]. Phillips here deals with reflections of Tennessen on the book of Job. He also refers to 9,32 as a key text for this view.

<sup>11</sup> K.H. Miskotte, *Antwoord uit het onweer* (Verzameld werk 10), Kampen 1984 [1935], 182-209.252-281.

<sup>12</sup> A. van de Beek, *Rechtvaardiger dan Job. Gedachten bij het boek Job*, Nijkerk 1992, 91-92.

<sup>13</sup> C.G. Jung, *Antwort auf Hiob*, Zürich 1952, 13.39. Bloch also characterizes the God of the prologue as demonic and holds that Job accomplishes an exodus from this God (E. Bloch, "Grenze der Geduld, Hiob oder Exodus nicht in, sondern aus der Jachwevorstellung selber, schärfe des Messianismus", in: E. Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum. Zur Religion des Exodus und des Reichs* (Gesamtausgabe Band 14), Frankfurt am Main 1968, 148-166.

<sup>14</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, ed. and transl. by H.V. Hong-E.H. Hong, Princeton 1983, 209-210 [*Repetition*: 1843].

<sup>15</sup> This is the basic thought in the commentary of Fohrer: "Wie zu Verhalten im Leiden" (G. Fohrer, *Hiob* (KAT 16), Gütersloh 1963, 549). Clines also points to this aspect, although it dominates his commentary less (D.A.J. Clines, *Job 1-20* (WBC 17), Dallas 1989, 53.66).

8 Some reflect on the book of Job from a specific point of view. For example, Gutiérrez interprets the book from the perspective of what it means with regard to talking about God in the context of the suffering poor in Latin America.<sup>16</sup> Girard understands Job as the scapegoat of his community. According to him, the scapegoat represents the innocent who take the hatred of the community upon themselves.<sup>17</sup>

While, for instance, one thinks that God particularly demonstrates the elusiveness of his actions with regard to evil in his answer, another reads God's answer as God's acknowledgement that he lacks omnipotence and is, therefore, unable to prevent cruel events. While on the one hand the book offers valuable clues for theological thinking in the eyes of various scholars, its concept of God evokes some very critical reactions on the other. So, the book of Job plays a considerable role in people's reflections on God's involvement in the existence of evil and suffering. Several aspects of the issue of theodicy are recognised in it. But the understanding and the use of the book differ substantially. Sometimes they even oppose each other. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine how the book of Job can be understood and what it could contribute to the current debate on the issue of theodicy.<sup>18</sup>

### 1.1.2 Purpose of this Study

This present study intends to examine what the book of Job could contribute to systematic theology with regard to the debate on the issue of theodicy.<sup>19</sup> Which useful language does the book provide for bringing up the issue of God's

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However, in a more recent article, Clines says that he has come to doubt his support to this position (D.A.J. Clines, "Does the Book of Job Suggest that Suffering is Not a Problem?", in: E. Blumenthal-D.J.A. Clines-H. Lichtenberger (eds.), *Weisheit in Israel. Beiträge des Symposiums "Das Alte Testament und die Kultur der Moderne" anlässlich des 100. Geburtstag Gerhard von Rads (1901-1971) Heidelberg 18-21 Oktober 2001*, Münster 2003, 95). Noort similarly states that the book of Job asks the question of *dealing* [Noort's italics] with suffering that suddenly happens to a human being without a clear reason for it. From this experience, it is further questioned, but according to him the centre is here (E. Noort, "Job en zijn uitleggers. Het boek Job in de spiegel van de oudtestamentische exegeese", in: B. Siertsema (ed.), *Job: Steen des aanstoets?*, Kampen 1996, 12). Rather comparably Steinmann says that the central concern is how a righteous person maintains faith and how integrity comes in a crisis (A.E. Steinmann, "The Structure and Message of the Book of Job", *VT* 46 (1996) 95-100).

<sup>16</sup> G. Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, New York 1987, xviii-xix [translation of *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente*, Lima 1986; transl. by M.J. O'Connell].

<sup>17</sup> R. Girard, *Hiob. Ein Weg aus der Gewalt*, Zürich-Düsseldorf 1990 [translation of *La Route antique des hommes pervers*, Paris 1985; transl. by E. Mainberg-Ruh].

<sup>18</sup> An impetus for such an undertaking is e.g. given in: H.P. Müller, "Die Theodizee und das Buch Hiob", *NZStThR* 39 (1997), 140-156.

<sup>19</sup> For a definition of 'systematic theology', see §1.2.1.

involvement in situations of unjustified suffering of sentient beings in our contemporary world? What does the book of Job have to offer and to ask of systematic theology with regard to the problem of innocent suffering? For this purpose, it is necessary first to investigate how the book of Job can be understood. As this study restricts itself to the value of the book of Job for systematic theology, it does not reflect on the hermeneutical process that lies at the basis of specific interpretations or use of some material from the book of Job.<sup>20</sup> I only deal with these regarding their exegetical or systematic theological claims. Also, since I look at the value of a biblical book for systematic theological thinking, the question arises of how these two are related to and interact with each other and I examine this topic in more detail in the next section.

## **1.2 The Relation between Scripture and Systematic Theology**

### **1.2.1 Biblical Theology**

Scripture has been constitutive for the Christian community of faith throughout the centuries and the community has based its belief and practice on it. However, this basis is not self-evident. Because of changing contexts and worldviews, the community must rephrase again and again how God and human beings living in a relationship with God should be spoken about. Dogma and theology have been formulated in order to indicate how God and human beings living in a relationship with God should be spoken about in a particular context. The discipline of *systematic theology* is concerned with this process of formulating the community's belief. It critically reflects on how Christian belief raises the issues of God, human beings, the world and the interaction between them within the context of our contemporary world. With this, systematic theology concentrates on what is meant when God is mentioned as well as on what living a life *coram Deo* implies. Since the Christian community of faith values the biblical writings as relevant for its belief and daily practice, Scripture is also an important source for systematic theology.<sup>21</sup> It inspires systematic theological thinking. The questions now are; in what way can systematic theology appeal to Scripture for its reflections? How do Scripture and systematic theology communicate with each other? What status does biblical material have for systematic theology?

In the main, the bible does not contain theological expositions in the sense that it can directly be transferred into *systematic* theological tracts. Whereas a certain

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<sup>20</sup> For a reflection on the hermeneutical process of some interpretations of the book of Job, see M. Wisse, *Scripture between Identity and Creativity. A Hermeneutical Theory Building upon Four Interpretations of Job* (ADSS 1), Utrecht 2003 [<http://adss.library.uu.nl/index.html>].

<sup>21</sup> Systematic theology also has other sources such as the Christian tradition and insights from modern times.

level of reflection in some biblical texts can be found<sup>22</sup>, these texts mostly do not have the character of explicit reflection on or discussion about specific beliefs. This is also demonstrated by the fact that systematic theology often refers to biblical texts as a ‘proof’ text instead of taking biblical passages themselves as systematic theological expositions. However, the question now arises of how the community of faith and particularly systematic theology can make an appeal to these texts in order to support or inspire their theological claims. Even though biblical texts do not generally include systematic theological expositions, they do nevertheless often have –what we would label as– theological implications. Take, for example, the deuteronomistic work. This work deals with the community of faith’s burning question of how the traumatic devastation of Jerusalem and the deportation to Babylon could happen. Whereas the composers<sup>23</sup> do not elaborate their theological view on this event explicitly, a pattern of thought can be found in these texts that reveals how they explain God’s involvement in this event and answer this question. Repeatedly straying from God and showing devotion for other gods were the reasons for this catastrophe, which could be interpreted as a divine punishment according to them. With this, God’s actions are understood according to a relation between a person’s actions and what befalls them. This pattern of thought, which occurs in the deuteronomistic work again and again, can be characterized as the implicit or implied theology of these texts. This implicit theology is a pattern that underlies or is behind the text, but is not stated by the text itself. It is theology in a person’s mind –perhaps not even consciously–.<sup>24</sup> These theological implications can only be revealed by means of reconstruction.

It is the task of *biblical theology* to explicate theological implications of biblical texts.<sup>25</sup> The implicit theological insights in biblical texts are made explicit by biblical theologians. This discipline is inspired by the significance of biblical texts for the community of faith and systematic theology. They recognise clues in these texts which can be of importance for or play a role in their own theological thinking. Biblical texts have theological implications because the community of faith presupposes that their concepts, ideas, and images are relevant for contemporary discussion about God, human beings, and the interaction between them. This implies that biblical theology raises an external question within the biblical texts and interprets them with a specific interest. The leading question in the *Theology of the Old Testament* of Brueggemann is: “how does ancient Israel, in this text, speak about God?”<sup>26</sup> However, this is too limited because biblical

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<sup>22</sup> E.g. the Pauline letters.

<sup>23</sup> The authors/collectors/redactors.

<sup>24</sup> J. Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology. An Old Testament Perspective*, London 1999, 248.

<sup>25</sup> Barr, *Biblical Theology*, 248.

<sup>26</sup> W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Minneapolis 1996, 117. In addition, he also includes in this question how God speaks.

theology also deals with the issue of what it means to live a life *coram Deo*. Therefore, biblical theology reconstructs and maps out how God, human beings, and the interaction between them in biblical texts are spoken about. Its result is an external construction which the scholar brings into the text.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, biblical theology is still an exegetical discipline. But it distinguishes itself from ‘non-theological’ approaches like, for instance, historical or literary readings that it reconstructs and arranges the exegetical results from the perspective of a theological interest. The discipline of biblical theology presupposes that the biblical texts are also relevant for the community of belief now.<sup>28</sup>

The reconstruction of the implicit theology of a biblical text can result in the material sometimes being rendered into (theological) concepts and categories which would not always have been understood by ancient Israelites. This happens because theological implications are not explicitly put into words by the text itself. Moreover, theological concepts and modes of thought stem from later periods or are developed throughout periods. Barton’s example of God’s omnipotence illustrates this. He points out how Jews and Christians often read the Old Testament in the light of their understanding of omnipotence, that God is able to do everything, and has complete control of the universe and the history of human beings. While in classical theism God’s plans can never be frustrated, God’s power, however, consists of the ability and willingness to be prepared for specific circumstances and situations in the perspective of the Old Testament, according to Barton.<sup>29</sup> In this way, there is a considerable difference between views on God’s power in the Old Testament and in later theology. This example demonstrates the area of tension in which a biblical theologian operates. On the one hand, the interpreter’s own theological concepts and views might influence the explanation of a text and the reconstruction of its theological implications. Biblical theologians have to be aware of this risk. They should try to do justice to the supposed authentic meaning of the text in its historical context(s) as much as possible in order to give it a fair chance to speak. This view is embedded in the conviction that Scripture has an independent position over and above the community of faith.<sup>30</sup> This independence is best guaranteed, if one first tries to retrieve what the author(s) of a text wanted to communicate in their own context; this prevents the explanation

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<sup>27</sup> See also L.J. van den Brom, “Systematische theologie en het publieke oordeel. Religie en het patatpantheon”, in: E. Noort-H. Zock (eds.), *Trends in de Groninger Theologie. ‘You Need a Busload of Faith to Get by’*, Delft 2002, 76. L.J. van den Brom, *Theoloog als jongleur. Positionering van de Christelijke geloofsleer* (Utrechtse Theologische Reeks 50), Utrecht 2006, 28. Barr describes this process as an imaginative one, which involves an imaginative construction (Barr, *Biblical Theology*, 204).

<sup>28</sup> Van den Brom, *Theoloog als jongleur*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> J. Barton, “Alttestamentliche Theologie nach Albertz?”, in: *Religionsgeschichte Israels oder Theologie des Alten Testaments?* (JBTh 10), Neukirchen 1995, 29-34.

<sup>30</sup> See also §1.2.2.



of a text favouring specific views of the community, although it is of course true that one's frame of reference affects one's understanding of a text. On the other hand, the community of faith and systematic theology consider biblical texts as relevant for their thinking. Therefore, theological implications of biblical texts have to be reconstructed. This calls for a space within which the encounter between Scripture and theology can take place. In this space, the religious categories of ancient Israel are expressed and reconstructed in contemporary categories. The discipline of biblical theology is the space for this encounter.<sup>31</sup> "Biblical theology may thus have a sort of mediating function between critical biblical study and theology in the stricter sense", as Barr says.<sup>32</sup>

There is some debate on the issue of the extent to which biblical theology should take the historical critical study of the bible into account. For example, Brueggemann is of the opinion that questions of historicity do not belong to the work of Old Testament theology. According to him, the speech of the community which can be found in the biblical texts is the proper object of study for Old Testament theology.<sup>33</sup> However, with this Brueggemann ignores the fact that this speech or text has functioned within a specific community. It put the community's belief into words and answered questions which were asked by the community. The texts were embedded in a religious, cultural, political, and economic situation. It seems to me that biblical theology should take these historical factors into account, because the awareness that biblical texts are determined by their situations has considerable impact. On the one hand, it opens one's eyes to the diversity of traditions in the bible. Groups have been arguing about how God could and should be spoken of in specific situations.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, Israel has confessed the different forms, names, and places of God as a continuum.<sup>35</sup> Biblical theology operates in the area of tension between this diversity and believed continuity. On the other hand, the processes of modification in biblical texts teach that God-talk is context related and has to be reinterpreted and adapted in changing circumstances in order to be able to mention God satisfactorily time and again. If we acknowledge this fact and realize that we also theologize within a specific situation, it leaves systematic theology room to modify existing concepts of God and to develop new, creative, and actual God-talk in order to formulate adequate God-talk for this moment.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Barton, "Alttestamentliche Theologie", 29.

<sup>32</sup> Barr, *Biblical Theology*, 83.

<sup>33</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 118.

<sup>34</sup> See E. Noort, "Tussen geschiedenis en theologie. Over valkuilen en mogelijkheden in de bijbelse theologie", *KeTh* 53 (2002) 214-215.

<sup>35</sup> E. Noort, "Teksten van toen voor lezers van nu? Het Oude Testament in de theologie", in: Noort-Zock (eds.), *Trends*, 129.

<sup>36</sup> See Noort, "Teksten van toen voor lezers van nu", 132. He remarks that we do not theologize for eternity nor describe truth apart from time and space.

### 1.2.2 The Interaction between Scripture and Systematic Theology

Gabler can be seen as the founder of biblical theology as an independent discipline outside the sphere of influence of dogmatic theology. In a well-known speech from 1787, he argues that biblical theology and dogmatic theology are two distinct disciplines. Gabler characterizes their distinct tasks as follows. Biblical theology has a historical character and hands down what the holy authors thought about divine matters. Dogmatic theology has a didactic character and teaches what each theologian thought about the divine matters from his own skill or according to, among others, influences of school, time, and place.<sup>37</sup> In my view, such a distinction between biblical theology and systematic theology is fundamental. On the one hand, it safeguards Scripture as an independent source for systematic theology which can surprise and offer new insights, or conflicts with theological views due to its independence. On the other hand, it leaves room for systematic theology's own creative process in order to find language by means of which God can be spoken of satisfactorily in conversation with the modern age. The relation between Scripture and systematic theology can then be described as an interaction. On the one hand, systematic theology appeals to Scripture as one of the sources for its thinking. On the other hand, biblical theology offers systematic theology insights from Scripture. The material from Scripture is accessible and applicable thanks to the fact that biblical theology maps out theological implications of biblical texts. This biblical theological exposition is descriptive. Systematic theology takes a critical stand towards the biblical material and evaluates its utility and relevance for speaking about God and human beings in relation to God in our contemporary context<sup>38</sup> and is thus prescriptive.

The basis of Gabler's thinking is that dogmatics should depend on exegeses instead of the reverse.<sup>39</sup> Gabler describes this path from Scripture to dogmatic

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<sup>37</sup> J.P. Gabler, "Von der richtigen Unterscheidung der biblischen und der dogmatischen Theologie und der rechten Bestimmung ihrer beider Ziele", in: O. Merk, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments in ihrer Anfangszeit* (MThSt 9), Marburg 1972, 275-276 (For a shortened version: G. Strecker (ed.), *Das Problem der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (WdF 367), Darmstadt 1975, 32-44. The original Latin text can be found in: J.P. Gabler, *Kleinere Theologische Schriften* II, eds. Th.A. Gabler-J.G. Gabler, Ulm 1831, 179-198).

<sup>38</sup> Compare Van den Brom, "Systematische theologie", 73. In an article, Clines mentions some ethical problems which he sees in different passages of the book of Job. Among others, he refers to the imposition of Job's suffering in the prologue and the fact that Job is kept in ignorance of the reason for his suffering (D.A.J. Clines, "Job's Fifth Friend: An Ethical Critique of the Book of Job", *Biblical Interpretation* 12 (2004) 233-250). One could say that these comments are systematic theological reflections on the biblical material.

<sup>39</sup> R. Smend, "Johann Philipp Gablers Begründung der Biblischen Theologie", in: R. Smend, *Epochen der Bibelkritik* (Gesammelte Studien. Band 3), München 1991, 104 [originally published in *EvTh* 22 (1962) 345-357].

theology as gradual one-way traffic. He thinks that biblical theology starts collecting the ideas of the various biblical authors by first interpreting the places and subsequently comparing them with each other.<sup>40</sup> Then dogmatic theology finally translates these ideas to today and questions their validity in Gabler's view.<sup>41</sup> However, the idea that biblical theology first supplies the scriptural building blocks upon which the construction of systematic theology can subsequently be built is a simplification of the rather complex interaction between Scripture and systematic theology. The relation between both can be characterized as an interaction between two relatively independent entities in which they affect each other mutually.

On the one hand, there is a movement from systematic theology to Scripture. Since the Christian community of faith regards Scripture as guidance for its thinking and practice, systematic theology confronts the biblical texts with the question of what their theological implications are. This approach influences the way in which the biblical material is expressed and reconstructed because biblical theologians themselves also have certain theological views. Therefore, they operate in an area of tension. They try to do justice to the supposed authentic meaning of the text on the one hand, but their own frame of reference also impacts on the articulation of a text's implicit theology on the other.<sup>42</sup> Either way, these preconceived ideas can have a heuristic function for exegesis. They can draw attention to specific facets and challenge the exegete to investigate how exactly to deal with this element in the text. For example, the dogmatic opinion that nobody is blameless before God can challenge an exegete to examine more closely the exact implications of Job's claim that he is blameless.

On the other hand, there is a movement from Scripture to systematic theology. Scripture provides systematic theology with insights, ideas, and concepts which can be useful for systematic theological thinking. This biblical material is somehow authoritative for systematic theology. However, it is a question of how systematic theologians attach authority to biblical texts and in what way they take them as a source. In a study on the uses of Scripture in modern theology, Kelsey analyses the different ways in which theologians appeal to Scripture. He suggests that "scripture may properly be said to be 'authority' for a theological proposal when appeal is

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<sup>40</sup> Gabler makes a distinction in his work between *true* biblical theology, which is historical, and *pure* biblical theology, which isolates basic biblical concepts from the modifications of age by means of philosophical critique (Smend, "Gablers Begründung", 107; R. Smend, "Universalismus und Partikularismus in der Alttestamentlichen Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts", in: Smend, *Epochen*, 118 [originally published in *EvTh* 22 (1962) 169-179]; see also Gabler, "Biblischen und dogmatischen Theologie", 276). However, such a distinction does not take into account that the supposition of timeless basic concepts ignores the historical aspect (compare Smend, "Gablers Begründung", 114). Moreover, God-talk or language more generally is always bound to the form of life in which it is used.

<sup>41</sup> Gabler, "Biblischen und dogmatischen Theologie", 277-280.

<sup>42</sup> See also §1.2.1.

made to it in the course of making a *case* for a proposal”.<sup>43</sup> Kelsey mentions Toulmin’s analysis of an informal argument’s pattern when an attempt is made to make a case for the conclusion (C) by appealing to data (D). Toulmin sums up different elements which can play a role in order to make a case for the move from (D) to (C). He mentions warrants (W), qualifiers (Q), rebuttals (R), and backings (B).<sup>44</sup> Kelsey’s point is that a passage or passages from Scripture might be entered as data or as one of these elements –(W), (Q), (R), or (Q)–, if we take theological proposal itself as the conclusion (C) of an argument. This means that Scripture may play somewhat different roles in an argument and it therefore lends authority in quite different senses, according to him.<sup>45</sup> These reflections give insight into the various ways in which systematic theology appeals to biblical material. Scripture does not only produce concepts or models, but also functions as a support for systematic theological arguments. So, its authoritative working is more complex and varied than is often assumed.

Even though there is more clarity now about the various ways in which biblical material can be authoritative in systematic theological argument, the question remains as to what extent it is authoritative or decisive. Kelsey suggests that a theologian’s decision to use the Scripture in a particular role in a theological argument is shaped by a theologian’s prior judgement about how best to construe the mode in which God’s presence among the faithful correlates with the use of Scripture in the common life of the church.<sup>46</sup> I would put this as follows; opinion about the authority of a scriptural argument depends on a person’s view of how God reveals himself in this world and how Scripture is related to this revelation. Whereas it is not my intention to deal with the issue of scriptural authority extensively in this study, I outline some presuppositions. In my view, human experience of God’s presence and actions in history finds its expression in Scripture. When the community of faith reads Scripture it also recognizes God’s own speaking in this expression of human observations. On the one hand, the diversity of how God is spoken of in Scripture is striking. This shows that these texts are situationally bound and make the community of faith aware that these texts are speaking in a human way about God’s presence and actions in this

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<sup>43</sup> D.H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine. The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology*, Harrisburg 1999, 125 [= *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, Philadelphia 1975]. Kelsey considers it more illuminating to consider theologian’s appeal to Scripture as part of an *argument* rather than characterising the relation between Scripture and theology by means of what is in his eyes a misleading picture ‘translation’ (122-124).

<sup>44</sup> Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 125-129. A warrant is a general, hypothetical statement that authorizes the move from (D) to (C). A qualifier indicates that the move from (D) to (C) can only be made tentatively. Rebuttals indicate the circumstances in which the authority of a warrant would have to be set aside. A backing is an assurance behind the warrant, without which the warrant would have neither authority nor currency (126-127).

<sup>45</sup> Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 144.

<sup>46</sup> Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 167-170.

world.<sup>47</sup> Because of this, systematic theology evaluates biblical material and wonders to what extent it is useful for contemporary conversations about God and human beings living in relation to God. The implication of this is that systematic theology can give rise to arguments that criticize a biblical picture or even see it as inadequate for contemporary theological speaking.<sup>48</sup> This also means that, in comparison to those from Scripture, other arguments from traditional and modern thinking are somehow seen as authoritative for systematic theology.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, theological thinking can not be detached from how God is mentioned in Scripture, because the community of faith has in one way or another experienced continuity in the diversity of how God is spoken of. The community has also determined a canon of texts which function as a form of guidance for its thinking and practice.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the collective diversity somehow provides the community of faith with boundaries for how God might be spoken of within its daily practice.<sup>51</sup> Scriptural authority operates within this area of tension where Scripture has a guiding role but is not infallible.

The concept 'Scripture' suggests a kind of wholeness or unity. At the same time, biblical material displays diversity within its believed continuity. This raises the question of exactly what systematic theology refers to in Scripture. According to Kelsey, theologians do not appeal to Scripture as such to help authorize their theological proposals, rather they decide on some aspect or some pattern in Scripture to which they appeal. He states that the 'text-construed-as-a-certain-kind-of-whole' is appealed to.<sup>52</sup> I think that systematic theology indeed refers to some pattern in Scripture, but the extent of such a pattern can differ considerably. While it might be a broad line of thought in some bible book, a singular image can also be

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<sup>47</sup> See also §1.2.1.

<sup>48</sup> A similar process has already been found in the bible itself. I mention two examples. First, Jehu was originally praised by the Lord for his total extermination of the Baal cult in Israel (2 Kgs.10,30). Since the reason for the Babylonian exile is that each king has sinned to some extent in the eyes of the deuteronomistic redactors, they added the editorial remark that Jehu did not carefully follow the law of the Lord by omitting to destroy the golden calves in Bethel and Dan (2 Kgs.10,29.31). Secondly, the books of Job and Qohelet can be seen as critical reflections on theology of the relation between a person's actions and what befalls them that is supposed in a considerable part of the Hebrew bible (e.g. in Proverbs and the deuteronomistic work). So, a process of criticizing and reformulating specific views on God and human beings living in relation to God in the light of new events or experiences has already been found within the bible itself.

<sup>49</sup> Kelsey suggests saying that theological criticism is guided by a *discrimen* instead of a 'norm' or 'criterion'. A *discrimen* designates a configuration of criteria that are in some way organically related to one another as reciprocal coefficients, according to him. Kelsey refers to J.C. Roberts with this description (Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 160).

<sup>50</sup> Although I do not intend to say that this canon excludes the possibility that there can also be other writings which can be valuable for the community of faith.

<sup>51</sup> See also Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 196-197.

<sup>52</sup> Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 103.

useful as a systematic theological model or argument. While an interrelated structure between bible books or even testaments may be helpful, the value of some biblical material can also be found in debate between two characters in a particular passage. In this way, the authority of Scripture takes different shapes. The nature of some biblical material which is appealed to as well as the way in which it is used in systematic theological thinking differs from case to case.

### **1.3 Outline of this Study**

This study examines what the book of Job has to offer and ask of systematic theology with regard to the issue of theodicy.<sup>53</sup> This means that I approach the book with an external question. The community of faith considers biblical texts as relevant for its thinking and it has the impression that the book of Job somehow deals with the problem of innocent suffering. Therefore, it consults the book of Job and investigates which possible contribution this book might have to systematic theological thinking on this burning topic. The explanation of the interaction between Scripture and systematic theology in the preceding section showed that two steps are to be made in order to achieve this goal.<sup>54</sup> First, theological implications of a biblical text have to be reconstructed. This is the task of the discipline of biblical theology. Secondly, systematic theology evaluates the value and usefulness of this biblical material for its thinking. These two stages are successively undertaken in Part 1 and Part 2 of this study.

Part 1 is the biblical theological division of this study. In it, I map out theological implications of the different parts of the book of Job and offer a reconstruction of the frame of thought behind the passages of the different characters in the book of Job.<sup>55</sup> In my opinion, the book of Job as a whole wants to question some consequences of a theology that understands God's actions according to a relation between a person's actions and what befalls them.<sup>56</sup> As Job

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<sup>53</sup> See also §1.1.2.

<sup>54</sup> §1.2.2.

<sup>55</sup> I take the all-knowing narrator as one of the characters.

<sup>56</sup> I do not fully deny that the book of Job also deals with the question of how to deal with situations of unmerited suffering (as several scholars do; see note 15 in this chapter). But I am convinced that the heart of this book is a theological problem. This is already highlighted by the satan in the prologue. His question of whether or not Job fears God for nothing (1,9) not only denounces Job's motives, but also questions the way in which God gains worship (see §6.2.2). The debate in the dialogue reveals some problematic consequences if God's actions are understood according to a relation between a person's actions and what befalls them. In the case of innocent suffering, God's righteousness is at stake. God's answer makes clear that God's actions in this world can not simply be indicated by a retributive scheme because human beings lack insight into God's counsel. It becomes clear from these different elements that the book of Job deals with the debate on how God's involvement in the occurrence of innocent suffering should be understood. Thus, it touches on a theological issue. Compare among others the following views on what the book of Job is about: 1. The nature/character of God (N. Whybray, "Wisdom, Suffering

9 is the heart of this questioning, the biblical theological part begins with an examination of the specific role that Job 9 plays in the book of Job (Ch.2). Later, it elaborates upon how Job's friends (Ch.3), Job (Ch.4), God (Ch.5)<sup>57</sup>, and the all-knowing narrator (Ch.6) deal with God's involvement in the occurrence of evil and particularly in Job's miserable fate. In this way, Part 1 expounds how in the various passages of the book of Job, God is spoken of in relation to the existence of evil on the basis of a detailed exegesis.

Part 2 offers some systematic theological reflections concerning the issue of theodicy. These reflections are inspired by the biblical material from the book of Job. Here, I evaluate the results of Part 1 and examine what the biblical material has to offer and to ask systematic theology with regard to the issue of theodicy (Ch.8). I emphatically speak about *some* reflections because I am aware of the fact that the issue of theodicy is an extensive field which can not easily be grasped. Nevertheless, I hope to give some useful clues. In short, these systematic theological reflections consist of two aspects. On the one hand, the biblical material is challenged by systematic theological questions in order to investigate what the implications of its implicit theology are. This is a necessary step in order to evaluate whether or to what extent some material can be useful for systematic theological thinking. I wonder, for instance, whether the prologue's representation that Job's suffering is meant to be a test of Job's loyalty is not too problematic for understanding God's involvement in evil today.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, some contemporary theological views and models are confronted with topics that the book of Job mentions. It has become clear how systematic theology appeals to biblical material in various ways.<sup>59</sup> This is also the case in the systematic theological part of this study. The book of Job will not only offer data for how God can be mentioned when evil happens, but also serve as, among other things, warrant and rebuttal in critical reflections on existing theological models.

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and the Freedom of God in the Book of Job", in: K.J. Dell –M. Barker (eds.), *Wisdom. The Collected Articles of Norman Whybray* (MSSOTS), Ashgate 2005, 195-196.199-200; D. Cox, "A Rational Inquiry into God: Chapters 4-27 of the Book of Job", *Gr* 67 (1986) 624-625; see also the dissertation D.W. Nam, *Job 42: 7-9 and the Nature of God in the Book of Job* (Studies in Biblical Literature 49), New York e.a. 2003); 2. The suffering of the innocent (M. Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job", *HUCA* 37 (1966) 96. He remarks in opposition to Fohrer that there is a theoretical treatise in the book of Job); 3. The issue of God –God in his relation to evil and suffering (T.N.D. Mettinger, "The God of Job: Avenger, Tyrant, or Victor?", in: L.G. Perdue –W.C. Gilpin (eds.), *The Voice from the Whirlwind. Interpreting the Book of Job*, Nashville 1992, 39); 4. How to speak about God (Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 12.16-17: in the midst of poverty and suffering); 5. The conflict between God and Job, between the integrity of the Creator and the integrity of a particular mortal (N.C. Habel, *The Book of Job. A Commentary* (OTL), London 1985, 60).

<sup>57</sup> This chapter also includes Job's response to God's words.

<sup>58</sup> §8.5.5.

<sup>59</sup> §1.2.2.

The content of Part 2 illustrates this diverse use of the biblical material. On the one hand, elements from the book of Job serve as rebuttal and warrant in the evaluation of some systematic theological perspectives. I argue on the basis of God's exposition on Job's lack of insight into God's counsel that theological realism and theological idealism are both not tenable.<sup>60</sup> The book of Job serves here as a rebuttal. Thesis of this study is subsequently that theological relationism very closely meets the point of God's answer.<sup>61</sup> Thus, God's answer provides systematic theology with a warrant that supports theologizing from the perspective of theological relationism. On the other hand, the book of Job also supplies data. For example, I propose that the book of Job demonstrates which different roles God fulfils or, in the eyes of a victim of evil appears to fulfil, in times of innocent suffering.<sup>62</sup> In this way, the book provides systematic theology with language for speaking about God when evil happens. These different kinds of appeal to the book of Job by the systematic theological reflections in this study confirm that scriptural authority functions in diverse ways.

#### **1.4 The Book of Job in Its Broader Setting**

A text has functioned within a certain group or community. Insight into the form of life of this group can help to understand a text because the historical setting of a text has determined its opinions and concepts. A biblical theological approach also has takes note of this aspect.<sup>63</sup> However, one is directly faced with the limits of the preceding statement if one tries to place the book of Job in its historical context because this book hardly offers any decisive clue for dating it. It has a rather universal atmosphere and the leading character is a non-Israelite. Egyptian as well as Mesopotamian elements occur. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the time and place of its origin.<sup>64</sup>

It becomes even more complex if one also takes the unity of the book of Job itself into account. For example, a considerable number of scholars agree that it is clear that the book itself also does not stem from one hand. Firstly, there is debate about the relation between the framework and the dialogue of book.<sup>65</sup> If one reads the prose of the prologue and epilogue together, it appears to give a reasonable

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<sup>60</sup> §8.2 and §8.3.

<sup>61</sup> §8.4.

<sup>62</sup> §8.5.

<sup>63</sup> See §1.2.1.

<sup>64</sup> See also Clines' conclusion that 'the author has succeeded well in disguising his own age and background in his creation of the character of the hero' (Clines, *Job*, lvii). The proposals for dating differ from seventh to fourth century. There is further debate on which kind of group should be thought to be behind this book. For instance, is it a professional class of sages and if so, to which group in society was it related? Or is it the work of an individual?

<sup>65</sup> The framework consists of the prosaic prologue (Job 1-2) and epilogue (42,7-15). The dialogue contains the intervening poetic speeches (Job 3-42,6).



story. Here, Job is depicted as a kind of wealthy patriarch of high regard. The dialogue, on the other hand, consists of poetic speeches and depicts a rebellious Job in debate with his friends and is addressed by God at the end. These differences have led to the suggestion that two independent literary sources may lie at the basis of these two parts. Secondly, it is quite generally held that the ‘Song of Wisdom’ (Job 28) and the speeches of Elihu (Job 32-37) are later additions to the dialogue. The message of the Song of Wisdom, that wisdom is hidden and that fear of the Lord is wisdom, is strange in the mouth of the rebellious Job, who considers himself as blameless and charges God with unjust actions. It is likely that the speeches of Elihu are later added; he is not mentioned in the framework, he refers to several elements from the dialogue as well as God’s answer in his speeches, he stresses a pedagogical view on evil, his speeches strangely interrupt Job and God, and the language of these speeches differs from the other speeches.<sup>66</sup> So, the internal complexity of the book of Job increases the difficulty of embedding it in a historical setting.

It is not my intention here to deal extensively with all possible arguments for one or another particular setting.<sup>67</sup> I only mention some general considerations which lead to my opinion that it is most likely that the origin of the book of Job is in the fifth century BCA (maybe the end of it). Whereas an earlier folktale about Job may lie at the basis of the story of the framework<sup>68</sup>, I am of the opinion that framework and dialogue in their current form are constructed with reference to each other. The dialogue assumes the scene in heaven in order to confirm Job’s innocence.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, it would not have been necessary to mention the arrival of Job’s friends (2,11-13) and God’s address to the friends (42,8-9), if they had not spoken in between. Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that the framework and the dialogue stem from one hand.<sup>70</sup> The deviating views of the Song of Wisdom and the speeches of Elihu make it probable that these parts are later additions.<sup>71</sup> What is striking is the rather monotheistic concept of God. God operates outside

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<sup>66</sup> See for an overview of the different arguments for this position during the research history: H.M. Wahl, *Der Gerechte Schöpfer. Eine redaktions- und theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchung der Elihureden -Hiob 32-37* (BZAW 207), Berlin-New York 1993, 8-14. Wahl’s own arguments for this view: 172-175. Clines proposes that the Elihu speeches originally followed Job 27 and were concluded with Job 28 (D.A.J. Clines, “Putting Elihu in his Place: A Proposal for the Relocating of Job 32-37”, *JSOT* 29 (2004) 243-253).

<sup>67</sup> See for an overview of different arguments and views e.g. Fohrer, *Hiob*, 29-43; De Wilde, *Hiob*, 51-60; Habel, *Job*, 35-42 (he defends the integrity of the book); Clines, *Job*, lvi-lix.

<sup>68</sup> The reference to Job in Ezek.14,14.20 could be an indication for this.

<sup>69</sup> See §2.2.2.3 and §2.2.3.

<sup>70</sup> Compare Clines, *Job*, lvii-lviii.

<sup>71</sup> There are some other smaller passages in the dialogue which are probably later additions (e.g. the passage about the Behemoth and the Leviathan (40,15-41,26)). I will indicate this when I deal with such particular passages.

the borders of Israel and is also the God of the non-Israelite Job, although Job does not mention his particular name.<sup>72</sup> This observation makes dating the text after the Babylonian exile all the more likely. The representation of ‘the satan’ in the prologue supports this view. It is related to the representation in Zech.3,1 where ‘the satan’ is also a kind of opponent.<sup>73</sup> This can be dated around 500 BCA. Two hundred years later, Satan becomes a proper name and represents an entity who accomplishes evil on his own initiative (1 Chron.21,1). This last observation can be taken as a further development and therefore as a *terminus ad quem*.<sup>74</sup> It is on the basis of these observations that I assume that the book of Job came into being in the course of the fifth century.

It is unclear whether the author either belonged to a group of sages or was a rather independent individual. However, the high artistic level of the book’s composition and the apparent familiarity with inner and outer biblical traditions indicate that he was a learned person who was familiar with topics and literature from Wisdom circles. In these circles, it was generally held that there is a relation between a person’s actions and what befalls them. There is debate as to whether God is particularly the preserver of such a rather independently operating order or God’s actions themselves are understood according to this relationship.<sup>75</sup> In the book of Job, the latter is the case.<sup>76</sup> The book of Job appears to be a critical reaction to an all too strict application of the relation between a person’s actions and what befalls them. Some have depicted this as a crisis in Wisdom thinking.<sup>77</sup> This is a rather strong characterization if it is applied to the book of Job. This book questions some aspects of the relation between a person’s actions and what befalls them but it does not fully reject it. The younger book Qohelet is more sceptical. That has the impression that this relationship is no longer adequate for understanding God’s actions with regard to human beings. The book of Job can be placed within this development of exploring the limits of ‘traditional’ Wisdom. At the same time, it has to be said that the problem of innocent suffering does not completely come out of the blue. Several writings from the broader surroundings in

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<sup>72</sup> The fact that Job is an Edomite has led to the suggestion that this might be a protest against the exclusivist politics of Ezra around 400 BCA (see e.g. De Wilde, *Hiob*, 54).

<sup>73</sup> See §6.2.2.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. De Wilde, *Hiob*, 55. See also Fohrer, *Hiob*, 83.

<sup>75</sup> See e.g. K. Koch, “Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?”, in: K. Koch (ed.), *Um das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des Alten Testaments* (WdF 125), Darmstadt 1972, 130-180 [originally published in *ZThK* 52 (1955), 1-42]; N.A. Schuman, *Gelijk om gelijk. Verslag en balans over goddelijke vergelding in het Oude Testament*, Amsterdam 1993.

<sup>76</sup> See §3.2.1.

<sup>77</sup> E.g. H.D. Preuß, *Einführung in die alttestamentliche Weisheitsliteratur*, Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln-Mainz 1987, 69-70. He states that theological objections by the book of Job and Qohelet make clear that Wisdom was and is falsely orientated with its basic view (185).

the Ancient Near East have also touched on the relation between innocent suffering and the involvement of the divine being in it.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> E.g. “Dialogue between a Man and his God”; “A Sufferer’s Salvation”; “The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer”; “The Babylonian Theodicy”; “Dialogue of Pessimism”. For a translation, see W.H.Ph. Römer-W. von Soden (eds.), *Weisheitstexte, Mythen und Epen: Weisheitstexte I* (TUAT III/1), Gütersloh 1990, 110-163. See also Laato-De Moor, *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*.