Problems and Poetics in the Text History of Job

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The application of abstract rules does not make the evaluation of readings objective .... Textual rules are limited to internal evidence. No commonly accepted or valid external rules exist in the textual criticism of Hebrew Scripture.¹

The book of Job is famously difficult, and the difficulties begin – if not end – with its text. Scholars have called MT-Job "one of the most obscure" books in the Hebrew Bible,² “far and away the most difficult” therein,³ “a compendium of unresolved problems,”⁴ and “textually the most vexed” of biblical books.⁵ To be sure, the many difficulties of Job extend beyond matters of text to matters of content since the book deals with some particularly hard and heady issues (above all, the problem of suffering) – though of course matters of text and content are closely interrelated here, as they always are. In any event, the textual difficulties encountered in the book of Job raise acute problems not only for its interpretation, but also and more fundamentally for any understanding of its textual history.

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The present study reviews some of the main issues that emerge from the text history of Job, and does so with an eye firmly fixed on the question of producing a critical edition of the book. The essay has three parts. It begins with an overview of the versional evidence (§1). Since this information is well known, this review is purposefully brief, though it plays a crucial role as prolegomenon to all that follows. The second part focuses on three particularly perplexing problems in the textual history of Job: the nature of the shorter Old Greek (ōG) text, Job's orthography, and the poetry and poetics of the book (§2). The third and final part of the essay concludes the study by building off of the last mentioned issue on the poetic nature of Job (§3). Across these three parts of the essay, I address in one way or another, to greater or lesser degrees, the seven questions posed to participants at the Madrid conference on the Complutensian Polyglot. For convenience, these questions are repeated here:

(1) Is the textual history of your book characterized by textual plurality or stability?
(2) What are the causes of that plurality or stability?
(3) Can you identify vulgar vs. non-vulgar texts?
(4) Which text-critical and editorial problems are posed by the forces of textual plurality and textual standardization of your book?
(5) Can you observe orthographic/linguistic variation in the textual history of your book or the absence of it?
(6) How do textual and orthographic/linguistic variants relate to each other in the textual history of your book?
(7) Which problems does your book pose for a critical edition?

As will be seen below, questions (1)–(2), (3), and (5)–(6) receive particular attention; in many ways, the entire essay is an attempt to answer question (7) especially in light of the problem posed by the poetry of Job.

1 A Brief Overview of the Versions

Given the famed difficulties already mentioned above, it hardly needs reiterating that Job presents any interpreter with a vast host of text-critical problems. Three of the largest and most important issues are taken up in §2, but at the very start it is instructive to underscore once more what is already well known – namely, that MT-Job is a notoriously difficult book, and this is not due solely or simply to matters of textual variance or corruption but because of the book's