Although the Book of Job was extremely popular in Byzantium, and after the Psalter it was the most frequently illustrated text, only two scholarly texts have addressed the entire group of 15 extant Byzantine illustrated manuscripts of the Commentaries on Job.1 Paul Huber’s Hiob. Dulder oder Rebell? (Düsseldorf 1986) and Stella Papadaki-Oekland’s extensive dissertation, published posthumously in 2009, Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts of the Book of Job (Athens 2009). More discussion has been given to the earliest manuscripts from the 9th and 10th centuries in both monographs and articles.2 Together the 15 extant manuscripts have hundreds of miniatures, and were produced in centers throughout the Mediterranean region. The rich and vast amount of material within these manuscripts can give us insight into iconographic and stylistic patterns in Byzantine illustrated manuscripts, as well as information on the transmission and reception of these works of art throughout the Mediterranean region.

The story of Job was available in the ancient world in oral and written form. The ancient model for illustrations of Job was likely a roll format that only included images of the Prologue, not based on the Septuagint text but on another related apocryphal text with details of Job’s legend in a narrative form, such as the Testament of Job.3 Early Christian images of Job are generally depicted as individual scenes and this image is continued in some Byzantine manuscripts which include a single framed image of Job on the dung heap, a representation of the height of Job’s tribulations.4

Job imagery in Byzantium exists primarily in the 15 surviving illustrated Job manuscripts, which are part of a group of catenae or collections of commentaries by the Early Greek Church Fathers. From an early date the biblical text

2 Bernabò, Libro di Giobbe; Weitzmann, Buchmalerei des IX. und X. Jahrhunderts; Oretskia, “A Stylistic Tendency”.
The Book of Job was associated with its commentaries. The Book of Job has sections written in prose and a large central portion written in verse. The prose sections are the Prologue and the Epilogue, which describe Job’s life, suffering, and eventual restoration. The section in verse is a series of speeches by Job and his friends, which includes much allegorical description.

There are two types of catena, which generally divide the surviving manuscripts into two categories: Type I includes the four earliest manuscripts and Type II the examples from the 12th century onwards. The Type I catena is centered on commentary by St. John Chrysostom and compiled by Olympiodoros, Deacon of Alexandria in the 6th century. The Type II catena was compiled by Niketas of Heraclea c.1100 based on the earlier form. With the new compilation, the latter group of illustrated Byzantine Books of Job also sees a renewal in style and theological content of imagery.

The first group of illustrated Job manuscripts dates from the 9th to the 11th centuries. These earlier examples have fewer miniatures and almost all are illustrations of the Prologue and Epilogue. Examples from the second group date from the 12th through the 16th centuries and have a large number of miniatures many of which illustrate the poem, the speeches of Job and friends. These later cycles of illustration, however, are the products of a gradual elaboration of older examples and show that they derive from similar archetypes.

The illustrations of the Book of Job in Byzantine manuscripts have been seen as repetitive or formulaic, particularly when examining the imagery of the poem. However, small changes and a clear but gradual embellishment of individual miniatures do reveal changes in historical context, and the events surrounding many manuscripts’ productions. An example among the earlier group is a reflection of the outcome of the iconoclast controversy. In the Patmos, Monastery of John the Theologian, cod. 171 manuscript of the late 9th century a bust of Christ replaces the single hand of God in scenes from the Meeting in Heaven (Job 1:6-12). Later manuscripts from the 12th and 13th centuries emphasize demonic elements and eschatological beliefs, possibly revealing the influence of monastic thought. In Byzantine examples of Job illustrations, the images change and conform to controversy, and new compilations.

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5 Other major commentators are Didymos of Alexandria and Julian of Halikarnassos.
8 Lowden/Tkacz, “Job”, p. 1042.