

The most questionable book in the Bible?

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

The world is full of scriptures.

If we take these as “scripts” for playing our “starring role” as human beings, we have to ask ourselves what the main plot line is. Until college, I thought the only scripture in the world, at least the only one worth reading, was the Bible, and the only part of the Bible I took seriously was the Christian part, the Jesus part, the “New Testament.” Books considered “holy” have been in the library of human history since writing began. Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and others scratched their marks on clay or stone, papyrus (“paper” made from reeds) or parchment (sheep or goat skin). In early Israel, scribes pieced together a patchwork of narratives telling the story of one people with their up and down relationship with a rather capricious

deity. Loving and compassionate, vengeful and bloodthirsty, the God of Israel became, in the Christian version ... loving and compassionate, vengeful and bloodthirsty. Yet, somehow, or so I once believed, this was a more compelling script for the drama of faith.

Reaching way back on the shelf of scriptures, we find a dusty volume of holy writ called the Book of Job. Some scholars consider this one of the oldest scriptures in the Hebrew Bible. Taken at face value, it’s quite an awful story. But we’re told we shouldn’t take this scripture (or any scripture) at face value—there is always supposed to be a “deeper truth.” Alright, let’s dig a bit deeper and see what truth we may discover. What does this ancient story, passed through hundreds of generations, reveal about religion, God and scriptures themselves?

It’s a heavenly courtroom scene: an accuser (a “satan:”

adversary, prosecutor) comes before the Almighty Judge to point a finger at one puny human named Job. Yes, he’s a man of great faith; yes, he’s prospering, but what if he’s put to the test? What if he has to face suffering? Let’s see if his faith would survive. The Almighty takes the challenge. Why? Well, that’s one question that hangs in the air over the centuries, from Abraham to Jesus and beyond.

The Almighty allows this prosecutor to persecute (pursue) this vulnerable, innocent man. He loses everything; a tornado destroys his house and kills his children, yet he holds firm: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away.” His wife and “friends” aren’t much help. Job had one “job:” to be faithful no matter what. Trust and obey, as the old hymn instructed. He was to be faithful—full of faith, accepting anything and everything that came his

way; whatever happens, “just believe.”

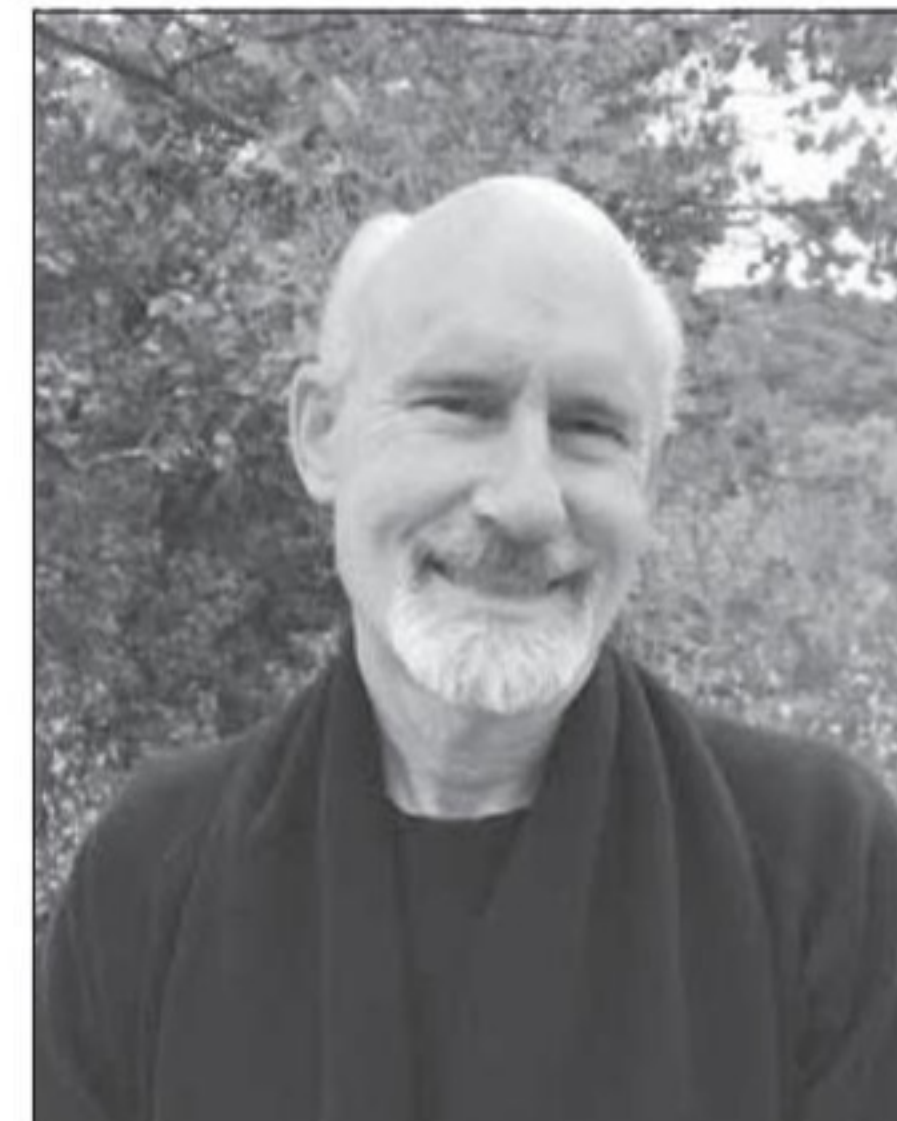
Most sermons I’ve heard about Job have focused on his incredible—unbelievable—believing; his endurance, his unwavering trust that the Lord Almighty would make it all better some way, someday.

Preaching has tended to call attention to “God’s Plan,” that God is in charge—the Righteous Referee in this Sacred Sport of trial and test. No matter how hard life is, how much you and your loved ones suffer, there’s a “higher purpose,” a divine order. All will be well, they say, just believe. Don’t ask too many questions, never doubt, leave it all in God’s hands and let go. As terrible as it can be, never fear ... have faith. As the Almighty scolds His servant Job: God “wounds, but he bandages; he hits you, but his hands heal” (5:18). How comforting is that?

What about the serious implications of this story?

What does this actually tell us about faith? More crucially, what do we learn about the Almighty Lord and Judge? We don’t hear much preaching or teaching that asks the most obvious questions: What about the injustice, and (dare we say it or think it?) the Unjust Judge? What kind of God tests and tortures to teach lessons to his children, a strict parent who seems to take pleasure in the pursuit, the hunt for the righteous, who deeply inhales the aroma of sacrificial animals, then takes this to a new and brutal level with human suffering and sacrifice (perfected in the Christian Cross)?

I don’t doubt there may be psychological insights presented in the Book of Job. In seminary we read Carl Jung’s “Answer to Job,” but I don’t recall very satisfying answers (except that God has a “shadow” side). Does it help to believe there is some divine lesson in



pain and suffering, physical or mental? Job finally cries out: “I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). He gives in and gives up; he’s proven his faith. The Almighty rewards him with a large family and wealth. Does that make this sad story any better?

Is there any true hero in the script of this divine play?

Chris Highland was a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years before becoming a humanist celebrant and author of many books. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina. His website is www.chighland.com.