

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 33

JOB

I. Background

Who wrote Job? When?

We really have no answers to these questions. Compared to many of the Old Testament books, this book was most likely written early. Many scholars date the authorship between the time of King Solomon (950 B.C.) to 250 B.C. – many date it even earlier. A good argument for early dating references the language used in the original Hebrew (for example, the monetary unit referenced in Job 42:11 occurs only in Gen. 33:19 and Joshua 24:32) and references to other cultural items like the Sabeans and Chaldeans as “nomadic raiders” (1:17). The time period written of is arguably even older.

We have a time period written of where there is no reference to organized religion as was set out on Mt. Sinai with Moses. We have more of a patriarchic age where the Patriarch figure offered up the sacrifices and there is no priesthood.

The text itself bears a fairly close relationship to certain Babylonian literature dated around 1200 – 800 B.C. The “Babylonian Job” was such a piece of pagan literature. In that book (actually it was four tablets!) a pious, wealthy and influential man gets deprived of his position in life and contracts some unknown terrible disease. Divine intervention is sought but not received. So, the suffering fellow figures that divine justice is not as fair as human justice. Ultimately (in tablet three), the Babylonian god, Marduk, restores the fellow to health. (This account can be read in [Ancient Near Eastern Texts](#), by Pritchard.)

An even earlier similar story was found in partial form in a tablet placed in the Louvre in 1906. This tablet was dated around 1619 – 1583 B.C. In this incomplete story we read of a friend who intervenes on behalf of his pious, suffering friend. Ultimately God intervenes and restores the system of cosmic justice to this fellow.

A review of the translations of the actual texts of the above accounts and a comparison of those to Job shows Job to be on a much higher level of both profundity and style. While similarities of content exist, there are also stark

differences. Thus, while the date of the material might shed light on an early date for similar questions raised in Job, the Babylonian materials should not be considered as “source” material for Job.

One last note on dates, the Dead Sea Scrolls contained four manuscripts of Job (they were all fragments that had very little text to them). One of the fragments was written in archaic “paleo-Hebrew” script. This is a very old script common before the Babylonian exile (587 – 539 B.C.).

How reliable is our text?

The text itself is reliable although some scholars wonder if some verses have been lost in chapters 26 and 27. The biggest problem we have with the text is the translation. Job presents the translators with the most difficult poetry in the Old Testament. Add to that the fact that 110 words are found in Job but nowhere else in the Old Testament.

Often, when translators need help with strange words or passages, they will go to other versions, typically the Septuagint (LXX). In the case of Job, however, the LXX is of little to no help. Almost one-fourth of the Hebrew text is missing from the LXX, possibly because the text was so difficult to translate. The text that made it into the LXX is very loose and frequently wrong.

What kind of book is Job?

Job is a hybrid book. The first 2 chapters are prose. They tell a story. Chapters, through 42:6, are poetic dialogues between Job and his friends. From 42:7 to the end, we again have prose.

Because Job presents such unusual literature (and also because of its unknown authorship), it has been placed in various positional order in Old Testaments. Sometimes it was placed AFTER the poetical books as a “Holy Writing,” meaning it followed the poetry books of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon (in the LXX, for example). In the 350 - 450 A.D. Christian Bible, the Codex Alexandrinus, Job was placed as a poetry book between Psalms and Proverbs. The Syriac version (the “Peshitta”) placed Job immediately after Deuteronomy, asserting that the book was authored by Moses (150 – 300 B.C.). Many of the early church fathers placed Job immediately before Psalms and Proverbs, as did the Latin Vulgate. Our Bibles follow this ordering, which was decreed at the Council of Trent on April 8, 1546.

What are the themes of Job?

Job deals with questions that have plagued the thoughtful for ages. The book addresses the problems of human suffering, the justice and consistency of God, and the limitations of the finite human mind. Answers are not easily found, but God is – and that seems to be the ultimate answer we can grasp.

Was there really a Job?

Conservative scholars present different answers to this question. Without a doubt, Job is written to address questions of suffering by the pious, not as a mere history book. Some see the man Job, therefore, as an “Everyman” rather than an actual historical person. Certainly, one can read Job as a book in the genre of an inspired story to teach certain truths (not unlike the parables Jesus told) and still hold firmly to an inerrant view of the Bible.

By the same token, there is no reason to believe that there was not a fellow named Job who actually walked through the events we read about. Ezekiel 14:14, 20 and James 5:11 both reference Job which some take as proof that Job was an historical figure rather than an allegorical one.

The story is recounted as taking place in the land of “Uz.” There is no definitive understanding of where this may have been. Legitimate viewpoints range from as far apart as modern Turkey to south east of Israel.

II. The Story

A. The Prose Prologue (1 - 2).

The book begins introducing us to Job. Job was an upright man who feared God. He was successful and rich. Job had a wife and ten children. Job had social status. In short, Job was “the greatest man among all the people of the East” (1:3).

Job is tested twice in the book. The first test comes after the angels present themselves to God and a discussion is held between Satan and God concerning Job. God points out Job’s piety. Satan replies that of course Job is pious; God has put a hedge of protection around Job, his possessions, and his household. God then gives Satan free reign with Job, with the exception that Satan is not allowed to touch Job himself.

Satan begins his work deflowering God's blessings on Job and takes away all Job's possessions (oxen, donkeys, sheep, and camels). Satan also takes the lives of all ten children.

Notwithstanding that torture, Job's response is not a sinful cursing of God. Instead, Job mourns and says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. Yahweh gave and Yahweh has taken away; may the name of Yahweh be praised" (1:21).

A second test begins when the angels again present themselves to God. At this second presentation, Satan came also. God pointed out Job's continued piety in spite of Satan's actions. Satan explains that the piety is only because God has not allowed anything to happen to the actual body of Job. God then allows Satan reign over Job's body with the one caveat that Satan cannot take Job's life.

Satan then afflicts Job's body with painful sores from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. It is at this point that Job's wife recommends that Job curse God and die (2:9). Job refuses. Job has visits from three friends who sit with him in silence for seven days and nights in an effort to comfort and grieve with him through this affliction. After seven days and nights of silence, the disease shows no sign of abating, and the discussions begin!

B. The Poetry Dialogue (3 - 42:6).

i. The dialogue with friends (3 – 31)

Job begins the dialogue ruing that he was even born. Job questions why life is even given to a man. Job's friend Eliphaz tells Job that God answers those who humble themselves. He adds that Job should not despise God's correcting hand, but see it as a blessing. In short, Eliphaz tries to offer theological comfort and counsel to Job. The effect, however, is to wound Job with false accusations.

Job replies to Eliphaz that God is hurting Job. Job's wish is that God would go ahead and just finish Job off, and let him die. Job notes that his friends are not being helpful. Job considers them as being heartless and cruel. Job does not claim to be perfect, but he asks what terrible sin anyone believes he has committed to merit the degree of suffering experienced.

At this point (chapter 8), Bildad, another of Job's friends, enters the fray. Bildad is confident Job is a hypocrite and offers a stinging response to Job. "Your words are a blustering wind" (8:2). Bildad reasons that God would never be unjust therefore Job's suffering must be on account of a horrific sin that justifies such misery.

Job replies to Bildad again asserting that he has not committed any sin that should merit such treatment. Job longs for a day in court to establish his innocence, but Job knows that he would not be able to contend with God. Job sees God as great and powerful, but finds that God's power is not helping him!

Zophar, the third friend, speaks next (chapter 11). Zophar takes out after Job for "idle talk" that is mocking God. Zophar claims that Job is setting himself up as a standard of perfection. Zophar says that Job needs a huge dose of repentance with a greater devotion to God. These actions, in Zophar's mind, would bring about the cure.

Job's response (Chapter 12) starts with a bite worth remembering: "Surely wisdom will die with you!" Job then explains that he (Job) is not an idiot ("I have a mind as well as you."). Job appeals to creation for the assertion that God does as he pleases without specific regard to man's piety and devotion. Job sees his friends as "worthless physicians, all of you!" (13:4). More than anything, Job wants a dialogue with God to figure out what is going on and why.

Eliphaz comes back into the dialogue next. As the first speaker, Eliphaz had been the most gentle, but now he seems to have lost patience. Eliphaz considers Job to be one who has filled "his belly with the hot east wind" (15:2). Eliphaz suggests that Job's talk is prompted by sin. Eliphaz sees Job's sin as the root of Job's problems.

Job replies to Eliphaz that Job's situation is actually the reverse. Job sees himself as an object of God's scorn undeservedly. Job sees himself dying before he will get a chance to vindicate himself to his friends.

Bildad chimes in that Job needs to stop with the stupid speeches and be sensible. Bildad reasserts the friends' position with comments suggesting that Job is reacting in an emotional, self-centered and irrational way.

Job tells Bildad that the friends' words are hurting Job. Job does not appreciate their "holier than thou" attitude and rejection. Job asks for his friends' pity, noting that when life is over, Job will see God as redeemer (19:25).

Zophar is "inspired" to reply because of Zophar's "understanding" (20:3). Zophar references his own health and happiness as proof that he is good and righteous. Bad experiences like Job's are a reflection of a sinful and wicked life.

Job tells Zophar, "Listen carefully..." (21:2) Job says wicked people can and do prosper, but righteous can and do suffer. Job wants answers from God, not his friends.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Job have another round of speeches reasserting each of their positions, but the friends are not able to sway Job to their beliefs. Similarly, Job does not persuade them either.

ii. Elihu's speeches (32 -37)

Elihu now enters the picture. Elihu is a younger man than Job and his three friends. As such, Elihu's wisdom would not be seen as on the par of those older. Still, Elihu offers his opinion in anger. Elihu is angry at Job for justifying himself rather than God, and Elihu is angry at the three friends for not persuading Job otherwise. Elihu speaks at great length but is not really insulting of Job as the other three friends were. Elihu believes that God has given him particular wisdom to assess the situation and enlighten Job. Elihu uses the words Job has used in the other speeches to try and persuade Job that the suffering is discipline from God.

iii. God speaks (38 – 42:6).

Yahweh then answers Job "out of the storm." Rather than subject himself to Job's cross examination, God asks Job the questions. God wants Job to say where Job was when God placed the earth's foundations (38:4). Job should think and answer about where Job was when God made all the creation decisions. Job should not pretend to have all answers about the world and God. Job does not have the experience, knowledge or power to have this discussion with God.

As God lays this opening out for discussion with Job, Job is brought in humility to respond that he has no answer and is unworthy of dialoguing with God.

God follows with challenges to Job about why Job feels he has a right to question God's justice. How can Job put himself in God's position on issues of justice and justification?

At this point, Job is moved to shame and humility. Job repents for the things he has said.

C. The Prose Epilogue (42:7 - 17).

In the prose epilogue, God speaks to Eliphaz and the other two friends that had been taking Job to task. God says he is angry with the three friends for the words they have spoken. Those friends that had held up their own self righteousness while accusing Job of sin, needed to offer sacrifices to God and get Job to intervene with God on their behalf.

Job prays for his friends, and God brings Job back to prosperity. Yahweh gives Job "twice as much as he had before." Job's siblings came to Job and offered him true consolation over all he had suffered. Job had ten more children and prospered materially and with a long life. Thus ends the story!

III. Points for Home

- A. Evil is real.
- B. Life is not always "fair."
- C. The answer to evil and unmerited suffering is not readily available or easily understood.
- D. God is God and he is in control.
- E. Human suffering is not always brought on by human actions.
- F. Suffering can bring significant spiritual maturity.