



PALMA CEIA
Presbyterian Church

Suffering & the Message of Job

Gathering Together Around God's Word

*Sunday, May 15th 2022
10:05am in EM 307/308 & Zoom*

Introduction

A folk tale, a saga, an epic, the greatest poem of ancient or modern times (according to Alfred Lord Tennyson), the Book of Job has been held up by countless generations as a high point of Biblical literature. Job is classified as wisdom literature which Richard J Clifford describes as, “*personal, reflective, and didactic. It is about personal rather than national affairs; it ponders problems and quandaries; it hands on its reflections to others...Job ponders what today we call ‘the problem of evil’ in a typically ancient way, treating evil not abstractly but as embodied in the story of a human being...The book of Job discusses divine irrationality and injustice in their effects upon a particular man, Job.*”

Job has long had a universal appeal, for both those of faith and those without, as it deals with questions common to all people; particularly, why is there suffering, why does suffering happen to the righteous, and what, if anything, is the meaning of life. More specifically, the book seeks to discern if righteousness, and service to God, can be had without consideration of reward and punishment. The book is a challenging text, asking questions that are often avoided and rarely confronted fully.

Unlike most books in the Old Testament, Job requires little prerequisite knowledge to understand the text. However, J Gerald Janzen notes, “*Thematically and perspectively it stands squarely within the Bible.*” While the book centers on the main character Job and the suffering he faces, it also grapples fully with questions about God and Creation.

Setting

There is no known geographical region for Uz, though tradition holds it to be in Huaran (Southern Arabia) or Edom. The book takes place in patriarchal, or pre-patriarchal, times. A number of factors point to this time period, including Job's owning of cattle and servants (instead of gold and silver), clans mentioned throughout the book are from that time period, Job's sacrifice of animals is consistent with the era prior to official priests, Job's long life span, and more.

Date

There is no firm consensus on the date of Job's composition, though most scholars agree it was written in the sixth or fifth century BC. The Old Testament scholar Gerald Janzen believes, "*the Book of Job was written in the exile and that the problems with which it deals arose in the existential tension between the historical upheaval and Israel's religious traditions.*" However, due to certain considerations such as Job being an Edomite and the book containing no mention of the Exile, other scholars believe the book to be older and most likely originating from the seventh century BC.

Composition

Job is an anonymous book written in both poetry and prose, though most of the book is poetry. The text utilizes irony, parallelism, dialogue, chiasmus, probing questions (rhetorical and otherwise), repetition, and other literary techniques throughout. The book is a story and makes its point through narrative, so while the existential and theological questions are central throughout the text, it's important to pay attention to the frame and flow of the story.

Purpose

James Wharton in his commentary on Job says, "*the function of Job, from the time of its inclusion among the Holy Scripture of Judaism and of Christianity, has never been to provide answers to the questions it raises. Rather it has functioned, for Jews and Christians alike, as a means of keeping the questions urgent and contemporary for all who set out to honor and serve the God of whom the Bible speaks.*" Elsewhere Wharton adds, "*Job resounds with our cries of the heart and honors them as an authentic dimension of faithfulness.*" Faithfulness can be seen in the honesty of the questions we ask.

Outline

1:1 – 2:13	Prologue
3:1 – 26	Job's Lament
4:1 – 14:22	First Cycle of Speeches
15:1 – 21:34	Second Cycle of Speeches
22:1 – 26:14	Third Cycle of Speeches
27:1 – 23	Job's Closing Discourse
28:1 – 28	Raising the Question of True Wisdom
29:1 – 31:40	Job's Calls for Vindication
32:1 – 37:24	Elihu's Speeches
38:1 – 42:6	God Speaks and Job Responds
42:7 – 17	Epilogue

Suffering & the Message of Job

Job 1:1-22 *Job; God & the Accuser; Job Loses Everything*

- Job is a book of wisdom literature focused on (disinterested) righteousness and suffering. The book wrestles with whether one can serve God without reward, as well as explores what are the causes of suffering.
- There has been centuries of confusion around the “Satan” seen in Job 1:6 and following. This is not the Satan, not the devil or evil one, of the New Testament. The Hebrew (*hassatan*) includes a definite article (*ha-*) indicating that Satan is not the proper noun but rather a function or office. A better translation would be the Accuser or the Adversary. The word occurs only two more times in the Old Testament, Zechariah 3:1-2 and I Chronicles 21:1.
- While the Accuser has no evidence to the contrary of Job being “upright and blameless” (1:8), he does present something that has never been put to the test—does Job love God for God’s sake, or for the sake of reward? The Accuser never directly answers God’s question but instead poses another question.
- Job seemingly passes the first test, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord had taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21), and second test, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10).

Job 2:11-13 *Job’s Three Friends*

- 2:11 introduces Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar who will play a large role throughout the dialogs in the book. They enter the book through the impactful, pastoral act of shared silence.

Job 4:1-11 Eliphaz Accuses Job of Sinning

- Eliphaz will give speeches in chaps. 4-5, 15, and 22. His speeches speak primarily to the justness of God’s involvement in history and human affairs and warn Job of speaking unjustly. Eliphaz seems concerned for Job and yet feels he must respond to Job’s outcry, “If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended? But who can keep from speaking?”
- 4:12-21 a theophany experienced by Eliphaz the Temanite, which states that mortals cannot be purer, more righteous than God.

Job 7:11-21 Job Responds

- In an earlier response to Eliphaz, Job states directly that his suffering is caused by God (6:4), “*For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me.*”
- Though Job is responding to Eliphaz in chapters 6-7, 7:8-19 indicate that Job is ultimately addressing God.
- 7:17-21 is a parody of Psalm 8:4-7. Richard Clifford notes, “*The divine attention that elicited awe and admiration from the psalmist elicits from Job anger and sarcasm: a*

hostile God is scrutinizing him. Job's world is collapsing. He seeks meaning and love and can find neither."

Job 8:1-10 Bildad Speaks

- Bildad offers a deal of sorts in 8:5-7: if you seek out God, God will restore your fortunes.
- Bildad evokes an ancient wisdom, 8:8-10.

Job 10:1-22 Job Speaks: I Loathe My Life

- Throughout chapters 9-10, Job considers the futility of suing God (9:2-13), considers the odds (9:14-24), explores alternatives (9:25-35), imagines suing God (10:1-17), and then, finally, declares it futile (10:18-22).
- 10:2 is especially intimate as Job asks God directly why he is suffering, "*I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me?*" And then in 10:7 Job claims to God that "*you know that I am not guilty...*"

Job 11:1-20 Zophar Speaks

- James Wharton suggests Zophar's response in chapter 11 is the most "*schoolmasterly... What Job has said interests him only as material for classroom debate and instruction.*" In 11:6-12, Zophar claims that God's wisdom far beyond, and greater, than anything humans could accomplish.

Job 12-14 Job Replies

- Chapters 12-14 comprise Job's longest speech and the end of the first dialogue cycle, with chapter 14 summing up the argumentation contained in the first set of speeches. These chapters see Job revisiting the idea of confronting God in a legal context. Job both acknowledges and attacks the "wisdom" of his friends throughout these chapters as well as addresses God directly "*in the language of outraged and heartbroken prayer*" (J. Wharton).
- Job decries his friends as quacks in 13:4-12, as those who speak falsely for God (13:7) and warns them of the consequences they will face for their deceit (13:7-11).

Job 28 Interlude on Wisdom

- Chapter 28 serves as an interlude of sorts in praise of divine wisdom. The chapter is not the words of Job or either of his three friends and has led to numerous views on what exactly it's doing in the book. Robert Alter notes, "*This rhapsodic celebration of divine wisdom is clearly not part of the debate between Job and his three reprovers, and the strong scholarly consensus is that it is an editorial interpolation, perhaps with the aim of introducing a pious view of wisdom in this book that is such a radical challenge to the guiding assumptions of Wisdom literature.*"
- Whatever chapter 28's origins, it is largely about the inaccessibility of divine wisdom and utilizes numerous subterranean locales to make its point, such as the hiding place of precious stones and metals, the ocean (which early readers believed lie beneath the earth), and Sheol. God alone knows where hidden wisdom lies, "*God grasps its way, and He knows its place*" (28:23; Alter).

- Richard Clifford sees chapter 28 as a cosmic perspective that breaks from the points of view presented by Job and his friends, “*The cosmic perspective is a shift from the historical and personal viewpoint of Job and points forward to the cosmic perspective in the divine speeches.*” This shift in viewpoint suggests, “*If there is to be an answer...it will come from ‘another quarter’ (Esther 4:14), thus pointing the way to the theophany of chapters 38-41.*”

Job 32-37 The Elihu Speeches

- Elihu is younger than Job and Job’s friends and comes across as arrogant and contemptuous. There are a number of theories as to Elihu’s appearance and the role he plays in the larger story as much of his speech reiterates earlier points made by Job’s friends in chapters 3-31. James Wharton sees Elihu as an unwelcomed return to the earlier “*mundane debating chamber where people endlessly swap ideas about the ways of God and the ways of people and how they relate to one another. Weary as the reader is by now of such arguments, Elihu at least provides a certain relief, perhaps even comic relief, from the apparently irresolvable issue raised in chapters 29-31.*”
- Another viewpoint of why Elihu’s speech appears where it does is from Greenstein who notes, “*The motive for inserting Elihu into this point in the dialogue, just preceding the deity’s speeches (chapter 38-41) is apparent. The divine discourses dwell on God’s power and majesty, not on his justice or concern for humanity—which are the elements Job has been seeking. Elihu anticipates the themes of the deity’s response but crucially adds the dimensions of divine concern for humanity and morality. He provides an answer to Job: although God’s ways are largely impenetrable, he sometimes induces suffering as a form of character building and discipline (compare Eliphaz in 5:17-18)... Meant to educate Job and enrich the deity’s presentation, Elihu’s bombast and sense of self-importance have an almost ludicrous effect; and the speeches by God can be understood to contradict, rather than affirm, Elihu’s moral theology. God’s self-representation supersedes Elihu’s pretentious attempt to explain divine behavior.*”

Job 38-42 God Answers Job

- God’s response is broken into two speeches (chapters 38-39 and 40-41), each ending with a short response from Job (40:1-5 and 42:1-6).
- The series of questions that God asks are intentionally set to reframe the conversation, only God can answer these questions in the affirmative and Job is left to silence. For example, “*Where were you when I founded the earth?... Who fixed its measures, do you know, or who stretched a line upon it?*” (38:4-5; Alter) and “*Will the wild ox want to serve you, pass the night at your feeding trough?*” (39:9; Alter).
- A large part of the divine speech is pointing out to Job that God’s concerns exceed beyond the human. For instance, 38:25-27 (Greenstein), “*Who cleaves a downpour’s channel, And a path for the thunderstorm; To rain down on land without people, On wilderness with no human in it; Drenching utter wasteland, And sprouting grassy growth?*” And, 40:15, 19 (NRSV), “*Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you; it eats grass like an ox...It is the first of the great acts of God...*”
- Finally, after 37 chapters, God appears before Job in chapter 38. The many readings of this book through the centuries largely hinge on how the reader interprets the divine speeches and their role in the larger story. James Wharton says that while there are

various strands of interpretation, “perhaps the special function of this marvelous book in the Jewish and Christian canons of Holy Scripture is to provoke this whole range of reactions. Long after all these interpretations have proven threadbare, including yours and mine, the book of Job will still be there, with all its mysteries, challenging people to think again about God’s righteousness and ours and to reject anyone’s canned answers as the final word. Neither Jewish nor Christian faith has grown up until it has faced Job’s questions with the full seriousness that human experience of people and of God demands.”

- Carol Newsome sees the divine speeches as something beyond interpretation. She notes, “...the speeches from the whirlwind, the most dazzling poetic rhetoric of the book, tease the imagination. There is no message in them to be decoded allegorically but rather the sense of a wholly different form of perception which, if embraced, would reorient and reorganize one’s entire sense of value and meaning.”
- Richard Clifford sees God’s second speech answering “Job’s charge of unjust governance by showing that God has power over cosmic evil, represented by Behemoth and Leviathan. God does not say that he always controls evil for the sake of human beings, but that he can if he wants.” Clifford sees Leviathan particularly as an unexplained evil much like the Adversary in the prologue, the point isn’t why the evil is there but rather it is “somehow under the control of God. God retains control over the beasts as over the Adversary...There is no guarantee, however, that evil will not ravage human beings.”
- Edward Greenstein, though, sees Job’s response entirely different, noting, “Parodying the divine discourse through mimicry, Job expresses disdain toward the deity and pity toward humankind (and not acquiescence, as has been generally thought).” Greenstein translates 42:6 as “This is why I am fed up; I take pity on ‘dust and ashes.’” Others, too, have seen Job’s comments as defiant or ironic such as James Crenshaw who notes, “The translation and meaning of this verse are uncertain. It can be read that Job repented of dust and ashes, i.e., of repentance. Perhaps Job relinquishes his conviction that guilt and innocence are taken into account by the ruler of the universe. Some scholars see irony in Job’s response, a concealing of his continued defiance in the face of divine cruelty.”

Job 42:7-17 Epilogue

- This last section (42:7-17) is referred to as the epilogue and finds the text returning to prose after an extended poetry section (3-42:6).
- The epilogue includes the Lord condemning Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar and declaring Job in the right, “To him only I show favor, not to do a vile thing to you, for you have not spoken rightly of Me as did my servant Job” (42:8; Alter). After this declaration, the Lord “increased twofold all that Job had” (42:9; Alter).
- Robert Alter notes that though God’s words from the whirlwind were forceful, they are not an outright rejection of Job, “Though the Lord from the whirlwind roundly rebuked Job for his presumption, Job in the debate, unlike his three companions, had remained honest to his own observation of reality and his awareness of his own acts; so, even in his presumption, he had spoken ‘rightly’ about God, had clung to his integrity. Thus God pointedly continues here to call Job His ‘servant,’ as He did in His exchanges with the Adversary.”

- Job, who has called out for a mediator nearly the entire book, suddenly becomes a mediator for his friends, praying to God on their behalf (42:8-11). Gregory the Great (540-604_{AD}) notes that Job, *“held that his prayers were effective for him, as he had offered them for others. The merciful Judge more favorably receives the sacrifice of prayer when it is accompanied by the love of neighbor, and one enriches it even more truthfully when he offers it for his enemies as well.”*
- Richard Clifford sees the epilogue leaving us with two things, *“First, it tells us that Job’s protests and even accusations were, strange as it may seem, ‘telling the truth’ about God (see 42:7). Job has withdrawn his suit, but Yahweh speaks admiringly of him, just as he did in 1:8 and 2:3, and blesses him above others. Second, the prologue and epilogue imply (like the divine speeches) that the universe is entirely God’s; it is theocentric, not anthropocentric. Job’s travails arose because of a wager in the divine assembly between God and the satan, about which Job knew nothing. God essentially says the same to Job in the divine speeches. Yet Yahweh remains Job’s God, who, in God’s own way, is respectful of Job.”*
- The philosopher Paul Ricoeur sees in Job an attempt to bind the ethics of this world with the larger cosmos. This happens not through any sense of explanation but rather *“the pathos of actively assumed suffering.”* *“What did Job ‘see’? Behemoth and Leviathan? The orders of creation? No. His questions about justice are undoubtedly left without an answer. But by repenting, though not of sin, for he is righteous, but by repenting for his supposition that existence does not make sense, Job presupposes an unsuspected meaning which cannot be transcribed by speech or logos a human being may have at his disposal.* Elsewhere Ricoeur adds, *“The only thing shown to Job is the grandeur of the whole, without the finite viewpoint of his own desire receiving a meaning directly from it. A path is thus opened ... I renounce my viewpoint; I love the whole as it is.”*
- The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard speaks of Job in his book *Repetition*. For Kierkegaard the Book of Job is not a theodicy—a theological explanation of evil—but rather an existential narrative in which Job chooses repetition, that is, Job chooses again and again the integrity of his faith.
- Gustavo Gutiérrez sees in Job a character embodying the suffering of the innocent. Though the book offers no rational or definitive explanation of suffering, Job’s *“faith prompts him to inquire into the possibility of finding an appropriate language about God that does justice to the situation of suffering. Not to make the effort is to risk succumbing to impotent resignation, a religion of calculated self-interest, a cynical outlook that forgets suffering of others, and even despair.”*
- James Wharton sees a central question at the center of Job, a book in which life is shown not to fit neatly into a reward-punishment framework. *“The question of the book of Job is whether even the most faithful imaginable person could maintain a life of integrity toward God and people under these hellish conditions.”* For Wharton, God not only vindicates Job but also what Job has spoken. *“Taken together, all the speeches of Job express a human outrage against whatever diminishes, cripples, or destroys human life; a human outrage against all oppression, injustice, and unrighteousness in human affairs; a human outrage against innocent suffering; and finally, human outrage against God, on the supposition that God is the one who causes or allows such things to happen.”*
- Carol Newsome reads the Book of Job as a polyphonic text where a variety of moral imaginations contend with each other in dialogue. *“Moral imaginations are the*

fundamental aesthetic and cognitive means by which persons and cultures construct meaning, value, and significance.” For Newsome there is no singular answer to the questions asked throughout Job, “Listing topics suggest that there is a logical entailment of issues that might have been as appropriately developed in a nuanced essay as in a complexly dialogic work...what the book of Job models so effectively, is that the true ‘image of an idea’ is produced by the lively and often surprising interaction of persons speaking from noninterchangeable positions and with differently formed moral imaginations. The only conclusion to a study of the dialogic structure of Job can be the advice to go and reread the book in the company of others who will contest your reading.”

- The theologian Norman Wirzba reads God’s speech as a spiritual event for Job in which he has been transformed from a human-centered worldview to a God-centered one, that sees the world in its multiplicity and not simply through the eyes of Job’s wants and needs. *“Having seen God now and no longer relying on what he has merely heard about God, Job had been introduced to a much larger world than he previously inhabited. His perception has been altered to sense in all things the majesty of God, a majesty that encompasses suffering and joy, benefit and loss. He undergoes the shift from an anthropocentric to a theocentric understanding of the cosmos...His own mortality, rather than being a curse, is no less a part of God’s plan than the calving of the deer and the hunger of the young lions.”*