

“By any standard of comparison Job ranks among the most significant pieces of world literature. It is unmatched in the writings of the Old Testament for its artistic character, its grandeur of language, depth of feeling, and the sensitivity with which the meaning of human suffering is explored,”¹ the “greatest monument of wisdom literature in the Old Testament.”² Martin Luther said that Job is “magnificent and sublime as no other book of Scripture” and Alfred Lord Tennyson called it “the greatest poem of ancient and modern times.” In the Hebrew Scriptures it is a part of the Sacred Writings called *The Book of Truth*, comprised of the poetic and wisdom books of Psalms and Proverbs. The prologue and epilogue are written in prose. The body of the story is written in the style of Hebrew poetry, which does not rhyme sounds but rhymes ideas. This kind of parallelism (27:4) lays couplets or triplets next to each other, repeating the same ideas in various ways.

Background. Job’s story is similar in form to Edomite, Phoenician, and Babylonian stories of wealthy persons who were devastated by catastrophe, only to be rescued at the last moment by the local god (e.g., Marduk); however, the Job story stands on its own. It is not a Babylonian story with the names changed. The story takes place in *Uz*, which is probably in Edom (1:1), setting the location outside Israel. The author is anonymous, though he was obviously a gifted poet and storyteller. Job’s story had a long life of transmission, likely circulated orally for centuries before being written down, and then copied and re-copied after its writing. Some believe the book was written as early as 1000 B.C., while others claim a date as late as 300 B.C. Many scholars date the book somewhere around the Exile (contemporary with Second Isaiah) in the 6th century.

Biblical references: 1.) Ezekiel 14:14, 20. Job (along with Noah and Daniel) is offered as an example of righteousness; 2.) James 5:11. Job is offered as an example of patience/perseverance. (In Romans 5:3 the Apostle Paul writes about how patience/perseverance is formed in us.)

Two misconceptions: 1.) that the book seeks to answer the question, “Why do the righteous suffer?” (it does not) and 2.) that Job is a prototype of patience . . . “the patience of Job” (he is *not* patient, James 5:11 notwithstanding . . . Job comes off in the text as very impatient, though you could describe him as persevering).

Theological underpinnings: Reward and punishment theology or tit-for-tat theology, a.k.a. retribution theology. This was the basic theological understanding of the *friends* in Job’s story and seems to be the theology we most embrace as well. It is reinforced by much of Deuteronomy (Deut. 28, for example) and is voiced frequently in the Psalms. This reward/punishment or retribution theology continues to be a primary mode of dealing with God.

If I am good, God will bless me. If I am bad, God will punish me.

If God blesses me, I will follow God. If God does not bless me, I will not follow.

Outline of the book.

- I. Prologue in prose (1:1 – 2:13)
 - A. 1:1 – 5. A description of Job: blameless, upright, feared God, shunned evil. He had 10 children and great wealth.
 - B. 1:6 – 22. The first heavenly council and disasters. *Does Job fear God for nothing?* (1:9)
 - C. 2:1 – 10. The second heavenly council and disasters. *Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?* (2:10)
 - D. 2:11 – 13. Job’s three *friends* visit and sit silently with him for 7 days.
- II. Three dialogue cycles in poetry (3:1 – 27:23)
 - A. 3:1 – 26. Job’s opening statement. *May the day of my birth perish!* (3:2)
 - B. 4:1 – 14:22. First cycle of speeches.
 1. 4:1 – 5:27. Eliphaz speaks. In his speeches, Eliphaz typically emphasized God’s justice and purity. He believed that people bring trouble on themselves.

¹Roland Kenneth Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1969), 1022.

²Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament, 3rd ed.* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957, 1966, 1975), 548.

2. 6:1 – 7:27. Job's response: *A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends.* (6:14)
3. 8:1 – 22. Bildad speaks. In his speeches, Bildad emphasized tradition. He comes across as a defender of orthodoxy. He believed that an individual who pursued wickedness should not be surprised by God's punishment.
4. 9:1 – 10:22. Job's response: he wants someone to mediate his case (9:33).
5. 11:1 – 20. Zophar speaks. Zophar seems like a rationalist. He believed that Job's situation was no less than could be expected of someone who has sinned.
6. 12:1 – 14:22. Job's response: *You smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom.* (13:4 – 5)
Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him. (13:15) *If a man dies, will he live again?* (14:14)
- C. 15:1 – 21:34. Second cycle of speeches.
 1. 15:1 – 35. Eliphaz speaks. Job is sinning and deceiving himself by his self-defense.
 2. 16:1 – 17:16. Job's response: *Miserable comforters are you all.* (16:2) *O God, you have worn me out.* (16:7)
 3. 18:1 – 21. Bildad speaks, trying to scare Job with descriptions of the calamities that may yet befall him.
 4. 19:1 – 29. Job's response: *I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. . . . I myself will see him with my own eyes.* (19:25, 27)
 5. 20:1 – 29. Zophar speaks, suggesting that Job abused the poor and needy.
 6. 21:1 – 34. Job's response: the wicked go unpunished (21:7 – 13).
- D. 22:1 – 27:23. Third cycle of speeches.
 1. 22:1 – 30. Eliphaz speaks, calling Job to repent of the way he has abused people (22:5 – 9).
 2. 23:1 – 24:25. Job's response: he wants to find God and be judged not on hearsay, but for himself (23:2 – 7).
 3. 25:1 – 6. Bildad speaks, accusing Job of being a *maggot* and a *worm* (25:6).
 4. 26:1 – 27:23. Job's response: *God has denied me justice.* (27:2)
- III. Hymn to Wisdom spoken by Job in poetry (28:1 – 28)
- IV. Job's Discourse in poetry (29:1 – 31:40)
 - A. 29:1 – 25. How life used to be with God.
 - B. 30:1 – 31. How life is now with God.
 - C. 31:1 – 40. Job's claim to innocence. *I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.* (31:1)
- V. Elihu's speeches in poetry (32:1 – 37:24)
 - A. 32:1 – 5. Introduction
 - B. 32:6 – 33:33. First Speech
 - C. 34:1 – 37. Second Speech
 - D. 35:1 – 16. Third Speech
 - E. 36:1 – 37:24. Fourth Speech
- VI. God Showed Up in a Whirlwind in poetry (38:1 – 42:6)
 - A. 38:1 – 39:30. God's First Speech
 - B. 40:1 – 42:6. God's Second Speech
 1. 40:1 – 2. God's question: *Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?* (40:2)
 2. 40:3 – 5. Job's response: *I put my hand over my mouth.* (40:4)
 3. 40:6 – 41:34. God continues out of the whirlwind.
 4. 42:1 – 6. Job's response: *Surely I spoke of things I did not understand . . . My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.* (42:3, 5)
- VII. Epilogue in prose (42:7 – 17)
 - A. 42:7 – 9. Job prayed and offered sacrifice for his friends.
 - B. 42:10 – 17. God restored Job.

Job's message for us:

1. Suffering is mystery and cannot be explained by trite theologies or philosophies.
 - a. God is all powerful.
 - b. God is good/loving.
 - c. Bad things happen to people/evil is present in the world.

2. Life moves seasonally or cyclically. One way of describing the human movement seasonally is by:
 - a. Orientation
 - b. Disorientation
 - c. Re-orientation

3. The Twin Questions:
 - a. Why are the righteous pious?
 - b. *Will a person serve God for nothing?* (1:9) My translation: *for better or for worse?*
 - i. Satan's answer is "no."
 - ii. Job's answer is "yes."
 - iii. Our answer is _____.

4. We need a stronger spirituality more than we need a stronger theology.
 - a. Theology describes the attempt to explain and understand Mystery. In the midst of pain and suffering, and as a method of loving compassion, it is grossly inadequate (see: Job's friends, who had a proper theological system but without any experience of God).
 - b. Spirituality describes the quest to engage and experience Mystery. In the end, Job did not get his questions about suffering and justice answered. He encountered God (*My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you*, 42:5). The language in the Jewish and Christian traditions for this direct encounter with God is *mysticism*.

5. The *dark night of the soul* and the *cloud of unknowing* are both appropriate descriptions for an experience that is a normal part of the Christian way. If we live long enough and walk far enough with God, at some point we likely will have the experience that God's presence has been withdrawn from us.

6. Prayer is a life-line, whether we sense God's presence or not.
 - a. Authentic prayer is honest. It develops out of a deep, resilient relationship with God. Prayers (like Job and the psalmist) are not afraid to stand toe-to-toe and go at it with God. They trust that the relationship is strong enough, immovable enough, that it can withstand rigorous debate. "Job is characteristic of Jewishness that finds dispute a viable, crucial form of faith."³
 - b. Authentic prayer consists not in talking *about* God (Job's friends) but in talking *to* God (Job).
 - c. God's silence is one legitimate answer to our prayers. For most of Job's struggle, God remains quietly on the edge, waiting, observing, and trusting. In that silence, God seems to draw us to a new, more resilient place spiritually which is not so tied up in tangible *blessings* but in God for God's own sake.
 - d. Often there can be a tremendous incongruity between what we ask for in prayer and God's awesome response. Job cried out to God with questions about God's justice. God responded with a lesson on how the earth was created and how living things are sustained.

7. In the midst of pain and suffering, theology and education are a sorry replacement for genuine friendship. There are some things we cannot *fix*, but can only patiently *wait into* with those we love.

8. Most of us have a very difficult time when we are not controlling our existence. For that reason we have difficulties trusting God. "Our most basic theological problem is that God is God and we're not. Most of us are terribly upset that we're not God. It really ticks us off that another is in charge and we're not, and that we're only creatures."⁴

9. Open-handed expectation moves us into the days ahead without manipulating or controlling what we think should happen . . . what we think the future should look like. The open hands are a symbol of receiving whatever comes, of holding all things in balance so that we are not ultimately shaken by anything that happens. Thus, we cultivate the capacity to find God in all things, both the good and the bad (and even forsake the need to label things and events as *good* or *bad*).

³Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 60.

⁴Richard Rohr, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 58.

Quotes

“God is all powerful.” “God is all-good.” “Terrible things happen.”

You can reconcile any two of these propositions with each other, but you can't reconcile all three. The problem of evil is perhaps the single problem for religious faith.

There have been numerous theological and philosophical attempts to solve it, but when it comes down to the reality of evil itself they are none of them worth much. When a child is raped and murdered, the parents are not apt to take much comfort from the explanation (better than most) that since God wants humans to love him, humans must be free to love or not to love and thus free to rape and murder a child if he takes a notion to.

Christian Science solves the problem of evil by saying that it does not exist except as an illusion of mortal mind. Buddhism solves it in terms of reincarnation and an inexorable law of cause and effect whereby the raped child is merely reaping the consequences of evil deeds it committed in another life.

Christianity, on the other hand, ultimately offers no theoretical solution at all. It merely points to the cross and says that, practically speaking, there is no evil so dark and so obscene – not even this – but that God can turn it to good.⁵

Job is a good man and knows it, as does everybody else including God. Then one day his cattle are stolen, his servants killed, and the wind blows down the house where his children happen to be whooping it up at the time, and not one of them lives to tell what it was they thought they had to whoop it up about. But being a good man he says only, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Even when he comes down with a bad case of boils and his wife advises him to curse God and die, he manages to bite his tongue and say nothing. It's his friends who finally break the camel's back. They come to offer their condolences and hang around a full week. When Job finds them still there at the start of the second week, he curses the day he was born. He never quite takes his wife's advice and curses God, but he comes very close to it. He asks some unpleasant questions:

If God is all he's cracked up to be, how come houses blow down on innocent people? Why does a good man die of cancer in his prime while old men who can't remember their names or hold their water go on in nursing homes forever? Why are there so many crooks riding around in Cadillacs and so many children going to bed hungry at night? Job's friends offer an assortment of theological explanations, but God doesn't offer one.

God doesn't explain. He explodes. He asks Job who he thinks he is anyway. He says that to try to explain the kind of things Job wants explained would be like trying to explain Einstein to a little-neck clam. He also, incidentally, gets off some of the greatest poetry in the Old Testament. “Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow? Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades? Hast thou given the horse strength and clothed his neck with thunder?”

Maybe the reason God doesn't explain to Job why terrible things happen is that he knows what Job needs isn't an explanation. Suppose that God did explain. Suppose that God were to say to Job that the reason the cattle were stolen, the crops ruined, and the children killed was thus and so, spelling everything out right down to and including the case of boils. Job would have his explanation.

And then what? Understanding in terms of the divine economy why his children had to die, Job would still have to face their empty chairs at breakfast every morning. Carrying in his pocket straight from the horse's mouth a complete theological justification of his boils, he would still have to scratch and burn.

God doesn't reveal his grand design. He reveals himself. He doesn't show why things are as they are. He shows his face. And Job says, “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see thee.” Even covered with sores and ashes, he looks oddly like a man who has asked for a crust and been given the whole loaf.⁶

Next Week: Psalms

Schedule of Daily Readings:

Monday: Psalm 1 – 22

Tuesday: Psalm 23 – 43

Wednesday: Psalm 44 – 64

Thursday: Psalm 65 – 85

Friday: Psalm 86 – 108

Saturday: Psalm 109 – 128

Sunday: Psalm 129 – 150

⁵Frederick Buechner, “Evil,” *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 24.

⁶Buechner, “Job,” *Wishful Thinking*, 46 – 47.