

“Tomorrow, if all literature was to be destroyed and it was left to me to retain one work only, I would save Job.” *Victor Hugo*

“The Book of Job taken as a mere work of literary genius, is one of the most wonderful productions of any age or of any language.” *Daniel Webster*

The Book of Job is first of the five OT “Books of Poetry” (including Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon). Although Jewish tradition attributes the Book to Moses, there is no certainty about the author, or the date of writing. It is regarded as Inspired, and St. Paul quoted from it in both Romans and I Corinthians. Job is also mentioned in Ez 14 and James 5.

As with most great works of secular literature, so with the Book of Job: the narrative provides a platform for a great issue, or question, to be considered. While an ancient Near Eastern story of a remarkably patient man predated this Book, here it serves only as the launch pad for something far more profound.

The narrative setting, which opens depicting a man whose situation confirms (in the traditional ancient Jewish sense) his uprightness before God (riches were viewed as proof of God’s approval) and thus Job’s standing as “a good man,” quickly moves to a literary, but not literal, depiction of “the royal court of God” in which a kind of “great experiment” is devised allowing the great question to arise.

“Satan” (Heb “adversary”) should not here be regarded as the figure of pure spiritual malevolence known in late-BCE Judaism and Christianity. He is simply the voice which speaks the challenge to present circumstances.

It is commonly assumed that the Book of Job addresses one of the “great questions” of humankind: “If there is a God, and God is all-powerful, and this God looks for righteousness in human beings, then why does this God allow the righteous to suffer?” In fact, Job himself asks this—but no answer is ever given. If this is truly the purpose of the Book of Job, then the work is worthless.

On the other hand, a different question can be asked—in fact, two. One of these is: “How should people who strive to be upright bear suffering?” This question is addressed, and answered, in the Book of Job. It is revealed here to permit readers to search out the answer, knowing for what they search.

The second question will be left for readers to discern. As the Covenant Study proceeds and you read, can you discover it?

Structure of the Book of Job:

Job Introduced: His Success, His Distresses: Chs 1-3

Job’s Crisis and Defense in Three Rounds and an Intervention

Round 1: Job 4-14 (Eliphaz - Job reply, Bildad - Job reply, Zophar - Job reply)

Round 2: Job 15-21 (Eliphaz – Job reply, Bildad – Job reply, Zophar – Job reply)

Round 3: Job 22-37 (Eliphaz – Job reply, Bildad – Job reply)

A New Voice, A New Perspective: Job 32-37 The young man, Elihu, speaks Truth to all

Job is Delivered: Chs 38-42 in Two Necessary Stages

God humbles Job (38.1-42.6)

God Bestows Honor Upon Job (42.7-17)

Study Session 1

What was the point of Satan's question to God in BkJob1.9ff?

How did Job receive his first Distresses?

Who called on Job to react after the second Distresses? What do you detect about assumptions of spirituality and gender in this?

Eventually, four characters make an appearance in the story, three of them friends of Job who learn of his difficulties and coordinate their visit together: Eliphaz ("The endeavor of God"), Bildad ("Old friendship"), and Zophar ("Rising early," "crown").

Much later, Elihu ("My God is he") enters the story to immediately challenge all that has been said before.

Since we will bear with the "three friends" for some time, what is your initial impression of them? How are they alike? How do they differ?

What distinct perspective does each of the three apply to Job's situation?

What do all three of them lack, but Job possesses? (You might have to read further before answering)

The Points of View of Job's Friends

Eliphaz the Temanite: The "orthodox" viewpoint

Job, you have taught and encouraged many with Godly teachings in times of difficulty, but now that you are in such times, you are consternated. Is not your fear of God your confidence? (4.1-6)

(4.7-8) Think, now, who that was innocent every perished? Those who plow iniquity . . . reap the same.

Advice: If I was you, I would seek God. (5.8)

Job's Reply: My misfortunes so exceed in proportion any offense I might have committed that would have called forth divine retribution. If any can show me my offense, please do; my conscience reveals none.

(Ch 7: Job recognizes the difficulty of human existence, painful and fleeting; since this is reality, Job will express his pain and sorrow in prayer. But his friends are of no comfort.)

Bildad the Shuhite: The "extended orthodox" viewpoint

Job, when will you knock it off? God is just. If you can find no sin, what about your children? What about your parents? The offense exists somewhere in all this (8.3-4). So get moving: pray and seek the causes of your plight and ask for relief.

Job's Reply (still addressing Eliphaz' point): It is impossible to meet God as an equal, to hammer this out between us. "Who has hardened himself against Him, and succeeded?" (9.4b) There is no umpire/mediator/conciliator/facilitator/authority to adjudicate between two "equal parties" when the parties are God and a man (9.33).

Job will not contend with God, but approach Him in humility (Ch 10).

Zophar the Namaathite: I certainly know how things work, I've read things: "egocentric orthodoxy"

Job, I know something about how all this works. Pure cause-and-effect. You are overcomplicating things. Iniquity brings divine disfavor. Uprightness brings divine reward. God's Power is absolute, and you simply must have offended Him. It's the only explanation. Straighten out your life, and all will be fine again (and I have the platitudes to prove it). (Example: 11.19-20)

Job's Reply (to Zophar): Well, you are Da Man! But you are not the only one with theological knowledge. Who doesn't know the stuff you spout? It's so easy for people not in the midst of troubles to speak the easy answers (12.3). God knows more than any of us and can strip away both knowledge and delusion regardless of earthly station (12.17-25).

No human has the answers; but I want to plead my case with God directly (13.3), not with "worthless physicians" . . . I wish you all would just shut up! (13.4) God does not need you to be his defense counsel or character witnesses—and you, too, will answer to Him(13.9).

I will face God, and I will find out whether or not I have brought this on myself(13.23ff).

Ch 14 follows, known as "one of the great poems in all literature," on the human condition.

If a man dies, shall he live again? (14.14) – the profound human question.

What are some modern echoes of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar in people's outlooks?

Have the "profound human questions" changed?

Summary through Ch 14: Job has heard from his “friends”—they have refused to believe him in his insistence that he has committed no offense before God and has a clear conscience. Nor will they acknowledge a mysterious, or hidden, Nature of God. God works just as they understand Him to work. It’s that simple: “No mystery here, Job, YOU have sinned.”

Job’s response is sarcasm, anger, and disgust at them. As he sees it, they have ignored a fundamental: reverence for God demands a respect for the Truth, first of all. (Sounds like Luther!)

Ch 14: In two parallel five-verse *strophes* (structural poetic subdivisions), Job expresses himself: 14.13-17, Job’s dream, that there will be restoration to God, even if it’s after his death. 14.18-22, Job’s sad reality.

Ch 15.1-35: Eliphaz’ second speech: His tone changes from sympathy to defensiveness. Eliphaz now feels spiritually threatened in his comfortable orthodox view. Job’s attitude has shocked him. Speech 1: God rewards the righteous. Speech 2: God punishes the wicked. Two sides of a coin.

Job is not wise, as Eliphaz had credited him, but impious. “Why isn’t “our” religion good enough for you, Job?” Ch 15.25: how Eliphaz sees Job now.

Ch 16.1-17.16: Job’s fourth response: “Oh, yes, I’ve heard all this before. You say nothing either new or profound.” Job denounces his tormentors: Eliphaz, all three friends, and God. Ch 16.16-17: Job’s self-view, and how Job sees Eliphaz now.

Ch 18.1-21: Bildad’s second speech: In a calm, cold, “clinical” response, B chides Job for his harsh language and contempt for “ancient wisdom.” No more consolation, only implied threats.

Ch 19.1-29: Job’s fifth response, Job’s central discourse: The need to respond to the friend’s wrong-headed reasoning prompts Job to analyze his situation.

The Problem: God was Job’s friend, now He appears to be Job’s enemy.

The Solution: A leap of faith: The charge against God is only what appears to be, not what is; eventually God will remember Job, and restore Job to God’s favor—even if Job dies first.

Note 19.25-26, source of the famed Oratorio in Handel’s *Messiah*. **Note:** *In Job, there is no concept of “the Resurrection of the Body” in the Christian sense, rather this is an “extension” of Job’s hope placed in God’s Friendship toward Job.*

Ch 20.1-29: Zophar’s second speech: Zophar parallels Bildad, but is both harsher and more crude (note 20.7, 20.15). Z, too, speaks of the fate of the wicked and the godless: Job, be warned.

Ch 21.1-34: Job’s sixth response. Job is now in an advantageous place to contend with the friends and attack their assumptions. He has not yielded or acquiesced to falsehoods they hold; he has kept his faith in God. Therefore, Job’s belief in God’s goodness is preserved, and he begins to assail their governing principles as false.

In 21.5-6, Job shows that the wicked do not always rule “only for a short time;” the wicked often prosper. God does not always visit due recompense in this life. Job himself is appalled by this realization—but it is still true.

Ch 22.1-30: Eliphaz' third speech: E is fed up with Job (first speech: encouraging tone; second speech: Job's present irreverence; third speech: Job has been a deceitful secret sinner all along).

Eliphaz mistakes his own simplistic reasoning with divine revelation—the blindness of smug ignorance chained to inertia of mind and soul. “The righteous do not question.”

But, despite Job's shameful deceit, Job can still make a deal with God to Job's own benefit; after all, why else does anyone serve God but that there's something in it for him?

Ch 23.1-24.25: Job's seventh response. This response is not conversational, but comprises Job's inward reflection: Job searching for God, a true dark night of the soul.

Job yearns for an encounter with God, but God is inaccessible (23.3). The absence of God is the keenest of all torments to one who loves Him and used to experience God's favor.

If only there was a way, God would hear Job (23.6; 23.9). But there isn't.

In Ch 24, Job's soul's reflection leads from the specific and personal—Job himself—to the general—all who are oppressed: the homeless; the powerless; the displaced; the refugee (“stranger and sojourner”).

God has revealed something profound to Job in the course of Job's questioning all this: Job now sees people he did not truly “see” before, and Job is one of many.

Next time: From Ch 25 toward the Conclusion of Job . . .

BUT, it's not quite a linear journey. Reading Chs 25 through 27 is confusing. This is because surviving ancient manuscripts are not intact, but “corrupted” (as computer data can be “corrupted”) compared to the original, of which there is no known copy.

To make the most sense possible out of Chapters 25-27, maintaining the “various speakers” structure of the Book of Job, try reading things in this order:

Bildad: Ch 27.7-10, Ch 27.13-23.

Job: Ch 26.1-4; Ch 27.11-12, Ch 27.2-6.

Zophar: Ch 25.4-6, Ch 25.2-3; Ch 26.5-14.

Questions for today:

Consider the shifts in tone and attitude evidenced by Job's friends in their later speeches. What is the consistent direction from their initial sympathy and horror at Job's plight?

How does one account for this?

What might have informed different attitudes?

Have Job's struggles brought him to a better place, or just a different place?

Is there any glimmer of divine Purpose in any of this yet?

Summary of the `Fragmented' Section:

- Bildad: 27.7-10: Bildad judges Job "godless"
 27.13-23: Traditional view of what the wicked are destined to receive
- Zophar: 25.4-6: "Wanna-be `grand poetry'—`sophisticated/wise' expression" of standard view
 25.2-3: GOD is pure, not man (irony: "How can man be righteous" considering The Law)
 26.5: The underworld/its occupants; waters (chaos)/its inhabitants (both `hidden')
 26.6: Even the hidden realm (Sheol) [Abaddon=Sheol, lit. `where destruction is']
 26.7: God founds Creation upon the unknown/emptiness (later doctrine: *ex nihilo*,
 "out of nothing")
 26.10-13: A fragment of pagan mythology (regarding `cosmic conflict') now folded into a
 strictly monotheistic world-view
 26.14: "and all this is just a tiny glimpse of all that God has done"
- Job: 26.1-4: Sarcasm: "O, how you have helped me!" (NOT!)
 27.11-12: Job insists on articulating a view different from Bildad & Co. (calamity CAN
 come upon the godly/innocent)
 27.2-6: Job maintains his innocence

Wisdom: 28: Wisdom is God's; He is sole Owner, sole Source. Humans cannot acquire it, obtain it,
 or even pretend to match it. Wisdom is also connected to God's operant Power,
 or decisive Acts.

Job's Final Summation (of his defense): 29.1-31.40

- Ch 29: Job longs for the "good old days"
 Ch 30: Job's utter wretchedness, before others and before God
 Ch 31: Job's self-examination, searching for any cause of reproach: 8 "if-thens:"
Lust Injustice to Servants Injustice to poor Material greed/idolatry
Lack of regard for others Absence of hospitality False/deceptive `uprightness'
Unjust gain *Job can find none of these in himself; therefore he IS innocent.*

A New Voice: Elihu, who has been listening and waiting, 32.1-37.24

- Ch 32: Elihu (name means "My God Is He"): "I am young . . . (but angry) . . ."
 Elihu embodies the presence of new things to consider—new insights (revelations which
 only come to light in the context of suffering?) Note 32.8
- Ch 33: First poem of Elihu Note 33.6—"I am at your level—God is not!"
 33.23ff: God gives grace, humankind does not find his own deliverance. NOTE 33.26-28:
 Confession – forgiveness—redemption—proclamation.
- Ch 34: Second poem of Elihu: God's justice
 34.9: A statement which must be challenged if we are to have live with God (see 34.14)
 34.35-37: Job rebels against God by claiming his innocence demands explanation for his
 suffering. (Spiritual pride of a different kind, which expects divine accountability.)
- Ch 35: Third poem of Elihu: God operates apart from the influence of human beings. We have
 no right to claim "rights" from God. Job has been judging God's behavior by his own
 standard.
- Ch 36.1-25: Fourth poem of Elihu (It is implied that God is speaking through Elihu): 36.8-10
 raises the truth that there can be a divine Purpose in suffering. 36.24ff: Humans would
 do well to contemplate this in times of suffering, and even praise God for God's activity

to produce a God-desired outcome.

36.36-37.22: Fifth poem of Elihu: Nature itself confirms that God is Sovereign.

37.23-24: Elihu's final word: No human wisdom can substitute for fear of God/humility before God.

The Theophany: 38.1-42.6 God Himself speaks

38.1-40.5: First Discourse of the Lord: God's "resume;" 40.1f, invitation: Go ahead, Job, ask Me! 40.1 "faultfinder:" (Implication: Job is guilty of insolence toward God)

40.3-5: Job declines to press his questions or "inquire" further.

40.6-41.34: Second Discourse of the Lord: Job is silent, but has given no indication that he understands any more than he did before. There has been no articulate recognition of divine Sovereignty on Job's part.

40.8: the central theme of the Book of Job: human self-righteousness and self-idolatry leads the human heart to condemn God. Pride is at the root of this.

40.15-24: God is in control of events; not even any evil power is beyond God-imposed limits.

41.1-34: Human control is a self-deceiving illusion. Only God has Power over all things.

41.34: He is King over all he sons of pride: God is Sovereign, not (ever) any human.

Job answers God: 42.1-6: Job now realizes the magnitude of his own error, and the Sovereignty of God. He (Job) was ignorant; even his refusal to respond to God's Theophanic invitation to question Him reflects not humility, but human striving to maintain some degree of control.

Now Job realizes that not only IS God in control, but that ONLY God CAN be in control—and that this is the only "Right" reality that can possibly be.

Further (42.5-6), though Job had heard OF God, Job never truly KNEW God—yet even his own ignorance is no excuse, so Job sincerely repents of his rebellious insolence and even turns in disgust from his former identity and nature ("I despise myself")—the genuine condition of the truly penitent in all contexts.

Epilogue: 42.7-17: God rebukes Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, and imposes sacrifices of penance on them. NOTE that they make their sacrifices not to God, but to Job, and Job's intercession is what proves decisive in the mercy God grants.

42.10: Job's willingness to seek mercy even for these who had abandoned friendship for judgmentalness and dismissiveness of Job's own point of view as well as his wretched condition.

Intercessory power was a hallmark of many ancient legends, across cultural and regional lines. In this case, Job's effective intercession for others also unlocks divine restoration of his own wealth, of loved ones, and of the status of patriarch.

Note that nowhere in the "double restitution" is healing of Job's physical afflictions mentioned, but Job dies after a very long life "full of days," indicating "a blessed and rich life."

Questions:

How do human beings "judge" God and "condemn" God today?

Consider the decisive role of "Elihu." Are we meant to be "voices of Elihu" in our world?

Have you had experiences of "truth insight" and self-horror/repentance such as Job evidenced in 42.5-6? Can one truly "know" oneself before truly "knowing" God?