THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB
Introduction

When the New Testament writer James says, "You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about," he could assume that his audience was familiar with the story. Indeed, most Christians are familiar with at least the opening of the story and perhaps the ending, though far less know much about the dialogues, arguments, and defenses that make up the larger part of the book. Still, some pithy phrases from the book, such as, "skin and bones" and "skin of the teeth" (19:20), along with "the root of the matter" (19:28) and "weighed in the balance" (31:6), are idioms from the Book of Job that have passed into the common English vocabulary.

THE TEXT OF JOB

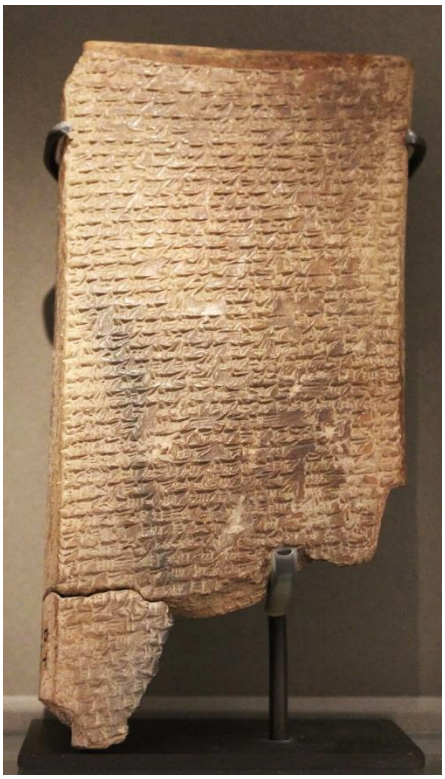
It is generally agreed that the Hebrew text of Job is difficult. For one thing, there are more than 175 hapax legomena in the book, which is to say, it has many words that appear only here and no place else in the Hebrew Bible.

The English versions reflect this textual diversity to greater or lesser degrees. Many of the more recent English versions offer footnoting with alternative readings based on the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Vulgate, as well as various other ancient sources, along with regular notations that the meaning of certain Hebrew words is uncertain.

Many questions remain ongoing concerning this book. In the first place, it is anonymous (written in the 3rd person), and speculation about its authorship has ranged from Moses to some unknown Jew in the post-exilic period. It apparently did not come from Job himself, since the setting includes the insider's view of the spirit world, including the *satan*, something which Job never discovered.

Cultural Context and Genre

Wisdom literature in the ancient Near East is widely attested. In Mesopotamia, for instance, the poetic monologue, "I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom," depicts a sort of Babylonian Job, a man who is described as struggling with the fact that the god Marduk has allowed him to suffer, even though he is righteous. Though he hoped that ritual piety would make a difference, he nonetheless asked, "Oh that I only knew that these things are well pleasing to a god!" In the end, like the biblical Job, he was restored and offered a thanksgiving hymn and offerings.



The so-called Babylonian Job, a 7th century BC poem.
Louvre, Paris

A geographical feature of the Book of Job is its link to Edom. Job is described as a "man of the sons of the east" (1:3), a description depicting those areas east and south of the Jordan, the ancient land of Edom (Is. 11:14). Edom had a reputation for being a wisdom center (1 Kg. 4:30). Uz, Job's land, is associated with several southern ethnicities, one of which is Edom (Je. 25:20-21; La. 4:21). Of Job's friends, Eliphaz came from Teman, an Edomite city which was also a center for wisdom (Je. 49:7; Ob. 8). If so, then it is likely that the accompanying friends who appear early in the book are Edomite as well.

That Job was a non-Israelite seems probable, not only because he is categorized as a "man of the east," but also because he is enumerated along with other pious non-Israelites (Eze. 14:14, 20).

Was Job an Historical Person?

This question is directly related to the genre of the book. Of course, depending upon the genre, a piece of literature need not be historical to be truthful (parables, for instance, are not necessarily historical, though we believe them to be truthful). Still, in the Talmud, some rabbis argued against the idea that Job was merely typological, while others argued the reverse. The mention of Job in the Bible alongside other historical persons suggests that ancient biblical writers thought of him as historical (Eze. 14:14, 20; Ja. 5:11). It seems hardly likely that an Israelite who wanted to write a parabolic story about wisdom would choose a descendent of Esau as the protagonist. Christians up until the time of the Reformation generally treated Job as historical, though there were exceptions (e.g., Theodore of Mopsuestia, d. AD 428). Luther, while he did not deny a historical core, suggested that it was poetically idealized. Catholics, responding to Luther, argued that if Job was not strictly historical, the book perpetrated a fraud, and more than one writer urged that the conversations in the book were literal transcriptions (and in poetry, no less!). Alternatively, some more recently have argued that the story was purely a poetical creation or myth (i.e., C. S. Lewis). Today the widely held opinion is that while Job's story may rest on an historical core, the biblical author has used this core and embellished it in order to underscore his moral lesson.

Perhaps the best answer still is Luther's, that is, that the underlying basic story concerns a real person and a real tragedy occurring some time in antiquity, but this basic story has been stylized and poetically enhanced to accentuate the moral and philosophical issues it addresses. There is

no reason why such a view should undercut the Christian view that this work is divinely inspired and truthful.

Structure

Inasmuch as most of the Book of Job is largely composed in poetry, it should come as no surprise that the overall structure of the composition displays symmetry as well. The book has, as it were, "book ends," the prose prologue and epilogue. These "book ends" framing the central poetic part of the book serve to emphasize the speeches that are described between them. Here is how the material in the book is ordered:

Prose Prologue (1-2)
Job's Opening Lament (3)
The Three Cycles of Dialogues:
- *Eliphaz and Job (4-7)*
- *Bildad and Job (8-10)*
- *Zophar and Job (11-14)*
- *Eliphaz and Job (15-17)*
- *Bildad and Job (18-19)*
- *Zophar and Job (20-21)*
- *Eliphaz and Job (22-24)*
- *Bildad and Job (25-27)*

Poetic Interlude on Wisdom (28)
The Series of Monologues
- *Job (29-31)*
- *Elihu (32-37)*
- *Yahweh (38:1—40:2; 40:6—41:34)*

Job's Closing Contrition (40:3-5; 42:1-6)
Prose Epilogue (42:7-17)

Meaning

While there are many lessons to be learned from the Book of Job, perhaps the single most important one is that conventional wisdom often falls conspicuously short. While Job's downfall and suffering is the setting that precedes the various speeches, the speeches themselves, which are the heart of the book, concern the basic assumption on the part of Job's friends that suffering is cause and effect and that justice is to be achieved in the present life. Particularly is this true in an ancient society that viewed all experiences and outcomes to be directly attributable to God. Righteous conduct was rewarded by material blessing, and the guilty received their just deserts, both reward and punishment coming in this life and at the hand of God. At best there was only a vague concept, if any, of immortality and justice beyond the present life.

This, then, underscores the importance of the prologue, where Job is described as a man of impeccable character (1:1). Though he was rich (1:2-3), he was utterly devout (1:4-5). He

responded to tragedy with worship and integrity (1:20-22; 2:9-10). This setting is essential, because the book is not about the suffering that Job deserved but the suffering of a man who was righteous (2:3). The bulk of the book, of course, details the series of conversations between Job and his friends, each of whom attempted to offer wisdom on why Job's tragedy had occurred. In general, his friends argued that suffering was punitive (4:7-9; 5:17; 8:20; 11:2-6) or redemptive (36:10-11), and any defense suggesting otherwise was an attack upon God's justice (8:1-7).

Job, for his part, struggled with universal questions. Can anyone truly understand the depth of another's suffering (6:1-3)? When a lowly human confronts a sovereign God, how can he hope to be counted righteous (9:1-3, 14-20)? Is there anyone in the universe who can legitimately arbitrate between human creatures and Almighty God (9:32-33)? How does God himself perceive human suffering (10:3-4)? Can God, because he longs for relationship with his creatures, cover over human sin (14:14-17)? Why is there such inequity in human suffering (21:23-26)? And most important, why does God seem silent in the face of such suffering; why does he postpone justice (23:3-9; 24:1)?

Throughout his crucible, Job defended his innocence while berating his friends for their callous presumptions (12:1-3; 13:2-19; 16:1-4; 21:34; 26:1-4; 27:1-6; 31:5-34). In the end, he consigned his case to God (31:35, 40b). Indeed, God finally answered Job, but the resolution to his universal questions remains shrouded in mystery. At no point did God explain Job's suffering. Rather, he left Job with two conclusions—but both are at the heart of the message of the book. First, the problem of evil and human suffering was bigger than Job's capacity to understand (38:1-2; 40:1-5; 42:1-6). Second, the notion that suffering was simply cause and effect—the solution offered by Job's friends—was wrong (42:7-8). In the end, while the Book of Job does not fully explain the problem of evil, it does warn the reader against superficial solutions, especially the notion that all suffering is punitive. Indeed, the very same point would be made many centuries later by Christ Jesus himself (Jn. 9:1-3; Lk. 13:1-5).

Water color of the attack upon Job by William Blake

In the larger picture, the questions of Job would eventually be answered in the coming of God's Son. Does God understand human suffering? Can humans be righteous before a holy God? Is there a mediator who can fully relate to both God and human life? Will God cover human sin so that he might have relationship with his creatures? Will there be justice in the end? To all these questions there is a resounding "yes" in the incarnation, suffering, and resurrection of the Son of God.