

## THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB

### The Prologue (1:1—2:10)

#### The Introduction (1:1-5)

The primary emphasis in the prose prologue is upon Job's integrity, which is stated in the opening sentence in unequivocal language (1:1). Like Abraham, he was wealthy in the ancient Near Eastern commodities of huge herds of cattle, sheep, donkeys, and camels, not to mention abundant servants/slaves. Unlike Abraham, however, Job was not a nomad, and later passages indicate that he lived in towns (cf. 29:7ff.). Most importantly, however, was not his wealth but his moral rectitude. He even offered sacrifices for his sons and daughters just in case they had sinned,<sup>1</sup> and such sacrifices belong to an historical context either earlier than the Levitical system or at the very least outside it, since Job served as priest for his own family (1:2-5).

#### The Adversary (1:6-12)

The introduction of the *satan* among the sons of God offers the reader a glimpse behind the scenes into the invisible world. The presence of the *satan* in the divine council comes as something of a surprise, and perhaps the fact that he alone is questioned by God about his business might suggest that he is an interloper (1:7; 2:2).

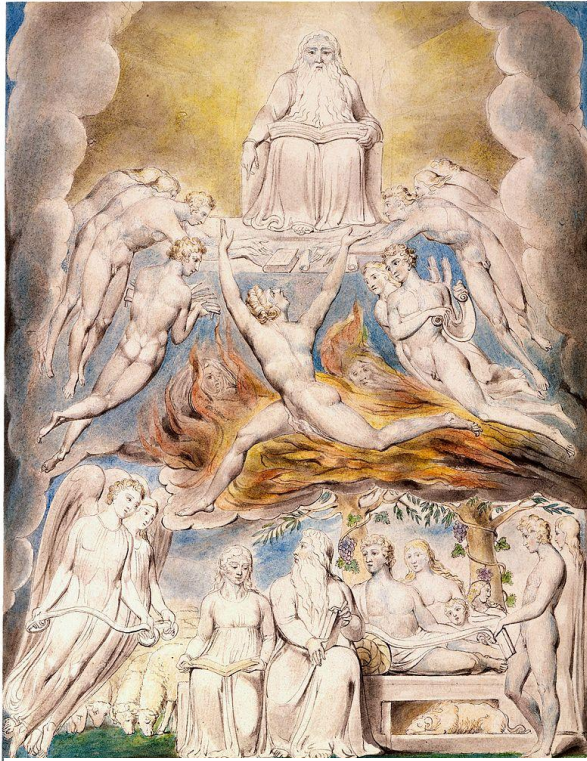
The Hebrew word שָׁטָן (*satan*) can function as both a title and a name (differentiated in biblical Hebrew by whether or not the definite article is used). In the Book of Job, the word is invariably used with the definite article, which means that technically it is a title, not a name, despite the fact that most English Versions capitalize it based on tradition (1:6-9, 12; 2:1-4, 6-7). Elsewhere, this title is used to describe a human enemy or adversary (1 Sa. 29:4; 1 Kg. 5:4; 11:14, 23, 25). In at least one instance it seems to be used of a prosecutor in a court of law (Ps. 109:6), and in others it seems to depict a spirit-being whose primary function is to accuse persons before God (Zec. 3:1; 1 Chr. 21:1), leading to the New Testament designation that he is the "accuser of the brothers" (Rv. 12:10). Insofar as this accuser indicts those whom God favors, he is implicitly the adversary of God, ostensibly making accusation in order to uphold God's honor, but in reality, opposing him.

#### THE DIVINE COUNCIL

*The idea of a heavenly council of spirit-beings, all under the creatorship and sovereignty of Yahweh, is widely attested in the Hebrew Bible. In several books, there appears the description of this council that attends Almighty God and is accountable to him. These heavenly beings, the "myriads of holy ones" (Dt. 33:2) or "council of holy ones" (Ps. 89:5-7), is presided over by God himself, who calls them to account (Ps. 82:1), and when necessary, passes judgment on them (Ps. 82:6). In the Book of Job, the satan himself is called to account along with all the other heavenly creatures (Job 1:6-7; 2:1-2).*

It is to the point that the subject of Job is raised, not by the *satan*, but by Yahweh, an example *par excellence* of an upright human (one who, implicitly, stands in contrast to this *satan*, who

<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew expression בְּלִבָּם אֱלֹהִים בָּרְכוּ in 1:5, "...and they blessed God in their hearts..." is likely a euphemism for cursing, and all English Versions take it in this way. It is an example of the Hebrew reluctance to place the word "curse" in juxtaposition to the word "God" (see 1 Kg. 21:10, 13; Ps. 10:3 for the same euphemism).



*Water color by William Blake of the satan  
before God*

seeks to undermine the divine purpose). The *satan's* business in going back and forth in the earth sets the precedent for Peter's later description of the devil as "prowling around" (1 Pe. 5:8). Job, by contrast, is one of those rare specimens of complete integrity, and when Yahweh sees such a righteous man, he is delighted (cf. Is. 42:1). The *satan*, for his part, is cynical, which is his essential character, what one commentator called "studied disbelief." In seeking to shift the focus from Job's piety to the more ambiguous issue of motives, the *satan* at once impugns both the character of God and the character of Job. His rhetorical question, "Does Job fear God for naught?" assumes the general posture that religious people only serve God for what they can get out of him—and Yahweh is himself complicit in this hypocrisy and self-deception. Take away the benefits of protection, and Job's apparent faith and faithfulness will shrivel!

Then comes the test challenge. "Remove the 'hedge' (an agricultural metaphor for protection)," says the *satan*, "and Job will 'bless' you to your face!"<sup>2</sup> In other words, the indictment is that Job's piety is based on love of self, not love for God. The *satan*, of course, has no power to remove such a hedge on his own. While there is evil in the world, the Book of Job does not countenance any sort of eternal dualism, such as one finds in Zoroastrianism or some forms of eastern thought. The *satan* is a creature, at best, and while hostile and powerful he is not the equal and opposite of God. As C. S. Lewis astutely observed in his introduction to *The Screwtape Letters*, Satan's true counterpart is Michael, not God. So, this is the challenge. The *satan* asserts that Job will curse God if his privileges are struck down, not merely in the silence of his heart but in God's very face. To this challenge Yahweh consents with only the restriction that while the *satan* can attack Job, he cannot strike his person, only what he has.

Here, then, are the fundamental questions in the book. **Is God sufficiently good that he can be loved for himself alone, not merely for what he gives? Can a mere human maintain his trust in God when there are no reciprocal benefits?** God says, "Yes!" while the *satan* sneers, "No!"

### **The First Stroke (1:13-22)**

The *satan* now takes advantage of his permitted freedom to attack Job, and in rapid succession a series of horrific blows remove from Job his wealth and his children. Raiding parties were the

<sup>2</sup> Here, the euphemism using "bless" means "curse." As before, it reflects the Hebrew protocol of not using the word "curse" when referring to the divine Being.

common experience of ancient Near Eastern life, and two of the disasters were from such attacks. The others were natural disasters, a tremendous lightning strike<sup>3</sup> and a desert sirocco. Together, these four strokes describe two kinds of evil, moral evil from self-conscious and intentionally malignant invaders and natural evil where self-consciousness is not a factor. The identical formula is used to describe all four consecutive disasters, and in each instance, there was only a single survivor left to report. The completeness of Job's piety is now matched by the completeness of his destruction.

It is Job's response to these disasters that now takes center stage. In the typical gestures of mourning in the ancient Near East, he tore his robe in consternation (cf. Ge. 37:34; Jos. 7:6; 2 Sa. 1:11, etc.) and shaved his head (cf. Ezr. 9:3; Is. 22:12; Je. 7:29, etc.). Prostrating himself, he worshipped in the midst of disaster. This is the initial answer to the *satan's* cynical challenge. Contrary to the *satan's* sneering predictions, Job humbly submits himself to God. Of course, Job was not privy to the behind-the-scenes machinations of the *satan*, so he attributed all the disasters to God himself in what Soren Kierkegaard regarded as a supreme example of true piety. He does not first say, "The Lord took..." which is the human default response, but rather, "The Lord gave..." which is the recognition that all the good things he had received in life had been in the first place the gifts of the good and gracious Giver. Job's loss only accentuated his gratitude for what he had previously enjoyed. He does not regard those things as "rights," as though they were things deserved and inappropriately removed by an arbitrary deity, but he accepts them as undeserved blessings for which to be grateful, and in this recognition, he could say with total conviction, "Yahweh's name be blessed!" The narrator's conclusion, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong," proved the *satan's* cynicism to be empty. Job did *not* serve God merely for the benefits he received; he served God for God himself. He had the same thankfulness, the same love, the same reverence for God as he had had when all was well.

### The Second Stroke (2:1-10)

**C. S. Lewis and Complex Good**  
 Lewis makes a helpful distinction between what he calls the "simple good" and "simple evil" as opposed to "complex good."

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| <p><b>Simple Good &amp; Simple Evil</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Simple good is that which comes from God to all his creatures to greater or lesser degrees, and for Job, this would be his initial blessings.</li> <li>◦ Simple evil is what is produced by rebellious creatures, and for Job, this would be the attacks upon his prosperity.</li> </ul> | <p><b>Complex Good</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Complex good is when God exploits evil for his own redemptive purposes, and the acceptance of suffering contributes to this goodness.</li> <li>◦ The good that comes is not suffering, as such, but rather the way in which the sufferer approaches his trial, where a greater good can be achieved than otherwise.</li> </ul> |
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The language describing the setting for the second stroke parallels exactly the language of the first, with the *satan* giving account of himself to Yahweh. This time, however, Yahweh not only calls attention to Job, but he also points out that Job has maintained integrity in spite of his great loss.

Still, the *satan* would not abandon his cynicism, for cynicism is the essence of the satanic. So, the game was still "on." The *satan* asserted that if Job's own person was afflicted, then he certainly would curse ("bless") God

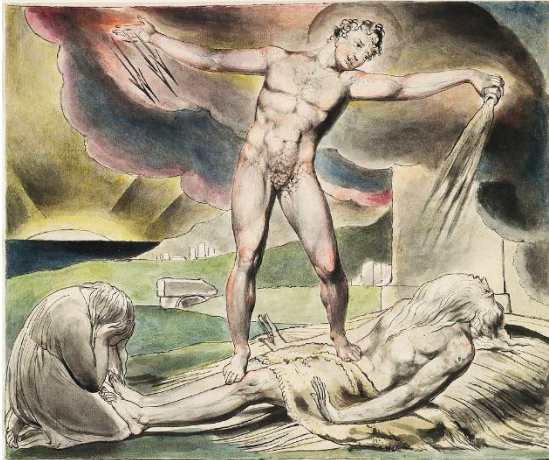
<sup>3</sup> The "fire of God" (שֶׁ֔ת) is a biblical idiom for lightning (cf. 1 Kg. 18:38; 2 Kg. 1:10-14).



to his face. To this challenge Yahweh assented with the single restriction that the *satan* could not kill Job. As before, Yahweh was still sovereign, and the *satan*, while the agent of destruction, could not proceed beyond the limits set by Almighty God. Hence, there is the anomaly that the misfortunes of Job derive from God's "stretched out hand" (1:11; 2:5), but the actual agent of misery is the *satan*. One sees this same anomaly in other biblical passages as well (cf. 2 Sa. 24:1; 1 Chr. 21:1).

The *satan* now attacked Job's health, striking him with terrible sores from head to foot. Diagnosing an illness from an ancient text is risky, at best, but at least we know that the word שָׂרָא generally concerns the skin (Ex. 9:10; Lv. 13:18). Suggestions ranging from boils to leprosy to elephantiasis are not uncommon. Residual effects described later include unbearable itching (2:8), disfigurement (2:12), maggots in the ulcerous outbreaks (7:5), nightmares (7:14), failing eyesight (16:16; 17:7), bad breath (19:17), rotting teeth (19:20), emaciation (16:8; 17:7; 19:20), joint deterioration (30:17), and discolored and peeling skin (30:28, 30). Job sewed for himself loose sackcloth clothing for a minimum of relief (16:15). The misery went on month after month (7:3). Like an outcast pottery shard, Job continued to sit in grief and consternation in the rubbish dump at the edge the city.

Now, his wife becomes a sounding board for the *satan*, urging Job to "bless" (curse) God and die.<sup>4</sup> Her words show that all his family relationships were now fractured, and he was truly alone in his suffering. In an era when the afterlife was hardly contemplated, death was preferable. Job, however, mildly rebuked his wife (he does not accuse her of blasphemy, but foolishness). He reasserts his earlier faithfulness to God: it is God's right because he is God to both give and take



*The satan attacks Job with boils.  
Watercolor by William Blake.*

away, and as before, he speaks of God's gifts before speaking of his deprivations. The narrator adds the majestic conclusion as before, "Job did not sin with his lips" (cf. 1:22). Some have suggested that the phrase "with his lips" might imply that he sinned in his heart, even if not verbally, but this would contradict God's own assessment at the end that Job had spoken faithfully (cf. 42:7-8). Rather, it was the sin "with the lips" (he will curse God to his face) that the *satan* had predicted, and now, that cynical prediction had proved false. After this scene, the *satan* will disappear from the rest of the book.

<sup>4</sup> The LXX has a longer passage here, which seems to ameliorate the seemingly insensitivity of his wife's words somewhat. Here is Alexander Pope's translation: *After a long time had passed his wife said to him, "How long will you endure and say, 'See, I will wait a bit longer, looking for the hope of my salvation.' Look, your memory is already blotted out from the earth [along with] the sons and daughters, the travail and pangs of my womb, whom I reared in toil for nothing. And you, you sit in wormy decay, passing the nights in the open, while I roam and drudge from place to place, and from house to house, waiting for the sun to go down, so that I may rest from my toils and the griefs which now grip me. Now, say some word against the Lord, and die."*