

THE BOOK OF JOB

1. PROSE PROLOGUE (1-2)
2. JOB'S COMPLAINT (3)
3. FIRST DIALOGUES (4-14)
4. SECOND DIALOGUES (15-21)
5. THIRD DIALOGUES (22-27)
6. MEDITATION ON WISDOM (28)
7. JOB'S LAST COMMENTS (29-31)
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INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The book of Job is a type of literature known as 'Wisdom' literature somewhat common in the Ancient Near East beginning about 4,000 B.C. Other books in the bible of this genre are Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

This type of literature tries to address the big 'why' questions that have to do with human suffering and the unfairness of life in the world. They also address other basic questions of human experience such as: What do I need to do to have a happy and secure life? How can I get along better with my neighbour? Is it true that I will prosper if I am good and follow the rules? Is there a principle of fair play in the world?

Depending on the book, different answers are offered to these questions. Some writings reflect a strong belief in a straightforward system such as Proverbs 10-22. If you follow some basic rules of behaviour you will prosper and live a long life, while ignoring these rules will lead to ruin. Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, recognizes that those who try to live a decent life often suffer and those who act selfishly often prosper.

The book of Job mirrors the above discussion. It was written over many generations and each new layer shows a new stage of development that took place in the faith of the writer and the community of which he/she was a part. The oldest part of Job is 1-2, 42, which tell of a man named Job who proved faithful under severe testing and was subsequently rewarded. Over time, the poetry sections were added to expand and comment on the original story. The later sections contain almost every explanation possible for why calamities happen in the world. Job wrestles to understand what has happened to him and what his experience of suffering implies about God. Indeed, he talks about God as if God is a split personality. On the one hand, God is gracious and kind, and one whom Job has worshiped throughout his life. On the other hand God is malicious, waiting for any opportunity to make humans suffer. Such a God is one to be hidden from. Job struggles to reconcile these two faces of God.

The end of the book, however, is worth the wait. Job receives a vision of God that restores his relationship with God in a way more full and deep than before. While the book never quite answers the question why, it stands as a glorious testimony to God's continuing presence in human lives and the power of faith to persist in the face of overwhelming tragedy.

The book of Job is ultimately about hope, perseverance, and a knowing and experiencing of God on a whole new level.

1) CHAPTERS 1-2

Even though there are a few references in other parts of the bible that refer to Job, he may be the stuff of legend as much as he may be a real historical figure. And the opening two chapters certainly lend credence to the “legend” point of view. 1:1 starts with a “once upon a time” kind of opening sentence, and we are introduced to a man who is basically faultless and flawless, and who has everything. As we shall see this is necessary so that the issue in question can be addressed (why do bad things happen to good people in a world that is believed to be controlled by God).

The word Job probably means “hated” or “persecuted” and this suggests that Job is best known as a man who experienced great misfortune and loss.

Chapters 1-2 are structured around 5 scenes:

- 1) 1:1-5 – on earth: an introduction to Job, a wealthy, wise and blameless man
- 2) 1:6-12 – in heaven: God and the Satan create the first test for Job
- 3) 1:13-22 – on earth: the Satan carries out the test; Job remains blameless
- 4) 2:1-7 – in heaven: God and the Satan devise a second test for Job
- 5) 2:7-13 – on earth: the Satan carries out the second test; Job remains blameless; Job is joined by three friends, which provides a transition to Chapter 3.

The Satan is not to be confused with Satan, the fallen angel, who is an active figure in the gospels. In the opening chapters of Job, the Satan is like the “prosecutor” in the heavenly court, addressing God about the kinks in the world and in creation. He is not especially bad, just suspicious of any person who claims goodness and righteousness.

Why does God co-operate with the Satan’s scheme? Is it not cruel what God permits done to Job? Then again, perhaps God is interested in finding out whether Job’s faith and worship are based on fear or hope for reward, rather than on a heart felt commitment to God and a conviction that God is the source of all that is good come hell or high water.

Job passes the test with flying colours, at least in chapters 1-2. If God is the cause (as God must be since God controls everything according to ancient middle-eastern faith) then Job will not resist. Job accepts what has been, what is, and what will be. He will receive whatever God will give and whatever is taken away.

But already in this idyllic opening story, important questions are raised. 1) Do people worship God and believe in God because they hope to benefit in some way, or because they want to be protected from the bad that can come their way? Obviously what happens to Job tears through this kind of faith. 2) How ought we to respond when bad things happen? Job initial response in these opening chapters is acceptance. However else we respond and whatever else we do, acceptance is a hugely important part of the spiritual journey when bad things happen or hardship befalls us.

Several people are introduced into the story. Job's wife may seem like a negative figure, for she harasses Job to give up his faith and condemn God. From another angle, though, she may represent a side of Job he is wrestling with. How long will he hold on to his faith in God and in a certain world view before it all breaks down. Maybe Job has questions in his heart that his wife is verbalizing.

Also, three friends are identified. They come to visit Job and their initial encounter is powerfully poignant. They would have known Job in the past as a healthy, vibrant man, with incredible wealth and hospitality. Now they behold a crumpled up, grotesque figure who has lost it all. They have no words to speak. They sit with him in silence for 7 days. The introduction of these friends is a segway to the next section 3-27, which will form a poetic dialogue between Job and his friends. Even though Job's friends have come to bring him comfort and support, in the end they will exacerbate his suffering.

Some questions to reflect on:

- 1) Job is described as a man of integrity, one who is "blameless and upright," who fears God and turns away from evil. What does having integrity mean to you? Who are models of integrity for you?
- 2) We hear people say that people get what they deserve. What do they mean by that? Is it true?
- 3) Why do we worship God? What would it mean to worship God "for nothing" (Job's wife's comment)?
- 4) Job's friends heard of his suffering and came to console and comfort him. When they saw him they were shocked into wordlessness and moved to tears. Have you experienced this kind of thing?