

## Job

### Session 1 Introduction and Prologue (Chapters 1 and 2)

The relationships between the opening two chapters of Job (the prologue) and the rest of the book have long been controversial. If one only read the first two chapters, it could be said that Job is a person of exemplary and quite incredible patience. This has long been the way he has been remembered; the “patience of Job” has become proverbial. (NOTE: In the New Testament book of James, the King James translation reads at 5:11 “Ye have heard of the patience of Job,” while in the New Revised Standard the same verse reads “You have heard of the endurance of Job.” In vs.10, the NRSV reads “suffering and patience,” but the Greek word for “patience” there is different than in vs.11. It is quite clear that there is a world of difference between the idea of “patience” and “endurance.”) And whether we read “patience” or “endurance” is important for the understanding of the book. Job’s so-called patience lasts precisely two chapters, making me wonder whether many commentators read beyond the prologue when making judgments about the meaning of the book! But his endurance is indeed quite legendary. Perhaps James was not so wrong in his use of Job as example after all.

But why is the prologue important for an understanding of the book? By means of the prologue we learn the following:

Job is an absolutely righteous man; this is said by the teller of the story, vs.1:1 and by YHWH, the Lord, vs.8. Thus, when Job loses his family, his goods, and his health, it cannot be because of some evil on his part.

Because that is true, we know that the friends’ later attempts to say that Job is getting what he deserves is false; Job does not deserve what happens to him.

And because that fact is true, the question of how God acts in the world is raised in a very direct way. If God does not reward and punish in response to what you and I do, then how are we to understand the actions of God in our lives? Thus, the story of Job is most basically about the nature of God and God's actions in the world.

If the book was written in the Babylonian exile of Israel (597BCE-539BCE), as most scholars assume, this basic theological issue would have been important. The exiles wondered what had happened to the ancient promises of their God for land, temple, king, priesthood, all of which had come to an abrupt end under the onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar and the armies of Babylon. Were God's promises false or non-existent? How can God now be conceived outside of the land of promise, without sacrifice in the sacred temple, without the leadership of the priests and the king?

And the theological issue is also raised by the twice-told story of the heavenly court, where the "heavenly beings" (literally: "children of God" or "the gods"), 1:6, 2:1, assemble to discuss whatever it is that such courts discuss. Among these heavenly beings is one known as "the Satan." Each time his name is given, the definite article, "the" is used. This is important, because the figure here should not be seen as the devil many know from later ideas. The word "satan" means "adversary." Perhaps "prosecuting attorney" would be close to what the word means in an ancient legal context. Some scholars think that the word is derived from a Persian word for "spy." The role of the Satan, we are told, is to observe the actions of human beings and to report those actions to the ruler of heaven. There is nothing inherently evil in the work of the Satan.

Twice YHWH, the Lord, says to the Satan that Job is God's servant and that he is perfectly righteous. Twice the Satan responds that Job is only righteous because he is safe and

comfortable. Twice the Satan is given permission by the Lord to destroy any sense of Job's comfort and safety. Job first responds that "the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away; blessed be YHWH's name" 1:21. His next response, this time to the loss of his health, is a question to his grieving wife: "Shall we accept good at God's hand and not accept bad" 2:10? Is it possible that Job's pious certainty in chapter 1 is followed in chapter 2 by a less certain question?

The first three friends of Job come from afar, we are told "to console and comfort him" (2:11). They sit in silence for seven days, weeping and tearing their robes in traditional mourning, witnessing his great suffering. Commonly, this silence is interpreted as sympathy on the part of the friends. However, given their behavior in the remainder of the story, their constant and increasingly ugly attempts to convince Job and themselves that Job's position on the trash heap is fully deserved, one might at least wonder whether their silence is the result of their certainty, when first they see him, that Job is evil. After all, in their worldview only truly evil people end up on trash heaps.

However we understand the actions of the friends in chapter 2, in chapter 3, Job opens his mouth and curses the day of his birth, wishing he had never been born (3:3-11), hoping that the day itself would disappear from the calendar (3:6), that it might be swallowed up by the fearsome monster, Leviathan (3:8). Job longs to be in the place of the dead, Sheol, where there is rest from labor and pain, where the wicked are not in control, where slaves are free (3:13-19). In short, Job rejects the greatest gift that an Israelite could receive from God, namely life itself. And he begins his accusations of God by asking just why life is given to a person whose days are pain and suffering, whose nights are endless. But more: why does God not give some notion of the point of it all (3:23)? The suffering itself is bad enough, says Job, but the apparent pointlessness

of it is equally cruel.

Job ends his tirade with this: “I have no rest, but trouble comes,” 3:26. The fact that Eliphaz and his two friends are about to speak suggests that Job’s trouble is far from over. It is possible that in the story, the friends hoped that Job would remain silent and simply die, confirming their belief that wicked folk get what they deserve from the God who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. But far from silence and death what the friends hear is a sufferer who demands the truth about his life and inches toward the conviction that God has in his case made some sort of ghastly mistake: Job agrees with the friends that God rewards and punishes, and because that is true he should be receiving rewards rather than life among smelly fish heads and orange rinds. All our characters agree that God rewards and punishes; but they disagree about that divine work in the case of Job. With that disagreement, the conflict truly begins.

#### Additional Questions for Discussion

What is important about the prologue for your understanding of the rest of the book?

Does the picture of God presented in the prologue trouble you? If so, in what ways?

Session 2 The Dialogue Chapters 3-7

Session 3 The Dialogue Chapters 8-14

Session 4 The Dialogue Chapters 15-27

The dialogue between Job and his first three friends is a genuine dialogue; they actually do speak to one another. However, the dialogue is often joined in very subtle ways, often at the level of the repetition of words or phrases. If the reader does not observe these dialogic connections, the long speeches can become tedious and boring, saying the same things over and over. Hence, a very careful reading is called for. (See my book for specific examples.)

It is also important to differentiate the four speakers. In my book, I have suggested that each of the speakers should be imagined quite specifically in terms of their voices and their dress. I urge you to use your own imagination to bring these characters to life for you. If they do not become real, the book becomes a philosophical debate, far removed from lived reality. I believe that each of them is an example known to the author and thus known to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The content of the dialogue is quite simple. The friends are convinced that Job must have sinned terribly to deserve his miserable life on the trash heap. Job is just as convinced that he has done nothing worthy of such horrors. To the friends, God is merely acting in the way God always acts, punishing the wicked appropriately. For them, Job is the poster child for evil and its inevitable rewards, and they say this to him in as many ways as they can imagine in their speeches. To Job, God's actions are completely incomprehensible. Job has always been a good and pious man; his actions in the prologue make that clear. The fact that he finds himself alone, sitting among the trash, clothed in a stinking shred of one of his former fine garments, scraping his suppurating sores with a broken piece of his finest dinnerware, first leads him to profound depression and then desire for death (see chapters 7, 10, 14).

Yet along the way, Job begins to desire a meeting with God in order to discover what has happened in his appalling experience. Has he done something terrible of which he is unaware (6:24-30)? Has God picked him out for special attack (7:12; 9:13-20; 16:7-17)? Is God some sort of sadist (7:12-14) or monster (9:22-24)? Job's inability to understand, and his increasing suffering at the hands of his friends, lead him to say the most astonishing things about them and about God (see 6:14-30 about the friends and 19:23-27 about God).

Perhaps what is notable about the movement of the dialogue is the various sorts of arguments employed by Job and the friends to make their points. Eliphaz claims to have had a direct encounter with the mysterious God, and because he knows God first hand, he insists that that knowledge should trump any claims that Job might make (4:12-21). Bildad insists that he knows the tradition so well that any claim to the contrary is just wrong (8:8-19). Zophar claims a deep acquaintance with the wisdom of God, and because that is so, Job could never say anything that could possibly contradict such divine wisdom (11:5-12). Each of these three, in their first speeches, end by urging Job to repent and by assuring him that after his repentance God will gladly receive him back into God's good graces.

To each of these claims of the friends Job replies in effect that he has heard all this before; he, too, was long schooled in these ways of thinking (6:2-7; 9:2; 12:2-3). But what has changed is Job's current experience. No longer can he calmly hold these beliefs in a simple God of reward and punishment when his own life gives a complete lie to the belief. Hence, he accuses them of mouthing meaningless words out of their own safe positions (12-13), rather than listening to his agony. The friends, says Job, would rather be right in their belief than helpful to his pain, and in that claim Job shines a searching light on those of us who have too often done the same in the face of modern suffering.

Of special note in the dialogue are those three times when Job reaches the very frontiers of Israelite theology and looks for a third party who will help him in his struggle with God. In 9:33 he longs for some sort of “umpire,” an impartial arbitrator who would take away God’s awesome might so that God and Job could discuss quietly and fairly just what God is doing in this situation. Then in 16:18-21, Job announces that his “witness” is in the heavens, ready “to maintain the right of a human with God, just as one does for a neighbor” (vs.21). This sounds rather like a heavenly attorney who would defend Job in God’s court. Lastly, Job thinks of his “redeemer” (or “avenger” or “vindicator”), who would stand up for Job before God, either before or after Job’s death (the Hebrew text is unfortunately not clear enough to make a final judgment on that part of the meaning).

The radical monotheism of that other theologian of the exile, II-Isaiah (chapters 40-55 of that book), is here called into question as Job attempts to find ways in which he can talk to God without fear and to discover why God has chosen him for attack.

The third cycle of speeches ( the first two have followed the same pattern of a friend speech followed by a Joban one) now inexplicably changes; Bildad’s third speech is very short (25:2-6), and Zophar has no third speech at all. Job ends the cycle by insisting on his own integrity and by refusing to admit any falsehood, any lack of righteousness, any evil-doing worthy of God’s monstrous actions against him (27:2-6). In short, we need a speech from God, since the friends have been silenced. We eventually get such a speech, of course, but 10 chapters of other material must be heard before God gets a turn.

### Additional Questions for Discussion

Discuss how you picture each of the friends and Job and why you see them as you do.

What does it mean that Job searches for a mediator of one sort or another in order to talk to God?

How do you understand the famous line 19:25? Is this an important passage for you?

What would you say to a person like Job?

## Session 5 The Speech of Wisdom, Job's Last Speech, and Elihu's Intrusion (28-37)

The material in this section of Job has generated a prodigious amount of comment but little agreement about what it all means. I have in my reading tried to include it all as part of the whole, but I have little doubt that some of it was written by authors different than the author of the dialogue. The discussion can be a complex one, but I will attempt to provide a very brief summary.

### Chapter 28 The Poem on Wisdom

In the book as we have it, chapter 28 is a speech in the mouth of Job, continuing his words from chap.27. This seems unlikely, given the nature of the speech. In very fine poetry, among the book's best, the chapter says one thing: only God knows the way to wisdom. All human attempts to discern wisdom, to capture its essence, are doomed to failure. "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" 28:28. This final line of the speech is familiar in the mouths of the wisdom teachers of Israel (see, for example, similar concerns in Prov.10:27; 14:26,27 and Psalm 111:10). "The fear of the Lord" is more properly "to be in awe of God," rather than to be afraid of God. "Wisdom" is right relationship to the proper



order of the universe. Thus, the poem says that to be in right relationship to the way things are in God's world must begin with the greatest respect and admiration for the one who founded it all, YHWH, the Lord.

Do we expect Job to say such a thing at this point in the story, right after his ringing announcement in the previous chapter that he is not sorry for anything he has said or done in his life, and that his complete integrity is intact? His quite intemperate attacks on God and the friends are included in that claim to integrity. I wonder, to the contrary, whether chapter 28 is not a sort of "word from our sponsor." Is it possible that a reader of the previous dialogue has become distressed at the ugly and fruitless wrangling between Job and his friends, and has offered a reminder that at the end of the day, only God knows what is truly wise and just and good? In effect, this poet attempts to stop the dialogue with a traditional theological sermon, reminding the four speakers that ultimately their argument is useless, since God is the only one who finally can adjudicate any theological debate.

Only one small use of language, however, gives me pause. I warned earlier that the language of the book was often subtle; here is a fine example. In 28:28, we are told that "to fear God is wisdom" and "to depart from evil is understanding." You may remember the phrases, "to fear God" and "to depart from evil." They are found in the very first verse of the book where Job's wonderful piety, the substance of his great wisdom, is precisely "to fear God" and "to depart from evil;" the phrases are identical (1:1). But it could be said that in the prologue Job's fear of God and departure from evil have led him to the trash heap rather than to understanding, to confusion and anger rather than a comfortable wisdom. Is there irony here? Though the poet of chapter 28 may have had in mind the desire to inject theological tradition into the dialogue, the poet/collector of the entire book may have incorporated the poem to show once again that

traditional theology is being called into the most serious question in the book of Job.

### Chapters 29-31

These chapters represent Job's final lengthy speech. They follow a simple pattern. Chap.29 describes the ways in which Job used to be respected and honored in his community. Chap.30 details how that honor has been lost; Job has become a joke (30:1). Chap.31, using the form of an oath, says that Job is innocent of all the terrible accusations brought against him by his friends and by God. This speech represents Hebrew morality at its finest, a summary of the right actions called for by any exemplary Israelite. He concludes the speech with perhaps his most powerful demands to talk to God in the entire book (31:35-37). The reader now expects God at long last to make an appearance and move the drama to its end.

But there is another surprise in store. A heretofore unnamed fourth friend, Elihu, steps onto the stage, and proceeds to speak for the next 6 chapters. It is nearly universally believed by scholars that these speeches are additions to the book by someone who believed that he or she had answers to the questions that had been raised in the dialogue by Job and his three friends. In fact, Elihu adds little to the responses of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar to the angry questions and declarations of Job. If this poet thought to solve the problems of Job, it is very difficult to see how that happens.

My view is that Elihu appears for two very different reasons, neither of which was in the mind of the poet who wrote the speeches. First, he is comic relief. Rather like the comic characters of Shakespearian tragedy—for example, the drunken gatekeeper in Macbeth's Act I—Elihu speaks to provide a needed laugh just as the tale's tension is at its height. It takes Elihu

fully 24 verses to announce to Job that he is about to speak! “My heart is like wine that has no vent” (32:19), he says, and no words were ever more truly spoken. He goes on and on and on, and reading his introductory words aloud can only be heard as funny.

Second, he ironically prepares us to hear the speeches of God by saying that God will never speak to a wicked person like Job in a million years. Anyone who asks questions of God’s justice, as Job has asked again and again, will not hear any answer at all from the God who brooks no argument. “They cry out, but God does not answer,” (35:12) because “God does not hear any empty cry, nor does Shaddai pay attention to it” (35:13). Job’s demands to talk to God are useless, says Elihu; he may shout until blue in the face, but God will never respond to such demands from any wicked person.

But the joke is on Elihu, since the very next sound we all hear is the sound of the voice of the maker of heaven and earth, the mighty YHWH who sweeps on the stage, wrapped in a great storm. It is at last time to discover what God has to say among all these human words.

### Additional Questions for Discussion

What do you think chapter 28 adds to the book of Job?

Are you surprised by the content of Job’s long speech in chapters 29-31 when it is compared with the rest of his words in the dialogue?

What do you make of Elihu? What role do you think he plays in the book?

Session 6 The Speeches of God, the Responses of Job, and the Epilogue to the Tale

An incalculable amount of writing and reflection has been engendered by the ending of the book of Job. One thing is certain; how one understands the speeches of God and Job's responses to them determine how the meaning of the book is understood. I can here only summarize my understandings very briefly. I urge you to read the speeches as carefully as you can, and to ask yourself just how they are answers, or not, to the questions you heard raised in the dialogue of Job and his friends. It is important to remember that though it is said to be God who is speaking, the speeches were written by the poet in order to provide some insight into the drama we have been reading. Too many readers and no few scholars have not taken that fact seriously enough, and have left their critical tools of reading at the base of the storm wind, proclaiming in so many words that God's simple speaking to Job is enough to end all discussion. I do not think that any poet of over 120 lines of some of the best poetry in the Bible would want that work summarized in such a simplistic way. The mere fact of God's speaking is hardly the point; what God says, and how God says it, is very important.

Two general comments: the tone of the speech, especially the first one (38-39) is very harsh, bordering on sarcasm. I used to find the tone infuriating, since I wanted God to answer Job directly. I had hoped for something like: "Well, Job, sometimes I do make a mistake here and there; these things happen. Now, let's go and grab a burger!" Or: "Job, do not be upset; I am finally on your side, not your enemy," throwing a divine arm around his shoulder. But I think the harsh tone is used for two reasons. First, God wants to be taken seriously; the issues at stake are indeed important, including the nature of God, the nature of the universe, the role of humanity in that universe, among others. A light and trivial tone is not appropriate.

Second, and more important, the world, and the God who made and sustains it, is not at

all what Job and his friends think. They imagine the world as a closed-end, mechanical system, where rewards and punishments are doled out by a God who more resembles a slot machine than a creator. The speeches of God, among other things, are designed to state that fact. The first speech demonstrates God's control of sea and ice and wind and storm, but the most important fact of that demonstration is not only God's control, but God's profligate use of all that power. In 38:26 God brings rain "on a land where no one lives, on the desert, empty of human life." In other words, Job, the world does not revolve around you and your narrow-minded notions of your own human justice.

This is also the point of the second part of the first speech, the zoological display of God's creatures (38:39-39:30). The central feature of the list of animals is that not a one of them has anything directly to do with human control. Even the gigantic "war horse" (39:19-25) is described in near supernatural terms, its unstoppable attacks so unlike the wavering courage of the soldiers who ride it. Every other creature is completely wild, from the high-nesting hawk and eagle (39:26-30), to the ridiculous ostrich (39:13-18), whose foolishness is proverbial, who cannot fly like hawks, but who nevertheless can outrun even the mighty horse. Who cares for these, the mountain goat, the wild ass, the wild ox, and the lion? Humans give them not a thought, but God cares for them all. In short, in all things Job and his friends are far from the center of a vast creation, whose wonders and mysteries transcend any idiotic claims of reward and punishment.

It is clear, says God, that nature is red in tooth and claw, that some creatures die that others may live (39:30). That is merely the way of things, and no simplistic divine mechanism can be discerned and enumerated to explain it. God and God's world is not to be reduced to a bumper-sticker theology. But Job's first response to this incredible divine display is a sullen

rejection (40:3-5). “You win, you big bully. You have not listened to a thing I have been saying, just as I predicted (see 9:16). So, I shut up!”

But God will not have it. Job has missed the point of God’s grand sermon, so God must go on to make it plain. Two mythological creatures lumber out of God’s throne room, Behemoth and Leviathan, monsters of land and sea, both of them made by God in precisely the same way God made Job (40:15). Behemoth and Leviathan are in the ancient myths destructive powers of darkness, the former the origin of the many earthquakes endemic to that region of the world, and the latter a huge twisting serpent of the sea, always ready to devour any who dare venture onto his waves. The fact that God made both ends forever any idea that God’s world is easily understood and limited merely to divine responses to human behavior. In short, the speeches of God in the book of Job attempt to put a stop to the idea that there exists in the universe a necessary and understandable connection between human actions and divine reactions. God is free and mysterious, and the world God creates is the image of its creator.

This time Job begins to understand. In his final speech (42:1-6), he admits that he was woefully ignorant of the truth of God, being confined only to “the hearing of the ear,” what he had been taught by teachers like the friends. But now “he sees God,” and his perceptions of life and suffering and the world are forever changed. So, “he recants what he said and changes his mind on dust and ashes” (42:6). (I fear that the translation of the NRSV is flatly impossible and misleading.)

Then God speaks the only time in the book to Eliphaz (who never spoke to God at all!), accusing him of “not speaking what is right,” unlike God’s servant, Job (42:7). That sentence affirms what God’s speeches said; Job and his friends have been completely wrong about who God is. In the epilogue the community is restored, even the friends join a party for Job and his

new family. As for Job, he prays for the friends, those foolish theologians who wished only for his death, and he is restored, but not because he prayed for them. Job is restored because of God's pure gift, God's blessing. And the community is not just like the old one. In this new community, Job's three daughters, not the sons, get names and, more than that, inherit property, a social convention denied to women in other places in the Hebrew tradition (Numbers 27:1-8). And Job dies, full of days, dandling his great- grandchildren on his aged knees. Plainly, this world is a new world indeed.

#### Additional Questions for Discussion

What is the meaning of the book of Job for you?

Does the epilogue (42:7-17) cause problems for your understanding of the book?

How do you hear the speeches of God to Job? Is God angry with Job?

Do you like the character of Job in his book? Why or why not?

John C Holbert

June/July, 2021

