



An Introduction to the Book of Job

Author

While Job is one of the most profound books of the Bible, its anonymous author can be known only through reading between its lines. Certainly he can be numbered among ‘the wise’, as confirmed in Proverbs 24:23, given his fondness for proverbs, which he quotes to develop a point: <<*those who plough iniquity and sow trouble reap the same*>> (4:8); <<*human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward*>> (5:7); <<*a stupid person will get understanding, when a wild ass is born human*>> (11:12).

Although the story of Job has its setting outside Israel to the east and south, Uz is related to Edom, which may be the setting of the book, as confirmed in 2:11 and 6:19, as well as Lamentations 4:21, the author of Job is a Hebrew, thoroughly immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The author of Job was a well-travelled individual who could draw on a wealth of knowledge and experience. He knew the constellations (9:9 and 38:31), could discuss meteorology (38:22-38), or describe a sophisticated mining operation (28:1-11). He could refer to skiffs of papyrus reed plying the waters (9:26), or the plants that grew in the marshes (8:11-19). He had observed ostriches, eagles, mountain goats, hippopotamuses, crocodiles, and war horses (Chapters 39-41). As was true of all the wise, he made extensive use of nature analogies to explain and defend moral truths.

Etymologically, the name Job could be related to the Hebrew word for ‘enemy’, with reference to either Job’s attitude to God or his response to suffering. The name might also be a contracted form of ‘Where is my father?’ But it is difficult to know, because its actual meaning was already lost to the earliest rabbinic commentators. However, the name is known outside the Bible. It is the name of the prince of Ashtaroth in Bashan in the Amarna tablets (circa 1350BC), and the

name of a Palestinian chief in an Egyptian text (circa 2000BC). At Ugarit a version of the name appears in a list of palace personnel.

Date

There are no historical allusions in the book to determine its time or circumstances. From ancient times there has been much discussion about the occasion for writing Job. The Babylonian Talmud records a variety of opinions as to the author of the book, ranging from someone in the time of the patriarchs, to Moses, to one of those who returned from the Babylonian captivity (Baba Bathra 15a). The hero of the book is given a patriarchal setting, authentic in detail and colouring, which has led some interpreters to suggest an early date, perhaps as early as the time of Abraham.

The earliest reference to Job outside the book itself is in Ezekiel. The prophet names three paragons of virtue: Noah, Daniel, and Job (Ezekiel 14:14 and 14:20). It is not certain whether Ezekiel knew of these men from the biblical narrative or from other traditions; this is particularly true for Daniel, a book that could not have been complete in Ezekiel's day. If Ezekiel knew of Job through the biblical book, then it would be pre-exilic.

Attempts have been made to date Job on the basis of theological development within the Scriptures. Job has been viewed as an elaborate midrash, i.e. a type of commentary, on Deuteronomy Chapter 28, or as an effort to apply a discussion of the problem of suffering for the nation, such as that depicted in Isaiah, to the individual. Arguments based on 'theological development', however, are difficult to sustain, because they presuppose that one can actually describe how such themes developed over time.

The author of Job makes direct allusion to the Hebrew Scriptures, e.g. Psalm 8:4 confirmed in Job 7:17-18, and at times quotes lines directly, e.g. Psalm 107:40 confirmed in Job 12:21 and 12:24. Such precise repetition of phrases and reapplication of biblical thought indicates that the poet had access to these writings, although again it cannot be certain in what form they existed.

Some have suggested, therefore, that the theological questions addressed in Job, and the use of Scripture in the book, indicate a time for the composition approximating Ezekiel's, but confidence in such a conclusion is hard to come by. The author uses a lot of vocabulary with meanings known in later Hebrew. This does not confirm a more precise dating but may favour a date that is exilic (587BC to 538BC), or postexilic (after 538BC).

Theological Themes

The Book of Job concerns itself with the question of faith in a sovereign God. Can God be trusted? Is he good and just in his rule of the world? Job will declare

outright that God has wronged him (19:6-7). At the same time, Job is certain that his 'enemy' is actually his advocate and will vindicate him.

The book sets out from the beginning to show that the reasons for human suffering often remain a secret to human beings. Indeed, Job's sufferings come upon him because Satan accused him in the heavenly courts, and the reader never learns whether these reasons were explained to Job. Probably they were not. There is irony in the Book of Job, due to the fact that God seems both too close and too far away. On the one hand, Job complains that God is watching him every moment so that he cannot even swallow his spit (7:19). On the other hand, Job finds God elusive, feeling that he cannot be found (9:11). Although God is intensely concerned about humans, he does not always answer their most agonising questions.

At the same time, Job's friends offer no real help. They come to 'comfort' him (2:11), but Job ends up declaring them 'miserable comforters' who would 'comfort' him 'with empty nothings' (21:34). These friends represent an oversimplified orthodoxy, based on a misreading of the wisdom tradition to the effect that all troubles are punishments for wrongdoing. Their 'comfort' consists largely of applying this message to Job, urging him to identify his sin and repent of it. In so doing, these friends serve as a mirror for all readers who might be inclined to say similar things to people in distress.

Astonishingly, the Lord does not take Job to task over his words, instead calling them 'right' (42:7). The book as a whole illustrates that a full understanding of God's reasons for events is not a prerequisite for faithfulness amid terrible suffering. Further, Job's deep perplexity and questioning are not a provocation to God.

Purpose

The Book of Job addresses a universal problem for all people of all faith perspectives, even for those who believe that the world is the result of impersonal forces operating in a predetermined manner. The author of Job specifically addresses those who believe in a personal Creator, known by the name Yahweh (the Lord), according to his self-revelation. His work is simply about God and man; it was written to those who struggle with the justice of a sovereign God in a world filled with suffering.

The author does not provide a theodicy in the sense of defending the justice of God. Job's friends serve as a foil to that end. Their wisdom is a human effort to resolve this dilemma, but as far as the author is concerned, these efforts fail. God also declares that the friends are in the wrong (42:8). Elihu's intervention probes further, but neither is he the intermediary whom Job seeks. The author is concerned about the triumph of faith in a time of suffering. To this end his hero

succeeds. Job can triumphantly declare *<<I know that my Redeemer lives>>* (19:25). Job's resolve to love and trust the one who seems to attack him as an enemy is evident throughout.

The problem of suffering is timeless, whether national or individual. It is therefore not helpful to infer specific national settings that might have inspired the Book of Job, whatever proposed relationships may be observed to books such as Deuteronomy and Isaiah. The author is careful not to allow his reflections to be limited by a particular set of circumstances.

The wisdom writers of Israel worked within their own context of thought and worldview. Although they did use sayings and works from other cultures, particularly Egypt, they wrote to articulate their own faith for their people, who were the primary readers. At the same time, they considered their thoughts applicable to all people of all times: *<<Hear this, all you peoples; give ear, all inhabitants of the world, both low and high, rich and poor together. My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding>>* (Psalm 49:1-3). A universal and timeless perspective is deliberately conveyed by the selection of a non-Israelite hero, the intentional avoidance of the Israelite name for God in the poetic section from Chapter 3 on until God speaks, except for the reference to Isaiah 41:20 in Job 12:9, and the relative absence of any specific historical allusions.

Job and His Setting

As already indicated, the Israelite author presents Job as a person living in Uz, which is outside the borders of Israel itself. His piety (1:1) exemplifies the ideal in Israelite wisdom, and he invokes the name of Yahweh (1:21). At the same time, his relationship to Abraham's offspring remains a mystery. The events of the book seem to be set in the times of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The way Ezekiel 14:14 and 14:20 refer to Job along with two others apparently from ancient times enhances this impression. So do the favourite names for the deity, 'God', Hebrew *'Eloah*, the singular of *'Elohim*, and 'the Almighty', Hebrew *Shadday*, which seem more suited to the days before Exodus 3:14 and 6:3; the name Yahweh, the Lord, appears only in Job Chapters 1-2 and 38-42, with one lone exception in the middle of the book (12:9).

The prophet Ezekiel mentions Job along with Noah and Daniel, and this seems to imply that he took Job as a real person. This is also the implication of James 5:11 *<<Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful>>*. At the same time, the author has supplied many details for the sake of his literary presentation: the question of whether Job and his friends actually spoke exalted poetry to each other is not important to the author's purposes.

History of Salvation Summary

In the history of God's dealings with his people, the question of the apparently undeserved suffering of faithful individuals recurs again and again. The Book of Job reminds God's people that they have an enemy in Satan who will denounce them and, through the ignorance of Job's friends, it helps the faithful to remember at all times how small a part of any situation is the fragment that they see. This equips believers to trust and obey amid life's perplexities, and it enables the faithful to support and encourage one another in a spirit of tenderness and humility (Romans 12:15). The death and resurrection of Jesus have not removed this perplexity. They have, however, given a firm foundation to Job's hope in his 'Redeemer' (Job 19:25-27).

Literary Features

A prose account of the fall and restoration of the pious Job frames the book as a whole (1:1-2:13 and 42:7-17). Here, readers meet a blameless man, whose peace and prosperity are tragically disrupted when, unknown to him, God points him out to Satan. The question posed in 1:9 <<**Does Job fear God for nothing?**>> appears to be the leading concern of the prose, and it receives a full and satisfactory answer by the book's conclusion.

Within those prose bookends though, a dramatic poetic dialogue unfolds as readers listen to the main protagonists in the story. Job's soliloquies (Chapters 3, 28 and 29-31) bracket three rounds of impassioned debate (Chapters 4-14, 15-21 and 22-27) with his 'friends' Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Their dialogue descends from intuitive integrity in Job as confirmed in 3:23-25 and 6:4, and sympathy from his friends (4:2-5) at the beginning, to embittered self-justification in Job (Chapter 27), and outrageous accusation from his friends (Chapter 22) at the end. Throughout, the main concern seems to be a question Eliphaz voiced: <<**Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?**>> (4:17). Consequently, Job himself comes under increasing scrutiny as he mounts an increasingly bold defence of his innocence in the face of the simplistic ethical onslaught of his friends.

Job longs for divine vindication, and for an intermediary who can bring this about. The reader, who has had a privileged glimpse into the heavenly mysteries behind Job's suffering, is prepared by the end of the dialogues for God to declare to the disputants their errors and relieve Job of his misery. It is not to be, however, at least not yet.

Instead, a new character makes an entrance, one who alone in the book bears a Hebrew name: Elihu meaning 'he is God' or possibly 'Yahweh is God', the son of Barachel, i.e. 'may God bless' or 'God has blessed'. Through five uninterrupted chapters (32-37) he rebukes both Job and his friends, but how are readers to

understand his intervention? Commentators vary dramatically in their assessments. From the text itself, certain factors stand out:

1. Elihu provides in small measure the intermediary for whom Job hoped. Elihu himself is not the answer to Job's quest, but he does point in the right direction.
2. The dialogues to this point appeal to tradition and observation; Elihu introduces the notion of inspiration (32:8 and 32:18-20). Some see here an overtly prophetic response to the wisdom discussion.
3. Elihu cites and finds wanting both sides of the debate (33:1 and 34:2). Again, Elihu anticipates the stance that God himself will take, which is recorded in Chapters 38-42.
4. Perhaps most importantly, Elihu reorients the entire debate. The focus slowly but surely swings away from Job and the problem of human morality, urging attention to God alone as the grounds of certainty and hope.

At the same time, Elihu may be overestimating his own contribution (32:6-10). He knows no more of the actual reasons for the events that occurred in Chapters 1-2 than the three friends do, and some of his arguments overlap theirs. Further, when the Lord finally speaks (38:1), he seems to ignore Elihu entirely, as confirmed in also in 42:7. Elihu may be asserting some true things at the core of his argument, but how he applies these things and the conclusions he draws about Job contrast significantly with the Lord's speech to Job. On a literary level, Elihu's speech builds suspense by delaying the final outcome.

Finally, the Lord appears in the whirlwind (38:1 and 40:6), as Job had suspected he might (9:17a). The 'Yahweh speeches' of Chapters 38-41 do not directly engage Job's questions but point rather to the reality of the God behind, and now clearly within, his suffering.

The reader's insight into the true state of affairs comes by the prose introduction of Chapters 1-2, which helps both to nuance the content of the dialogues and to explain the outcomes in the book's conclusion. While Job's assertions of innocence have some justification, his character develops throughout the speeches. On the other hand, the friends may claim some kernel of truth, but despite their orthodoxy, the reader can make an informed judgment about how their accusations apply to Job. Thus, the Lord's commendation of Job and instruction to the friends to beg Job's intercession on their behalf (42:7-9) is in part explained by the context set in the opening two chapters.

The most important key word in the book is the term 'comfort'; the book shows where true comfort is to be found. In 2:11 Job's three friends come to comfort him; in 6:10 Job takes comfort in not having denied the words of the Holy One; in

7:13 Job claims that God will not allow his bed to comfort him. In 15:11 Eliphaz claims to be offering the comforts of God, while in 16:2 Job calls his friends miserable comforters, and in 21:34 he declares they are trying to comfort him with empty nothings. In 21:2 Job sarcastically offers to his friends the ‘comfort’ of hearing him out. The key comes in 42:6: now that God has spoken, Job can say that he is ‘comforted in dust and ashes’. When Job’s relatives and friends come to comfort him in 42:11, this is probably ironic: Job found the comfort he needed in the vision of God’s unsearchable wisdom.

Outline

- I. Prologue: Job’s Character and the Circumstances of His Test (1:1-2:13)
 - a. Job and His Family (1:1-5)
 - b. The First Test (1:6-22)
 - i. Attack on Job’s Character (1:6-12)
 - ii. Job Loses Property and Children (1:13-19)
 - iii. Job’s Confession and Confidence (1:20-22)
 - c. The Second Test - Attack on Job’s Health (2:1-10)
 - i. The Challenge in Heaven (2:1-6)
 - ii. Job’s Affliction and Confession (2:7-10)
 - d. Job’s Three Friends (2:11-13)
- II. Dialogue: Job, His Suffering, and His Standing before God (3:1-42:6)
 - a. Job Curses the Day He Was Born (3:1-26)
 - i. Introduction (3:1-2)
 - ii. Job Curses his Birth (3:3-10)
 - iii. Job Longs for Rest (3:11-19)
 - iv. Job Laments his Suffering (3:20-26)
 - b. The Friends and Job: Can Job be Right Before God? (4:1-25:6)
 - i. The First Cycle (4:1-14:22)
 1. Eliphaz: Can Mortal Man be in the Right Before God? (4:1-5:27)
 - A. Eliphaz Speaks: Job Has Sinned (4:1-21)
 - B. Job Is Corrected by God (5:1-27)
 2. Job: Life is Futile (6:1-7:21)
 - A. Job Replies: My Complaint Is Just (6:1-30)
 - B. Job: My Suffering Is without End (7:1-21)

3. Bildad Speaks: Job Should Repent (8:1-22)
4. Job: How can a Mortal be Just Before God? (9:1-10:22)
 - A. Job Replies: There Is No Mediator (9:1-35)
 - B. Job: I Loathe My Life (10:1-22)
5. Zophar Speaks: Job's Guilt Deserves Punishment (11:1-20)
6. Job: a Challenge to the Wisdom of his Friends (12:1-14:22)
 - A. Job Replies: I Am a Laughing-stock (12:1-13:19)
 - B. Job's Despondent Prayer (13:20-14:22)
- ii. The Second Cycle (15:1-21:34)
 1. Eliphaz Speaks: Job Undermines Religion (15:1-35)
 2. Job: Hope for a Sufferer (16:1-17:16)
 - A. Job Reaffirms His Innocence (16:1-22)
 - B. Job Prays for Relief (17:1-16)
 3. Bildad Speaks: God Punishes the Wicked (18:1-21)
 4. Job Replies: I Know That My Redeemer Lives (19:1-29)
 5. Zophar Speaks: Wickedness Receives Just Retribution (20:1-29)
 6. Job Replies: The Wicked Often Go Unpunished (21:1-34)
- iii. The Third Cycle (22:1-25:6)
 1. Eliphaz Speaks: Job's Wickedness Is Great (22:1-30)
 2. Job: God is Hidden (23:1-24:25)
 - A. Job Replies: My Complaint Is Bitter (23:1-17)
 - B. Job Complains of Violence on the Earth (24:1-25)
 3. Bildad Speaks: How Can a Mortal Be Righteous Before God? (25:1-6)
- c. Job: the Power of God, Place of Wisdom, and Path of Integrity (26:1-31:40)
 - i. Job Replies: God's Majesty Is Unsearchable (26:1-14)
 - ii. Job Maintains His Integrity (27:1-23)
 - iii. Interlude: Where Wisdom Is Found (28:1-28)
 - iv. Job Finishes His Defence (29:1-31:40)
- d. Elihu: Suffering as a Discipline (32:1-37:24)

- i. Elihu Rebukes Job's Friends (32:1-22)
 - 1. Introduction: Elihu and his Anger (32:1-5)
 - 2. The Voice of Youth (32:6-22)
 - ii. Elihu Rebukes Job (33:1-33)
 - iii. Elihu Proclaims God's Justice (34:1-37)
 - iv. Elihu Condemns Self-Righteousness (35:1-16)
 - v. The Mercy and Majesty of God (36:1-37:24)
 - 1. Elihu Exalts God's Goodness (36:1-23)
 - 2. Elihu Proclaims God's Majesty (36:24-37:24)
 - e. Challenge: the Lord answers Job (38:1-42:6)
 - i. The Lord Answers Job (38:1-40:2)
 - ii. Job's Response to God (40:3-5)
 - iii. God's Challenge to Job (40:6-41:34)
 - iv. Job Is Humbled and Satisfied (42:1-6)
- III. Epilogue: The Vindication, Intercession, and Restoration of Job (42:7-17)
 - a. Job's Friends Are Humiliated (42:7-9)
 - b. Job's Fortunes Are Restored Twofold (42:10-17)