

THE BOOK OF JOB

“Title”: As with other books of the Bible, Job bears the name of the narrative’s primary character. This name might have been derived from the Hebrew word for “persecution,” thus meaning “persecuted one.” Or from an Arabic word meaning “repent,” thus bearing the name “repentant one.” The author recounts an era in the life of Job, in which he was tested and the character of God was revealed. New Testament writers directly quote Job twice (Rom. 11:35; 1 Cor. 3:19), plus Ezek. 14:14, 20; and James 5:11 show that Job was a real person.

“Authorship”: The book does not name its author. Job is an unlikely candidate because the book’s message rests on Job’s ignorance of the events that occurred in heaven as they were related to his ordeal. One Talmudic tradition suggests Moses as author since the land of Uz (1:1) was adjacent to Midian where Moses lived for 40 years, and he could have obtained a record of the story there. Solomon is also a good possibility due to the similarity of content with parts of the book of Ecclesiastes, as well as the fact that Solomon wrote the other Wisdom books (except Psalms, and he did author Psalms 72 and 127). Though he lived long after Job, Solomon could have written about events that occurred long before his own time, in much the same manner as Moses was inspired to write about Adam and Eve. Elihu, Isaiah, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, and Ezra have also been suggested as possible authors, but without support.

The date of the book’s writing may be much later than the events recorded within. This conclusion is based on;

- (1) Job’s age (42:16);
- (2) His life span of nearly 200 years (42:16), which fits the patriarchal period (Abraham lived 175 years; Gen. 25:7);
- (3) The social unit being the patriarchal family;
- (4) The Chaldeans who murdered Job’s servants (1:17), were nomads and had not yet become city dwellers;
- (5) Job’s wealth being measured in livestock rather than gold and silver (1:3; 42:12);
- (6) Job’s priestly functions within his family (1:4-5); and
- (7) A basic silence on matters such as the covenant of Abraham, Israel, the Exodus, and the Law of Moses. The events of Job’s odyssey appear to be patriarchal. Job, on the other hand, seemed to know about Adam (31:33), and the Noahic flood (12:15). These cultural and historical features found in the book appear to place the events chronologically at a time probably after Babel (Gen. 11:1-9), but before or contemporaneous with Abraham (Gen. 11:27).

The name of the author is not indicated in the book. That Job himself could not have written all of it is shown by the inclusion of the record of his death (42:17). Some have suggested that Moses wrote the account. This hypothesis would explain its inclusion in the canon, but that’s mere speculation.

As far as the date is concerned, a distinction must be drawn between the date of the events and the date of composition. Most conservative scholars are agreed that the patriarchal age is indicated as the likeliest setting for the events, because Job, the father, acts as priest for the family, and because there is no mention of the tabernacle, temple, law, or national institutions. On the other hand, such primitive conditions could have easily persisted into later times outside of Israel. Indeed, the homeland of Job is said to be Uz, apparently located near Edom (compare Lam. 4:21). Also, a foreign locale is indicated in that the book shows a distinct preference for the generic word for God, Elohim, as opposed to the personal name of God, Yahweh (or Jehovah). In spite of the uncertainty of the time or place of the events, the theology of the book is clearly pure monotheism.

The date of composition is widely disputed. Suggested dates range from the patriarchal age to the Babylonian exile. If the events transpired during the patriarchal period, the book probably would have been written shortly afterwards in order to preserve the story. On the other hand, there was a notable flowering of wisdom literature during the reign of Solomon, and the Book of Job may well have been part of those achievements, especially if its events may be dated later in a foreign locale. The doubt surrounding the date of the book should not obscure its message, which is certainly applicable to any age.

“Introduction”: At its beginning, Job seems to be a book about human suffering. By its conclusion, the true subject of the book emerges: God’s sovereignty.

In a matter of probably hours, Job had lost everything that was important to him except his wife and his own life. But he held fast to his integrity, determined to unravel the mystery of why he, a man who had done his utmost to live an upright life, was being treated by God as the chief of sinners. If he was a sinner deserving divine punishment, he demanded his friends tell him what he had done, which they could not. He also asked the same of God, and received more silence in response.

The truth is, Job never received an answer as to why he suffered. But more importantly, he received a deeper understanding of who God is.

The Bible is unique because the reader knows, at least in part, what the main character would have loved to know: Job suffered because Satan accused him of a self-serving devotion to God, claiming that Job was not really righteous but was simply currying God’s favor. God used the accusation as an opportunity to prove Satan wrong, and all the hurtful events in Job’s life unfolded from there.

In the Old Testament, sin and suffering were connected because of the nature of the covenant. It was believed that keeping God’s statutes resulted in blessing, and not keeping them resulted in cursing (Lev. 26:1-46); Deut. 28:1-68). Even though Job lived in the patriarchal period (before the Law was given), such a natural law would have been understood. So Job’s friends could be excused from assuming Job guilty of a secret sin, secret and serious, given the level of calamity that befell him. But the Bible adds more ingredients to the recipe for suffering, all of which are found in this book.

To begin with, righteous people like Job do sometimes suffer. Righteous does not mean totally sinlessness, but living upright in God's sight. The book portrays Job as a faithful man who honestly tried to do right before God, and who acknowledged his errors and sought to correct things when he faltered (42:1-6). Still, he suffered, but not because of sin. So deeper questions must be asked and answered. Job asked, but he got an answer he was not expecting.

Second, a third party operates between God and man, with God's permission. In Job, we see Satan's primary method of spiritual warfare: attempting to discredit God in man's sight. Satan cannot harm God, but he can attempt to influence how man perceives God, whether as unjust, unfair, or unloving. Satan causes Job to suffer unjustly in an attempt to get Job to attack God. He also accuses Job of being self-serving, trying to make God look unjust in the eyes of the heavenly hosts for not punishing a sinner like Job. But Satan's plot was foiled by the third variable, that there can be godly purposes in suffering unrelated to sin or punishment.

Job suffered so he might have a deeper and more accurate knowledge of God. This happened without him even knowing about the precipitating conversation between Satan and God.

As one of the longest books in the Bible, Job can be captured under four headings:

“Prologue” (chapters 1 and 2): the setting for Job's suffering;

“Dialogues” (chapters 3 and 27): accusations and answers between Job and his friends;

“Monologues” (chapters 28:1 to 42:6): discourses by Job, Elihu and God;

“Epilogue” (chapter 42:7 - 17): Job's understanding of God and Job's restoration.

“What does all of this mean”: Job speaks of foundational themes every human being contends with, especially in times of suffering.

“God's Character”: The book of Job defends the character of a loving and righteous God in spite of earth's obvious evils and injustices. Although Job was unaware of the interaction between Satan and God, Job comes to the conclusion that God is just and good. That is the lesson of the book for anyone who questions God without access to all the facts (38:1-42:6).

“Trust”: Job was forced to walk by faith rather than by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). He could not see what the reader sees in chapters 1 and 2. Job's perspective is best summarized in 13:15 “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him.” Job continued to plead his innocence before God but was prepared to die trusting Him.

“Sovereignty”: Although Satan wreaked havoc in Job's life on earth, the limits of his activity were (and are) clearly set by God. Satan can go only so far. This serves as a template for viewing evil on earth. Satan does not operate as a free agent but is always under the sovereign and deciding hand of God (chapters 1 and 2).

So what does it mean for you?

In Job's most dreadful and difficult situation, this broken man caught startling glimpses of God and God's work in his life beyond what he, or perhaps anyone else, had ever seen. Millennia before Jesus walked this earth as the God-Man, Job saw One who would be Redeemer, Mediator,

Friend, Guide, Advocate, and Perfecter of faith, Job saw these intense, beautiful images through his tears.

Those who turn fully to God in their great sorrow, even if they argue, plead, and protest in His presence as Job did, will find a pathway nearer to the tender mercies of heaven than they have ever walked before.

Believers talk about trusting in the Lord with their whole heart and refusing to lean on their own understanding. But no one really knows what that means until circumstances cast them headfirst into a dark and painful place. If we give ourselves fully to God in those moments, we will obtain keepsakes of Him to treasure now and forever.

“Historical Setting”: The occasion and events that follow Job’s sufferings present significant questions for the faith of believers in all ages. Why does Job serve God? Job is heralded for his righteousness, being compared with Noah and Daniel (Ezek. 14:14-20), and for his spiritual endurance (James 5:11). Several other questions are alluded to throughout Job’s ordeal. For instance, “Why do the righteous suffer?” Though an answer to that question may seem important, the book does not give such an answer. Job never knew the reasons for his suffering and neither did his friends. The righteous sufferer does not appear to learn about any of the heavenly court debates between God and Satan that precipitated his pain. In fact, when finally confronted by the Lord of the universe, Job put his hand over his mouth and said nothing. Job’s silent response in no way trivialized the intense pain and loss he had endured. It merely underscored the importance of trusting God’s purposes in the midst of suffering because suffering, like all other human experiences, is directed by perfect divine wisdom. In the end, the lesson learned was that one may never know the specific reason for his suffering; but one must trust in Sovereign God. That is the real answer to suffering.

The book treats two major themes and many other minor ones, both in the narrative framework of the prologue (chapters 1 and 2), and epilogue (42:7 to 17), and in the poetic account of Job’s torment that lies in between (3:1-42:6). A key to understanding the first theme of the book is to notice the debate between God and Satan in heaven and how it connects with the 3 cycles of earthly debates between Job and his friends. God wanted to prove the character of believers to Satan and to all demons, angels and people. The accusations are by Satan, who indicted God’s claims of Job’s righteousness as being untested, if not questionable. Satan accused the righteous of being faithful to God only for what they could get. Since Job did not serve God with pure motives, according to Satan, the whole relationship between him and God was a sham. Satan’s confidence that he could turn Job against God came, no doubt, from the fact that he had led the holy angels to rebel with him (see note on Rev. 12:4). Satan thought he could destroy Job’s faith in God by inflicting suffering on him, thus showing in principle that saving faith could be shattered. God released Satan to make his point if he could, but he failed, as true faith in God proved unbreakable. Even Job’s wife told him to curse God (2:9), but he refused; his faith in God never failed (see 13:15). Satan tried to do the same to Peter (see Luke 22:31-34), and was unsuccessful in destroying Peter’s faith (see John 21:15-19). When Satan has unleashed all that he can do to destroy saving faith, it stands firm (Rom. 8:31-39). In the end, God proved His point with Satan that saving faith can’t be destroyed no matter how much trouble a saint suffers, or how incomprehensible and undeserved it seems.

A second and related theme concerns proving the character of God to men. Does this sort of ordeal, in which God and His opponent Satan square off, with righteous Job as the test case, suggest that God is lacking in compassion and mercy toward Job? Not at all. As James says, “You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful” (James 5:11). It was to prove the very opposite (42:10-17). Job says, “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” (see verse 2:10). God’s servant does not deny that he has suffered. He does deny that his suffering is a result of sin. Nor does he understand why he suffers. Job simply commits his ordeal with a devout heart of worship and humility (42:5-6), to a sovereign and perfectly wise Creator, and that was what God wanted him to learn in this conflict with Satan. In the end, God flooded Job with more blessings that he had ever known.

The major reality of the book is the inscrutable mystery of innocent suffering. God ordains that His children walk in sorrow and pain, sometimes because of sin (Num. 12:10-12), sometimes for chastening (Heb. 12:5-12), sometimes for strengthening (2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Peter 5:10), and sometimes to give opportunity to reveal His comfort and grace (2 Cor. 1:3-7). But there are times when the compelling issue in the suffering of the saints is unknowable because it is for a heavenly purpose that those on earth can’t discern (Exodus 4:11; John 9:1-3).

Job and his friends wanted to analyze the suffering and look for causes and solutions. Using all of their sound theology and insight into the situation, they searched for answers, but found only useless and wrong ideas, for which God rebuked them in the end (42:7). They couldn’t know why Job suffered because what happened in heaven between God and Satan was unknown to them. They thought they knew all the answers, but they only intensified the dilemma by their insistent ignorance.

By spreading out some of the elements of this great theme, we can see the following truths in Job’s experience:

1. There are matters going on in heaven with God that believers know nothing about; yet, they affect their lives.
2. Even the best effort at explaining the issues of life can be useless.
3. God’s people do suffer. Bad things happen all the time to good people, so one cannot judge a person’s spirituality by his painful circumstances or successes.
4. Even though God seems far away, perseverance in faith is a most noble virtue since God is good and one can safely leave his life in His hands.
5. The believer in the midst of suffering should not abandon God, but draw near to Him, so out of the fellowship can come the comfort, without the explanation; and
6. Suffering may be intense, but it will ultimately end for the righteous and God will bless abundantly.

“Interpretation - Purpose”: The literary genre of the book has defied classification events. It should therefore be regarded as a unique piece of didactic poetry based on historical events. We cannot assume that the author intended the book to be like a reporter’s presentation of what happened in real life. People from the Middle East are much more poetic in language than

Westerners. In the poetic form the book's message is most appropriately preserved for perpetuity.

Many suggestions have been made as to the purpose of the book. However, the overriding intention seems to be to demonstrate to man the inadequacy of human reason to account for the suffering of the innocent. There is a mystery of divine freedom which does not contradict God's goodness or sovereignty but remains elusive to man. Therefore, man is resigned to an attitude of trust and dependence on a good God whose workings man cannot fathom.