

THE BOOK OF JOB -- SYNOPSIS

Job is considered a literary masterpiece in wisdom literature. It has been called the greatest work of poetry in ancient and modern times. The author has been ranked with Homer, Dante and Shakespeare. Yet the book is not an easy or swift read. The author's words have to be pondered as he deals with the great mystery of God's love and human suffering. While the writing is seen as one person's attempt to deal with the perennial question of why an all-good and all-loving God allows a good and faithful person to suffer, other issues are also raised in the book. The book of Job questions the traditional retribution doctrine outlined in the book of Deuteronomy and accepted by the prophets and even by the authors of Proverbs, namely, that material blessings are a sign of a virtuous life, and poverty and suffering are a sign of a sinful life. This belief continued to be prevalent even at the time of Jesus.

In John 9, which tells about the healing of a man born blind, the disciples ask: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered: "Neither he nor his parents sinned..." (vv 2-3). Job's so-called comforters assume that his suffering is brought on by his sins, whether or not he knows it, and for that, he needs to repent. In 11:6, Zophar says: "It is for sin that God calls you to account." In the final chapter of the book, God tells Job's friends "that they had not spoken rightly about him" (42:7). They are wrong in believing that success and happiness are rewards for righteous living and equally wrong in believing that failure and grief are punishments for unfaithfulness. A third issue raised concerns the right of humans to question God about suffering and to expect an answer. When God finally speaks (ch38), he gives Job a non-answer. He tells Job that just as there is much in nature that he does not understand, so there is much in human experience that is beyond him.

Many centuries later, Paul grapples with his own people's rejection of Jesus, saying: "Who has known the mind of the Lord or who can be his counselor?" (Rom 11:34). The book raises another question: will humans be loyal to God if there are no rewards and punishments—or do they only do good in order to be rewarded? To put it another way: is it possible to continue to believe in God's goodness when we are in the depths of suffering and experiencing no consolation? Historical book or not? We are free to believe that Job was a real historical person, but most scholars today believe that Job was used by the author to personify the suffering just man. Also, while scholars are not sure when the book was written, many think it was during the post-exilic period. Some consider that the author could be writing about his own experiences of suffering and his refusal to believe that God was punishing him for some sin. Drama with five scenes Job opens with

a narrative introduction or prologue, followed by a series of poetic dialogues and a narrative epilogue.

The book is subdivided into five sections or scenes. Scene 1 (Chapters 1-2). The prose dialogue has five scenes alternating between heaven and earth. In the heavenly scenes, God and Satan are engaged in a dialogue about Job. Satan says that Job is only loyal to God because God has been so good to him. God allows Satan to test Job to see if Job will remain loyal to God even when bad things happen to him. Despite the terrible suffering inflicted on Job by Satan, Job refuses to follow his wife's advice to "curse God and die" (2:9). Then three of Job's "friends" come to comfort him. Scene 2 (Chapters 3-31). This long section comprises three series of conversations between Job and his three "friends" concerning divine justice as it relates to Job's suffering. Job's friends, holding tightly to the traditional belief of retribution on earth, conclude that Job is suffering because he has sinned. Job challenges this presupposition and insists that he is innocent. He seeks to comprehend why a just God would allow him, a good man, to suffer so much. Job repeatedly bangs his head against the mystery of divine justice. His tortured soul matches his suffering body.

At the end of the series of conversations, Job demands that God appear and defend himself if he is a just God. Scene 3 (Chapters 32-37). Suddenly, an upstart called Elihu enters the story. He challenges both Job and his friends, and demands that they submit to the God who controls all events. 2 Scene 4 (Chapters 38-41). God breaks his silence and begins to speak. He tells Job that he is in no position to understand the workings of God. Finally, Job gets it and submits twice. He says: "Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I will put my hand over my mouth" (40:4). Then later in 42:6, he says: "I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes." Scene 5 (Chapter 42:7-16). The final scene gives us a happy ending. Job's friends are told that they have misspoken. God restores to Job all his material blessings and gives him twice as much as he had previously owned. Suggested Texts to read Chapters 1-2: Dialogue between God and Satan. Job's material blessing and family are destroyed. Introduction of Job's "comforters". Chapters 3-31: contain three cycles of speeches by Job and his comforters. Some excerpts.

In chapter 3 Job's so called patience with God comes to an end. He curses the day he was born. • Chapters 4-5 is an example of the kind of response or sermons that one of Job's friends offered him. • Chapters 6-7 is an example of Job's response to his friend's speech. Chapter ten is a lament by Job on his bad situation. • Chapters 15-21. Second cycle of speeches. Scholars tell us that the second and third cycles of speeches add little by way of a new argument. Chapters 29-31: Job's self-justification "Job took up his theme anew

and said: 'Oh, that I were as in months past, as in the days when God watched over me...as I was in my flourishing days.' (29:1-4) "But now they make sport of me...." (30:1) "Does God not see my ways.... Let God weigh me in the scales of justice; thus he will know my innocence!" (31:4-6) In these three chapters in which Job seeks to justify himself, he begins with a description of his past happy relationship with God (ch. 29), proceeds to a painful lamentation of his present situation (ch. 30), and ends, looking to his future vindication, with a resounding oath of innocence illustrated by a series of very specific moral behaviors (ch. 31).

Chapters 38-42: God breaks his silence and has a conversation with Job. In her introduction to God's speech scripture scholar, Diane Bergant writes: The last words in Job's final declaration of innocence pose a challenge to God: "Let the Almighty answer me!" (31:35). These words of Job, the plaintiff, constitute the subpoena for God, the defendant, to appear in court. Will God comply? Will God answer and thus give evidence of being aware of what has been happening in Job's life? Or is God as disinterested as Job fears? And what if God does answer? Will there be words of understanding and comfort, or words of anger and condemnation? The fact that Job ends his plea in this way indicates that he has not given up hope that justice will prevail.

God does respond. But does God answer? Job has been struggling with questions of justice. He does not demand the return of his family and possessions, but he does seek an explanation of why he lost them in the first place. For the most part, the men who came to counsel him also discussed matters of justice. However, God never even comes close to responding to Job's concerns. Some people claim that this proves that God is disinterested in Job's plight. However, the very fact that God responds at all disproves the allegation of divine disinterest. God does have something to say to Job. But what is it? In the Old Testament, the presence of God is made manifest in various ways. At Sinai, God came to Moses in a dense cloud amidst thunder and lightning (Exodus 19:16). On Horeb, Elijah experienced God in a tiny whispering sound (1 Kings 19:12). God speaks to Job out of a storm wind. God does not accuse Job of any sin, as Job's visitors had insisted. Rather, God tells Job that Job does not understand something that Job has been saying all along. In other words, Job has been crying out: Why? Why? And God responds: You just don't understand. ³ God does not provide answers. Instead, like a good teacher, God asks questions. Pointing to the marvels of the natural world, God challenges Job: Were you there when I fashioned the universe? Do you know how it was made? Can you exercise control over any of its wondrous features? Such questions do not really seek information. They are rhetorical questions meant to emphasize both God's indisputable creative power and Job's finite human ability. They are questions that force Job to admit that he

lacks the competence to fashion, the authority to control, and the capacity to understand the world in which he lives. Some people think that God is humiliating Job with this kind of questioning. Is this true? Are the questions too much for Job? Do they crush him? We will have to wait for Job's response to see if this is the case. One thing is sure, God is shown here to be the all-powerful creator, the one who controls all of the cosmic waters as well as the celestial bodies (Journey Into Scripture-Job-Lesson Five). Since these final chapters are the most important ones in the book, I recommend that the reader read the commentary on them found in article 71.