

The Book of Job: Part 1

How is God Involved in Human Suffering?

Background:

“Many consider Job to be the crown jewel of biblical literature... Whatever date we assign to the book of Job, we can be sure the biblical writer(s) did not create the story out of whole cloth. From the second millennium Sumerian composition known as "Man and His God" to the fragmentary Job manuscripts from Qumran ..., textual evidence confirms that innocent suffering, random disorder, divine injustice, and the futility of life were issues of major concern throughout ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syria-Palestine. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to find a corpus of texts from any place or time in ancient history where such issues are not present. By the time biblical writers penned this book, others had been exploring similar issues for more than 2,000 years. This wider context for encountering the Bible's version of the story keeps us mindful that the Joban problem is no aberration; instead, it stands at the center of what it means to be human. For as long as men and women have walked this earth, they have shared the journey with someone, somewhere, named Job.”¹

“Scholars agree that neither the character Job nor the story about his misfortunes originated in Israel. The name "Job" is not a typically Israelite name, although forms of the name are attested in Syria-Palestine in the second millennium BCE. Moreover, the story itself associates Job with the land of Uz, a place that is to be located either in Edomite or Aramean territory. Job's three friends— Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite-also come from non-Israelite locales. The story as we have it in the Bible has been adapted for an Israelite religious context, however, so that Yahweh is assumed to be the God whom Job serves.”²

Our Biblical story is set in the patriarchal era, but the monotheism, monogamy, and development of the Satan figure suggest a late sixth or fifth century B.C.E. date, but scholars are widely divided.

This is wisdom literature. The book is a literary device to explore ideas. It demonstrates some of the most sophisticated thought and literary talent in the entire Bible.

The Book of Job is made up of two different stories which share some of the same characters and a stand-alone poem on where wisdom is to be found. The first story, presumably the oldest, the Prose Tale, is written in prose and frames the second story in that the second story, written almost entirely in poetry, is sandwiched between the beginning and ending of the Prose Tale.

Structure of the book:

Prose Tale: chapters	1-2	
Job	3.....	Poetry
Dialogue with friends.....	4-27	Poetry
Wisdom Poem	28.....	Poetry
Job	29-31	Poetry
Elihu 32-37 ..		Poetry, but a later addition
God’s speeches/Job's replies	38:1-42:6	Poetry
Prose ending to poetry section	42:7-9	
Prose Tale ending:	42:10-17	

¹ Samuel E. Balentine, *JOB*, Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary, p. 3,5.

² Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job*, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume.IV, p.328.

The Prose Tale:

It is self-contained and its focus is not on the nature of God but on piety (reverence toward and devotion to God). The Satan works for God and functions as a special investigator who checks to see who is really acting out of devotion and reverence for God or just for reward. In the meeting of the Heavenly Council, the implication of the Satan's question about Job's piety is that God's rewards for Job's piety can have a coercive effect which undermines true devotion. The Satan is the embodiment of suspicion. How can one know if Job's piety is genuine? Apparently God, in this story, does not know the heart of Job, but can only know whether Job's piety is genuine or not by testing it, although God praises Job's impeccable character and is confident that Job will pass the test. There also might be a hint of doubt that any of God's creation could be that perfect. The nature of true piety is expressed in 1:20-22, "Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came from mothers's whom, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong doing." This is radical acceptance of suffering under an all powerful God. Job's wife sees suffering as alienation. Job's relationship to God is not based on barter; it is not transactional. Since Job's piety has proven to be genuine, God eventually restores Job's fortune and family, presumably out of a sense of the necessity of some justice for Job.

The Poetry Section Plus 42:7-9

This writer of the poetry section, perhaps with the Prose Tale in hand, presents material beginning with Chapter 3 that has an entirely different focus from the Prose Tale. It asks serious questions about the validity of traditional wisdom. In this section, the only parts of the Prose Tale that are relevant are that Job's friends are still present, Job is suffering, and Job is a righteous person. The reason Job is suffering in the Prose Tale is irrelevant in this new material. This is a study of how this righteous person deals with his suffering and his relationship with a God who appears to be unjust according to traditional wisdom. Here are a few obvious differences between the Prose Tale and the poetry section.

<u>Prose Tale</u>	<u>Poetry Section</u>
God speaks about Job	God speaks directly to Job
Job's friends don't speak	Job's friends argue with Job
Job never speaks irreverently	Job criticizes and challenges God to answer

"Scholars generally agree that the author of the poetic sections did not create the story that appears in the prologue and epilogue. Not only is there the difference between prose and poetry, but also the portrait of Job himself differs, as already noted. Moreover, the author of the narrative uses the name Yahweh, whereas the author of the poems uses general Hebrew terms for deity, such as 'Eloah ("God") or Shaddai ("The Almighty"). Finally, the prose parts are written in the charming manner of a folktale, whereas the poetic sections resemble the wisdom literature in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. It follows, then, that if we are to understand the viewpoint of the author of Job we must rely primarily on the poems rather than on the prologue and epilogue."³

After the end of the poetic section, in 42:7-9, God criticizes Job's friends for what they have said which must refer to the poetic material since in the Prose Tale, Job's friends do not speak.

³ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Prentice-Hall, 1998, p. 530

Wisdom Literature

Job, along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are the primary examples of Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament. There are also a few “wisdom psalms” (Ps. 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, 128). This type of writing is not concerned with historical events. Rather, it addresses the timeless question of how does one live under an all powerful God such that life is consistent with how God created and orders the world thus leading to the most successful life possible. “Wisdom teachings emphasize human action that is wise because it fits God’s way of ordering the world and therefore gets us good results.”⁴ In the poetry story, Job is struggling to understand his relationship with his God and why he is suffering. “The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” (Proverbs 9:10) One who “fears” God lives in reverence of God. Reverence implies obedience to God’s teachings and a proper perspective of our place in God’s creation. The purpose of wisdom literature is not to report historical facts but to explore ways of thinking about how to live a meaningful life in God’s creation.

Theological Ideas in the Poetry Section

The Hebrew writer would have pinned this story in a culture in which two propositions would have been widely accepted;

- (1) An all powerful God created the world and is actively involved in managing its moral order. Think about God’s acts in the Exodus, the Flood Story, the conquest of Canaan, the Babylonian Exile, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc.
- (2) God is just in that the righteous are rewarded and the unrighteous are punished. These are foundational for the Covenant between God and the Israelites. (See Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 28.)
- (3) Job is a righteous man. (1:1,1:8, 2:3) In the Prose Tale, God declares this to be true.

In the Prose Tale, Job’s true piety is ultimately rewarded so that all three propositions are satisfied. When the writer introduces the poetry material, the attitude of Job changes from acceptance to one of anger and resentment. Now, if Job were prosperous and healthy, he and his friends could hold all three propositions simultaneously. However, when the righteous Job is suffering, he can only hold two of the above propositions to be true. Job accepts propositions 1 and 3 as true, but rejects proposition 2, which means that Job believes God is not just. Job believes that all three propositions should be true, but cannot accept that undeserved suffering is just. His three friends, who did not speak in the Prose Tale, believe that traditional wisdom demands that propositions 1 and 2 must be true, which means proposition 3, that Job is a righteous man, must be false. God speaks in Chapters 38-42 and gives Job a new perspective with which to view traditional wisdom.

⁴ Glen H. Stassen & David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* [Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2003] p. 34.