

Job: Living Between What Is And What Ought To Be

The book of Job may be the oldest work in the wisdom literature of the Bible. This profound discussion of suffering is rooted in antiquity, Baba Bathra attributes the authorship of Job to Moses. Certainly the cultural context described in Job is substantially older than that. But we will discuss that a little later. Regardless of the when of Job, this work is timelessly relevant. The mystery of suffering lies at the heart of Job. Since all suffer, this book has universal significance.

Job raises one major question; “Are God’s ways just?” This is the question of theodicy. Theodicy can be defined as the defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in respect to the existence of evil. It is ultimately a combination of *theos* and *dikaiois*, “God” and “just.”

However, Job does not answer the question directly. The series of monologues and the framing narrative prologue and epilogue make no effort to explain or rationalize God’s actions. This removes it from the genre of theodicy.

Which raises the question, to what genre does Job belong? Actually Job is its own genre. Since Job is not a theodicy, it is hard to compare it to other theodicies. Job is also not typical of most wisdom literature. Even Qohelet does not confront the mysteries of man’s suffering and God’s infinite character as directly and poignantly as does Job.

There are other examples of literature something like Job. There is the “Babylonian Job,” a nickname and misnomer given to the Babylonian Ludlul Bel Nemeqi “I will praise the Lord of wisdom.” The main character Subsi-mesri-Sakkan protests his suffering because he is loyal to the gods and the king. This writing is in monologue, and the protagonist, Subsi-mesri-Sakkan, gives thanks to Marduk for his ultimate restoration. Written in Akkadian, probably dating to the Kassite period of the second millennium B.C. it does reflect a certain confusion about the reasons for suffering, but is very different from the text of Job. Though the suffering Subsi-mesri-Sakkan complains that, “When my acquaintance sees me, He passes by on the other side, My family treats me as an alien;”¹ filled with demons and dream priests as well as shining woman who brings his healing, Ludlul Bel Nemeqi exhibits more differences than similarities to Job.²

The Babylonian Theodicy, written about 1000 b.c. is a dialogue between one who suffers, and another pious man. It is an acrostic poem of 27 stanzas each having 11 lines. The acrostic is the phrase, I Saggil-kinam-ubbib, the incantation priest, am an adorant of the god and the king.”³

The central figure complains about his innocence and suffering, while the pious man warns against blasphemy. He however eventually concludes: “They harm a poor man like a thief, They lavish slander upon him and plot his murder, Making him suffer every evil like a criminal, because he has no protection, Terrifyingly they bring him to his end, and extinguish him like a flame. (lines 284-86)

If Job is not like the ancient theodicies, what is Job then? Is it history? Job’s intention is not to be history. Yet, there is a definite historical venue to this book. We are supposed to understand from it that: Job actually lived, he suffered, and his experience has meaning for people in all ages.

Compare the following passages:

¹Lines 91 & 92 of tablet 1.

² The text and translation of Ludlul Bel Nemeqi can be read in Babylonian Wisdom Literature, Wilfred G. Lambert. Available to read through Google books.

³page Babylonian Wisdom Literature, page 63.

Job 1:1 There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.

1 Samuel 1:1 Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim Zophim, of the mountains of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite.

Judges 17:1 Now there was a man from the mountains of Ephraim, whose name was Micah.

The similarity of these initial sentences argues for the intention of the writer that Job should be regarded as historical. "There was a man," should not be read as "once upon a time." Our familiar fairy tale phrase is an introduction that presumes fiction. Just like George Lucas's phrase: "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...."

Consider Ezekiel 14:14-20. "Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel,⁴ and Job, were in it, they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness," says the Lord GOD. "If I cause wild beasts to pass through the land, and they empty it, and make it so desolate that no man may pass through because of the beasts, even though these three men were in it, as I live," says the Lord GOD, "they would deliver neither sons nor daughters; only they would be delivered, and the land would be desolate. Or if I bring a sword on that land, and say, 'Sword, go through the land,' and I cut off man and beast from it, even though these three men were in it, as I live," says the Lord GOD, "they would deliver neither sons nor daughters, but only they themselves would be delivered. Or if I send a pestilence into that land and pour out My fury on it in blood, and cut off from it man and beast, even though Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live," says the Lord GOD, "they would deliver neither son nor daughter; they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness."

It is obvious that Ezekiel considers these three men to be historical figures. I believe that a commitment to the inspiration and authority of scripture precludes regarding Job as an idealized everyman who is presented as a caricature to explore the universal significance of suffering.

Also it seems likely that there is a reference to Job 22:29, 30 here in Ezekiel. In Job we read: "He will save the humble person. He will even deliver one who is not innocent; Yes, he will be delivered by the purity of your hands." If this is true, not only does Ezekiel believe in the historical reality of Job, he is quite familiar with the text.

Job, however, is more than history. The key to understanding its even greater significance is discovered from the clues of style. The shift in the dialogues to poetic style is a clue that we are not dealing with history as we understand it. The dialogues are historical but not precise transcriptions. We have become quite accustomed to CNN style news. This is the modern representation of current events by carefully selected sound bites which gives us an illusion of understanding our own times. The poetry of Job is more easily compared to the histories of Thucydides. Thucydides represented important speech, not by slavish reproduction, but by carefully constructed Attic prose. The complexity of the periodic structure increased with the prestige of the speaker. Pericles' funeral oration is one of the most complex passages in classical Greek. It would have been virtually impossible to understand by listening. The complexity draws attention to the gravity of the circumstances and the prestige of Pericles.

⁴I believe it is impossible to assume that Daniel mentioned here, is any other than the Daniel of the book bearing his name. Contrary to most modern critics it is unlikely to be the Danel of the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat, who was anything but a righteous man.

In a similar way, the language of Job and the poetic structure of the monologues attest to the universal significance of the subject being debated. It is a real person in acute trouble asking questions that resonate with every one who is overwhelmed with trouble. The use of the poetic form is a clue that we are to take these conversations as more significant than a record of what was said but as wisdom sayings that are worth learning and following.

Where does Job come from? Job come from the east! Job 1:3 states: “this man was the greatest of all the people of the East.” But, which east. Those who try to link Job with the Babylonian theodicy literature, would make it the east of modern Iraq. However, also east of the covenant land is the land of Midian. Perhaps it is possible that Job came into the possession of the children of Israel by way of Midian and Moses? Or was there a Canaan connection with Abraham?

Job is described as “a man in Uz.” There are two other references to that land. Jeremiah 25:20 talks about “all the foreign people, all the kings of Uz and all the kings of the Philistines. Lamentations 4:21 speaks of the daughter of Edom that dwells in the land of Uz. When this is combined with the statements in Job 1:15 and 17 about Sabaeen and Chaldean raiders, the location of Uz might be somewhere west of Ur and east of the Jordan river.

These verses naturally raise a question about the when of Job. We must be careful when we consider the time of writing. We do not need to conclude that the setting of the story and the time of authorship are one and the same. The story of Job is clearly very ancient. Job lived in a time when wealth was measured in real property and livestock not in terms of currency or treasury wealth. It is likely that Job lived at a time prior to the levitical system. He is represented as performing sacrifices for his family much as the patriarchs are represented building altars.

It is possible that Job lived earlier than the Abrahamic covenant. His age appears contemporary or slightly earlier than that of the patriarchs in the history of redemption. Albright’s assertions about the domestication of camels, let some to place Job later than the 12th century. Recent research has produced evidence for their domestication in the 3rd millennium B.C. which means Job could easily have lived prior to Abraham. Though the use of the term Chaldeans for nomadic raiders would probably indicate tribes descended from Nahor’s son Chesed. This is reinforced by the fact that Elihu is identified as a Buzite, perhaps descended from one of Nahor’s other sons.

There is no internal or external attribution of authorship. So we must regard Job as an anonymous work. As mentioned before Baba Bathra suggests a Mosaic authorship. Several commentators that have noted a similarity between Deuteronomy 28 and the book of Job. It is possible that the story of Job was learned by Moses in Midian when he was a shepherd for forty years. It is also possible that Moses was the original source of the prologue and epilogue.

The language of Job is thought by many to reflect the period of the monarchy. This is not a scientific judgement, but a subjective impression of style. It is not unlikely that the poetic expression did not reach its final form until a later time. David Wolfers has suggested Isaiah as the author of Job (Deep Things Out Of Darkness), but for Wolfers the poem is not so much about suffering as a political analysis of the empires threatening Israel in Isaiah’s day. We can certainly assert that it must have been written in the present form prior to the exile.

Job is a three part, A-B-A’ structure. It contains a lengthy prologue comprising chapters 1 and 2. The dialogue and monologues of the next section include chapters 3 through 42:6. The last 10 verses comprise a short epilogue.

The dialogues are introduced by Job’s complaint monologue. This monologue is important in establishing the unity of Job. Job 1:21 reads: “Naked I came from my mother’s

womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.” R. D. Moore⁵ finds here a reverent acceptance of the womb, the tomb, God’s ways, and then Job blesses God. But now in the complaint monologue of chapter 3 we find Job’s complaint against the womb in Job 3:3-4: May the day perish on which I was born, And the night in which it was said, 'A male child is conceived.' May that day be darkness.

He also complains against the tomb in vss. 12-13 Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? 13 For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; Then I would have been at rest. He complains also about God’s work in 3:20 & 23: "Why is light given to him who is in misery, And life to the bitter of soul, why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, And whom God has hedged in? In this monologue we find Job cursing his birth in contrast to his former blessing God.

An important motif in Job is the *riv* (רִיב), a controversy or legal complaint. The *riv* is an important topic in the prophetic books as God charges Israel with covenant faithlessness. In Job, it is Job’s desire to face God, as one would face an adversary in court. Job desires to plead his case before God’s justice. Notable occurrences of this emphasis are found at: Job 9:2 & 3, Job 10:1-3, Job 13:6-23, and Job 31:35, 36. Especially note the language of (Job 23:1-7) Then Job answered and said: 2 "Even today my complaint is bitter; My hand is listless because of my groaning. 3 Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, That I might come to His seat! 4 I would present my case before Him, And fill my mouth with arguments. 5 I would know the words which He would answer me, And understand what He would say to me. 6 Would He contend with me in His great power? No! But He would take note of me. 7 There the upright could reason with Him, And I would be delivered forever from my Judge.

Another idea that is introduced in Job is the adversary, Satan. The word *ṣāṭān* means an opponent, accuser, or prosecutor. He appears in Job 1:7: And the LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?" So Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it." The role of accuser is clearly seen in Job 1:9-10 "Does Job fear God for nothing? 10 "Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side?

What is very interesting is the statement that proceeds this accusation. Job 1:8 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?" What does this mean? Is God inviting Satan to test Job, or looking to protect his servant? The idiom “to set the heart upon,” means to pay special attention to something. God is asking if Satan already has Job in his sights because of his extraordinary character.

The Dialogues between Job and his “comforters” break into three cycles. The first cycle is Eliphaz then Job, followed by Bildad and Job responds, then Zophar speaks and is answered by Job. Cycle 2 follows the same pattern. The third cycle is truncated omitting a third exchange between Job and Zophar.

In the first cycle, Eliphaz argues that God does not afflict the poor, and Job’s suffering must be chastening. To this Job responds that God’s hand is heavy on me. Job argues that his complaints were valid, because God’s hand was against him without any reason.

Job’s pathetic prayer. Job 7:16-21

I loathe my life; I would not live forever.

⁵R. D. Moore, “The Integrity of Job” CBQ 45, (1983) pp. 17-31.

Let me alone, For my days are but a breath.
 17 "What is man, that You should exalt him,
 That You should set Your heart on him,
 18 That You should visit him every morning,
 And test him every moment?
 19 How long? Will You not look away from me,
 And let me alone till I swallow my saliva?
 20 Have I sinned?
 What have I done to You,
 O watcher of men?
 Why have You set me as Your target,
 So that I am a burden to myself?
 21 Why then do You not pardon my transgression,
 And take away my iniquity?
 For now I will lie down in the dust,
 And You will seek me diligently,
 But I will no longer be."

Job wonders why God will not forgive him, he has a dread of God's continued "attention." After the first cycle of dialogues Job's soliloquy gives a good view of a psychology of suffering:

He contrasts God's transcendence to man's finiteness, Job 14:1-5
 He contrasts the renewal of nature to the finality of death 14:7-12
 He longs for oblivion and hopes for resurrection 14:13-17
 He sinks into despondency 14:18-19

The Transition or Hinge that leads from the desperate search for meaning both by Job and his comforters to the coming of God in the whirlwind is The Wisdom Poem (Ch. 28). Many find this one of the most intriguing features of Job. Its placement is questioned. Many feel that it is placed properly here as the main hinge, others believe it is misplaced. It is speculated that it has displaced Zophar's last speech. Stylistically it is very simple poetry, very simple vocabulary

18 No mention shall be made of coral or quartz, For the price of wisdom is above rubies.
 28 And to man He said, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, And to depart from evil is understanding.' "

The next section consists of Monologues, first Job, then Elihu. The monologue of Elihu serves to prepare the way for God's address to Job. God speaks in two speeches, The first speech extends from 38:1 to 40:5 and the second speech from 40:6 to 42:6. Elihu is often maligned as brash and youthful or boring and repetitive. This is not accurate. As a Literary device, Elihu is a "forerunner" to God's speech from the whirlwind. Dramatically he balances Job's riv. He actually listens to Job and addresses his complaint. Elihu is mostly normative he speaks of inspiration 32.8,18 and 36.4. He speaks well on chastening value of suffering. His "comfort" is not condemned, though Eliphaz, Bildad & Zophar, Job's friends are censured in 42.7 for what they said. Elihu serves to introduce and explain the ultimate coming of God in the storm.

Job's friends restricted God to their own concept of retribution (13.7-8), imputed crime to a righteous man (22.6-9; 32:3), Yet they did not speak only wrongly. Compare 5.13 with 1 Corinthians 3.19 for example..

We find some profound thoughts in Job's own words. In Job 13:15, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him." Consider Job 19:25-27, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth; 26 And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God, 27 Whom I shall see for myself, And my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" Yet Job sinks to his lowest ebb when he suggests that God enjoys the suffering of the innocent. Job 9:22-24 "He destroys the blameless and the wicked.' If the scourge slays suddenly, He laughs at the plight of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked. He covers the faces of its judges. If it is not He, who else could it be?" This kind of thought is often a misplaced application of a finite human comprehension of God's absolute sovereignty

The book of Job asks "why?" Why do the innocent suffer. God's answer is "who!" The only true resolution to the problem of evil and suffering in an intimate encounter with the character and glory of the living God. In Job 42:1-6 we read: "Then Job answered the LORD and said: "I know that You can do everything, And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.' I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, But now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, And repent in dust and ashes."

Some regard the epilogue as a weakening of the poetry. A capitulation to theodicy. Yet in returning double livestock to Job, God is affirming his innocence indeed.

Our secret fear that is aroused by Job's trouble, is a concern that it could happen to each of us. Job's friends became his accusers because their world view was shaken up by Job's sufferings. They needed to find a reason for Job's sorrow, or they might have to suffer also. How does Job help you minister to terminal patient, some one with a debilitating degenerative disease, some one who has lost a child?