

The Book of Job (Part One)

Introduction

It is obvious that a key topic in the book is suffering. The way this topic is tackled is "both deeply moving and incredibly complex" (IOT 199). The book is challenging to interpret.

1A. The structure of the book of Job

Prologue 1.1-3.26

Dialogue 4.1-42.6

Dialogue with the three friends in three cycles 4.1-31.40

Dialogue with Elihu 32.1-37.24

Dialogue with God 38.1-42.6

Epilogue, 42.7-17

Detailed Outline

Prologue 1.1-3.26

General background, 1.1-2.13

Job's lament, 3.1-26

Dialogue 4.1-42.6

Dialogue with the three friends in 3 cycles 4.1-31.40

Round one

Eliphaz 4.1-5.27

Job 6.1-7.21

Bildad 8.1-22

Job 9.1-10.22

Zophar 11.1-20

Job 12.1-14.22

Round two

Eliphaz 15.1-35

Job 16.1-17.16

Bildad 18.1-21

Job 19.1-29

Zophar 20.1-29

Job 21.1-34

Round three (Zophar not in the 3rd)

Eliphaz 22.1-30

Job 23.1-24.25

Bildad 25.1-6

Job 26.1-31.40

Dialogue with Elihu 32.1-37.24

Dialogue with God (between God and Job) 38.1-42.6

God 38.1-40.2

Job 40.3-5

God 40.6-41-34

Job 42.1-6

Epilogue, 42.7-17

Even though chapter 3 (Job's forceful lament) is poetry (after the first two verses), should we think of it as part of the introduction of the book versus restricting the prologue to the opening prose section of chapters 1 & 2? It contains no word of self-defense from Job, no claim of being innocent; nor is there any faulting of God or any hint of counter-arguing with his friends (as if their demeanor argued some kind of disapproval of Job that his lament counters).

Thus, the narrator gives us all the background we need to understand the nature of the dialogue. Right away Eliphaz faults Job for complaining and charges him with wrongdoing (cf. 4.8, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same). Eliphaz thus begins the dialogue.

2A. Theme

Consider the challenge of the book in light of the fact that the point of the book is not to answer any of the following questions. What is the origin of suffering in the world? Do people suffer according to their sins? Why do people suffer? Why do the righteous suffer?

Accordingly, note that when God settles the debate He does not answer the questions raised in it. 1) Instead, He rejects the answers that the friends gave to Job (42.7). 2) Although Job spoke "what is right" about the Lord (42.7), Job's call that God explain Himself in writing so Job could refute Him (31.35-37) remains unanswered when God steps into the debate (38-40). Clearly Job faulted God to justify himself (40.2, 7-8), so how does he speak what is right about God? When God speaks (38-40), He gives no answer to the problem of suffering; instead, He addresses Job's contending with the Almighty (40.2). This indicates that different questions are put on the table by suffering such as "who is wise?" and "how do we live wisely in the presence of suffering?" In this light, the theme is wisdom in the presence of suffering (where to find wisdom and how to live wisely when suffering is present).

3A. Historical Background

The plot is set in the patriarchal period before the formal priesthood was established (Job offers sacrifices, 1:5). Job's length of life (42:16) is indicative of a time early in patriarchal history because of the declining age span from Adam to David (from hundreds of years to three score and ten, Ps. 90:10). The location, Uz, outside of Palestine suggests Job is a non-Israelite and prior to the narrowing of the redemptive community through Abraham (IOT 200-201).

4A. Story line

The prologue introduces the main characters, sets the stage, and initiates the plot that needs resolution. The reader is given information that none of the characters of the story are aware of: that Job's suffering is not caused by sin.

Instead, God has a purpose that He brings to pass through Satan. Notice that God directs Satan's attention to Job (1:8) to which Satan replies with a question and a challenge (1:9-11). The Lord permitted Satan access to the heavenly court, challenged Satan, and agreed to Satan's challenge; Yahweh is in control! Interestingly, Satan is dropped from the narrative after the prologue. Notably, Job is afflicted severely in stages with no knowledge of the scene in heaven.

The book begins with harmony and happiness in which Job fears God and God blesses Job. Then Job is afflicted and nonetheless fears God. God's blessing has become affliction and Job's fear of God takes the form of patient endurance. Then, suddenly, even shockingly, quiet and patient endurance becomes loud and bitter lament in chapter 3 after the friends have come to offer comfort (2.11). Perhaps we are already cued into their incapacity to comfort by their loud weeping and utter silence for seven days and nights (this may of course be custom indicating deep feeling; but is it wise?)

Three cycles of dialogue arise from Job's lament in chapter 3 where Job bemoans his fate even asking why he was born. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar represent "retribution theology." This is a very mechanical view of God's blessing of the righteous and cursing of the wicked. If Job suffers then he is cursed as a sinner and needs to repent (Eliphaz: 4:7; Bildad: 8:1-6; Zophar: 11:3, 6, 14). Job cannot agree though he admits that he is not totally without sin (9:2). "Upright and blameless" does not mean perfect or sinless as Job himself acknowledges (31:33; 13:26; 14:17). What he does is counter the friends and question the justice of God. Job does have a moment of insight in his depression expressed in the moving poem to God's wisdom in chapter 28 (cf. the retribution triangle; Job is innocent, God is Just, Job is suffering: in this incorrect

model, we can't have all three, only two at the same time, the other is excluded). But Job's last speech (27-31) complains that God has unfairly turned a deaf ear to one who does not deserve such suffering. He longs for the past when God watched over him (29:2) with friendship (29:4). Now God afflicts (30:11) and is ruthless (30:20-21). God is accuser to an innocent one! (31:35-37).

God speaks to Job (38:1-41:34). Job responds (42:1-6). Job had asked for an indictment in writing to which he would respond (31:35-37). God never directly answers except to rebuke Job for questioning His justice (40:8). Yahweh then does not directly address any specific question or defend himself. Instead, He questions Job concerning the ultimate source of wisdom to show "God's full knowledge and control of the natural order that he created and contrast this with Job's ignorance. The implication is that the same is true for the moral order as well. God knows, but Job is ignorant." Job repents submitting himself to the Almighty God of the universe and his will (IOT 205). He makes no court case.

Job asked for a trial in which he is well prepared to argue his case and in which he expects God to explain his actions but when God appears Job declines to speak and God refuses to explain his actions. Job questioned God but in the end God questions Job.

In the epilogue, God speaks to the three friends (42:7-8). They respond (42:9a). Job responds (42:9b). God says, "You are wrong and Job is right. You need his intercession on your behalf for I am angry with you." They obey and Job intercedes with a prayer acceptable to God (42:9).

The comforters became accusers in their claim to be wise but in the end God reveals their folly. Though they think they honor God in condemning Job, the friends are condemned and Job is commended. Yet surprisingly Job is commended by the Lord even though he faulted God as cruel and unjust. God accuses Job of darkening counsel and yet affirms that Job has spoken rightly in defending His divine integrity. Job surrenders his oath of innocence and God still blesses him. Job is and is not innocent. God faults but finally blesses Job.

The friends are condemned by God but prayed for by Job. In the end, Job's final state in life is far better than his former state and all the tensions are resolved in harmony and happiness: "The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first...and so he died, old and full of years" (Job 42:12, 17).

5A. Message per IOT (*Introduction to the Old Testament* by Dillard and Longman)

First, they see the real question to be "Who is wise?" All the participants ultimately fail in their claims of wisdom. "God alone is the source and he distributes wisdom as he sees fit" (208). Note the ring of sovereignty here.

Second, a word is given regarding suffering that is mainly negative. The retribution doctrine is refuted. All the friends reversed the principle from sin leads to suffering to "If you suffer you have sinned" (209). At bottom we have "if you sin then you suffer, so, since you suffer, therefore, you sinned" (The logic is like: if an elephant steps on a balloon then it will burst, so, since it burst, therefore, an elephant stepped on it. There may be another cause.).

Third, the book teaches that God is in control of the affairs of heaven and earth. He reprimands the innocent sufferer for questioning his wisdom and power. And the appropriate response for such questioning is repentance.

Fourth, on the positive side, the work of God is displayed. John 9 is paralleled with Job showing "that God is glorified through the suffering of his faithful servants" (209).

Fifth, Job can only be properly read in light of the totally innocent one who suffered the just for the unjust (IOT 209-210). We should be self-conscious about the fact that we are viewing the book of Job within the larger context of the sixty-six books of the Bible. This means, of course, that our interpretation is uniquely Christian. We must see the book of Job as a point in the unfolding drama of redemptive history that has moved from promise (the wisdom of Job) to fulfillment in Jesus Christ (who is wisdom, I Cor. 1:30).