

Bible 101
Job
April 6, 2022

Mantra for Bible study at Redeemer: Bible is a book of truth (about God), not a book of facts!

The book of Job is one of the most thought-provoking, perplexing, and puzzling books of the Bible. Biblical scholars and commentators have been arguing for centuries about the meaning of the book and it still defies a simple answer. An involved or detailed examination of Job will raise issues of theology and philosophy that are beyond the scope of this Bible 101 series. This summary will provide an overview of the book, sample some content, and list some of the questions and issues that emerge from the text.

Important sections to read:

- Job 1:1 – 2:13 – Introduction
- Job 19:25-27 – “I know that my Redeemer lives”
- Job 28 – The source of Wisdom
- Job 42 -- Conclusion

Authorship/time period/location of Job:

- The authorship of Job is unknown. Analysis of the text indicates that Chapter 28, a discourse on wisdom, and Chapters 34 through 37, the speech of Elihu, are later additions so the book most likely has multiple authors.
- The book has no chronological references, such as mention of a king or a battle. Expert opinion when the book was written ranges from 7th Century BCE to 3rd Century BCE, with a consensus of 6th Century BCE.
- The location of the story is Uz. The precise location of Uz is unavailable from either the Biblical or historical records. Some experts locate it in what is now southern Jordan, others in the Arabian peninsula, and others associate it with modern Uzbekistan. From the Biblical perspective, the story is sited outside of the territory of Israel.

Literary Type

The consensus of modern commentators is that the book of Job should be read as an extended parable. Reasons for this are:

- Outside of a brief introduction and conclusion, most of the text is a series of poetic speeches. Sections are introduced with no action or narrative but with a brief statement that a certain character spoke these words.
- As noted above, the time and the place of the story is vague. We can read counterparts in the parables of Jesus that typically open “There once was a man...”.
- Chapter 1 describes Job as holding incredible wealth in livestock and flocks. Exaggerated wealth is also a feature of some of the parables of Jesus.

If we treat Job as a parable, then we can focus on the important questions contained in the book and its meaning for us today.

Literary Style

The dialogues and discourses that comprise Chapters 3 through Chapter 42 Verses 1-6 are in the form of Hebrew poetry. In the Old Testament, the poetic style is also found in Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the oracles of the prophetic writings, most notably the Servant Songs of Isaiah in Chapters 42, 49, 50, and 53. We are familiar with many examples of this poetry in worship through Bible readings, chants and other uses in the liturgy, and choral compositions. Additionally, some Psalms have been reset to hymns. Two examples are “The King of Love My Shepherd Is”, from Psalm 23, and Psalm 46 was the source for Martin Luther’s great reformation hymn “A Mighty Fortress”.

As this is our first encounter with Hebrew poetry in the Bible 101 series, what follows is a brief overview of its formats and style. Unlike classic English poetry that features meter and rhyme, the central characteristics of Hebrew poetry in the English translations are structure and imagery. The core elements of Hebrew poetry are the use of pairs or triplets of phrases or sentences to explore a topic. Sometimes the pairs open with the expression of a topic in a positive statement followed by a negative one. An example is the familiar opening of Psalms 23. The topic is that the Lord provides, and the opening is the positive shepherd image, “The Lord is my shepherd” followed by this stated in negative terms, “I will not be in want”.

Triplets are frequently used to give an extensive or expanded set of images or descriptions. Turning again to Psalm 23, verse 5 extols the bountiful blessings of the Lord in this triplet:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies,
You anoint my head with oil,
My cup runs over.

These pairs or triplets can be fitted into a larger structures of texts. Good analogies are library catalog systems, musical compositions that develop or present variations on a theme, and for those that have done any programming, nested If-Then-Else logic.

A good example of the pair or A/B format is Psalm 22, which is traditionally chanted on Good Friday. The first 21 verses are a bitter cry of anguish that open with “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me” (Job will deliver similar lamentations) but the concluding verses are a song of vindication. One problem with reading poetry in the Bible is that sometimes the split of the text into verses does not fit the structure of the poetry and it may take two or more readings to fully understand the text. Also, consulting a study Bible or a commentary on the book of Job can explain some of the idioms and nuances that are lost in the translation.

The pair or A/B structure lends itself to pairs of extremes such as the righteous and sinners, good and evil, the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor, and the old and the young. All of these are found in Job. Job and other Hebrew poetry make extensive use of imagery and comparisons that use familiar items such as storms, earthquakes, and other events in nature—in Chapter 38 God appears to Job in a whirlwind; agriculture and farming practices; animals, especially predators like lions and eagles; formations of nature, especially seas, and mountains; and the mythical cosmic beasts of Leviathan, that lives in the waters, and its land counterpart, Behemoth.

The Hebrew poets used this imagery and word play to portray intense emotions. In Job are expressions of accusation, rage, lament, anguish, bewilderment, and sarcasm. While this poetry is very good at delivering the emotions and complexity of life, it is inadequate to present an academic-level exploration of problems of morality and philosophy.

Overview of the Book of Job

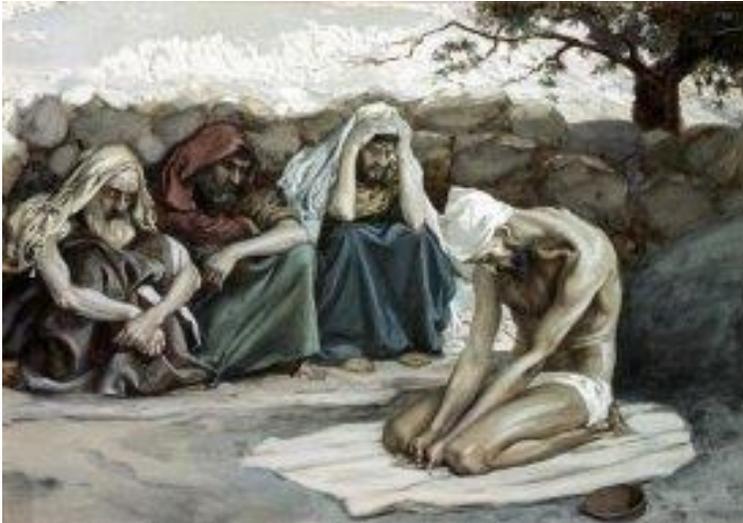
Chapters 1 and 2 set up the story. Verse 1-5 of Chapter 1 describe Job as “blameless and upright, who feared God, and turned away from evil”. Job also had a large family of a wife, 7 sons, and three daughters; and was extremely wealthy with “seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 donkeys.”—the land and fields to support this immense agricultural enterprise would be immense. The readers at the time the book was written would see this fitting into a mindset that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked; theologians call this the theory of “retributive justice”.

In verse 6 the scene shifts to the heaven with God hearing reports from the “heavenly beings”. We can envision this as God seated on his heavenly throne and attended by the angels—this is a common motif in both the Old Testament, pagan religions existing concurrently with ancient Israel (consider the Greek pantheon), and in the New Testament book of the Revelation of St. John. One of the heavenly beings or angels that report to God is Satan, which means “accuser”. We must not conflate this Satan with our modern concept of Satan as the source of evil and ruler of Hell—this is a later development in Judeo-Christian theology. The Satan of the book of Job serves in modern legal terms as a prosecuting attorney presenting charges.

God asks Satan if Satan has seen his faithful servant Job. Satan replies that he has but charges that Job is faithful to God only because he has accumulated his vast wealth. God agrees to allow Satan to test Job by allowing Satan to strip away from Job everything but his life. By the end of Chapter 2 Job has lost his children, all his animals, and is covered from head to foot in boils. This movement from extreme wealth to extreme suffering sets up the drama and intense emotion shown in the remainder of the story. We are now compelled to listen to Job in his physical suffering and emotional anguish.

In Verse 9 of Chapter 2. Job’s wife asks: “Why do you persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.” Job rejects this as foolish thought and clings to life and belief in his integrity.

In Verse 11 of Chapter 2, Job is visited by his three friends—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuite, and Zophar the Naahanite (like Uz, the locations of the home areas of the friends are obscure). Job’s friends join him in seven days of silent mourning.



“Job and His Friends”, by James Tissot, made available to the public by The Jewish Museum of New York

Chapter 3 is a lamentation of Job in which he regrets the day he was born. Here are some excerpts:

- Verse 3: “Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, ‘a man-child is conceived.’”
- Verse 11: “Why did I not die at birth, come from the womb and expire?”

Chapters 4 through 31 are a series of poetic speeches and dialogues between Job and his three friends. They follow a pattern of a speech by one of the friends and then a reply by Job. Here is an outline of these speech cycles:

Friend	Chapters	Chapters of Job’s Reply
Eliphaz	4 – 5	6-7
Bildad	8	9 – 10
Zophar	11	12 – 14
Eliphaz	15	16 – 17
Bildad	18	19
Zophar	20	21
Eliphaz	22	23 – 24
Bildad	25	26- 27, 29-31

Basically, Job’s friends assert that because God is all powerful and just, that Job is suffering because he has committed great sin. Some sample texts of these speeches are:

- Eliphaz, Chapter 4 Verse 17
“Can mortals be righteous before God?
Can human beings be pure before their Maker?”
- Bildad, Chapter 8, Verses 2-3, 5-6
“How long will you say these things,
and the words of your mouth be a great wind?
Does God pervert justice?
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?”

If you will seek God and make supplication to the Almighty,
if you are pure and upright,
surely He will rouse Himself for you
and restore you to your right place.”

- Zophar, Chapter 11, Verses 4-6
“For you say, ‘My conduct is pure, and clean in God’s sight.’
But O that God would speak, and open his lips to you,
and that He would tell you the source of wisdom!
For wisdom is many-sided.”
- Eliphaz, Chapter 22, Verses 5-6
“Is not your wickedness great?
Is there no end to your iniquities.
For you have extracted pledges from your family for no reason
and stripped the naked of their clothing.”

In his replies Job maintains his innocence and integrity. Here is a sample of his speeches:

- Chapter 9, Verses 20-23
“Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me;
though I am blameless, he (God) would prove me perverse.
I am blameless, I do not know myself,
I loath my life.
It is all one, therefore I say, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked.
When disaster brings sudden death,
he mocks the calamity of the innocent.”
- Chapter 12, Verses 3-4, reply to Zophar’s accusations
“But I have understanding as well as you.
I am not inferior to you.
Who does not know such things of these?
I am a laughingstock to my friends,
I, who called upon God and he answered me,
a just and blameless man, I am a laughingstock.”
- Chapter 27, Verse 6
“For I hold fast my righteousness,
and will not let go,
my heart does not reproach me for any of my days”
- In Chapter 29 Job lists his deeds of mercy and justice to the poor, widows, and orphans.

During his suffering and torment, Job issues a statement of faith that he will be vindicated. The text is Chapter 19 Verses 25-27, with the opening line the same as the great Easter hymn:

“I know that my Redeemer lives.
and at the last he will stand on the earth,
and after my skin has been destroyed,
then in my flesh I will see God.”

Chapter 28 is an interlude in Job’s speech by an anonymous source. In poetic form it states that wisdom cannot be found in nature but only found in God. Verse 28 concludes the Chapter with:

“And he (God) said to humankind.

‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom,
And to depart from evil is understanding.’”

Chapter 32 introduces a new character—Elihu. Although he is younger than Job and his three friends, Elihu boldly states that all of them are wrong. Verse 2 states that “He was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God; he was angry also at Job’s three friends because they had found no answer, though they had declared Job to be in the wrong.” The remainder of Chapter 32 and Chapters 33 through 37 contains Elihu’s poetic speeches that support his claims. From a dramatic perspective they are a foreshadowing of the final resolution of the story.

Chapter 38 then introduces God as a voice in a whirlwind. In Verses 1 through 3 God issues a sarcastic challenge to Job:

“What is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird your loins like a man, I will question you and you shall declare to me.”

In the remainder of Chapter 38 and in Chapters 39 through 41 God recounts his acts of creation and power over all of it—the heavens and stars, earth, the seas, and all creatures of creation—even the great sea monster Leviathan (Chapter 41). Job offers a feeble reply in Chapter 40 Verses 3-5: “I have spoken once and will not answer, twice but will proceed no further” (verse 5).

The story reaches its climax in Chapter 42 where Job humbles himself before God. In Verse 3 Job confesses that “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” and in Verse 6 “therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” God then addresses Eliphaz: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. God commanded that the three bring seven bulls and seven rams to Job so that he might offer a sacrifice and prayer on their behalf.” The three did as the Lord commanded them and Job’s prayer was accepted (Verses 7 through 9).

The story concludes in Verses 10 through 17 which describe the restoration of Job’s fortunes. He is reunited with his brothers and sisters—an unstated assumption is that they followed the law codes of the Torah and isolated themselves from Job after he was covered in boils. The next generation is started as he became the father of seven sons and three daughters. God blessed Job by giving him double of his original livestock and herds—14 thousand sheep, six thousand camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 donkeys. The book concludes by stating that Job lived to be 140 years old and saw his descendants to the fourth generation.

Reflections

In the end, God never explains why he permitted Satan to cause such great harm to Job. If we extend this outside the story of Job, we have the general question of why God allows evil to exist—the technical name for this is theodicy. This issue has bedeviled (pun intended) theologians, philosophers, pastors, teachers, and others for centuries. The book of Job does not have a clear or convincing answer to this “why” question. It hints that the answer is beyond human comprehension. Does modern science or philosophy or psychology offer any answers?

As people of faith, a better approach to the presence of evil and suffering is to ask a different question. In his sermon on March 20, 2022, the third Sunday of Lent, Associate Pastor Joshua Wullenweber delivered this encouraging message:

“Especially this Lent as we continue to struggle with the “why’s” of the pandemic, the why’s of the War in Ukraine, and the why’s of the community struggles that are happening all around us.

Today Jesus encourages us to move beyond the whys and focus on the how’s. How can we better engage in our current context? How can we more fully serve as we have been called to serve? How can we live more completely in the Kingdom of God? Because we may never fully know the why. Nor may we completely be able to do everything about the struggles we witness in the world. But what we can do is change our hearts and our minds in a way that allows us to make a difference in the communities in which we live and in the lives of those we serve.”

God’s speech to Job is in Chapters 38 through 41. In it, God emphatically declares that He is the creator and ruler of all that exists. Some commentators connect this with the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 and see this as a reminder that we are called to be good caretakers of the world that the Creator has given us. A recommendation for anyone interested in this topic is Kathryn Schifferdecker’s book “Out of the Whirlwind, Creation Theology of the Book of Job”.

The book of Job is replete with Job’s bitter complaints, and rages about the unfairness of his suffering. At the end God does not condemn Job for his tirades but calls him “my servant”—the same title God gave Job in Chapter 1. This tells us that it is okay to lament or give voice to our situations and that it is okay to be angry with God about what has or hasn’t happened—God hears and understands.

One final point of speculation: What did God tell Satan after Job remained faithful to God throughout all his suffering?