

Notes on Job

This is a remarkable book. It has the form of stories told in ancient Mesopotamia. Scholars say it is the most theological consistent book in the Hebrew Bible as it deals with one issue and one issue only: the problem of suffering.

Did a real person named Job live and go through these exact things and make these exact exchanges? We don't know. It really doesn't matter. Here, we see how those without the Temple, Tabernacle, a written law, or a nation of believers dealt with the horrors of life.

There is no mention of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or any of the prophets or judges. It doesn't mention Israel or Sinai. It never mentions the Commandments and we see no visits from a Levite priest. The Hebrew here is old and very, very detailed, making this an intellectually challenging book. This is faith in the dark.

If you want to really dig into this book – and we hope you do – you will need to know a few things about the players. The characters are God, Satan, Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and a drive by appearance by a young man named Eilhu. Another character weaves throughout the book but is never named: the narrator.

Picking out exactly where each speech begins and ends can be challenging, so we will stick with the divisions most often drawn by scholars.

The Oxford Companion to the Bible has this intriguing phrase when describing the speeches: “All the speaking moves toward silence; Job, who has done most of the talking, in the end lays his hand on his mouth.”

There will be exchanges of speeches. Speeches made in the dark about suffering. When people think of this book, they often knee jerk with “the patience of Job” when that is not at all what this book is about. They may say “the problem of suffering” and they would be correct...but which problem?

Why is there suffering, and what are its origins and cause? Why has THIS suffering happened to THIS person? There are no satisfactory answers to those questions in this book.

What about the idea that suffering is sometimes punishment for sins committed, sometimes a warning not to commit sins in the future, or, in Job's case, suffering for no known reason but, perhaps, part of the plan of God? Again, this book will not clear that up for us.

I would like to posit another way to approach this book and our lives: We seem troubled when we see evil. I know that I get upset and ask God why and how long and when will He intervene and why isn't He intervening already. But...Then I think of Romans 1 where Paul says everything that can be known about God can be learned by observing nature.

And what do we know about nature? The philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, wrote a book called "Leviathan" in 1651. It can be heavy lifting but it is fascinating in its portrayal of nature and human nature. He took a low view of each. He referred to human nature in the greater world of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote "In Memoriam" in 1860, 200yrs after Hobbes, to speak of the type of evil we see in Job; the mind boggling suffering of those who pray and are righteous. In it, he coined another phrase that has stuck with us for nearly two centuries now. The narrator in the poem is speaking about Nature, referring to it in the feminine gender:

Man, her last work, who seemed so fair
Such splendid purpose in his eyes.
Who rolled the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer.

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law –
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shrieked against his creed.

Theologians have long said that we live in a broken world, broken by the rebellion of Adam and Eve. When I was a boy, that seemed grossly unfair. Why should I be scratched by thorns because some woman ate an

unauthorized fruit? As I grew older, I realized that their sins were no greater than mine. I, who had much more information and history from which to draw, sinned – often willingly and willfully. We all broke the world. That would lead us to the conclusion that “nasty, brutish and short” is the norm.

Pain, disappointment, frustration, and failure ARE the norm on this planet. Scientists estimate that between 90-98% of all species that have ever lived on this earth are now extinct. That’s quite a batting average. Rather than storm the gates of heaven in outrage when things go wrong, perhaps we should be perpetually surprised at how many things go right!

Here, again, Job gives us guidance but nothing perfect. He teaches us how to suffer and who to be while we are suffering. His is a mind in turmoil, a heart broken, a spirit confused – but he still insists on speaking with God and keeping his face turned toward God...even when heaven is silent.

This book was written in this final form sometime during the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews. Some believe it was written specifically for the people trapped there, far away from home, and vassals to a brutal kingdom. I think it works regardless of where you find yourself.

Let’s set up the book I will be asking you to do some reading ahead in the future. We will look at chapter 1 today. Please read 1-3 for next week. (we might take a break for celebration when we can gather as a whole body)

Job 1:1-11. This is the very issue I spoke to you about last week. Satan does not think you are worth the effort, love, and sacrifice of God. Satan believes you are only in this for stuff God gives you and, if that tap is ever turned off, we will turn against God. Keep that in mind: two teams are ready to cheer you on. One is God, cheering your faithfulness. The other is Satan, cheering your anger, disappointment and rebellion. Which cloud of witnesses is cheering what you are doing and thinking now?

Next week...we look at chapters 1-3. One of the few truisms we have in psychology is that the cards you are dealt are not as life defining as what you choose to do with them. More on that...next.