

# An Introduction to the Book of Job

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The structure of the book of Job is relatively straightforward. A prologue introduces the book's readers to Job and describes decisions made in a parallel universe, that of a celestial court in which Yahweh, the head of the pantheon according to Israelite belief, holds ultimate power (chs. 1-2). The heart of the book consists of a series of dialogue cycles between Job and three friends in which Job appeals to Yahweh for vindication (chs. 3-31), followed by responses by Yahweh to Job's appeals and a brief response by Job (chs. 38-41; 42:1-6). Speeches by a young interloper, Elihu, serve as a kind of intermezzo before Yahweh's responses to Job (chs. 32-37). An epilogue ties up all the loose ends of the book (42:7-17).

Job's response to the experience of undeserved suffering is the focus of the book. The book's resolution of the problem of Job's suffering, the role assigned to God in bringing about Job's suffering, and God's reply to Job's charges against God, have challenged and baffled generations of interpreters. Put another way, the book describes the titanic struggle of a human being with the meaning of his suffering and what it says about his self and the world of which he is a part. Even interpreters who do not believe in God, or in the God of the book of Job, have praised the book as a literary and theological masterpiece. The influence of the book of Job on art, literature, drama, and philosophy, wherever Judaism and Christianity have been potent cultural forces, has been far reaching, and shows no signs of abating.

In the prologue of the book of Job, we the readers are made privy to the fact that Job, a man of exemplary behavior, is meted out suffering through no fault of his own. One of God's angels ("the Satan" or "the accuser" in the original Hebrew) has cast aspersions on Job. God takes up Job's defense. The matter is put to the test. If Job suffers every manner of affliction but does not thereby hold God in contempt, Job will be vindicated. God allows the Satan to empty Job's life of whatever makes it meaningful, but the Satan must also act as Job's guardian angel and save Job's life from a premature conclusion: "He is in your power, but his life you must protect" (Job 2:6).

No one in the Job story - neither Job, nor Job's wife, nor Job's friends, nor Elihu - knows about God's wager with the accusing angel. We the readers know, but despite this knowledge, an explanation for Job's suffering is not thereby given to us. After all, Job fails the test. He cracks under the pressure of his suffering. He begins by speaking of God approvingly, even after he loses his children and all that he possesses (1:13-22). But when the suffering literally gets under his skin, Job maligns God again and again, directly and indirectly. "Let there be darkness," exclaims Job (3:4). Job colors the world and God's relationship to it with the same dark hues that have invaded his personal existence (7:17-20; 9:21-24; 10:8-19; 16:9-14). He now considers God to be his worst enemy, and the enemy of all humankind. This is particularly clear in 21:7-33 and 24:1-24.

When Job charges God with all manner of inappropriate behavior, Job's friends defend God from Job's charges by maligning Job. Job must have done something to deserve his fate.

Job is incensed by his friends' accusations. So malicious are their words that Job ends up contradicting the God-accusing thrust of his early speeches (through ch. 24), and insists instead on God's righteousness and wisdom. Given his friends' accusations, he *needs* God to be a righteous Judge; otherwise, his friends will not be condemned and he will not be justified. Job refers his case to God (chs. 26-31).

God replies to Job out of a whirlwind. God is furious. How dare Job darken God's counsel! Does Job even know what darkness is? Only God, of all living beings, has walked in the recesses of the deep (38:1, 16).

God confirms Job's worst fears. God's counsel, or design, really does include unimaginable terror. The world God has created is not anthropocentric at all. It is full of awesome creatures, useless or inimical to human beings, creatures in whom God takes immense delight (chs. 39-41).

Obliquely and indirectly, God rebuts Job's most awful insinuations. In distress Job claimed, "He mocks as the innocent fail" (9:23). Not so, implies God, who "hunts prey for the lion, and satisfies the appetite of the king of beasts," who "provides food for the raven, when his young cry out to God (38:39, 41).

Expatiation on God's knowledge and power, not God's justice, take up most of God's replies to Job. We sense the bewilderment of Job, who has suffered without cause under God's hand. "I am of contemptible worth; what can I answer you? I clap my hand to my mouth" (40:4). "I recant and I change my mind amidst dirt and ashes" (42:6).

Now the plot thickens. God acquits Job and vindicates Job before his friends. Job was right to defend himself before God. Job was guilty of putting God in the wrong in order to put himself in the right, the point of God's reproof of Job before acquitting him (40:8). But Job's forthrightness before God is ultimately held to his credit (42:7).

God instructs Job to pray for his friends, because they, not he, risk God's displeasure. Job, though he is furious with his friends, accedes to God's request. Job thereby signals his recommitment to exemplary words and deeds, and God responds by giving Job twice what he had before. He goes on to live a life of legendary proportions and delight in his children's children (42:8-18).

A theodicy is an attempt to justify the ways of God to men. The book of Job is an anti-theodicy. According to the book of Job, unjustifiable suffering takes place in the world. Those who claim otherwise "do not speak the truth about [God]" (42:8). Defense of man before God (anthropodicy), not defense of God (theodicy), is appropriate when suffering occurs. Job's friends should have defended Job against God rather than God against Job.

The apologetics of Job's friends do not do justice to the status of the sufferer in God's sight. If the book of Job is taken as a model, the right response to undeserved suffering is to vindicate the sufferer even if that means calling God's actions, or inaction, into question. The God of the book of Job vindicates Job. Before doing so, that same God puts an end to Job's revolt against him.

As Michael V. Fox points out, the book of Job is not skeptical literature ("Job the Pious," *ZAW* 117 (2005) 351-366; 363). It is not about approaching the world with questions and no expectation of answers. But does the book of Job demand "unqualified faith in God's goodness" ("Job the Pious," 364)? A bolder claim is hard to imagine.

In my view, the opposite is true. The book of Job justifies the sufferer's lack of faith in God when darkness colors all. An attitude of faith is

something a virtuous person characteristically has. It is also something a virtuous person may expect to lose in a time of despair.

Furthermore, faith in God's goodness, or more precisely, acquiescence to God's sovereignty, is not demanded of Job so much as given back to him in and through the fact that God replies to him out of the whirlwind. Job accepts God's reply to him even if God does not answer all of his questions. His acceptance of God's reply is a kind of faith, or more precisely, a form of obedience, without which Job could not have gone on living.

The book of Job does not resolve the problem of evil so much as rehearse it within the context of a more encompassing set of reflections on the ways of God with humankind. Other works of ancient literature in and beyond the limits of the Jewish Bible do likewise. Examples include the "Babylonian Theodicy" and "I will Praise the Lord of Wisdom" from Mesopotamian literature, Psalms 37, 49, and 73, Proverbs 30, and Qohelet (often called "Ecclesiastes"), and 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch from Jewish literature of the Roman period.

David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20* (WBC 17; Dallas: Word, 1989); Leo G. Perdue and W. Clark Gispin, eds., *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); Carol A. Newsom, "Job," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck et al, Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 4:317-637; Antti Laato and Johannes C. De Moor, eds., *Theodicy in the World of the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); David J. A. Clines, *Job 21-37* (WBC 18A; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006); Michael V. Fox, *Job* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming); David J. A. Clines, *Job 38-42* (WBC 18B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, forthcoming).

NB: a condensed version of the above will appear in *Encyclopedia of World History* (ed. Mark Whitters et al., New York: Facts on File, forthcoming 2007).