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978-0-521-09943-1 - The Book of Job
Norman C. Habel
Excerpt
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THE BOOK OF JOB

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WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT

There are two different Jobs in this book, the patient Job and the angry Job. The patient Job is the hero of the opening story whose wisdom and greatness were known throughout the ancient world. This Job is a perfect wise man whose exemplary faith and life become the focus of special attention by the divine beings of the heavenly council. Satan, a member of that council, challenges the faith of Job. Thereupon God grants permission for Job to be tested by permitting every possible disaster to befall this paragon of piety. Despite the efforts of Satan, Job comes through the ordeal with flying colours, praising God from a loathsome ash heap. The Job of the poem which follows, however, has a very different character. It is as though the angry soul deep within Job comes to the surface and he reveals his true nature. But much more is involved. The poem of Job is the intense struggle of a great poet to probe the very meaning of life, especially life where suffering and injustice prevail for no apparent reason. The poet is searching for human integrity in the face of numerous traditional answers to life offered by the religion of his day. His comforters are the representatives of that religion. Ultimately, however, Job's conflict is with God himself. He is the real enemy; the comforters are but spokesmen in his defence. The only resolution of the case is for God to appear in person and face Job's accusations. When God does come in all his majesty, Job is silenced and the case is closed. Or is it? Is Job vindicated? Does he resolve the dilemma of life and discover a new meaning for existence? To those questions we shall

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return. In any case, the Job of the opening story, who reappears at the end of the book, is restored to a greatness exceeding his former glory. (For further comments, cp. pp. 232-4 in the Message of Job.)

THE WISDOM BACKGROUND OF JOB

The book of Job belongs to a group of writings known as wisdom literature, of which Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are two notable examples within the Old Testament and Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon are classic illustrations from the Apocrypha. The concept of wisdom expressed in these books involves a distinctive outlook on life and a peculiar way of thinking. Wisdom thinking, the origins of which are lost in the distant past, is as much at home in Babylon and Egypt as it is in Palestine. The context of wisdom may be the local family, the tribal community, the city gate, the court, or international politics. From the time of Solomon the principles of wisdom were fostered and taught in the royal court at Jerusalem. Solomon, whose sagacity was acknowledged as a direct gift from Yahweh, the God of Israel (1 Kings 3: 1-14), was hailed as the father of wisdom theology in Israel.

The disciples of wisdom did not normally claim to receive direct revelations from God comparable to those of the prophets, or to find in the mighty acts of God in Israel's past the basic message for faith and life. Nor did they turn to the law of Moses as the all-sufficient reservoir for moral and ethical guidance. The student of Moses, for example, would consider adultery taboo because it violated a divine commandment of the decalogue. The wisdom student, however, viewed adultery as foolish; it was likely to ruin his life (Prov. 6: 32). Wisdom disciples were realists who attempted to understand the world as they found it and to make sense of what they found. The mind of man was for them a legitimate means of discerning truth, and the minds of other wise men, whether past or present, could be summoned to test the worth of new ideas.

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Ancient wise men were the forerunners of modern scientists and philosophers in that they ascertained truth by observation and reflection. By watching the movements of nature and the conduct of man recurring patterns could be discovered. These observations were formulated as axioms, parables or proverbs which captured the essence of reality and provided suitable guidelines for living. The wise believed that if they assiduously practised the proven principles of wisdom they would enjoy a happy and prosperous life. Underlying these principles and the persistent search of the wise to discern them, was the assumption that the universe is governed by an eternal order or design. This design was God's blueprint for creating the world and stands as the basic reality for all existence. It is the task of the wisdom student to search out the governing principle of the universe, otherwise known as 'wisdom'. To walk in the 'way of wisdom' is to live in accordance with the over-arching plan and principles exhibited in the construction of the universe.

To a large extent the early wisdom thinking in Israel was humanistic and practical. In the course of time, however, efforts were made to co-ordinate the relatively secular thinking of wisdom with the religious attitudes of the ardent followers of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The marriage of the two movements is reflected in the maxim, 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom' (cp. Job 28: 28; Prov. 9: 10). The implication is that all wisdom, despite the relentless probing of the wise, is incomplete and fruitless without a prior commitment to the teachings and faith of Yahwism, the traditional religion of Israel. A later development of wisdom theology within the context of Yahwism revolves around the figure of Wisdom as a divine reality emanating from God prior to creation and attending him as counsellor in the work of designing the universe (Prov. 8: 22-31). The reader is directed to the discussion of wisdom by other commentators in this series (E. G. Clarke, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, pp. 8-12 and R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, pp. 3-6, 50-2).

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One point at which wisdom philosophy and the theology of Yahwism converge is in the doctrine of reward and retribution. According to Deuteronomy, those Israelite believers who obey the covenant laws are promised the blessing of Yahweh, while those who violate his covenant and rebel against Yahweh are threatened with a divine curse. In wisdom teaching the expectation was similar: all who walked in the way of wisdom could anticipate a reward of happiness and prosperity, while those who ignored the maxims of wisdom would bring about their own destruction. A real dilemma arose when the assumption was made that those who suffered misfortune were being cursed for specific deeds of wickedness, or when flagrant sinners prospered in the community without ever facing the judgement of God. These issues are some of the major concerns of the book of Job. True to good wisdom tradition, the poet of Job challenges these and similar accepted teachings of Israelite theology by testing them in the crucible of human experience.

The wise were haunted by questions of meaning and purpose, injustice and evil. Why did the righteous suffer? What was the point of human existence when human beings experienced inner torment and endless doubts about the justice of God? Was there no integrity for the man oppressed by God or his fellow man? How does the human being find his true self amid the dehumanizing forces of a supposedly ordered universe? With these questions the book of Job is deeply involved.

These difficult issues were not confined to the scrutiny of Israelite wisdom disciples. Wise men throughout the ancient Near East recognized that actual experience challenged any simple belief that the world was governed by clear principles of cosmic justice. One example of this concern is a work popularly known as 'The Babylonian Job', more correctly described by its opening words as 'I will praise the Lord of Wisdom'; the original of this probably stems from about the fifteenth century B.C. The hero of the book complains about

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the apparently arbitrary will of the gods who desert him in his hour of torment. 'Where have mortals ever learned the way of a god?' he cries. His friends abuse him as an outcast cursed by the gods; all his past piety, righteousness and good works are of no avail. He suffers turmoil of mind and body as he wallows in his own excrement. Yet he is innocent of any major crime and in no way deserves his fate. After several dreams and a healing ritual he is restored to life by Marduk, the 'Lord of Wisdom'. The ultimate purpose of the work is the exaltation of Marduk for his deliverance of the diseased sufferer.

Another relevant Babylonian parallel is the dialogue known as the 'Babylonian Theodicy', sometimes called 'A dialogue about human misery', a text dating back to about the time of David (about 1000 B.C.). Just as in Job, the friends of the sufferer present the traditional orthodox answers concerning the reason for suffering, while the sufferer counters with the realities of life as he has experienced them. Themes such as the prosperity of the wicked, the misfortune of the righteous, the absence of divine intervention for the oppressed and the inscrutability of the gods, are developed in a variety of ways. Both parties assume that the gods are responsible for maintaining justice among men, but that they created mankind prone to injustice. In the last analysis the friends agree that 'the divine mind, like the centre of the universe, is remote'. Other Near Eastern parallels could be cited, but these two examples illustrate that many of the questions posed by Job are treated in comparable literature prior to the writing of Job. While these similarities are important, Job's ultimate resolution of the problem is different. But more of that later!

THE LITERARY CHARACTER OF JOB

The book of Job surpasses any of its known Babylonian or Egyptian forerunners in literary beauty and insight. In bold outline its structure can be sketched as follows: prologue

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(chs. 1–2); Job’s opening soliloquy (ch. 3); dialogue discourses (chs. 4–27); poem on wisdom (ch. 28); Job’s closing soliloquy (chs. 29–31); speeches of Elihu (chs. 32–7); answer of God and response of Job (38: 1 – 42: 6); epilogue (42: 7–17).

The prologue and epilogue comprise a simple narrative story about a heroic figure similar to the patriarchs of ancient Israel. This story is probably a non-Israelite folk legend whose historical roots are lost in antiquity. In the book of Job this legend has been modified to provide an effective background and foil for the poetic discourses of the book. Precisely how the poet reworked the original narrative is debated; some scholars argue that the three comforters were introduced into the story as a device of the poet to provide a suitable wisdom context for debating the issues posed by the innocent sufferer. Others maintain that the scenes where Satan appears before the heavenly council were created by the author of Job to highlight the irrationality of Job’s fate. Regardless of how the original folk legend was expanded, it now provides a dramatic and ironic arena within which the protagonists of the poem meet in theological combat.

The two ‘soliloquies’ of Job which frame the dialogue discourses bear strong similarities to features of the so-called lament psalms (e.g. Pss. 22 and 88) and the confessions of Jeremiah (e.g. Jer. 20: 7–18). The ‘opening soliloquy’ is a fierce complaint to God in which Job invokes a curse on the day of his birth. Typical of such complaints is the emotional exclamation ‘Why?’ which is evoked in response to the injustice of the sufferer’s situation. Job’s ‘closing soliloquy’ is similar to the summing up of a case at court. Elements typical of the protestation of innocence found in lament psalms have been expanded here into a lengthy defence of Job’s personal integrity. He begins with a survey of his past life, follows with a vivid portrayal of his current agony and concludes with a bold oath of innocence in which he disclaims any impropriety of conduct.

The bulk of the poem is composed of three cycles of

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speeches in which Job alternates with each of his three comforters, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. The predominant literary form of these 'dialogue discourses' is that of the disputation in which one speaker addresses his opponent with oratory and arguments designed to discredit his position. In so doing the speaker may cite a teaching or truism which is held in common by both parties. This common ground, whether it be in the form of a proverb, a credal statement, a portion of a hymn or some other known tradition, provides the basis for the speaker's argument. The disputant may introduce his speech with sarcastic comments belittling his opponent's contentions or his capacity to think clearly. He may conclude with a forceful appeal to his opponent to change his ways and accept the superior thinking of the speaker. Job's own speeches, however, tend to fluctuate between arguments addressed to the friends in the dispute and violent outbursts against God. For Job the dilemma of his suffering can never be resolved by any kind of logical argument, however persuasive it may be. Job is demanding a direct confrontation with God. The third cycle of speeches is incomplete as it now stands. Most of Job's speech in ch. 26 should be added to Bildad's truncated address in ch. 25. (See the comment at that point.) Zophar's final speech has been completely lost although many scholars find portions of it among Job's speeches (see the comment at 27: 8).

Two segments of the book, the 'wisdom poem' and the 'Elihu speeches', are held by most scholars to be later additions inconsistent with its basic structure and outlook. The 'wisdom poem' of ch. 28 is not a disputation speech dealing with arguments previously raised, but a self-contained literary unit describing the inaccessibility of cosmic wisdom, and the futility of attempting to fathom the inscrutable ways of God. The mood of resignation reflected in this poem stands in direct contrast to the tone of Job's bold demands addressed to God. The theme of the inscrutability of God's wisdom does appear in the discourses of the friends and it is possible that ch. 28 was originally intended as the culminating speech of Zophar, the

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last of the friends (see the comment at the beginning of ch. 28). The problem with the 'Elihu speeches' lies in the fact that the figure of Elihu appears on the scene unexpectedly. He is nowhere introduced in the opening prose story along with the other characters. His arguments appear as a kind of appendix to the dialogue discourses and tend to anticipate many of the arguments put forward in the Yahweh speeches which follow. In addition there are certain stylistic differences between this unit and the rest of the discourses. Other scholars are inclined to view the Elihu speeches as genuine, but the later work of the poet himself. In either case, these speeches now stand as a bridge between the discourses of the friends and the majestic answer of God. The Elihu speeches are also a series of disputations which expand many of the arguments of the friends but pay special attention to the theme of God the Creator.

The 'answer of God' from the whirlwind which concludes the poem takes the form of a long series of riddles about creation. Such riddles are typical of certain kinds of wisdom literature. It seems likely that these questions were based on earlier lists of natural phenomena prepared by wisdom teachers. By responding with additional questions, God answers Job in a cryptic and indirect way; yet God too enters the dispute. 'Job's response' to God's answer is a brief expression of his new humility before his Creator.

THE DATE OF THE BOOK

When was this literary masterpiece written down? What specific audience was the writer addressing with his portrait of the righteous man crushed by God? Was there an historical or communal crisis in Israel to which this writer wished to speak an appropriate message from the context of the wisdom tradition? These questions are difficult to answer. The opening narrative of Job is probably based on an ancient legend whose roots may reach back to the patriarchal era. In Ezek. 14: 14, 20

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Job is mentioned along with Noah and Danel (or Daniel), two other legendary figures from antiquity. The details of the story of Job are not inconsistent with what is known of the patriarchal period, while texts like 'The Babylonian Job' (cp. p. 4) illustrate that stories of this kind were prevalent as early as the patriarchal era. The original legend, moreover, was probably non-Israelite. The events of the story, as such, are probably set among the Edomites, a people whose ancestors are traced back to Esau, the brother of Jacob. For these and other reasons, ancient Jewish tradition favoured Moses as the author of the book of Job. This old legend provides the literary context for the later poet to create his work. Many elements within the poem itself, such as the retention of archaic divine names, illustrate that the poet was conscious of preserving the atmosphere of the patriarchal era throughout his work. It may be noted that the name Yahweh (rendered LORD in the N.E.B.) is used in prologue and epilogue, and in the headings of the final speeches of God and Job (chs. 38–42), but not in the remainder of the book except in 12: 9, probably as the result of a scribal alteration.

When was the poem of Job written? It is natural enough to think of the period of Israel's humiliation in exile as the time of writing. According to this view Job becomes a type of Israel. The questions of divine justice posed by Israel during her suffering are formulated and thrashed out vicariously in the person of Job. The difficulty with this hypothesis is that elsewhere in the Old Testament the exile of Israel is considered a well-deserved act of divine judgement upon her apostasy. Job is innocent; Israel is guilty. The second weakness of this theory is that an Edomite hero is employed to represent Israel. At the time of Israel's collapse the Edomites were rather unkind neighbours who helped to contribute to her downfall in 586 B.C. If we propose a date after the exile we are obliged to evaluate the relationship between Job and the teaching of Second Isaiah (the exilic prophet of Isa. 40–55 who was active about the middle of the sixth century B.C.). Here,

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particularly in Isa. 52: 13 – 53: 12, the suffering of one individual, who may represent a body of faithful prophets or a righteous remnant within Israel, is accepted by God as a vicarious atonement for the sins of Israel. Many scholars maintain, however, that the suffering servant poem of Isaiah is dependent on Job rather than *vice versa*. If we pose a date before the exile, we are forced to consider the probable literary connection between Job and the ‘confessions of Jeremiah’ (compare Job 3 and Jer. 20: 7–18). Here again, the priority of Job is as likely as the priority of Jeremiah. Similarities can also be discerned between certain expressions and forms in the Psalms and the rhetoric of Job, but nothing conclusive can be ascertained with regard to date. Dates as early as the eighth century B.C. and as late as the third century B.C. have been argued with great cogency.

The problem with many attempts to date Job is the tacit assumption that, as with prophetic books like Amos or Jeremiah, the author is addressing the Israelite community as it faces a public crisis or need. The viewpoint of the wisdom writer seems to be very different. He does not normally speak to a specific historical crisis, but rather to those recurring dilemmas and situations in life that plague all human beings. If his insights are true, they will be as welcome in Egypt as they are in Israel. Job, therefore, does not represent Israel as such, but any man or community who suffers without apparent reason and who searches for meaning and integrity in the face of the meaningless. Thus, while a date after 600 B.C. appears most probable because of the connections with Jeremiah, the specific historical situation in Israel is relatively secondary for interpreting the book. Obviously Job is using texts from Israel’s worship life and is well acquainted with her wisdom traditions. Accordingly any date prior to the seventh century B.C. seems unlikely.