

The Old Testament: Part Fourteen

The Book of Job

God's Love and Man's Suffering

Introduction. The Book of Job is considered a literary masterpiece in wisdom literature. It has been called the greatest work of poetry in ancient and modern times. The author has been ranked with Homer, Dante and Shakespeare. But the book is not an easy or swift read. The author's words have to be pondered as he deals with the great mystery of God's love and human suffering. While the writing is seen as one person's attempt to deal with the perennial question of why an all-good and all-loving God allows a good and faithful person to suffer, other issues are also raised in the book.

The Book of Job questions the traditional view of retribution inherent in the Book of Deuteronomy and accepted by the prophets and even by the authors of Proverbs, namely, that material blessings are a sign of a virtuous life whilst poverty and suffering are a sign of a sinful life. This belief continued to be prevalent even at the time of Jesus. In John 9 which tells about the healing of a man born blind, the disciples ask: "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" Jesus answered: "*Neither he nor his parents sinned.*" (vv 2-3). Job's so-called comforters assume that his suffering is brought on by his sins, whether or not he knows it, and for that, he needs to repent. In 11:6, Zophar says: "*It is for sin that God calls you to account.*"

In the final chapter of the book, God tells Job's friends "that they had not spoken rightly about him" (42:7). They are wrong in their belief that success and happiness are the reward for righteous living, and are equally misguided in their thinking that failure and grief are the punishment for unfaithfulness.

Another issue raised pertains to the right of humans to question God about suffering and to expect an answer. When God finally speaks (ch.38), he gives Job a non-answer. He tells Job that just as there is much in nature that he does not understand, so there is much in human experience that is beyond him. Many centuries later, Paul grapples with his own people's rejection of Jesus, saying: "*Who has known the mind of the Lord or who can be his counselor?*" (Rom 11:34).

The book raises another question: will humans be loyal to God if there are no rewards and punishments—or do they only do good in order to be rewarded? To put it another way: Is it possible to continue to believe in God's goodness when we are in

the depths of suffering and experiencing no consolation?

Drama of five scenes

Job opens with a narrative introduction or prologue, followed by a series of poetic dialogues and a narrative epilogue. The book is subdivided into five sections or scenes.

Scene 1 (Chapters 1-2). The prose dialogue has five scenes alternating between heaven and earth. In the heavenly scenes, God and Satan are engaged in a dialogue about Job. Satan says that Job is only loyal to God because God has been so good to him. God allows Satan to test Job to see if Job will remain loyal to God even when bad things happen to him. Despite the terrible suffering inflicted on Job by Satan, Job refuses to follow his wife's advice to "*curse God and die*" (2:9). Then three of Job's "friends" come to comfort him.

Scene 2 (Chapters 3-31). This long section comprises three series of conversations between Job and his three "friends" concerning divine justice as it relates to Job's suffering. Job's friends, holding tightly to the traditional belief of retribution on earth, conclude that Job is suffering because he has sinned. Job challenges this presupposition and insists that he is innocent. He seeks to comprehend why a just God would allow him, a good man, to suffer so much. Job repeatedly bangs his head against the mystery of divine justice. His tortured soul matches his suffering body. At the end of the series of conversations, Job demands that God appear and defend himself if he is a just God.

Scene 3 (Chapters 32-37). Suddenly, an upstart called Elihu enters the story. He challenges both Job and his friends, and demands that they submit to the God who controls all events.

Scene 4 (Chapters 38-41). God breaks his silence and begins to speak. He tells Job that he is in no position to understand the workings of God. Finally, Job gets it and submits twice. He says: "*Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I will put my hand over my mouth*" (40:4). Then later in 42:6, he says: "*I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.*"

Scene 5 (Chapter 42:7-16). The final scene gives us a happy ending. Job's friends are told that they have

misspoken. God restores to Job all his material blessings and gives him twice as much as he had previously owned.

Chapters 1-2 narrate a conversation between God and Satan. God brags about Job as his good servant. But Satan says that Job is only loyal to God because God has blessed him. Try taking away Job's blessings and see how loyal he will be. God allows Job to be dispossessed of his blessings: his material possessions, his family, and even his health. Thereupon, Job curses God as Satan had hoped he would. But then Job prostrates himself upon the ground and utters his now famous words: "Naked I came forth from my mother's womb and naked shall I go back. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (v. 21).

Job accepts that all is gift from God. He believes that if all of his blessings have been a reward for his goodness, they only belong first to God. If God, for his own reasons, has chosen to take back his blessings, Job seems to be okay with that. God has a perfect right to do as he pleases, and it in no way cancels out Job's duty to continue to worship and praise God.

In her commentary, Barbara Reid, O.P., cautions us about offering Job's response in the face of suffering as the only model for handling adversity. She writes: "The suffering of the poor, by oppressive systems, should not simply be accepted with compliance. As the story of Job unfolds, we will see him fight back more against the unjust suffering he is experiencing" (Daily Homily commentaries, Oct. 2, 2006).

In 2:30, God says to Satan: "You incited me against Job without cause." As we go forward, it is important to remember that statement about Job's innocence. Job does not know why he is being inflicted with great suffering, but we, the audience, do. We know God is testing Job to see if he will remain faithful to him in the midst of great suffering.

At the end of chapter 2, Job's friends are introduced and have their best hour. They try to comfort their friend. But once they begin to open their mouths (chs 31-33), they only add to Job's suffering. They uphold the traditional belief of that period: if someone is suffering, it is *only* because he is a sinner. They keep telling Job to repent. But Job persists in declaring his innocence. As we move towards the end of the book, Job demands that God explain himself, that he speak.

Chapters 38-40: God speaks

These chapters are the dramatic climax to this book of the Bible.

In its introduction to God's speeches, the *Collegeville Commentary* states: *The God of the prologue who has, as Elihu observed (35:13), been hearing and taking notice now speaks, and it is a surprise for all involved. The friends had said in effect, that it was unnecessary for God to speak—Job's condition could be adequately explained by their theory. They were wrong. Job had called either for a list of charges against him or for a verdict; he gets neither. God enters the argument as another debater.*

God's replies are given in two speeches (38:1-40:2; 40:6-41:26), to which Job gives brief replies (40:3-5; 42:1-6). None of Job's questions are answered. In fact, God's remarks are little more than a series of counter questions. Like a teacher springing a surprise quiz, God is trying to involve Job in the process of learning and to lead him out (the literal meaning of "educate") of his own small context into the larger world. If the speeches contain no answer to Job, do they perhaps contain an answer for Job? (p. 695)

God's first speech (38:1 to 40:2). In his first speech, God says to Job: "You want to know and understand my ways, but your small finite mind cannot even begin to comprehend them." In this first speech, God interrogates Job about the marvels of creation which manifest divine power and wisdom. Does Job understand or can he do any of them?

Chapters 38:39 to 39:32 focus on God's work in the animal world.

Job's first response to God (40:3-5). Job says: "Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I put my hand over my mouth. Though I have spoken once, I will not do so again; though twice, I will do so no more."

It is as if God pauses to catch his breath and to allow Job to speak. Job feels overwhelmed by the mystery and greatness of God. He realizes that when he tries to fathom God's ways, he is way in over his head. To symbolize his smallness before God's greatness, Job covers his mouth saying: "I am of little account; I put my hand over my mouth" (40:4). Having said that, we can assume that Job is absolutely thrilled that God finally breaks his silence and decides to speak to him.

God's second speech (40:6 to 41:26). In his second speech, God challenges Job to stand up like a warrior and respond to his questions. The set of questions in the second speech centers around two ferocious beasts, Behemoth and Leviathan, monstrous water animals: a hippopotamus and a crocodile. If Job cannot control these powerful animals ("Can you put a rope in his

nose?” [40:26]), how does he think he can understand the ways of God, who is “King over all proud beasts” (41:26).

Job’s second response to God (42:2-6). “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be hindered. I have dealt with great things that I do not understand, things too wonderful for me which I cannot know. I had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you. Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.”

Diane Bergant writes: *Job’s second response is truly remarkable. There we can see that his dilemma has been resolved. He acclaims God’s sovereign power, a power he never really questioned. However, previously he viewed that power as oppressive. God’s questioning has led him to see God’s power as both creative and providential. He acknowledges his own inability to understand God’s ways, an acknowledgment that he consistently made throughout his struggle. However, previously he presumed that he should have been able to understand. Job may not have been humiliated by God’s questioning, but he certainly has become a humble man. Previously well versed in his religious tradition’s view of retribution, his extraordinary experience of God has moved him beyond insisting on justice to trusting in divine providence.*

Does Job repent and admit he has indeed sinned? Throughout the three sets of speeches (chs 3-31), Job’s friends believe that his suffering is due to sin and that if he repents, his health and wealth will be restored. Job, however, has always asserted that he has not sinned and that God should reveal himself and explain why he is letting his faithful servant suffer. So if Job repents, as verse 6 above says, does it mean that he finally acquiesces that he has indeed sinned as his friends contend? The answer is no. Throughout the book, Job never stops believing that he is blameless before God. In verse 6, Job repents of his rash speech toward God, which is not a sin. It is not a sin to get mad at God and question his ways, especially when we are suffering greatly. God knows that such questioning can lead us to hear God’s voice in ways we may not have heard him prior to our suffering and prior to our questioning.

Epilogue (42:7-17)

The epilogue makes three points or moves through three stages.

- Job’s friends, for all their long speeches, have not correctly represented God concerning Job’s situation. In fact, God scolds them, saying to Eliphaz: “I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken rightly concerning me, as has my servant Job” (v.7).

Fr. Peter Ellis writes: *Job’s friends have been rebuked because they have attempted to foist on God their own justification of Job’s suffering and indeed of all suffering. They have limited God’s providence to the narrow confines of their own theology. They have not allowed Him the liberty to have His own mysterious reasons for inflicting suffering even where there is no sin to provoke it.*

In addition to being reprimanded by God, Job’s friends are ordered by God to go to Job and ask him to make intercessions on their behalf so as to escape more severe punishment. Job is happy to pray for his friends.

- Even though Job repents for speaking with such audacity to God, demanding an explanation why God is punishing an innocent man, Job, on the whole, has spoken well of God (v.7). Job’s near-blasphemous candor is preferred to the piety of those who misspeak about God.
- Job is rewarded with great prosperity for his faithfulness. We also notice that family members and other acquaintances, who have totally abandoned him in his hour of need, come running back to him after God has vindicated him and restored his wealth.

Concluding word

At the end of its commentary on Job, the *Collegeville Commentary* has a long piece on the meaning of the book. The following is an excerpt.

Love is a mystery; so is death. So is suffering. Problems are solved; mysteries are lived, and lived most fully in relationship with others....

In the prologue God speaks of Job as a proud parent might. Then the test begins. God is not a disinterested spectator, but God’s honor and God’s person are at stake as well as Job’s. It is not God on one side and Job on the other (as Job thinks), but God-with-Job on the one side, and Satan, Job’s wife, and the friends on the other. Perhaps it would be true to the dynamism of the story to picture God looking down on the debate, anxiously hanging on every word, cheering Job on, wincing at the friends, and more often than not holding back until Job has had his say. Finally, unable to prolong the restraint after holding it in for thirty-four chapters (chs. 3-37), God bursts out like a whirlwind, enters the debate, ostensibly chiding Job’s audaciousness, but behind it all a proud parent once again. The test has been passed in glorious fashion. God and Job (“my servant,” 1:8; 2:3; 42:7, 8), wiser for the journey, are seen again to be what they always were – friends (p.698).