

## Book of the Quarter

## THE BOOK OF JOB

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The book of Job has a two-fold medical interest. On the one hand it is concerned with the problem of human suffering which it is the task of medicine to prevent, alleviate or remove, if not to explain. On the other hand it presents medicine with a diagnostic problem in the identification of the disease which afflicted its principal character.

The book itself, by common consent, is a literary masterpiece. It forms the longest poem ever written in the Hebrew language, although it begins and ends in prose. The poem itself has too little history to be called an epic, and too little movement to be regarded as a dramatic poem. It is essentially a didactic poem which wrestles in an unforgettable way with a subject of perennial interest—the problem of human suffering.

The book is anonymous, undated and without price. It was written by an author who had a profound understanding of human nature and a detailed knowledge of natural history.

## THE STORY OF THE BOOK

The basic story of the book is simple and easily told. It is set in the patriarchal period of Near Eastern history. Its main character Job was the greatest man amongst the people who lived east of the River Jordan, who are not further identified. He was a man who was described as blameless and upright, one who feared God and shunned evil (1.1). He was immensely wealthy and owned large flocks and herds of animals of different kinds. He had a loving wife, whom Jewish tradition has named Dinah, and ten grown-up children about whose welfare he was very concerned (1.4-5).

One day, Job's comfortable existence was interrupted by a series of disasters. His oxen and donkeys were carried off by Bedouin marauders from the Arabian desert, his sheep were destroyed by lightning and his camels were driven away by Chaldean raiding parties from across the eastern desert. In each case his herdsmen were killed too. Finally, a whirlwind from the desert demolished the house in which his children were feasting and they were all killed. He had barely recovered from these losses, when he himself became the victim of a loathsome disease.

However, Job bore all his troubles with great fortitude and did not lose his trust in God. Eventually he came through his troubles. He regained his wealth and his place in society and his goodness and his trust in God were vindicated, as well as God's trust in him. His family came to comfort him and he lived to see four generations of his children before dying at a great age.

Three additions have been made to this basic story. The first one sets the disasters which happened to Job within the context of divine providence. It consists of a description of the heavenly court at which the decision is made to

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allow Job to be exposed to these disasters in order to test his faith in God and demonstrate that he does not serve God simply for gain. The second addition is the account of Job's conversations about his situation with his three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, and then with his young friend Elihu. This forms the largest section of the poem. In the third addition, God himself confronts Job and addresses him out of the midst of a thunderstorm. The last word is given to Job to allow him to respond to God.

The book can therefore be analysed as follows. It begins with a prologue (1.1-5) and ends with an epilogue (42.7-14) which are mainly taken up with the basic story of Job. These are separated by a series of three dialogues of unequal length. The first is between God and Satan (1.6-2.13). The second is between Job and his friends (3.1-37.24). The final dialogue takes place between God and Job (38.1-42.6).

## THE PROBLEMS OF JOB

The book deals with several problems each of which is raised by one of the three additions to the original story.

*The problem of Job's integrity*

Was Job a hypocrite? This problem was posed by the first addition to the basic story and was summed up in the cynical question of Satan ('The Adversary'): 'Does Job fear God for nothing?' (1.9). The implication was that Job served God because of the material and social prosperity that he believed would result from his service. If this were removed, Satan suggested that Job would curse God to his face and cease to serve him. In other words, Job would be shown to be a hypocrite and not the man of integrity he professed to be.

At the meeting of the heavenly court, Satan's accusation was considered and it was agreed that that Job's integrity should be tested. God gave Satan power over all Job's possessions, but forbade him to touch Job's person (1.12). Satan went off and, as we have already mentioned, deprived Job of his flocks and herds and of all his children.

At a later meeting of the heavenly court, it was reported that in spite of the disasters which had overtaken Job's possessions and family, he still maintained his integrity and faith in God. Satan was still not satisfied, and suggested that if he was allowed to take away his health, Job would then curse God to his face. God agreed to allow Satan to do this, on condition that he would spare Job's life (2.6). Satan then inflicted a loathsome disease on Job, which made even his wife advise him to curse God and die (2.9).

The book, therefore, shows how when Job's prosperity was removed and he was left in poverty and disease, he did not curse God but retained his integrity and faith in God. The first problem posed by the book is therefore solved, namely, whether Job would remain faithful in spite of his disastrous experiences. He did remain faithful and therefore could not be described as a hypocrite.

*The problem of Job's innocence*

Was Job innocent? The second problem is that of Job's innocence. It is of course related to the first one because if Job had been shown to be a hypocrite he could not be innocent or described as 'blameless and upright' as he is in 1.1; 1.8 and 2.3.

This is the problem which is dealt with in the second addition to the basic story of the book which consists of the dialogue between Job and the friends

who hear of his troubles and come to console and comfort him. He is so disfigured by his disease that they do not recognise him at first. They are so upset at seeing his sufferings that it is a whole week before they feel able to speak to him (2.12-13). Even then it is Job and not they who finally breaks the silence with a long outburst of his grief. And so begins the series of dialogues which forms the major part of the book.

With the evidence of Job's great suffering of body, mind and estate before them, his friends find conversation difficult. Their difficulty arose from the traditional view, which they all held, that goodness brought prosperity and wrongdoing brought suffering. In view of what they had formerly believed about Job's blameless character, there was no problem whilst he was prosperous, but once disaster struck him the problem arising was that his suffering was assumed to be the result of wrongdoing. Their reasoning may be expressed as a syllogism:

Job is a great sufferer;  
Suffering is the punishment of sin;  
Therefore Job is a great sinner.

Although the three friends all share this basic view of the reality of moral retribution, they approach it from different aspects. The foremost and most articulate of the friends is Eliphaz the Temanite, a mystic who speaks from his personal experience of the fate of innocent people (4.7) and tells of a mystical vision he had one night (4.12-21). Bildad the Shuhite points to the lessons of the past (8.8-10) and so may be called a traditionalist. Zophar the Naamathite has been described as a dogmatist and compared to the man in the street of today who simply repeats sentiments he has heard expressed but has not examined. It is interesting to notice that Zophar the dogmatist is the first to be silenced, for he takes no part in the third cycle of the speeches of the three friends.

His friends tried every way to get Job to confess that he had sinned. They began by probing his character gently and tactfully and then finally bluntly accused him of great wrongdoing. Thus his friend Eliphaz boldly asks him:

Is not your wickedness great?  
Are not your sins endless? (22.5)

But Job will not accept their accusations of wrongdoing (27.5-6). He knows himself to be blameless before God, but this is taken as self-righteousness by his three friends and they finally stop arguing with him (32.1).

The final friend to join in the dialogue is Elihu, son of Barakel the Buzite, a self-confident young man who condemns all who have spoken before him; Job for his self-righteousness and his three friends for their failure to convince him of wrongdoing. However, he does little more than repeat their arguments and he too fails to convince Job of wrongdoing and self-righteousness.

With his friends reduced to silence, Job remains convinced of his innocence before God. He does not know, as the reader of the book does, that God has confirmed that innocence before the heavenly court by describing him as 'blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil' (1.8). The question of whether Job was innocent of wrongdoing is thus answered in his favour. This only serves to raise the greatest question with which the book deals, namely, the question of why Job suffered if he was innocent.

### *The problem of Job's suffering*

Why did Job suffer? His friends had insisted that suffering was always the consequence of wrong-doing and therefore they had tried to prove to Job that he could not be innocent, or he would not be suffering. However, Job now knew from his own experience that not only was he suffering, but that he was also innocent. He could not therefore accept the arguments and insinuations of his friends.

In terms of logic, Job did not accept the equation of suffering and sin which was expressed in the middle term of the syllogism we set out above. The syllogism commits the fallacy of the undistributed middle term, because the middle term is a statement which is not universally true, i.e., all suffering is not punishment for sin. As we have just seen, Job knew this from his own experience. Thus there must be causes of suffering other than wrongdoing.

It is in the expectation that some light will be thrown on the problem of Job's suffering that we approach the third addition to the basic story in which God speaks directly to Job. Throughout the book Job has sought to confront God and plead his case before him. This appears in such verses as the following:

I desire to speak to the Almighty,  
and to argue my case with God (13.3).  
If only I knew where to find him! (23.3).

Finally, God breaks his silence and answers Job out of the midst of a thunderstorm. But what God says is not what Job had expected. He had expected a list of the charges against him (31.35) or a verdict declaring his innocence, but he gets neither. However, the fact that God has at least come forward to speak to him assures him that everything is still all right between himself and God.

God says that Job has been speaking out of ignorance (38.2) and proceeds to ask him a whole series of rhetorical questions about natural phenomena. These questions reveal Job's limited knowledge of God's work in the creation and control of nature, and also his presumption in seeking to contend with a God of such power and wisdom. Job accepts the implied rebuke and says he will put his hand over his mouth and say no more (40.4-5).

God speaks again and says that Job has not only questioned his power, but also his justice in the control of the world. God says quite bluntly to Job;

Are you trying to prove that I am unjust—  
to put me in the wrong and yourself in the right? (40.8 Good News Bible)

Then follow the two poems about the behemoth and the leviathan which are commonly identified with the hippopotamus and the crocodile respectively. Only God can control these beasts, just as only he can control the forces of evil in the world. Man, therefore, must leave this to God.

Job is finally convinced by God's demonstration of his knowledge and management of the creation that there are things in the world which must remain in the realm of mystery. By implication, one of those things is the cause of suffering. The result is that, in his encounter with God, Job does not find the solution to his problem, but he loses his problem. It is swallowed up in the realisation of the greatness and majesty of God who has everything under his control. He is satisfied now that he has seen and heard God (42.5) and been assured of his absolute power and perfect wisdom. So the poem ends with Job's

acceptance that all he can do is wonder at God's work in creation and providence, and repent of his own ignorance.

I know that you can do all things:  
no plans of yours can be thwarted.  
You asked, 'Who is this that obscures  
my counsel without knowledge?'  
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me to know (42.2-3).

In the prose epilogue to the book God speaks a final word to Eliphaz and his two friends:

I am angry with you and your two friends, because you  
did not speak the truth about me, as my servant Job did.  
(42.7 Good News Bible)

In these words God provides another testimony to Job's blameless and upright character. For misrepresenting God in their words to Job about God, his friends are sent away to offer sacrifice and to seek God's and Job's forgiveness.

#### JOB'S DISEASE

The first description of Job's disease says simply that he was afflicted 'with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head' (2.7). The Hebrew word translated as 'sores' is *shechin*, a non-specific term which is associated with a Semitic root meaning 'to be warm or hot'. We may therefore understand it as meaning local inflamed areas of skin which appeared all over Job's body. These areas soon broke down to form ulcers (7.5), and Job is described as scraping himself with the edge of a potsherd to remove the purulent discharge of the ulcers and to relieve the itching which they produced (2.8).

As the dialogue with his friends proceeds, Job mentions other clinical features of his disease. Maggots breed in his ulcers and produce intolerable itching as they move about (7.5). The ulcers become covered with scabs as their discharge dries up. The smell from his ulcers, which affect both his skin and his oral mucosa, drive people away from his presence (19.17-19; 30.10) and he has isolated himself on the local ash-heap (2.8) where the little boys come and torment him (19.18). His skin becomes blackened but not by the sun, and its upper layers peel off him (30.28, 30). His face is so disfigured that his friends do not recognise him (2.12).

His body is racked with fever (30.30) and at night he cannot sleep for intense pain deep-seated in his bones (30.17). When at last he does sleep he is visited by terrifying dreams and nightmares (7.14), so that he can only describe his nights as 'nights of misery' during which he longs for the morning (7.3-4). He has lost so much weight that he describes himself as skin hanging on bones (19.20). He has lost all his teeth and only his gums ('the skin of my teeth') remain (19.20).

When we come to consider the diagnosis, we are looking for a disease of acute onset, but which will last for months (7.3). It is characterised by generalised skin lesions which break down and ulcerate, and by deep-seated bone pains worst at night. It produces fever and emaciation.

There have been many suggestions for the identity of Job's disease. From early times the disease has been regarded as a form of leprosy or *elephantiasis Graecorum* and some of its features resemble a prolonged lepra reaction seen sometimes in the lepomatous form of that disease. It is unlikely, however, that leprosy was the disease from which Job suffered.

Several other communicable diseases have been proposed for the diagnosis including smallpox, cutaneous leishmaniasis, yaws and bubonic plague. Skin diseases which have been proposed include eczema, ecthyma, pemphigus foliaceus and mycosis fungoides. Two unlikely diagnoses which have been put forward are dracunculiasis (Guinea worm disease) and schizophrenia.

However, we must confess that it is not possible to identify the disease which afflicted Job for there is no one disease which would have caused all the symptoms and signs which the book describes as present in Job's case.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOOK

Although we have been defeated in our attempt to diagnose Job's disease we can take comfort in the fact that the description of this disease is incidental to the main purpose of the book.

The task which the book of Job sets out to accomplish is one which has often been attempted by writers in prose and poetry in the history of the literature of the world. John Milton defined it in his epic poem *Paradise Lost* when he said his purpose in writing that poem was to 'justify the ways of God to man' (1.22).

The significance of the book of Job is, therefore, that its subject proved from his own experience that the common idea of its time that suffering inevitably meant the sufferer was a sinner, was not universally true. It could also mean the vindication of disinterested devotion to God as it did in Job's case. The book does not attempt to deal with the general question, *Why do the righteous suffer?* However, in dealing with the individual problem of Job, it represented a breakthrough in the understanding of suffering for it demonstrated the possibility that there were reasons for suffering other than wrongdoing. Such reasons were to become more apparent in later biblical literature when suffering was associated with redemption and spiritual development.

*Note:* All Bible quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.