Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربي), French (Français), Hindi (हिंदी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

Job

When suffering comes to us, we often ask why. People sometimes say it's because the sufferer did something wrong. The book of Job examines the suffering of one man who suffered precisely *because* he was blameless. Job's friends supposed that he was guilty of some unknown sin. They tried to persuade him to repent, but Job knew he hadn't sinned, so he questioned God. Finally, God appeared, but he did not give Job the answers he sought. Instead, God confronted Job, changed his perspective, and blessed him.

Setting

The book of Job unfolds early in the patriarchal age, before Israel became a nation. Job's wealth, like Abraham's, was in livestock and slaves (1:3; 42:12; see Gen 12:16; 32:5). He was his family's priest, as was a common practice before the law of Moses (1:5; 42:8; see Gen 4:4; 8:20; 12:7–8; 13:18; 15:9–10; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1–6; 46:1). During Job's time, the Sabeans and Chaldeans were nomadic raiders (1:15, 17), not important political and economic powers as in the late monarchical period (cp. Isa 45:14; Joel 3:8). The money used by Job and his relatives was called the *kesitah*, which was used during the patriarchal age (42:11; see Gen 33:19; Josh 24:32). Only those who lived before the flood (Gen 1–6) and the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) matched or exceeded Job's longevity (42:16; see Gen 5:3–32; 25:7; 35:28; 47:28; 50:26). With Job, we return to the beginning of history, when mortals first struggled to know God and understand the world.

Summary

The prose introduction to the book of Job (chs 1–2) provides the heavenly perspective on Job's suffering and sets the context for the human dialogue that forms most of the work. Job was a righteous man whom God allowed Satan to test. In the heavenly courtroom, Satan argued that if God removed his blessings from Job, he would "surely curse you to your face" (1:11). Instead, Job responded, "Praise the name of the Lord!" (1:21), and, "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" (2:10). God's praise for Job was vindicated.

The reader then leaves the court of heaven and enters the council of humans as three of Job's friends come to sympathize with him. Their silent, seven-day vigil is apparently a genuine attempt to console Job (2:11–13). However, when Job breaks his silence with a bitter complaint (ch 3), his counselors begin to criticize and condemn him. In three rounds of debate (chs 4–27), their rhetoric varies from innuendo to blatant accusation. Job's friends argue a tight theological case: Since God is righteous, he rewards each person according to what that person has done; therefore, Job's suffering must be the just punishment for some evil he has committed. Job responds to each of their speeches by insisting that he is innocent and that his suffering is undeserved and unfair.

After the three rounds of dialogue between Job and his friends, a poetic interlude praises God as the sole source of wisdom (ch 28). When Job then makes his final statement about both his misery and his righteousness (chs 29–31), his three friends give up on him (32:1). Elihu, a new voice, then renews the human struggle to explain Job's suffering (chs 32–37). Finally, God arrives to challenge Job (chs 38–41). Instead of hearing Job's case, God demands answers and poses questions that demonstrate his own power and sovereignty. Job responds with repentance and acknowledges that he does not have the right to question God (42:1–6).

In the final prose section (42:7–17), God reaffirms Job's righteousness and faithfulness, pronounces judgment on Job's friends, and pours out tremendous blessings on Job.

Job as History

The heavenly setting of the book's opening and the manifestation of the supernatural at its closing tempt the modern reader to cast the book of Job as a fictional parable. The poetic dialogues also suggest that it is something more than just a dry historical record. But history can be described in flights of poetry just as well as in detailed narrative (cp. Exod 14:21–31; 15:1–12; Pss 78; 105). The biblical record elsewhere suggests that the account of Job is historical. Both Ezekiel and James referred to Job as an example of righteousness and endurance (Ezek 14:14, 20; Jas 5:11).

Author and Date of Composition

The authorship and composition of Job is a riddle. Although the story has a patriarchal setting (around 2000 BC), the date of its composition appears to be much later. Commentators have suggested dates that range from the era of Israel's wilderness wanderings (Exodus—Numbers) to the era following the return from exile (Ezra—Nehemiah). The final composition of Job probably took place during the monarchy (1–2 Kings), when other wisdom materials such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes were being accumulated.

Even if we accept that Job was a historical character, we still do not know who the author was, where he lived, or what level of society he came from. The author appears to have been a sage who was skilled in the use of proverbs (e.g., 4:2; 6:5–6), rhetorical questions (e.g., 21:29), and the art of eloquence. He also knew about plant and animal life, foreign culture, and antiquity, including the patriarchal period.

The book cannot be dated with certainty by reference to (1) events or people mentioned or implied in the book (the earliest reference to Job is during the Exile, Ezek 14:14, 20); (2) theological ideas in the book that point to distinct dates; or (3) its textual relationship to other material in the Old Testament (e.g., cp. 3:3–10; Jer 20:14–18). Job may even have been edited over a period of time by a number of different people.

Literary Characteristics

Ancient Parallels to Job. The book of Job has several parallels in ancient Near Eastern literature (The following list of parallels is based on James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* , 3rd ed. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969]):

- The Canaanite "Legend of King Keret" tells of a king who loses his family in a series of natural disasters; his god El restores his family.
- The Egyptian document "Dispute over Suicide" (2000s BC) tells of a man who considers suicide and hopes that someone will take up his case with the heavenly council. (Job wishes he had never been born, but he never considers suicide.)
- Also from Egypt, "Protests of the Eloquent Peasant" (2200s BC) tells the story of a robbery victim who is not treated justly and appeals to local authorities. At first he is polite, but as he keeps presenting his case, his language becomes increasingly strident.
- From Babylonia, the story "I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom" tells of a pious man of high rank who is struck with illness and mocked by friends. Unlike Job, this man believes that he has committed some accidental sin, perhaps something that he never thought was wrong. Rather than maintain his innocence, he acknowledges his guilt and begs for mercy. After a series of exorcisms that bring healing, his god restores his fortunes. In gratitude, he concludes with a long hymn of praise to his god.
- Also from Babylonia, the "Babylonian Theodicy" follows the same dialogue form that the book of Job uses: The sufferer complains, and his friends respond with rebukes. The arguments on both sides are remarkably similar to those in Job. Yet we also see key differences: (1) The "Babylonian Theodicy" is polytheistic, whereas Job is monotheistic; (2) its sufferer threatens to abandon his faith and give up obedience, even as he ends with a petition to his god and goddess. Job remains committed to the Lord throughout (e.g., Job 13:15–16).

Relationship to Israel's Wisdom Literature. The book of Job has the flavor of other works of Old Testament wisdom literature. Job's friends follow lines of thought spelled out in Deuteronomy, Chronicles, and Proverbs. They argue that wisdom and righteousness lead to life and prosperity, while folly and wickedness lead to death and failure. Job joins the author of Ecclesiastes in questioning the simplistic, universal application of this doctrine.

Meaning and Message

The book of Job does not explain suffering. That is not its purpose. But it does demonstrate that suffering is not necessarily God's retribution for sin. Job does not get an answer as to why bad things happen to good people, and neither do we.

The central conflict of the book is between the integrity of the Creator and the integrity of a man. Heaven and earth appear to be at odds. It is too easy simply to line up with Job's three friends in denying Job's innocence, as we can appeal to various New Testament passages that deny that any human is righteous (e.g., Rom 3:10, 23; Luke 18:19). Job's righteousness is genuine and thorough, though his obsession with his own rectitude sometimes borders on self-righteousness. He grows so adamant in defending his integrity that he seems ready to defy God. Job's three friends set out a view of God that is more orthodox, at least on the surface. These counselors are more than weak, imaginary straw men; they accurately develop most of the biblical ways of explaining suffering. But their presumptuous applications go sour. They insist on a *quid pro quo* view of retribution, in which all the good and evil that people experience is directly related to what they have earned or deserved.

The book works within the basic commitments of Old Testament Israel's faith. Job and all of the other speakers take seriously the covenantal ideas of blessing and cursing (Lev 26; Deut 28) and of sowing and reaping in this life (Ps 34:11–22; see also Gal 6:7; 1 Pet 3:10). They don't even consider solutions to the problem of why God permits the righteous to suffer (*theodicy*) from outside the scope of biblical revelation (e.g., metaphysical dualism, polytheistic tensions, or materialistic naturalism). Instead, the book's speakers explore only biblical answers. They explain the meaning of suffering as (1) punishment for sin (e.g., Job 4:7–9); (2) the inevitable lot of mortals, who tend toward sin (e.g., 15:14–16); (3) God's discipline (e.g., 5:17–18; 33:15–28; 36:8–15; see Prov 3:11; Heb 12:2–13); (4) part of God's mysterious plan (e.g., Job 11:7–8; 37:19, 23); or (5) a test imposed on earth to satisfy a heavenly dispute (e.g., 1:6–12).

Since life "under the sun" (see Ecclesiastes) is an arena too small to provide answers to all the great questions, the writer looks to the courts of heaven for a divine dimension to what takes place on earth. But the answer is not disclosed even there. Why did God entertain Satan's challenge in the first place?

In the end, the book of Job shows God defending Job's innocence and rejecting easy explanations of suffering. God also rejects Job's demands for an explanation. Since Job could not possibly understand the whole universe, he should not demand an explanation of how his suffering fits into that order. The world cannot be explained in terms that humans can fully understand.

The book of Job thus offers a complex picture of God. He could have rejected Satan's suggestion, having nothing to prove; yet he chose to allow the test, ultimately demonstrating his power and bringing defeat to Satan through the human Job. God never explains to Job what is happening behind the scenes. Instead, God challenges Job's right to question the integrity of divine justice (40:8).

The way to live through calamities is not just to keep a stiff upper lip but to bow reverently before God and trust his sovereign goodness. In a day of calamity, humans can respond to God by worshiping him and acknowledging the wisdom and justice of his ways, regardless of how harsh the pain or dark the confusion. God's holy purposes for human suffering are sometimes hidden. In the end, Job draws closer to God through his suffering: "I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes" (42:5).