

# THE BOOK OF JOB: AN INTERPRETATION

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B. D. TUCKER

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*The Book of Job* is a basic and seminal book in religion and philosophy, for it deals in an original way with one of the most difficult problems of human life, the problem of suffering and evil. It also has a unique importance in literature. Tennyson, no doubt, went too far when he called it "the greatest poem, whether in ancient or modern literature." That is perhaps excessive praise, but others, while not being quite so extravagant, have also ranked it as equal to the greatest monuments of literature. Carlyle said that it was "one of the grandest things ever written with pen." Milton admired *Job* and seriously considered it as the subject of a dramatic poem. Its influence on both *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* is very marked. Shelley also considered it, but finally took Prometheus for the subject of one of his greatest dramatic poems. In recent times Archibald MacLeish and Robert Frost have based works on it.

What is this book that has aroused such interest through the centuries? To answer this question let us look first at its origins and background and then try to interpret its contents and what it sets out to teach us.

## I Background

The language of *The Book of Job* is Hebrew with some admixture of the closely related language, Aramaic. Hebrew was the language of the people of Israel, but Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the spoken language in much of Palestine around 500 B.C., although Hebrew continued to be used as a written and religious language, especially because it was the language of the Jewish Bible (Old Testament). The text shows evidence of damage and dislocations, which is not sur-

prising since it was copied over and over again by hand during the centuries when the Jews themselves were dislocated, defeated and moved from place to place. There are a few words which are incomprehensible and places where the text must be rearranged to make sense, but in general these are not so important, and the text is good enough to show us a masterpiece of religious literature.

No one knows who wrote *The Book of Job*, nor exactly when. Most scholars agree that several authors and editors had a hand in writing it; but that one supremely gifted literary and religious genius was the author of the major part of the poetic section seems certain. This primary author, however, used as the prose framework of his poem an earlier story about a patriarch named "Job" who is referred to in *Ezekiel*. This folk tale may have been very ancient and certainly must have been well known before 600 B.C. We can assume that the author of *Job*, writing some time after 600 B.C., rewrote the prose framework, making a few changes to suit his purpose, but keeping its basic content unaltered. This prose section is found in the first two chapters and in 42:7-17, forming a prologue and epilogue for the poem.

Although we do not know who the author of the main poem was, we can say a good many things about him. He was a Jew who belonged to the so-called Wisdom School which produced *The Book of Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes* and some of the *Psalms* and books of the *Apocrypha*. The Wisdom writers were scholars and teachers who had formed the bureaucracy for the government in Israel from the time of Solomon and who taught those who hoped to become officials or scribes. They had contacts with Egypt and Babylon and were influenced by the Wisdom writings of those countries. Perhaps for this reason the Jewish writers of Wisdom literature do not show the nationalism which characterizes much of the literature of Israel. They were interested in the problems of daily life which individuals faced and the universal concerns of mankind. Among them, the author of *Job* shows himself to be one of the most erudite, with a wide international knowledge as well as poetic gifts of the highest order.

## II Contents and Interpretation

As mentioned above, the first two chapters of *Job* are a prose prologue. Together with the prose epilogue, it gives the framework within which the author of the poem gives his message. According to the ancient story, Job was an exceedingly good man, and he was rewarded for his goodness by great prosperity and riches. Now this was a confirmation of the idea that the good were always rewarded and the bad were always punished, an idea which was accepted by most of the teachers of Israel, including the Wisdom writers. For instance, *Proverbs* 13 : 21 states, "Misfortune pursues sinners, but prosperity rewards the righteous." As we shall see, it is one of the main purposes of *The Book of Job* to refute this as a universal law, and to assert that the innocent righteous person sometimes suffers for no fault of his own.

In 1 : 6 we are taken to the heavenly court of God. It is an ancient, primitive anthropomorphic picture, something like that in *I Kings* 22 : 19-22. The "sons of God" come together in the presence of God, and among them is "the Satan." Now this is not "the devil" of popular imagination. "Satan" is not a proper name but a common noun designating a person with a certain position. It is used with the definite article, "the," and its meaning is something like the accuser, the enemy, the adversary or the prosecutor in a court. This prosecutor is one of "the sons of God" and can only act with the permission of God.

Now it needs to be repeated that this is a very primitive conception of God which we find in the Prologue. The sophisticated author of the poetic section of *Job* would never have written of God in this way. He had a much loftier conception of God. The Jews, however, had a cautious reverence for these old traditions which may have been considered semi-scriptural, and they did not feel free to change them radically. No doubt they interpreted them metaphorically, but they were loathe to alter stories which had the aura of antiquity and which were well known and loved by the people.

God asks where the satan has been, and he answers, "going to and fro on the earth." God then asks, "Have you considered my ser-

vant Job, . . . a blameless and upright man?" Then the adversary replies contemptuously, "Does Job fear God for naught?" This is the key question for the prose narrative and we have to realize that the theme and the purpose of the prose narrative may be different from that of the poem. If we look just at the prose narrative, what is the crucial question? The question is whether there is any person who can love God for God's sake; not because of hope for reward or fear of punishment, but because of God himself. Is there among God's creatures any pure, disinterested love? So the adversary's question, "Does Job fear God for naught?" is the central theme, and to find the answer God accepts the challenge. Therefore he gives the satan permission to afflict Job with all sorts of calamities. But instead of cursing God as the adversary had said he would do, Job says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." So Job passes the first test and remains blameless (1: 20-22).

Chapter 2, in the style of ancient epics, repeats much of the same identical wording as Chapter 1. In the next challenge the adversary says, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face." Here the heavenly prosecutor is reasserting that Job's love for God is self-centered, and that if God should allow his body to suffer, his love would vanish. But again the satan proves wrong, and Job refuses to curse God, but says instead, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" So Job's integrity, his pure love of God is vindicated. God was right. Job is blameless. His love is completely unselfish. Job has passed the test, and the Epilogue in prose, which is part of the original ancient story (42: 7-17) shows that Job was amply rewarded in the end for his righteousness.

Was this all of the original story—a story to prove the pure, disinterested love of one heroic man? Perhaps so. Or, if there was more, it probably did not alter the central theme. In James 5: 11 we read, "You have heard of the patience of Job." Now if we look at the poem beginning at Chapter 3, we will never think of Job as patient. He protests and rebels. He is anything but a quiet and

patient sufferer. Could it be that James, in New Testament times, knew only the Job of the old epic? Perhaps. He would scarcely have approved of some of Job's outcries in the poem. And the same could be said of Ezekiel in 14 : 14 and 20 of that book, where Job is referred to. So it seems that the Job of the ancient epic, as distinct from the poem, was known not only to Ezekiel in the sixth century B.C. but even in New Testament times. Since *Job* was one of the last books of the Hebrew Bible to be accepted into the canon about 90 A.D., this is not necessarily improbable. It is the Job of the ancient narrative to whom the proverbial expression, "the patience of Job" applies.

With Chapter 3 we enter into a new realm. The Job who speaks there does not sound like the same man who was so meek and patient in Chapters 1 and 2. True, he does not curse God, as his wife had urged him, and as the adversary had predicted he would, but he curses the day of his birth, and he asks, "Why is light given to him that is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not?" (3 : 20) Does this not question God's creation and the giving of life? It is certainly far removed from the patient resignation of Job in Chapter 2.

We therefore surmise that the author of the poem (Chapter 3ff.) took the prose narrative as his framework. Since it was well known and held in reverence, he could not change it radically, and since the patience of Job and his meekness towards God were the central theme of the ancient narrative, these he especially could not alter. But he did feel free to add to it what happened after that part of the narrative and before the conclusion which he also retained in something close to the original form. In this way it was possible for him to present his religious ideas, while associating them with the venerable name of Job.

To us this may seem dishonest, but it was the only way in which the author of the poem could have received a hearing. Pride of authorship was marked among the Greeks of this period, but if it existed in the Jewish religious world (and we would be rash to deny that it did), it had to be suppressed. The canon of the Law of the Jewish Bible was fixed about 400 B.C., and that of the Prophets about 200 B.C.

The third section of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings (which includes Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Ezra and Nehemiah, etc.) was the latest part to be accepted, and was not fixed until 90 A.D. No book in this section could be accepted unless it was thought to be the work of one of the "saints" of Israel's past or closely associated with one of them. Thus the *Psalms* were attributed to David, while *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes* were ascribed to Solomon. It is safe to say that the poem of *Job* would not have survived at all had it not been associated with one of the patriarch's of Israel's ancient traditions.

Chapter 3, the curse on the day of Job's birth, sets the stage for the dialogue of three friends with Job. It is very similar to *Jeremiah* 20:14-18, and may have been influenced by that. The satan had said that Job would give anything for his life, but here Job wishes for death. But Job goes further than this. In 3:23 he seems to be accusing God of unjustly bringing on his life all sorts of sufferings: "Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, whom God has hedged in?" It is this and Job's general attitude which lead his three friends to attack his position, his innocence and his religious viewpoint. The three friends, "Job's comforters," as they are ironically called, are mentioned in 2:11, but whether they were an integral part of the original ancient narrative or not is impossible to determine now.

The three friends and Job then begin the poetic dialogue which forms the main portion of *The Book of Job*. It is contained in Chapters 4 through 27 and is arranged in three cycles. In each cycle each of the friends counsels or criticizes Job, and Job answers each one in turn. The arrangement is as follows: First cycle, Eliphaz (4-5), Job (6-7), Bildad (8), Job (9-10), Zophar (11), Job (12-14); Second cycle, Eliphaz (15), Job (16-17), Bildad (18), Job (19), Zophar (20), Job (21); Third cycle, Eliphaz (22), Job (23-24), Bildad (25), Job (26), Zophar? (27:7-23?), Job (27:1-6). The third cycle is incomplete, and as the text stands there is no speech of Zophar. But Chapter 27:7-23 contradicts everything Job has previously said and cannot logically be his speech. It may be intended for Zophar's reply, or an extension of Bildad's speech in Chapter 25 which is unaccountably short. Almost all scholars agree that the text of Chapters 24-27 is damaged and part of it lost. The order has obviously been disrupted, but although va-

rious reconstructions have been proposed, none is convincing or generally accepted.

There is not space here to go over in detail each speech in the debate, but we will try to describe the general characteristics of the dialogue and to discover the main points which the author is trying to present in the dialectic.

In the first place it is not really a dialogue, but a series of speeches loosely connected. Job does not really answer the statements of his friends in a logical way, and often his speeches seem to have little relation to what they have just been saying. The three friends do not really present a progressive argument, and it is hard to see them as genuine individuals. There may be some differences in personality which we can detect, although it is not clear whether the author intended to paint living portraits. Eliphaz is doubtless the oldest and most dignified. He speaks first in each cycle and shows some sympathy and consideration particularly at the beginning. He asks if anyone can be righteous before God (4 : 17). But he says that the wicked are punished (5 : 12-14), and the innocent spared (5 : 15-16). And he counsels Job to be patient and to be glad that God is reproving him, for, if he is innocent, he will surely receive blessings in the end (5 : 17-27).

Bildad is less considerate, suggests that Job's children have sinned (8 : 4), and implies that he is not without fault and does not really trust God (8 : 5-6). He also says that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will perish (8 : 20-22). Zophar is the least sympathetic and is downright insulting, referring to "Job's babble" in 11 : 3. Far from agreeing that Job is suffering unjustly, he tells him that he deserves to be punished even more. "Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves." (11 : 6)

Job answers their speeches and replies to their arguments to some extent, but often he is addressing God directly, rather than speaking to his friends. He complains that his suffering goes beyond reason (6 : 2-3), and he wishes that God would crush him and take his life away (6 : 9). Job can see no justice on earth. The innocent and the wicked are destroyed together, and the world is put under the control of the wicked (9 : 22-24). In fact, it is precisely the wicked who

live in peace and security (12 : 6). Job maintains that he is innocent and blameless (9 : 20-21), and he wants to argue his case with God alone, not before his self-righteous friends (13 : 1-4). Even if God should slay Job, he will still argue that he is innocent (13 : 15).

Job says that he has a witness in heaven who will vouch for him (16 : 19). He had heard all the arguments of the three miserable comforters, and he could have said all the things that they say (16 : 2-4). But it does not help his suffering, for he believes God has unjustly punished him. Even if he had sinned a little, the punishment is too much. And he denies that he had sinned. There is a mistake. Job is like Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*. He does not know of what he is accused, and he cannot find the Judge (13 : 23-24). "Behold, I have prepared my case : I know that I shall be vindicated . . . Call, and I will answer ; or let me speak, and do thou reply to me" (13 : 18, 22).

The idea of a court, with God as Judge, an adversary to accuse (the satan), and a defending lawyer (witness, vindicator, advocate, redeemer—Hebrew *goel*) to testify on behalf of Job, is always here. Job believes this witness is in heaven (16 : 19), but he is still trusting in his own virtue. Then in a great expression of faith he declares, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth" (19 : 25). In this famous passage (19 : 25-27), familiar to all English speaking people because of its position in the Burial Service and also in Handel's *Messiah*, Job shifts the emphasis from the assertion of his own virtue and innocence to the vision of the Redeemer himself and finally to a vision of God.

Christians have traditionally seen this as a prophecy of Christ, the Redeemer. However, the context, the date of writing, and the text itself (which is extremely difficult, ambiguous and corrupt) seem not to justify this. Job is still hoping for a witness to declare that he is innocent. The word, "Redeemer" is almost certainly not thought of as a messianic savior, but rather as a vindicator or witness for the defending counsel. The Hebrew word, *goel*, usually referred to the next of kin, who would stand as guarantor and pay bail, if that was required.

But the emphasis begins to change in this passage. Job is hoping



for his own vindication. But now, more than that, he is hoping to see God and God's justice vindicated. For now the greater suffering of Job is that God's silence over his innocent suffering seems like acquiescence to injustice (compare the silence of God in Endo Shusaku's *Chinmoku*). And if this is true, if God is unjust, then the center falls apart. Job would then have no just God to trust in. But that he will not believe. He has faith still that he will see in this life, or even somehow after death, God in all his justice (19 : 26-27).

I do not think this is a prophecy of Christ nor a belief in the resurrection, although it may, perhaps, come close to that. The author of *Job* knew, no doubt, that the Egyptians and others believed in a resurrection, but to him that was still a pagan idea, and he had rejected it in 14 : 12; "So man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep." Job's hope for a witness or redeemer is either for someone on earth to witness to his innocence (but his wife and his three friends fail him), or for an advocate in the heavenly court (just as the satan was the prosecuting attorney). He hopes to see this vindication in this life, but if not, to know that it will happen after death.

Now, we should notice that this was only Job's hope, his faith. The book never confirms that he was right. On the contrary, I think that we can say that Job was partially wrong, but in a glorious way. For in the end, Job does not have to depend on an earthly witness, nor even a vindicator in heaven to defend himself before God. In the final vision of God, when God answered Job out of the whirlwind<sup>1</sup> (Chapters 38-41), God himself speaks to Job, and although he rebukes Job for his presumption in daring to judge the Almighty, he himself vindicates Job from the accusations of his friends. God himself is the redeemer and the witness. He knows all and sees all. Job does not need someone to plead his case, for God himself declares Job innocent.

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1. Because of limitations of space, we must omit in this paper consideration of the Ode in Praise of Wisdom (28), Job's Summation (29-31), and Elihu's Interruption (32-37), which is probably a later addition. They do not, however, alter the basic theme of the book nor contribute materially to its conclusion.

The speeches of the Lord (Yahweh, God) from the whirlwind are the natural climax of the book and the answer to its questions. There are two speeches, the first in Chapters 38 and 39, and the second in 40 : 6-41 : 34.

The first speech of Yahweh rebukes Job for daring to question the Almighty out of his own ignorance and contrasts it to God's wisdom and power. Here the poetry of Job is on a very high level. God goes over the wonders of creation and ironically asks Job if he was there when heaven and earth were created, or if he could control them. He goes all through inanimate and animate life, giving beautiful pictures of various animals. The effect of all this is to show Job's weakness and ignorance before God. The speech begins with, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" and ends with "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it" (38 : 2, 40 : 2).

Is this really an answer to Job, though? Job never questioned God's power and wisdom. In fact he complained that God was too powerful and Job too weak to defend himself (9 : 2-19). At one point he wanted to argue directly with God (13 : 15), but he was afraid that he could not speak (13 : 21). But in fact this is precisely what has happened after the first reply of Yahweh. Job had said, "Then call, and I will answer" (13 : 22), but when God demanded, "He who argues with God, let him answer it" (40 : 2), Job could only say, "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further." (40 : 4-5)

Yahweh's second speech, however, beginning at 40 : 6, touches on the main problem which concerned Job: In the face of innocent and unjust suffering, can we really believe that God is just? Yahweh's speech may not look like an answer, and it is not the kind of an answer that we might like. Nevertheless it is God's answer to Job. It is in the form of a question. In 40 : 8 God demands of Job, "Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" Here God is taking up Job's complaint that God is unjust. In doing so Job had to proclaim that he himself was just. Yahweh is challenging finite man to judge the finite and transcendent

God whom he cannot even understand, and this Job knows he cannot do.

Then God ironically tells Job to put himself in the place of God (40 : 10-14). He tells Job to deck himself "with majesty and dignity" as though he were God, and then to look down on the earth and see all the proud and wicked people. God tells Job to try to bring each one to justice, and amidst all the conflicting claims and injustices to try to make a perfectly just world, in which every injustice will be corrected. If Job can do that, if he can make the whole world perfectly just, then God himself will acknowledge that Job is greater than he, and that Job has won the victory in the debate (40 : 14).

This may not be an answer, but it showed Job the impossibility of finite man understanding how God rules the world and exercises justice. Job, on seeing God's greatness (38-39), and having received an answer from God himself, is convinced of God's justice, in spite of all appearances to the contrary. He realizes that he can never understand it, but he has faith in God and he is comforted.<sup>2</sup>

But in another way, Job's main appeal is answered. Job's appeal was for a witness to defend him and to declare his innocence. As long as the doctrine of retributive justice was accepted as universally true—the belief that all sin is followed by commensurate punishment on this earth, and that all suffering is therefore punishment for some sin—as long as this doctrine was maintained, it appeared that Job was the worst of sinners. Never had so much affliction fallen on one man. Surely his sin must have been great. That is what the world would say, and it is essentially what the three friends were saying.

But God does not say this. He never once mentions any sin of Job. He only rebukes Job for questioning God's justice. He does not explain why Job suffered, because man could not understand the mind of God, as Job has just learned. But by not condemning Job of sin, God does vindicate him, does say, in effect, that Job is innocent. And when Job says at the end, in 42 : 5-6, "Now my eye sees thee ; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes"—there is, I think, joy mixed with abasement in that statement. Now he knows not only

2. The long descriptions of Behemoth and Leviathan (40 : 15-24, 41 : 1-34) are probably mistakenly inserted here, although they may be by the same author.

God's greatness, power and wisdom, but also his justice, and Job's repentance is possible because he knows that he has been guilty of presumption in doubting God. Now with Job's faith and repentance, his forgiveness and new life are possible, and we see these, rather crudely in the words of the old prose narrative (42: 7-17), restored to Job. But even without the restitution recorded in this Epilogue, we feel that Job would have been satisfied. His innocence was vindicated; his friends' condemnations rebuked; and God's justice dramatically confirmed.

One major purpose of the poetical part of *The Book of Job* is to refute the idea that all suffering is a punishment for sin. That some suffering is the result of our sins no one would doubt, but that the good are always rewarded and the wicked always punished in this life is contrary to the facts, as Job maintained. The book successfully refutes the old doctrine but it has lingered on to this day.

More than this, the book reaches an extremely high level of awareness of the greatness of God and his justice, and also a more intense concept of the possible relationship of man to God. Job found this not by following the precepts of conventional religion, but by striving strenuously to find God, to require an answer of him, and to grasp his Being in his life. Job sought a redeemer to plead his cause with a distant God he could not see. In the end he found that the redeemer was God himself, and that God, although infinite and omnipotent, could still enter into direct relationship with a human being and lift him out of the depths of suffering to the joy of the presence of God. If it was possible for Job, it is possible for us.