

Job- A Reflection on Suffering -January 2021

It is the greatest thing ever written with pen. There is nothing I think, written in the Bible or out of it of equal merit -Thomas Carlyle 1795-1881

I read the book of Job last night. I don't think God comes out of it well. -Virginia Woolf

Feel free to argue with Carlyle. -Mark Fisher

About Theodicy - *the vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil.*

(Note: This study is based largely on the scholarship of Ralph Klein along with some assistance from Mark Fisher. We will complete in 4 or 5 weeks. It will be helpful to read the complete book before class but if not hopefully by the second week of class.) Also, by the second week of class I will distribute a reflection by Catherine Federspill on the book.

Authorship and Date

- The book is anonymous
- No references to specific human events
- May however about more than theodicy and divine justice but also about issues related to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586BCE. However, many scholars date this around 1000 BCE (Verbal connections between Jeremiah, Lamentations and Isaiah 40-55)

Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

- “Man and His God,” The Sumerian Job
- “I will Praise the Lord of Wisdom” A Babylonian poem dating around same time.
- “The Babylonian Theodicy” dating to around 1000 ACE
- “The Protestation of Guiltlessness” from The Egyptian Book of the Dead maybe around 200ACE.

(Scholars have found no direct connection between the book of Job and the references above but rather demonstrate the use of similar genres relating to the suffering of the innocent in ANE.)

About The Satan

- It means an adversary either military (1Sam 29:4, 1Kings 5:4)
- Legal (Psalm 109:6)
- Greater than Human (Job 1-2, Numbers 22:22, Zechariah 3:1, 1Chronicles 21:1)

(Although the Satan in an important figure in the prologue he is absent in the dialogues and the epilogue. For Job, his friends and narrator, it is ultimately Yahweh who is responsible for Job's suffering. Later developments of Satan (Gen3 book completed around 580BCE) as a theological explanation for the problem of evil in a monotheistic system is not the view of the book of Job.

The Prologue - (Once Upon a Time)

- Introducing Job on earth - Job is rich and pious 1:1-5
- First assembly in heaven Satan is given permission to take things away. 1:6-12
- First test on earth. Job loses animals, servants and children. 1:13-22
- Second assembly in heaven Satan is given permission to touch his life 2:1-6
- Second test on earth job has sores and wife turns on him 2:7-10
- Third assembly of friends on earth 2:11-13

The Poetry of Job

- Job's opening monolog curses his birthday and night he was conceived 3
- Dialog of Job with his friends (3 cycles) 4-28 (Condensed Review CR)
- Job's monolog oath affirming his innocence 29-31 (CR)
- Elihu not mentioned before - ritards the plot and serves as anticlimactic foil to divine speeches. 32-37 (CR)
- The Divine Speeches 38-42 (CR)

The Prose of Job

- Epilogue: They all lived happily ever after. Job spoke the truth and friends did not. Job recovers family and property. Retribution is affirmed at the beginning and end of the book.

Answers to Suffering Proposed by the book of Job

- 1) Suffering is the result of a test or contest between God and Satan. This is unknown by the other participants in the book nor does it have much relevance for others who suffer. Its view of God is very problematic.
- 2) Suffering has demonic or Satanic causes. But this proposal is ignored outside the Prologue. What is its modern relevance in North America?
- 3) The patience of Job - at first Job willingly accepts suffering and does not ignore the past gifts from God. You have heard of the endurance of Job (James 5:10-11)
- 4) The protests of Job against God's "brutality" are acceptable (per Exod. 17:7: The Israelites quarreled and tested Yahweh saying, "Is Yahweh among us or not?") Look at Job 16:9-14, 9:20, 9:30-31. Contrast James 5:11 and Job's patience. Consider this strategy: Let Job the patient be your model so long as it is possible but when it fails let the grief and anger of Job the impatient direct itself and your self forward or even against God, for only in the encounter with God will the tension of suffering be resolved.
- 5) The problematic relationship of sin and suffering. Job the narrator and God say he was innocent!! His friends however say he was guilty of sin.
- 6) Resurrection is not an answer to suffering in OT times since all die without the mention of hope for it.

- 7) Elihu: suffering educates and is a merciful warning. True but God teaches us through dreams (33:15) This ought to lead us to confession “I sinned and perverted what is right (33:27) But God actually brings Job to a state of equilibrium through his word.
- 8) Elihu says God is detached, remote. If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him? If the old wisdom of retribution seems passe, the new wisdom of Elihu is pompous. Elihu’s views are ignored and implicitly rejected in the divine speeches and epilogue.
- 9) The almighty does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.
- 10) Humans and God could work it out if they just talked face-to-face (31:37) Seeing God (19:26) should bring an answer through the answer was hardly what Job was looking for. Assuming we can even understand what God is saying in the divine speeches the rules of God’s governing the world would transcend the rational.
- 11) The type of wisdom that is accessible through faith active in love (28:28) but this wisdom is often contradicted by reality.

Some conditioning factors for reading the book today

- 1) Much of the book is wrong! Job’s whole argument is based on ignorance of the real reason for his suffering. His friends are wrong, Elihu is wrong. Divine speeches are in part irrelevant.
- 2) Job is a story about a rich man told by a rich man. He is rich and pious - not our usual experience. Is Job ever really poor? Even in his worst days he has maids, a valet and house guests never worried about his next meal. His wealth is not considered as problematic as wealth is in much of the Bible.
- 3) Very strong male bias. Principal characters are all male. Women’s interests are ignored, (check out 31:9-10)
- 4) Job knows that his friend’s common sense, traditions, rationality etc. are inconsistent with his own experience. For Job to hold fast to his integrity means to insist on the validity and authority of his own experience, even when it is contradicted by “what all the world knows is true.”
- 5) Much of the suffering we observe today is caused by prejudice, oppression or something systematic. Protest today is about suffering people not so much against God but against the attitudes actions or indifference of fellow human beings.