

THE PERSEVERANCE OF JOB THE PATRIARCH

The book of Job in the Old Testament is part of a collection of books in the Bible called wisdom literature. More importantly, the book can be seen as a “wisdom tractate which discusses theodicy and the suffering of the righteous, which is inherently connected with it.”¹ The narrative, which opens up with prose, tells the story about a Hebrew patriarch who is a faithful servant of God. He is a happy man who has been blessed with great riches and an extended family (1.1-3). The plot of the book ponders whether or not Job will stay faithful to God in spite of grave misfortune. God allows Satan to test Job, and as a result Job loses his possessions and his children (1.6-19). But he is resigned to the fact that God can take back what he has given:

‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will depart.
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised’ (1.21).²

This shows that Job’s faith gives him the strength that he needs to get through this difficult time in his life. He does not rely on material possessions nor even his own family. He does not depend on the props that people typically use to give meaning to their lives.

But Satan is not done with Job. Next, he attacks Job himself with a vile sickness (2.1-8). The author of Job makes the connection between the Lord, Satan, and Job’s suffering very clear: “Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles

¹J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament from Its Origins to the Closing of the Alexandrian Canon*, translated by John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976), 387.

²Unless noted otherwise, all scripture quotations are from *The New International Version Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

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of his feet to the crown of his head” (2.7). Job becomes so loathsome that even his “breath is offensive” to his wife (19.17). As a result of their misfortune, he is abhorrent to her, and she hates “his intimate embrace.”³ Job’s most intimate companion and helper cannot sustain him during this time of tragic grief. She too feels great loss, and she can no longer bear the sight of looking at a husband who seems to her like a stranger. Like the friends of Job a bit later in the story, she blames him and believes that he is suffering because he has done something wrong. She asks, ““Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!”” (2.9). But Job does not depend on her for his strength during this confusing time. Rather, he depends on the rightness of his character and his trust in the goodness of the Lord. He tells her, ““You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”” (2.10). Job is resigned to accept what comes his way by God’s design. As the writer of the story says, “In all this, Job did not sin in what he said” (2.10).

At this point in the story, Job’s three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—come to pity him and offer wisdom about the situation (chapters 1 and 2). Here, the prose breaks off into a lengthy poem of dialogue, a four-way conversation between Job and his companions. In three series of speeches, Job and his three so-called comforters explore their different ideas about “divine justice.”⁴ There is no progressive or systematic development of ideas, but rather an exploration of ideas that were presented by each of the three friends at the beginning of the cycles of speeches. Eliphaz speaks from the perspective of his advanced age, since he understands the

³Victor E. Reichert, *Job: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible, edited by A. Cohen (London, UK: Soncino Press, 1946), 97.

⁴Henry Wansbrough, et al., editors, *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 753.

severity of life's challenges based on his lengthy experience. Zophar reveals the naivete as well as the zeal of youth, and Bildad adds little to the discussion by his matter-of-fact and even wearisome judgment of Job's predicament. All three defend a traditional idea about the cause of human suffering, and this is the idea of retribution. Job suffers because he has sinned, so although he protests his innocence, only God can acquit the afflicted patriarch.⁵ Job, however, must rely on his integrity and his faith in God, rather than the support of his three friends, to get him through it all.

Since he has done no wrong, Job pleads his innocence, but this only makes his friends more stubborn in their belief that Job is guilty. As a result, Job confronts their rigid belief in retribution with the stark reality of his experience of injustice. He takes refuge in the fact that he has fallen prey to the unpredictable forces of a hostile world, and he comes back to this truth again and again. As Soggin notes, "The solution put forward here is only acceptable to those who, like Job, abandon the idea of an ordered and harmonious universe of wisdom and enter into the sometimes hard and irrational world of faith, accepting its paradoxical categories of thought."⁶ This truth leads Job to see God as somewhat of a mystery—a God who is just, no doubt, but a God who allows the righteous to suffer. But as Job explores this mystery of God, he comes no closer to a solution for his predicament. In this way, as Terrien suggests, "The poet portrays Job as an exemplar of hubris. Job's trust in divine omnipotence is so unshakable that he feels himself to be the special target of divine enmity."⁷ So Job gropes in the dark, so to speak,

⁵Ibid.

⁶Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 387.

⁷Samuel Terrien, "Job," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Volume 8, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 99.

as a tortured soul in a wretched body—the soul alternates rebellion with periods of submission, just like the body in times of duress or stress alternates spasms with times of ease.⁸ This tension in Job’s own person comes to a climax in two places in the book—first, in his expression of faith in God as Redeemer (chapter 19), and second, in his last protest of innocence (chapter 31).

In the first climax of the story, Job dismisses the counsel of his friends as a source of comfort. For him, their words of false wisdom give him nothing to help him sustain his crisis. In fact, just the opposite is true, since their words tear down rather than build up. Job asks them:

‘How long will you torment me
and crush me with words?
Ten times now you have reproached me;
shamelessly you attack me’ (19.2-3).

In a real way, Job’s friends have become his enemies, because they challenge his integrity. Without the support of friends and family, without the security of material possessions and physical health, Job is laid bare before God. He must take his cause to God, since he has nowhere else to turn, and he does this in the form of a complaint:

‘Know that God has wronged me
and drawn his net around me.
Though I cry, “Violence!” I get no response;
though I call for help, there is no justice’ (19.6-7).

Alienated and abandoned, Job is left to suffer alone:

‘All my intimate friends detest me;
those I love have turned against me.
I am nothing but skin and bones;
I have escaped only by the skin of my teeth’ (19.19-20).

⁸See Wansbrough, editor, *The New Jerusalem Bible*, 753.

Job has nothing left to sustain him except his integrity and the God whom he knows and trusts but does not fully understand. In his despair, Job leaps from complaint to express a radical confidence in God:

‘I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!’ (19.25-27).

This disputed statement by Job has been used by some Christian interpreters as a proof-text for the resurrection of the body. The evidence is not at all clear, since the Hebrew words are ambiguous.⁹ But the overall message of the passage is clear. Job expresses hope in a future vindication, even though he feels that God has been his enemy. This gives Job a new confidence, something that he realizes fully at the end of the book.

In the second climax of the story, Job once again declares his innocence to his friends. Janzen writes, “In his last soliloquy . . . Job had taken his sufferings as God’s arbitrary action to put him in his proper place as ‘dust and ashes’.” Job rightly understands that he is nothing more than “suffering dust.”¹⁰ But this does not change his belief in his integrity—something that gives Job inner strength to face the difficult questions of his tragedy and the wrong answers of his friends. Job has not sinned with his eyes; he had not “walked with falsehood” (31.5). Job was not guilty of adultery; he had not been “unfaithful to God” (31.28). To the contrary, Job proved

⁹See P. W. Skehan, “Job, Book of,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), 1001.

¹⁰J. Gerald Janzen, “Job, the Book of,” *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, edited by Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), 494.

himself to be a just, kindhearted, and generous companion and master (31.13-34). He is “a man of unassailable piety.”¹¹

As surely as Job protests his innocence, he raises again the problem of his unanswered dilemma. If humans suffer because they sin, then why is he suffering? Who can give him an answer? His wife could not and his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar could not. With no answer from human sources of wisdom, Job turns to plead his case with the Almighty:

‘Oh, that I had someone to hear me!
I sign now my defense—let the Almighty answer me;
let my accuser put his indictment in writing’ (31.35).

Job appeals to God as both accuser and redeemer. For some unknown reason—not because he has sinned—Job is afflicted by God, so God himself must take up Job’s cause and give an answer.

Just as Job trusts in his integrity to sustain him, so he trusts God’s wisdom over and beyond the wisdom of his wife and his three friends to provide a solution. Job appropriately ends his words with an appeal to the land itself to judge whether or not he is innocent:

‘If my land cries out against me
and all its furrows are wet with tears,
if I have devoured its yield without payment
or broken the spirit of its tenants,
then let the briers come up instead of wheat
and stinkweed instead of barley’ (31.37-40).

A “new character” in the story, Elihu, now comes on the scene to share some wisdom. He argues that both Job and his companions are wrong about Job’s suffering and about God.¹² Elihu, in a very long speech, tries to prove that God is right in all that he does, and that God’s majesty and splendor make it futile for Job to try to prove his innocence or to challenge God

¹¹Terrien, “Job,” 99.

¹²See Wansbrough, editor, *The New Jerusalem Bible*, 753.

(chapters 32-37). At the conclusion of Elihu's windy speech, the Lord himself answers Job "out of the storm" (38.1). In this whirlwind speech (chapters 38-40), the Lord in essence does not give any solution to Job's predicament as a righteous sufferer. In a series of direct questions, the Lord simply affirms his infinite power and wisdom and calls for Job's complete confidence and trust. In response to this direct revelation from the Lord, Job can no longer protest his situation. He admits the folly of his own words and yields to the decree of the Almighty:

I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?
I put my hand over my mouth.
I spoke once, but I have no answer—
twice, but I will say no more (40.4-5).

After the Lord speaks, there is nothing left to say, and there is nothing left to discuss. The matter has been settled: Job indeed is innocent, and as such he is a righteous sufferer. But the Lord is the Lord, and his ways cannot be questioned. The story of Job concludes with a short prose epilogue, which is similar to how it began. The Lord reproves Job's three friends for their misrepresentation of the ways of the Almighty. For Job, the Lord restores him to health and gives him sons and daughters and "twice as much as he had before" (see 42.7-17). In the end, Job is sustained by the strength of his own character and his faith in God, as well as everything else the Lord gives him.

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