

UNDERSTANDING
OLD TESTAMENT
WISDOM LITERATURE:

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes
(and a few Psalms)

The Book of
Job

The Book of Job contains several different genres or kinds of literature.

It is clearly “wisdom” literature, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, but within the Bible it is a completely unique book for many reasons.

AUTHOR: The book is *about* Job, but the book is *not by* Job. The author was an Israelite: this narrator, but never Job or his friends, uses Israel’s covenant name for God, “Yahweh.”

The author “had access to a tradition about an ancient righteous man who endured great suffering ... without turning against God.”

The author preserves the ancient aspects of the story: mentioning Sabeian and Chaldean raiders, describing life in a more ancient setting, and using more ancient Hebrew in the “spoken” portion.
(About 3% of the Hebrew is not translatable.)

DATE: There are two dates involved in Job - the time of Job himself and the time the book was written.

The style and language of the narrator's portions place the book's composition between Solomon's reign (970-930 B.C.) and Israel's exile in Babylon (586 B.C.).

Job himself would have lived sometime in the second millennium B.C. (2000-1000 B.C.).

PURPOSE: Job has several purposes.

1. The book traces Job's development from a very good but only moderately wise man, to a man who becomes what God really wants us to be: a truly wise person.
2. The book explains how God can be truly good and truly sovereign in a world where good people suffer.
3. The book compares worldly wisdom which appears logical and appears to explain reality, with God's true wisdom.

PURPOSE: Job has several purposes.

4. The book refutes the human wisdom that links suffering with sin and failure in the sufferer's life.
5. The book seeks to explain that not everything that happens in life is fair or is God's desire: God has sovereignly chosen that some things are determined, and some things are open.

VIEWPOINT:

The writer of Ecclesiastes took the overall perspective that God was relatively uninvolved in the daily affairs of life.

“What happens, happens,” and it doesn’t much matter who you are or what you do.

The writer of Job presents two overall perspectives.

VIEWPOINT:

The first is that of Job's friends, Bildad, Zophar, Eliphaz, and Elihu. Their perspective is that God is active in every detail of life, “constantly meting out his judgment in through the events of this life.”

They claim that whatever happens to you in life, whether good or bad, is a direct result of whether or not you are pleasing God.

Therefore, Job's loss of fortune and family **MUST** mean he has sinned or displeased God in some way.

Initially, Job appears to have the same perspective.

We know this because he defends both HIS righteousness AND GOD'S righteousness and justice.

This is his great quandary: Why am I suffering if what my friends and I believe about God is true?

Through the course of the book, we see the narrator's perspective, we see Job's perspective changing and growing, and we eventually see God's perspective, which settles the matter.

That second viewpoint, *God's viewpoint* which becomes Job's, is that God IS indeed almighty, AND sovereign, AND just.

God's universal kingdom includes both good and evil, humans can never fully control or understand evil, and that which is beyond our control will be dealt with by God in his own time and way.

God's perspective - true wisdom - explains that people suffer for many different reasons, including but not limited to displeasing God.

Sometimes in God's sovereignty good people suffer as a result of living in this place where both good and evil exist.

When good people suffer, and evil cannot be controlled or explained, we can be sure that God the Great Creator is still GOOD and RIGHTEOUS and JUST.

HE WILL DEAL JUSTLY WITH US.

There will either be justice in this life or in the next.

We grow through suffering. Righteousness is good, but **Wisdom** and righteousness is God's ultimate goal for us.

Definition of the Fundamental Problem:

1. We believe God is almighty, just, and good.
2. Therefore, he is ABLE to intervene, he REWARDS RIGHTEOUSNESS and PUNISHES EVIL, and he is ESSENTIALLY GOOD in what he does and why.
3. Therefore, suffering is caused by our unrighteousness, blessing is caused by our righteousness, and a righteous person should not suffer.

Definition of the Fundamental Problem:

4. BUT ... sometimes good people suffer, wicked people prosper.
5. EITHER the suffering person is unrighteous, OR God is NOT almighty, just, or good.

If there is a God, and he is good, why do the innocent suffer?

The first three friends follow the standard worldly logic.

Job refutes them.

Elihu adds the possibility of divine chastening and redemptive suffering. No other options.

BUT, Job says he does NOT need chastening to bring him to repentance or redemption. Elihu's explanation, though true enough and an improvement over the first three friends, still does NOT answer the question, solve the problem.

GOD SPEAKS. *He does not directly answer Job.*

For the test to be successful, and Job to be proven truly righteous, and attain true wisdom, *he CANNOT know the divine perspective fully.*

Job must remain in mystery, trusting God.

We learn from this ... we too will sometimes not understand why good people suffer, and we will have to let that mystery be, and simply trust God.

PRINCIPLES for INTERPRETATION:

1. Since disputation speeches dominate the book, you should determine what perspective (truths) dominates each speaker's attempts at persuasion.
2. Since the narrative framework identifies Job as the human Hero, you should pay particular attention to Job's self-defense for his perspective (truths). *(As always, God is the true Hero.)*
3. Since Job's friends are at best "foils," and at worst "antagonists," you should beware of their perspectives as probably opposed to God's perspective.

PRINCIPLES for INTERPRETATION:

4. Since God does indeed speak in this book, and God is always the True Hero of all biblical narrative, you should above all pay attention to God's first-person speeches for the meaning of the book.

5. When other genres are incorporated into the disputation speeches, you should pay attention to how they support the perspective(s) of that speech. They “illuminate” further.
6. Job’s avowal of innocence is a crucial clue (ch. 31). His adamant declaration of innocence, as the human Hero, points you directly toward the book’s purposes (*Job’s growth into wisdom, God’s goodness, and sovereignty even when good people suffer*).

7. In light of all of the above, you must decide from God's long soliloquy God's explanations, how they answer Job, how Job's response highlights his true innocence, and what the book teaches about the reasons for our suffering.

8. You must pay particular attention to the Epilogue, for the ending answers questions and points forward into time.

9. Whatever your final conclusion from Job, you must then examine that in the light of the other Wisdom books, the whole Bible, and especially later revelation (*books written after Job, all the way through Revelation*).

CONCLUSION

The book of Job tells us that sometimes God's people suffer for reasons known only to God.

We CANNOT accuse God when this happens, but in our pain and confusion we must seek his face, acknowledge his goodness AND his justice, and wait expectantly for our vindication, in this life or the next.

Sometimes suffering does indeed have a purpose, and God may or may not choose to reveal his purpose or relieve our suffering.

STRUCTURE: Organization

I. Prologue: Chapter 1-2 (narrative)

(Job is in the Primary School of Wisdom.)

A. Job's Happiness - 1:1-5

B. Job's Testing - 1:6-2:13

1:8 - Job is righteous, blameless, the best that can be offered (remember this).

1:12 - God is sovereign

2:6 - God is sovereign

II. Dialogue - Dispute: Chapters 3-27 (disputation speeches)

(Job is a Sophomore in the College of Wisdom.)

A. Job's Opening Lament (3)

I wish I had never been born. I wish I could die.

B. First Cycle of Speeches (4-14)

1. Eliphaz (4-5) and Job's reply (6-7)

4:7-8 - worldly wisdom's fundamental error in this matter.

4 - 5 - Eliphaz's philosophy and argument are a mixture of truth and error, but the error is serious, horribly destructive.

"Suffering is your fault!"

Even the "true" statements are *generalizations*, proverbial, from a not very wise man.

They are NOT laws OR promises OR God speaking!

5:27 – IS **WRONG!** *Worldly wisdom falls short of God.*

II. (continued)

B. First Cycle of Speeches (4-14)

1. Eliphaz (4-5) and Job's reply (6-7)

6:4 - Job initially agrees with the worldly wisdom of Eliphaz and the others

Job believes God is punishing him for something.

Job begins laying out his case, examining himself.

(In his responses, Job speaks to his friends, then to God.)

Job's speeches may contain more truth than his friends, *but they will also contain generalizations, proverbs, and error. Even JOB's words are NOT laws, promises, or God's words.*

7:20-21 - Job knows he is not perfect, but he knows of no unrighteousness that would deserve this.

Job asks God to forgive him for whatever (if anything) he has done wrong.

II. (continued)

B. First Cycle of Speeches (4-14)

2. Bildad (8) and Job's reply (9-10)

8:2 - Eliphaz was oblique, Bildad is blunt, impatient.

8:4-5 - Wrong again. You or your family have sinned. Repent, and THEN God will restore your fortunes BECAUSE you will have admitted your sin and will DESERVE blessing.

NOTE: Bildad is NOT prophesying, because his entire philosophy is **WRONG**: he is basing his prediction on an entirely FALSE idea. (8:7, 13, 19-22 ... **all are error!**)

9 - 10 - Job responds that he KNOWS he has not sinned in such a way as to deserve this kind of suffering, but God is so great that there is no use in trying to prove Job's innocence.

9:21 - 10:17 - **Job claims God brings blessing or disaster whether you are innocent or guilty.** (That God does not really care.)

II. (continued)

B. First Cycle of Speeches (4-14)

3. Zophar (11) and Job's reply (12-14)

Zophar is not only blunt, but without compassion.

11:3-4 - He accuses Job of mocking God and claiming to be pure, but Job has done neither.

11:12 - **Zinger! Zophar calls Job "witless," compares him to a wild donkey, whereas the friends are wise and teachable.**

11:13-20 - Same old error again.

12:2-3,6 - Job's sarcasm and accusation against his friends.

12:13-25 - God is sovereign, and sometimes his actions **appear** negative or not logical (contra Eliphaz 5:10-16).

II. (continued)

B. First Cycle of Speeches (4-14)

3. Zophar (11) and Job's reply (12-14)

13:1-12 - Wow! Job slams his “friends,” and basically says **God does not want anyone lying for him or making excuses for him based on false “wisdom.”**

13:18-28 - **Job still believes the error.**

C. Second Cycle of Speeches (15-21)

1. Eliphaz (15) and Job's reply (16-17)

Eliphaz has lost patience. **He refuses to deal with REALITY: a good man suffers.**

Job is giving up on this life, hoping for vindication in the next life.

II. (continued)

C. Second Cycle of Speeches (15-21)

2. Bildad (18) and Job's reply (19)

Bildad makes more of the same argument.
Job rejects the accusations again.

NOTE: 19:3 - “ten times” - several times. Throughout all kinds of biblical literature, numbers are often used in non-precise ways: rounded off, used figuratively, used with heavy symbolism, etc., whether or NOT an actual precise number is known or even meant.

19:23-27 - One high point of the book. (NIV note)

3. Zophar (20) and Job's reply (21)

II. (continued)

D. Third Cycle of Speeches (22-26)

Same old arguments and defenses.

1. Eliphaz (22) and Job's reply (23-24)
2. Bildad (25) and Job's reply (26)

E. Job's Closing Discourse (27)

NOTE: The symmetry - the first half of the dialogue-disputation section began with Job's lament, had three cycles of speeches, and now closes with Job's closing discourse.

27:13-23 - All these discourses are generalized, mixed, and proverbial, for Job even "contradicts" his own earlier statements, 21:7-15, 23-16.

III. Narrator's Meditation (Interlude) on Wisdom (28)

All attempts to penetrate the mystery of human suffering have failed. The traditional worldly wisdom did not work, and Job's defenses have not helped.

The narrator inserts a poem to answer the question, "Where then can wisdom be found?"

Three parts:

1. 28:1-11 - precious stones and metals are found in the deepest mines;
2. 28:12-19 - wisdom is neither found there nor bought with jewels and metals
3. 28:20-27 - wisdom is found only in God, and God says that is to fear God and shun evil.

This meditation anticipates God's speeches (38-42:6) and echoes God's assessment of Job in the Prologue.

IV. **Monologues** (29 - 42:6) (disputation speeches)

A. Job's Call for Vindication (29-31)

29 - Nostalgic review of past happiness

30 - Lament over loss, especially his honor

31 - Final protest of innocence

B. Elihu's Speeches (32-37) (*youth knows nothing more*)

32:8,14,18, 33:4 - Elihu claims that he will not use the failed arguments of the other friends, but will be led by God's Spirit to speak the truth!

Elihu is presumptuous ... he is young.

36:4! He thinks he has a word from God for Job!!

Again, Elihu's discourses are mixtures of truth and error.

34:35 - Job does indeed speak without knowledge, but not as Elihu and others think.

36:5-10 - Elihu is *partially* correct. *This too is harmful.*

IV. Monologues (29 - 42:6) (disputation speeches)

C. Divine Discourses - God Speaks (38 - 42:6)

(Job is in the Graduate School of Wisdom.)

God's governance includes chaos bounded by good. < < <

1. God speaks (38-40:2), Job replies (40:3-5)

God does NOT justify his ways to Job, or to anyone.

“The wisdom that directs the Creator's ways is beyond the reach of human understanding.

Human wisdom should not presume to match God's wisdom, or to take it's measure.”

God describes his vast creative power and activity.

He repeatedly asks Job, “Who did this, when was it done, where, how, and why was it done, and *where were you?*” *You don't know, can't go, can't do!!*

IV. Monologues (29 - 42:6) (disputation speeches)

C. Divine Discourses - God Speaks (38 - 42:6)

(Job is in the Graduate School of Wisdom.)

God's governance includes chaos bounded by good.

1. God speaks (38-40:2), Job replies (40:3-5)
Job's reply is utter humility - "I am unworthy"
Job's mouth is shut.
2. God speaks again (40:6-41:34)
God asserts his absolute ability and his determination to administer justice. Job cannot do this.
40:8 - Job claimed God had wronged him (19:6).
Job condemned God to justify himself.
God instructs Job to leave his ultimate vindication to God (vv 9, 14).

IV. **Monologues** (29 - 42:6) (disputation speeches)

C. Divine Discourses - God Speaks (38 - 42:6)

(Job is in the Graduate School of Wisdom.)

God's governance includes chaos bounded by good.

(Note the figures of chaos in God's descriptions of his universal kingdom: sea, wild animals, storms, etc.)

(There is a chaotic energy, a hostile-to-life realm that we do not understand, and it threatens us.)

3. Job's repentance (42:1-6)

Job requires nothing else from God. He will simply repent, trust, worship, and wait for whatever God decides to do.

Job rejects his old viewpoint / philosophy, and completely accepts GOD'S VIEWPOINT.

Job makes a good confession - he says exactly what God has said!

V. Epilogue (42:7-17) (narrative)

A. God's Verdict (42:7-9)

Job's refusal to curse God, Job's refusal to falsely admit guilt, and his unconditional repentance, proved Job's righteousness.

God was right about Job, satan was wrong.

Job complained angrily against God, but from a heart that truly loved God, that spoke honestly as far as he knew the truth, and with a desire to know the truth.

Job's friends had a **religious philosophy** but did not know God, and they spoke false things about God, and even false things claiming to be speaking for God.

Their pride caused them to claim knowledge they did not possess!!

V. **Epilogue** (42:7-17) (narrative)

B. Job's Restoration (42:10-17)

God did **NOT** HAVE to restore Job. Regardless of what Job said or did.

This was an act of God's sovereign grace.

To say otherwise is to refute the essential message of the entire book!

Instead, the book of Job instructs us to say "We don't really know why God restored Job."

Our best guess is redemption history - Job points forward!

God never told Job or his friends why everything happened as it did.

Job's lessons are repeated in Christ and the N.T.:

James 5:11 - We should endure as Job, for God is merciful. < < < <

Romans 5:1-6 - Our suffering produces endurance, etc. < < < <

1 Peter 4:12 - Rejoice when we suffer with Christ < < < <

V. Epilogue (42:7-17) (narrative)

B. Job's Restoration (42:10-17)

God wants even Job's friends to repent and join the blessed covenant community.

*They must first accept Job as their priest and intercessor - **the innocent, righteous man who suffered but was raised from certain death to abundant life!***

Job suffered as a prince or king (ch 29)!

He was the best humanity could offer, God's favored.

> > **NOTE: ...**

Job's final state of "perfection" and blessing points forward to God's ultimate state of blessedness for humankind. **Daughters receive the same as sons!**

Suffering, poverty, disease, and death will end in the New Heavens and the New Earth!!

THE POINT:

God's wisdom is beyond our ability to understand or question.

Sometimes good people suffer for reasons known only to God.

They are *not* being punished for sin.

They are *not* trapped in trouble because of any failure of any kind on their part, nor on the part of anyone connected to them.

Sometimes ungodly or un-Christlike people prosper, they are considered godly and may even rise to prominence in the Church.

God will not always reveal to us the reasons for our suffering, or for the prosperity of the wicked.

THE POINT:

Sometimes both of these states will continue until death.
Sometimes the truth will never be known in this life.

Nevertheless, God is almighty, just, and good.
He will mete out mercy and justice, reward and punishment, in his own time, *whether in this life or in the next.*

PURPOSE: Remember ... Job has several purposes.

1. The book traces Job's development from a very good but only moderately wise man, to a man who becomes **what God really wants us to be: a truly wise person**.
2. The book explains how God can be truly good and truly sovereign in a world where good people suffer.
3. The book compares worldly wisdom which appears logical and appears to explain reality, with **God's true wisdom which is deep, mysterious, often the opposite of worldly wisdom**.

PURPOSE: Remember ... Job has several purposes.

4. The book **refutes** the human wisdom that links suffering with sin and failure in the sufferer's life.
5. The book seeks to explain that not everything that happens in life is fair or is God's desire: **God has sovereignly chosen that some things are determined, and some things are open.**

