

Job 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 1. There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He possessed seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, It may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts. Thus Job did continually. Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them.

The Lord said to Satan, From where have you come? Satan answered the Lord and said, From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it. And the Lord said to Satan, Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? Then Satan answered the Lord and said, Does Job fear God for no reason?

Have you not put a hedge around him, and his house and all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face. And the Lord said to Satan, Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand. So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and there came a messenger to Job and said, The oxen were ploughing, and the donkeys feeding beside them. And the Sabaeans fell upon them, and took them, and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword. And I alone have escaped to tell you. While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, The fire of God fell from heaven, and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them. And I alone have escaped to tell you. While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, The Chaldeans formed three groups, and made a raid on the camels, and took them, and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword. And I alone have escaped to tell you. While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house. And behold, a great wind came across the wilderness, and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you. Then Job arose and tore his robe, and shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped.

And he said, 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. In all this, Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

The book of Job raises many questions for its readers. Beyond the many questions raised by its narrative and its poetry, there are questions of dating, setting, and authorship that are particularly difficult to answer. Its Hebrew style is an unusual one, and many of its terms aren't found elsewhere.

[3 : 31] John Hartley observes many of the parallels between Job and other parts of the biblical literature, with parts of the Proverbs and certain Psalms, especially Psalms 8 and 107. There are connections with Lamentations, with Amos, with Jeremiah, and with several parts of Isaiah.

The character of Job is also mentioned in Ezekiel chapter 14 verse 14. The relationship between Job and some of these other texts is strong enough to suggest dependence, but it's not clear in which direction. Is the book of Job drawing from the other scriptures, or is Job the text that the other scriptures are drawing upon? Dates for the book have also varied considerably, with many people seeing different parts of the book as dating to different periods. Nahum Sarna, for instance, sees behind the framing narrative of the epilogue and the prologue, some deeper epic story that dates back to a pre-Israelite period. This, many scholars have suggested, was used as a framing device for a series of speeches, speeches that many scholars date to between the 7th and the 4th centuries BC. Following this approach, many scholars see tensions between the framing narratives of chapters 1 and 2 and chapter 42 in the prologue and the epilogue, and the speeches that they bookend. They argue, for instance, that the Job of the prologue and the epilogue is living in a rather different context from the Job that we see in the poetry that intervenes. This tension, however, is greatly exaggerated, and as we look a bit more closely, I believe that they can readily be reconciled. The book has a fairly easy structure to discern.

It begins with two chapters of the prologue. Then it has Job's lament. There's a cycle of speeches that follow from chapters 4 to 27. There's a poem concerning wisdom in chapter 28. In chapters 29 to 31, Job delivers his final speech, followed by Elihu's speeches in chapters 32 to 37. God's speeches and Job's response are found in chapter 38 to the beginning of chapter 42. The book concludes with an epilogue in chapter 42. The subject of the book are the sufferings of Job, and debate about those sufferings, leading to the question of where wisdom is to be found. Its concern with wisdom and the fear of the Lord mean that its place among the poetic wisdom books is quite fitting. The book opens by introducing us to the character of Job, who lives in the land of Uz. We are not entirely sure where the land of Uz was.

The Septuagint identifies Job with the character of Jobab in chapter 36 of Genesis, one of the Edomite kings. And while this particular identification may be questionable, considering Job as an Edomite is not unreasonable. While there are various places that have been called Uz, in Lamentations chapter 4 verse 21, Uz seems to be associated with Edom.

In Genesis chapter 36 verse 28, one of the names of the Edomites is Uz. Furthermore, one of Job's friends is called Eliphaz the Temanite. Once again, in Genesis chapter 36 verse 11, one of the sons of Edom is called Eliphaz and he has a son called Teman. All of these considerations suggest that Job is an Edomite, living to the south of the land of Israel, likely prior to the conquest. There is every reason to believe that Job was a real person. He is described here as blameless and upright. The language of blamelessness is used elsewhere of characters such as Noah, Abram and Jacob. It's language that is associated with the sacrificial system, in which animals had to be without blemish in order to be fitting sacrifices. He fears God and turns away from evil. The fear of the Lord is a common theme within the wisdom literature, and Job exemplifies this trait that is elsewhere called the beginning of wisdom. The book of Job is in many respects a book that is about wisdom, about the limited understanding of man and the mysterious ways of the Lord. From Job's righteous character, which is the thing of first importance, the narrator moves to discuss his family, his seven sons and three daughters.

[7 : 39] There is a proportion here of seven to three, both significant numbers, which in turn add up to ten. The seven to three ratio is found elsewhere in scripture. We might think, for instance, of Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines. From his family, we now move to his possessions. He has 7,000 sheep and 3,000 camels, once again a seven-three ratio, adding up this time to 10,000. While these aren't unrealistic numbers for a particularly wealthy man, it should be apparent that Job is not a normal individual. He is a king or a chief among his people, a man of incredible wealth, indeed one who will be described in a moment as the greatest of all of the people of the east. In chapter 29 verse 25, Job speaks of himself as like a king or a chief among his people. Bearing Job's wealth and status in mind is important when we consider what happens next. What happens to Job is not merely a personal crisis, it's a crisis for his entire people. Their chief has been struck in a devastating way and it seems that the Lord has singled him out for particular judgment. This might help us to understand why the three friends confront him as they do in the later chapters. They are his royal counsellors and they want him to confess to whatever it is that he has done that has brought this national disaster about, in addition to his 7,000 sheep and 3,000 camels. He owns 500 yoke of oxen and 500 female donkeys.

This time the numbers are equal and add up to 1,000. His 10 children, his 10,000 sheep and camels, his 1,000 oxen and female donkeys give us a sense of the completeness and the perfection that he experiences. This is a blameless man, a blameless man with a perfect household and with glorious and complete possessions. He enjoys so much wealth that each one of his sons has his own house in which he can hold these massive feasts that last for perhaps a week. The seven sons in their seven houses holding their seven feasts, perhaps for their seven days, accumulates sevens in addition to the tens that were accumulated earlier on. Once again the perfection and the glory of Job's house is being underlined.

As a pious father, Job is concerned for the spiritual well-being of his children and concerned that they might have cursed God in their hearts, literally blessed God in their hearts. He offers sacrifices for them early in the morning after every single feast that they have had. This presents Job both as a pious and a rich man, but it also raises the theme of cursing God in the heart, which will be a very important theme in what follows. We also see a setup for a contrast here. Job is concerned that his children might have cursed God in their hearts, yet the Lord, Job's father, puts him forward as someone who will not curse God in his heart when he is put to the test. The setting of all of this seems to be in a patriarchal era. We see later on that the Chaldeans and the Sabeans form raiding parties. The wealth of Job is measured in oxen, sheep, camels and donkeys, and then there are the possible associations with the descendants of Edom. From the portrayal of this perfect man, this new Adam as it were, within the garden of his perfect family and perfect kingdom and possessions, we are made privy to a heavenly scene, the gathering of the sons of God to present themselves before the Lord.

This should remind us of divine counsel scenes that we find elsewhere in scripture, for instance in 1 Kings chapter 22, with Micaiah's description of the host of heaven before the Lord. The sons of God here are the angels, as they seem to be in Genesis chapter 6, although it's possible that some human prophets might be among them. Among their number, however, the adversary, or Satan, is present.

While the New Testament speaks in places like Revelation chapter 12 of Satan and his angels being cast down from heaven, in this period Satan seems to have enjoyed heavenly access.

[11 : 35] In Zechariah chapter 3 verse 1 we have a description of Satan in the divine counsel. Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. The Lord addresses Satan, who describes himself as one who has been roaming around on the earth, perhaps bringing to mind the epistle's description of him, as a roaring lion prowling around seeking whom he may devour. While Job was concerned that one of his children had done something wrong, cursing God in their hearts, the Lord puts Job forward to the front line, pushing him forward into the position of testing. He invites Satan to test and inspect Job, presenting him as a singly righteous man, a man of integrity and godly character. Satan, however, is having none of it, insisting that Job is only righteous because it works out well for him.

If Job were really put to the test, he would fail. The Lord has set a hedge around him. The glorious paradise of Job is guarded all around with this great barrier to protect it. If the Lord were just tear down that barrier and allow Satan true access, Job would rapidly capitulate. Perhaps we should see in the story of Job some of the themes at the beginning of the book of Genesis. Job is a new Adam in a new paradise. He is being tested by the Lord as a son. He is facing the attack of the serpent and the temptation of his wife. Will he succeed where the first Adam failed? The Lord grants Satan access to Job and the rest of the chapter as a litany of disaster. In one day, four hammer blows descend upon Job and his family, related together by the same pattern. His oxen and donkeys are stolen and servants are killed by the edge of the sword by a foreign tribe. Then the fire of God falls down and burns up the sheep and servants. And then camels are stolen and servants are killed by the edge of the sword.

And finally, a great wind strikes the house in which his sons and daughters are feasting, and they are killed. In each case, we see a similar formula. Only one servant survives to bring the terrible news. There is a chiasmic structure as well to observe, a bookended structure.

Toby Sumter observes that it begins with sons and daughters eating and drinking, and ends with them eating and drinking, and then being killed. Within those bookends, there are oxen and donkeys stolen, servants killed by the edge of the sword, and then camels stolen and servants killed by the edge of the sword. And then in the middle, the fire of God falls down and burns up the sheep and the servants.

Sumter argues that this particularly singles out the falling down of the fire of God. This is the one disaster in particular that is marked out as an action of God. Whereas the first and third disasters could be attributed to human forces, this particular disaster points towards God as the instigator of Job's crisis. Sumter notes the presence of several allusions to themes of sacrifice within this chapter. Job was introduced to us as a blameless man, like the sacrifices needed to be without blemish. Job symbolically offered sacrifices for his children in the earlier part of the chapter.

[14 : 43] In the second disaster, the fire of God comes from heaven, as the fire of God might come upon the sacrifices, burning them up into the presence of God. This happens with the sheep that correspond with the sons. The great divine wind then strikes the four corners of the house in which Job's sons are celebrating their feast. Four corners language is associated elsewhere in scripture, with the tabernacle and the altar. All of this points in the direction of a sort of sacrifice taking place.

Job and his household are being rendered as sacrifice. By the disasters falling upon him and his household, he is being offered to the Lord. Job's response to all of this is faithful. His action is an expression of his mortality. He tears his robe, shaves his head and falls to the ground. And then he worships.

He acknowledges the fact that he came from his mother's womb with nothing and he will return there with nothing. Everything that he has ever received has been a blessing and a gift from the Lord, not something to which he was ever entitled. And as he loses it, he gives thanks for what he once enjoyed.

Rather than cursing the name of the Lord, as Satan has said he would do, he blesses the name of the Lord. The theme of blessing or cursing the Lord holds together the entire chapter, as do the themes of sacrifice. A question to consider. In verse 21, Job says, naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. Where else in scripture can we fill out this association between the womb and the earth?