

INTRODUCTION TO JOB (1-27)

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One of the mediaeval Jewish Bible commentators was Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508). He was not only a scholar and philosopher, but also an important financial adviser to the kings of Portugal, Spain and Naples. But he was frequently forced to emigrate and start his life all over again during the terrible period of the Spanish inquisition and the expulsion of Jews from Spain. He had his own technique in the way he presented his Biblical commentary. He would begin with a detailed list of questions that he felt needed to be addressed to the text that he was studying. Then, in the course of his long commentary, he set about providing his own answers. There is an apocryphal story about a rabbinic student who began studying Abarbanel's commentary of a particular passage. He became deeply disturbed by Abarbanel's questions and completely convinced about the problems raised, to which the student himself could find no answer. As a result he never even finished reading the commentary, gave up his rabbinic studies and became an apostate. I mention this because of the unusual circumstances in which we find ourselves this year. For once I am not talking about the effects of the pandemic. Instead I mean the fact that we are only studying the first half of the Book of Job in which the author raises enormous questions about the meaning of human suffering and the challenge of trying to understand the role that God plays in it.

The traditional belief, which is forcefully expressed by Job's friends, is that the world is governed by a just God, who ensures that good behaviour is rewarded, and that bad behaviour is punished. So when someone, like Job, an upright and prominent citizen, is observed to have been subject to enormous misfortunes and suffering, the logical explanation has to be that he has committed serious sins for which God is punishing him. The more that Job proclaims his innocence, the more his friends add this denial itself to the list of sins that they assume he must have committed and continues to commit! By the end of our studies this week of only half the Book, we will not have had the chance to find out if Job is ultimately vindicated and if so, on what basis. Nor will we learn how God responds to Job's accusations about the obvious injustices that Job sees in the way God governs the world. In short, we risk being left at the end of the Week, like Abarbanel's student, with genuine spiritual and existential questions unanswered. I thought I should offer this as a health warning before we embark upon our studies.

The Book of Job is in many ways unique in the Hebrew Bible. It is generally classified amongst the so-called 'wisdom literature', alongside Proverbs and Kohelet, but its main thrust is actually to challenge the convictions and traditional teachings of conventional wisdom. Its structure is also unique, a short narrative prologue describes a wager between God and one of God's entourage of heavenly servants about the genuineness of Job's piety. The title of this servant, *ha-satan*, 'the adversary', literally makes him a 'devil's advocate'. God even goes so far as to sanction a direct onslaught on Job's possessions, his family and finally his own body in order to test Job's piety. But while the reader knows this background, neither Job nor the friends who come to comfort him,

do. So we are in the privileged position of sharing God's bird's eye view of the ferocious debate that ensues between Job and his friends, knowing that it is carried out in complete ignorance of what is really happening. This perspective adds a bitter irony to our engagement with the way in which the protagonists tear one another apart. We know the futility of their mistaken attempt to justify Job's suffering as divine punishment for some wrongdoing, despite Job's stubborn insistence on his innocence. We ourselves bear a degree of discomfort, as onlookers or bystanders, unable to intervene.

On one level the Book is an exercise in theodicy, the attempt to vindicate God's ways of governing the world given the ever-present reality of evil. But it is conducted entirely in long poetic speeches exchanged by the protagonists. This makes it unique among Biblical texts, both as a sustained piece of poetic writing and in its dramatic construction. In each of three rounds Job responds in turn to challenges to his personal integrity raised by his three friends. After this long section and Job's final response to his friends (chapters 27-31), a new figure, Elihu, appears with a further argument, though this section is often considered to be a later interpolation into the Book. The rest of this poetic material includes the powerful speech of God and the final exchange between God and Job. The Book ends with the return of the opening narrative in which Job is restored, at least in material terms, to his former state.

This structure of the bulk of the book raises questions about the context in which the text of Job might have been read or spoken aloud or possibly even staged before an audience. In modern times the text has been performed successfully with professional actors playing the different characters. As early as the fourth century a Christian bishop, Theodore the Interpreter (c. 350-428), argued that the book of Job was a drama on the pattern of Greek tragedy. However, a sixteenth century Italian Jewish theatrical producer from Mantua, Yehuda Sommo, (1527-1592) argued in his book *Dialogues on the Art of the Stage* that Job was the first dramatic text in recorded history. He even suggested that it might have influenced the Greek playwrights, though, apparently, there is no evidence to support this.¹ What this does suggest is that alongside the kind of detailed analysis of individual chapters and verses that we undertake at the Bible Week, it is helpful to listen to the entire text, or at least the chapters we are studying, read by a professional actor.² So we have recommended listening to the recording of the reading of the Book of Job in English by the actor David Suchet. There remain the historical questions about who might have been an audience for the Book at the time of its composition and how it came to be sufficiently well known and valued to be considered for inclusion in the Hebrew Bible. Despite the Book's sometimes shocking arguments, perhaps, in this case, artistic or aesthetic considerations triumphed over conventional pious considerations.

For all the radical views expressed by Job, the protagonist of the story, the author of the Book of Job picks up themes that appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Job opens his first speech with a curse on the day of his birth. His wish never to have been born because of the suffering he has experienced (Job 3:1-10), expresses the same anguished plea of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14-18). The prophet was oppressed and almost put to death by the political authorities of his day and was torn apart inside by the impossible task imposed on him by God. Job complains bitterly about being abandoned by God when most needed, using the image of the waters in a wadi that disappear in the summer heat (Job 6:15). The same complaint and imagery is used by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 15:18). But for Job it is not only God's absence that concerns him, it is also God's overwhelming and claustrophobic presence. The Psalmist may sing with wonder and joy:

What is mortal man that You remember him,
and the son of man that you engage with him.

¹ 'A Reading of Job as a Theatrical Work: Challenging a Retributive Deuteronomistic Theodicy' Stephen Cook *Literature & Aesthetics* 24 (2) December 2014, pp 39-62.

² For example: 'The Book of Job read by David Suchet' [youtube.com/watch?v=LBUUmCN4dB4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBUUmCN4dB4) .

Yet you have made him little less than divine,
crowned him with glory and honour. (Psalm 8:5)

Job cynically rewrites this as:

What is mortal man that you elevate him,
that You set your mind upon him,
engaging with him every morning,
testing him at every moment! (Job 7:17)

This week we have a roller-coaster ride before us into the pain and suffering of a tormented individual; into his bitterness at the abuse he experiences at the hands of uncomprehending friends who should have understood him; and behind it all the dread of a God he once thought he had known and trusted who had somehow become his greatest enemy. As I warned at the beginning, we are engaging with a challenging text. We may not ourselves be Job, but we are forced to ask ourselves what it means to observe his plight as Job's sisters and brothers.

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