

Introduction to Job  
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### **Background stuff**

The author or authors are unknown to us. The date of composition is also unclear. Ancient dates are generally determined by kingships or well-known events, neither of which occur in Job. The setting is the time of the patriarchs. The friends belong to clans from the ancient world, and the practice of animal sacrifice corresponds to the time before the priesthood evolves.

### **Theological background**

The Hebrew Bible is dominated by a theological perspective which may be referred to as Reward and Retribution (R & R) theology. This perspective, which is introduced explicitly and forcefully in Deuteronomy, says: if we are righteous and obedient, God will pour out blessings on us in this life; and if we are unrighteous and disobedient, God will inflict punishment, or suffering, on us in this life. This R & R theology dominates Hebrew faith and theology for centuries, and it is the theological perspective assumed by the historical books between Deuteronomy and Kings.

### **Versions of the story of Job**

There are two versions of the story of Job, one in prose (1:1-2:13; 42:7-17) and one that is poetic (3:1-42:6). It may be that the prose version is older and the poetic version was added to give increased substance and/or to alter the theological perspective.

Acknowledging that there are different ways to interpret the two stories, here is the approach which I find most helpful. The prose story explores the motive for human obedience; it addresses the question, "Why do people obey God?" The poetic story explores the nature and cause(s) of human suffering; it addresses the questions, "Does suffering come from God?" In this sense, the epic poem questions—and ultimately refutes—R & R.

### **The prose story**

Job is introduced as righteous and God-fearing; he offers sacrifices to God every day. He is also prosperous: he has seven sons, three daughters, 11,000 animals (!), and many servants.

The scene shifts from earth to heaven. The text assumes that God presides over a heavenly council (lit. "the sons of God"). Among those on the council is "the Satan"—*ha satan*, meaning "the Accuser" or "the Adversary". (This being is completely distinct from Satan, or the devil, in the New Testament, who represents evil and opposes the will of God. In Job, the Satan's job is to wander the earth [1:7; 2:2] and observe humans. He then brings reports, or accusations, of people's shortcomings and sins.) God takes the initiative to say that Job is "a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8). The Satan does not dispute Job's character but rather questions his motive, suggesting that Job obeys God only because God has prospered him. Remove Job's prosperity, the Satan says, and Job will curse God openly (1:11).

God allows the Satan to test his hypothesis by degrees. First God gives the Satan permission to take away all that Job has but not to touch Job himself. Job loses all of his wealth, and all of his children are killed. Next God allows the Satan to attack Job's health but not to take Job's life. Job is afflicted with terrible sores all over his body. But both times, Job refuses to curse God. The first time he asserts, "the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (1:21). The second time he frames a question: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?" (2:10)

As this climactic moment, the editor interrupts the prose story to begin the poem; but the original prose story likely continued in 42:10, where the LORD heals Job, arranges for him to be comforted by family and friends, gives him even more wealth than he had before, blesses him with him with ten more children, and then allows him to live to see his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

In sum, in the prose story, the Satan says that people obey God only because they benefit from doing so. Job disproves the Satan's theory and serves as example of a person who does what is right out of principle, simply because it is the right thing. While the epic poem will vindicate God, the prose story vindicates humanity by showing a human being who is intrinsically good.

### **The epic poem**

The long, complex, beautifully written epic poem is inserted into the prose story at the perfect moment, as the reader considers the question, "Shall we receive good from God's hand but not receive the bad?" As I have paraphrased it, the question addressed by the prose story is: why do humans obey God? The poem, however, artfully shifts the thesis from a question about human nature to a question about *God's* nature: is God fair?

R & R theology asserts that God is fair—and that fairness, or justice, is fleshed out in the rewards and punishments that people receive during their lives: the righteous prosper while the wicked suffer. In the epic poem, Job begins with (and persists in) his observation that *life doesn't work the way that R & R theology suggests*. Look around, Job argues, and you can find plenty of good people who are suffering and plenty of wicked people who are prospering.

The poem presents a cycle of speeches in which Job speaks and his friends, in turn, respond. (Part of the third cycle is missing, suggesting that we may be missing a portion of the text.) The whole point of the epic poem is that some issues warrant profound and extended discussion, not mere summary. Nonetheless, in the hope that it will be helpful, I will try summarize Job's speeches by offering four categories into which Job's words can be placed: (1) Personal lament: Job's suffering is so intense that he rues the day of his birth. (Not surprisingly, people in deep pain resonate with these texts.) (2) Empirical observation: Job's righteous suffering is not a rare exception; many righteous people suffer, and many wicked people prosper. (3) Critique of easy piety: theological clichés ("If you're suffering, you must have done something bad") do not adequately account for the complexity and pain of life. (4) Desire to hear from God: Job has plenty of questions for and about God, but perhaps more than wanting answers, he wants God to show up (and God does!).

After the surprising introduction of a fourth friend named Elihu (who also defends R & R), the climax of the poem is the YHWH speeches. They present a dramatic reversal in which God speaks from the whirlwind: "Gird up your loins like a man, and I will question you, and you will declare to me!" (38:3). God expounds on the wonder of creation, especially the creatures (natural and supernatural) that God has created. God's series of questions exposes how Job's knowledge and power are dwarfed by the knowledge and power of God. Job acknowledges that he is indeed "of small account," but God isn't finished. God invites Job to try his hand at being God, to include abasing the proud and controlling the wicked. (Paraphrase: "Do you really think you can do my job better than I can?!")

Having been overwhelmed by God, Job acknowledges that this firsthand encounter with God has changed his perspective. Significantly, however, Job does not retract his insistence that he is innocent or his criticism of R & R theology—and God doesn't ask him to. Then, in delicious irony, God chastens Job's friends and suggests that they have Job pray for them!

### **Final thoughts**

While R & R theology dominated Judaism for centuries—and is so prominent in scripture that it still carries sway in some circles of Judaism and Christianity—the poetic portion of Job represents a beautiful and devastating critique. At the risk of being formulaic, the book of Job has had three lasting effects on Judeo-Christian theology: (1) Job is completely right: you don't have to look far to see that R & R theology doesn't hold up to empirical scrutiny. (2) God is big enough to absorb our questions—and even our anger. God prefers Job's honest emotions to the friends' easy piety. (3) While we all long to understand God, Job ultimately discovers that *encountering God* is more valuable than understanding God.