

THE BOOK OF JOB

AN OVERVIEW

The book of Job is often grouped together with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes into a category called wisdom literature. In order to understand what Job is doing inside of the wisdom literature, we have to know something about the book of Proverbs: the book of Proverbs is based on the assumption that wise and proper behavior will lead to good outcomes. The search for this proper behavior, or wisdom, is founded on a relationship with Jehovah, thus “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:6). The search for wisdom is likened to the search for the “tree of life” (Proverbs 3:18), and wisdom grants long life, riches, honor, and peace (Proverbs 3:16–17). Proverbs is full of unbridled optimism about the ability of humanity to choose their own destiny within their relationship with God.

The book of Job, however, pushes against the way that Proverbs portrays the world. If good choices bring blessings, why do bad things happen to those who make good choices? As Latter-day Saints, we also find ourselves grappling with these questions. We wonder why life is so hard and why trials come to us when we have worked so hard to choose the right. We sometimes live with the assumption that God will protect us from suffering and harm if only we are good enough or righteous enough. The book of Job deals with this way of looking at the world, but it doesn’t answer the question of why bad things happen to good people. Rather than answering this question, the book of Job helps us answer a more useful question: what kind of relationship should I expect to have with God? The book of Job follows the story of Job’s relationship with God.

Job begins the story as a righteous individual who has been blessed with a good family and material wealth. We are told about a conversation in heaven, in which Satan challenges Job’s relationship with God. (For a discussion of Satan in Job, see commentary on Job 1:6–12.) This conversation is an important moment in the book. Satan asks, “Doth Job fear God for naught?” (Job 1:9). Satan’s question is better translated as, “Does Job’s relationship with God come at no cost?” In other words, Satan wonders

whether Job's relationship with God is purely transactional. Job has only benefited from his relationship with God, but is he willing to suffer for that relationship as well? God thinks there is something to what Satan says, and he allows him to test Job. Job loses his possessions, his family, and his health.

Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zohar, hear about what has happened and come to comfort Job. The ensuing argument between the Job and his friends takes up the bulk of the book (Job 3–31). Job and his friends all hold to the worldview described in Proverbs that the righteous are blessed and the wicked are punished. Job knows that he has done nothing wrong and, therefore, feels betrayed by God. He feels that God has unjustly brought punishment upon him. Job wishes to challenge God in court so that he can prove he is innocent and God is unjust. Job's friends also believe that only the wicked should be afflicted or punished, and so they assume Job is wicked and God is righteous. Job and his friends all believe they are correct, yet they cannot all be correct.

As readers, we have more information than Job and his friends. We know that Job has not sinned and that God is not punishing him. We know that Job's relationship with God is undergoing a stress-test of sorts. Because of this, we know that Job's friends are wrong. As readers of scripture, we have been trained to hang on every word that the narrator gives us in order to understand what is happening. The narrator is quite helpful in the first two chapters, telling us that "in all this Job sinned not" (Job 1:22; 2:10). However, for the conversations between Job and his three friends, the narrator practically disappears, and we are left on our own to understand what is happening with Job. We are given some parameters for interpretation near the end of the book. The Lord tells us that Job's speeches are "words without knowledge" (Job 38:2), but the Lord also says that Job's friends "have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath" (Job 42:7). The Lord tells us that there is fault both in what Job and his friends have said, but Job is less wrong. Job spoke from a place of suffering. He wanted answers and to mend his relationship with God. Despite Job's stumble during his adversity, he never walked away from God. His struggles and accusations against God led to God's appearance. Job's friends, however, accused Job of hypothetical sins and attempted to defend God while neglecting their real duty to comfort those who stand in need of comfort.

We might question why so much of scripture is taken up by chapters and chapters of invalid thinking. By its very composition, the book of Job argues that dialogue is important to understanding and that the journey to understanding is often more important than the answer. The book of Job gives place for Job, his friends, Elihu, and God to each contribute to the discussion, but nowhere does it give easy answers. This book of scripture invites us to participate in the dialogue by reading and engaging with the ideas swirling around in the book of Job. It is our interaction with the text that will invite God to come and teach us, just as Job's conversation with his friends resulted in God entering the conversation.

The book itself has clearly defined structure that is laid out below:

- I. Narrative introduction (Job 1–2)
- II. Conversation between Job and his friends (Job 3–31)
 - a. First round of speeches
 - i. Job’s speech (Job 3)
 - ii. Eliphaz’s first speech (Job 4–5)
 - iii. Job’s reply (Job 6–7)
 - iv. Bildad’s first speech (Job 8)
 - v. Job’s reply (Job 9–10)
 - vi. Zophar’s first speech (Job 11)
 - vii. Job’s reply (Job 12–14)
 - b. Second round of speeches
 - i. Eliphaz’s second speech (Job 15)
 - ii. Job’s reply (Job 16–17)
 - iii. Bildad’s second speech (Job 18)
 - iv. Job’s reply (Job 19)
 - v. Zophar’s second speech (Job 20)
 - vi. Job’s reply (Job 21)
 - c. Third round of speeches
 - i. Eliphaz’s third speech (Job 22)
 - ii. Job’s reply (Job 23–24)
 - iii. Bildad’s third speech (Job 25)
 - iv. Job’s reply (Job 26–31)
- III. Elihu replies to Job (Job 32–37)
- IV. God speaks and Job answers (Job 38–42:6)
- V. Narrative ending (Job 42:7–17)

The narrative introduction and ending of Job are written in prose, but the bulk of the book is written in extremely challenging poetry. Although the Hebrew version is challenging to read, English translations usually mask this difficulty for the reader. The book of Job, like most of the Old Testament, is silent about its author. We know that the protagonist of the story is Job. Job is not an Israelite and is possibly an Edomite since the land of Uz is elsewhere associated with Edom (see Lamentations 4:21). In the Old Testament, Job is also mentioned in Ezekiel. In speaking of the impending disaster coming upon the land of Israel, the Lord says that even if “Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness” (Ezekiel 14:14; see also verse 20). This verse seems to be referring to people well-known for their righteousness. The name translated as Daniel may actually be Danel, a character in a story found at Ugarit, a non-Israelite city. The Lord may be referring to three individuals who were not Israelites but were well-known for their righteousness. Just as other cultures were familiar with a righteous hero who survived the flood, other cultures may have been familiar with Job as well.

One of the important storylines in the book of Job is the transformation of Job’s relationship with God. Job begins the story as someone who uses his relationship with God as a way to ward off misfortune and suffering. He offers sacrifices in the off chance that his children have done something wrong. The picture that is painted is one in which Job both is afraid of uncertainty and suffering and sees his relationship with God as a way to keep these forces at bay. Job is in danger of treating his relationship with God as a transaction. Satan’s question to God (Job 1:9), as noted above, can be rephrased as, “Does Job’s relationship with God come at no cost?” Does Job’s relationship with God mean enough to him that he is willing to suffer for it? Or is this relationship only a way to make life easier for himself? The most important relationships in our lives do not always make life easier, but they do make life more meaningful. Parents willingly suffer as they raise and love their children because it makes their lives more meaningful. Relationships are built on trust, and trust always comes in the face of uncertainty. Transactions increase certainty at the expense of trust.

Initially, Job takes his calamities in stride (Job 1:21–22; 2:10), but as the story unfolds Job feels betrayed. God has made Job suffer through no fault of Job. God has broken Job’s expected transaction of righteousness for peace and comfort. When God appears to Job and speaks to him in Job 38–41, He does not explain much to Job other than to tell him that He does indeed watch over and provide for His creations. Job is given the chance to reestablish his relationship with God while embracing the need to trust in the face of uncertainty. When Job chooses again to trust God even though he has no answers and to forgive his friends even before they apologize, Job chooses a life that chooses meaningful relationships even in the face of possible pain and uncertainty. Job chooses to embrace the journey of mortality even if there are heartaches and unanswered questions, because the relationships that he had along the way were what made his life meaningful.

A Note on Translations

As readers read the book of Job in the King James Version, they may find it useful to consult other modern translations. Most modern translations are accurate and reliable, and consulting them may give the reader a feel for when the Hebrew translation is uncertain or open to interpretation. Translations that I consulted while working on this commentary include the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the Common English Bible (CEB), the Tanakh from the Jewish Publication Society, the New International Version (NIV), and Robert Alter's translation of the Bible.¹

Additional Resources

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¹ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, 3 vols. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019).

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