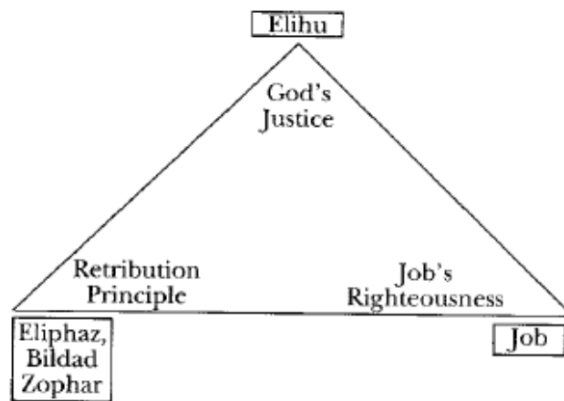


Job: Background

Date: The setting is during the patriarchal period, possibly in Edom. Internal clues suggest Job may have been written around the 6th cent. B.C., but this is uncertain.

Structure: Job has a very simple, clear structure. Sandwiched between a narrative prologue and epilogue are three cycles of speeches, Job alternating with his three friends, followed by alternating speeches with Elihu, a young newcomer, and finally with Yahweh.

Theme: Job tackles the “retribution principle” put forth in Proverbs, that people get what’s coming to them (e.g. Prov 8:18; Job 4:7-8). It does this by considering Job’s innocent and apparently meaningless suffering. The proverbial view is championed by Job’s friends. But the book is more than just a philosophical treatise: the words of Job pour forth from the soul of tragedy in a way which transcends context and speaks to all who suffer. The arguments in Job can be represented by a “triangle of claims” (from the *IVP Dictionary of the OT: Wisdom Books*). So Elihu defends God’s justice, the three friends defend the retribution principle, and Job defends his own righteousness:



Historical readings of Job:

- The pre-rabbinic Jewish view of Job was of a thoroughly righteous Gentile. Rabbinic writings initially viewed Job as a Gentile so righteous as to be among Hebrews in terms of divine favor.
- With the emergence of a Christian reading which went so far as to see Job as a Gentile precursor to Christ, much rabbinic reading turned to condemnation of Job for his defiant defensiveness and accusations of God.
- In the Patristic reading Job is not just a good example, but a Gentile who prefigured of the coming of Christ, and an example of a pre-Christian Gentile who was certainly saved through his innate understanding of the gospel (Augustine, *City of God*).
- For Ambrose he was an example of sanctification through suffering.
- Pelagius used Job as an example of one who achieves righteousness without grace. (Augustine combatted this by arguing that Job did indeed sin.)

- Jumping ahead to the Reformers, Luther reads Job as an example for believers of someone who balances well his piety with an awareness of his own guilt (depending on 9:28).
- Calvin explores the partial inscrutability of God's plans; he argues that revelation in nature—as exemplified in the whirlwind—is enough to demonstrate God's providence despite what we see in human history.

External references: Job is mentioned in Ezekiel 14:12-14 along with Daniel and Noah for his legendary righteousness, and James 5:7-11 lauds Job for his endurance or persistence (as opposed to patience, which the KJV uses to translate 5:11).

Resources for Study: There is a vast literature on Job, and a great deal which derives from this book, such as the plays *J. B.* by MacLeish and *The Trial of God* by Wiesel, not to mention Frost's *A Masque of Reason*. Below are a few resources which I found particularly helpful.

On Job:

- The entry on Job in *The Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*
- *Job*, Gerald H. Wilson, New International Bible Commentary

On Suffering:

- Tim Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* (includes a section on Job)
- D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord*
- Mary Hammond's blog (<http://ajobcontemplative.wordpress.com/>) (incomplete at this date but worth reading)

See the following page for a list of some lessons from Job.

Spoiler Alert: Lessons and Inferences from The Book of Job

The book of Job has for millennia garnered great interest because suffering is woven into human existence. Even those of us who do not suffer as Job did will eventually lose someone we love and most of us go through times when God seems distant or even absent. However, despite the universality of its theme, many have failed to appreciate the substance or value of what Job has to say on this topic. Bernard Shaw, an extreme example, remarked, "If I complain that I am suffering unjustly, it is no answer to say, 'Can you make a hippopotamus?'" (*Dictionary of the OT*, 333). Often this is because Job is treated incorrectly as a theodicy, an explanation of evil and suffering. Job focuses on innocent suffering, but in God's response to Job he does not attempt to explain that suffering.

Which isn't to say there aren't explanations given in Job. Each of the main characters in Job has a question of his own to pose, many of which receive responses:

Job: Why am I suffering?

Job's friends: What did you do wrong?

Elihu: Is God not just?

Satan: Is there truly disinterested righteousness, or do humans all serve God for their own gain?

God: Are *you* God?

The book of Job has much to say about how to undergo suffering and without losing your faith. Below is a list of some of the insights associated with each of the main characters.

Job's friends:

- Some (not all, as Job points out) suffering is due to sin; examine yourself
- Grieve in community
- *Wait* before speaking to those who are suffering

Job

- Talk to God
- Don't be afraid to ask tough questions of God

Elihu:

- When God seems silent look for other channels of communication
- God sometimes allows/causes suffering to prevent sin
- God is control of nature; his wisdom and justice are beyond question

God:

- Trust me, I am God
- Don't expect to know all the reasons for suffering; you are not God
- Let my design, purpose and nurturing of nature give you confidence
- If I can govern nature, I know what I am doing with you
- Satan/God: God should be pursued for God's sake, not for gain