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Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms

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HANDBOOK ON THE WISDOM BOOKS AND PSALMS

Job

Psalms

Proverbs

Ecclesiastes

Song of Songs

Daniel J. Estes



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Preface

Although poetry is used throughout many of the Old Testament texts, the five books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are especially marked by their skillful combination of poetic language and form. By this means, the most profound issues that confront humans are explored with penetrating insight and memorable expression. Even though the ancient Hebrews produced few written texts apart from the Bible, these books of Old Testament poetry are widely regarded as among the finest literary masterpieces in all of world literature. Job and Ecclesiastes probe the perennial problems of evil and significance, Song of Songs develops a delightful theology of intimacy, Proverbs addresses the various ways in which wisdom is practiced in life, and in Psalms humans speak to God out of the full range of their experiences.

As the bibliographies in this volume attest, many scholars have examined the various facets of the Old Testament poetical books. Why, then, have I written this book? This work is intended for advanced undergraduates, seminary students, pastors, and lay teachers of the Bible. In my twenty years of teaching, I have become aware of the need for a bridge to span the distance between eager students who have been introduced to the poetical books and the rich resources in the scholarly literature that lie beyond their grasp. Because so many articles, essays, monographs, and commentaries have been written on these books, students can easily get confused and frustrated as they attempt to move to the next level of understanding. In this volume, I attempt to guide them in their next steps ahead as they explore the books of Old Testament poetry.

Each chapter considers one of the five poetical books, and is comprised of three parts. First, I summarize some of the key introductory issues for the biblical book, so that the student will have a basic familiarity with the prominent scholarly discussions. Second, the main portion of the chapter is devoted to an exposition of the book, using the New International Version as a textual base. For Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, the exposition covers the entire text of the book. For Psalms, I discuss ten major types of psalms and then provide expositions of examples of each type. In the chapter on Proverbs, I take a topical approach in synthesizing several key themes in the collection. For all of the five books, I have endeavored to present the interpretive positions to which I have come in my study at this time. Although limitations of space have prevented me from giving complete reasoning for many of my conclusions, I have sought to interact with the major commentaries on each book, as well as with significant recent scholarly studies. Rather than simply referencing secondary literature, I have integrated insightful citations into my text, so that the student can have immediate access to the words of the scholars themselves. Third, each chapter concludes with an extensive bibliography that directs the student into further investigation. I have included a list of commentaries, including standard works that have passed the test of time as well as more recent commentaries since 1992. For articles, essays, and monographs, I have included materials from 1992 to early 2004 that I have found useful in my research. Significant secondary literature prior to 1992 undoubtedly has found its way into key commentaries, and so it will be available already to the student. Materials from the recent past, however, may likely be out of reach to students who lack access to an excellent theological library. Because most of my intended audience are not professional theological scholars, I have limited the bibliographies to sources written in English, although, of course, many fine works in German, French, Hebrew, and other languages could be added to them.

I deeply appreciate the help and support that many people have provided to me on this project. Jim Weaver first invited me to write this book, and his kind helpfulness has been matched by Jim Kinney, his successor at Baker Book House. It has been a delight to have one of my former students, Brian Bolger, serve as my editor. In addition, my students and colleagues at Cedarville University over the past twenty years have been a continual source of joy and stimulation as we have learned and lived together in a nurturing Christian academic community. Above all, I am grateful to my family—my wife, Carol, and our three children, Jonathan, Christiana (and Bill), and Joel (and Sharon)—for their unwavering love and encouragement throughout the seven years that this project has entailed.

Job

The book of Job is renowned as one of the greatest masterpieces, not only in the Bible, but also in all of world literature. In telling the story of Job, a man who in a day went from having everything to suffering utter collapse, it addresses some of the most profound theological and philosophical questions posed by humans. This ancient text, which has no precise literary parallels, has prompted interpreters to look in many different directions as they seek to understand its message.

Authorship and Date

The book of Job includes no claim of authorship or date of composition, nor does it even contain explicit historical allusions that could assist in locating its original setting. As Murphy (1999: 6) notes, “Any dating of the book has to proceed on the basis of tentative evidence, and nothing is certain.” To complicate the matter, the book is set outside of Israel, so the Old Testament historical narratives cannot be used as a guide to the temporal background of Job. In light of all this, it is not surprising that even evangelical scholars have suggested a wide variety of dates for the book, ranging from the time of Moses to the eighth century B.C. (Dillard and Longman 1994: 200). Many nonevangelical scholars argue for dates well into the Persian period. Although the Babylonian Talmud, in *Baba Batra* 14b, attributes the book to Moses, the passage also indicates that the rabbinical scholars had numerous opinions on the authorship and date of the book (Dhorme 1967: lxi). Thus, from the beginning of biblical interpretation this anonymous book has prompted debate.

Making the issue even more difficult is uncertainty about the genre of the book. Zuck (1985: 716) regards the book as an eyewitness record of Job's experience. If that is the case, then the time of composition would be determined by the date of the literary setting of the book. That premise, however, is open to question. For millennia writers have penned texts that they have set in historical periods different from their own. For example, Shakespeare composed his drama about Julius Caesar some sixteen hundred years after the actual events. Similarly, biblical writers such as the narrator of the primeval history in Gen. 1–11, the Chronicler, and Luke retold events that occurred long before the composition of their biblical texts. At the very least it must be recognized that the epilogue of the book of Job, with its statement that Job lived for 140 years after the events described therein, demands a date of final composition long after the dialogues between Job and his friends. Therefore, it may well be the case that the entire book of Job was written long after the events that it portrays.

Many interpreters have sought to establish the date of the writing of the book of Job by examining its language and themes, but these too are not definitive for dating. It is evident that the book uses many forms that parallel Canaanite and Aramaic literature, but as Hartley (1988: 17–18) notes, there are no extant Northwest Semitic texts that represent the precise dialect used in Job. Although many have argued that wisdom was a late, postexilic development in Israel, it must be considered that Babylonian and Egyptian texts that parallel the themes of Job can be dated at least as early as 1700 B.C. (Bullock 1988: 73).

A further challenge to dating the book comes from the likelihood that Job is set in a foreign context, probably Edom or perhaps Aram (Syria). The existing literature from Edom is negligible (Harrison 1969: 1023), and the early Aramaic texts are only a little more numerous, yielding only the slightest basis for comparative textual and linguistic study.

Even though the author and the date of composition cannot be determined in any specific terms, some general observations can be made about the nature of the person who wrote the book of Job. The author is anonymous, but obviously is comfortable with the language and forms of wisdom (Hartley 1988: 15). It is even more evident that the author has an unusual sensitivity to, and likely an experience of, human suffering (Pope 1973: xli). For this author, suffering entails the full existential reality of pain, because the book refuses to reduce Job's predicament to a mere theological case study. Although it is impossible to verify, it would not be surprising to learn that the insights in this masterpiece were forged in the fires of intense personal pain and loss. In addition, the writer clearly was intrigued with the full range of life experiences, as Scheindlin (1998: 24) notes: "Its energy and exuberance, palpable

from the very beginning and hardly ever fading during the work's long course, keep present before us the fact that we are reading the work of a writer who is fascinated with this life, troubled as it is, a man who never wearies of the variety and vividness of the multitude of things that life offers for our observation."

The proposed dates for the composition of the book of Job range from the patriarchal period to the fourth century B.C. Harrison (1969: 1040) argues persuasively from the details of the text that the book fits well into the patriarchal milieu in the early second millennium B.C. If it is assumed that the book contains transcripts of the conversations recorded as they were spoken, then the date of composition would need to be in the patriarchal period as well. This line of reasoning led to that conclusion in the Talmud, by church fathers such as Eusebius, and by numerous Christian scholars even to the present time.

Some scholars have suggested Moses as a plausible author, although there is no hard evidence to prove this hypothesis. For example, in 1637 Jacques Bolduc proposed that Moses translated an earlier Aramaic text into Hebrew, and this led to the book's inclusion in the Old Testament canon (Archer 1974: 456). The book of Job, however, bears little resemblance to the style of the Pentateuch, and so it is difficult to sustain the Mosaic connection.

Because the book of Job is such an extraordinary example of wisdom literature, it is not surprising that some interpreters have placed its composition in the time of Solomon. Archer (1974: 459) offers a cumulative argument in which features of the Solomonic age plausibly coincide with features of Job, but he admits that his reasoning should not be regarded as conclusive, because many of the same features are compatible with an earlier date of composition.

Numerous scholars have sought to date the book of Job by correlating its themes with various epochs in the history of Israel. For example, Wolfers (1995a: 14–17) argues that Job is an allegory written in the eighth century B.C. in the face of the Assyrian invasion, and it was designed to teach that the Mosaic covenant was no longer valid for Israel. Hartley (1988: 19) points to the allusions to Canaanite religion and parallels to Isa. 40–55 as he posits a preexilic date in the late eighth century B.C. It must be remembered, however, that arguments from literary dependence often founder on establishing a clear direction of dependence. So, for example, LaSor (1996: 473) holds that Job must have come after Isa. 40–55, because it comments on that biblical text, whereas Hartley contends that Isaiah was influenced by Job.

Others have suggested that the theme of suffering, which dominates the book of Job, is best correlated with the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, as they detail the suffering of the fall of Jerusalem and

the Babylonian exile. Suffering, however, is a theme that is prevalent throughout world literature (Andersen 1976: 62–63). Even more to the point, the book of Job focuses on undeserved individual suffering, whereas the exile entailed national punishment for blatant sin against God (Hartley 1988: 19).

In his thorough study of the book of Job, Dhorme (1967: clxix) reasons from purported similarities to Zechariah and Malachi that the book was composed well into the postexilic period, between 500 and 450 B.C. Crenshaw (1986: 312) comes to a similar conclusion, on different grounds, by arguing that the features similar to the Aramaic language, the figure of Satan, and an insistence on rational order in the universe all support a date in the late sixth or early fifth century B.C.

Eissfeldt (1965: 470) holds that Job was written in the fourth century B.C., building his case primarily from its theme of retribution and the Aramaic coloring of the language. Treves (1995: 268) argues for a very late date of 188–170 B.C., mainly because of purported parallels to Hellenistic texts. Nevertheless, as Hartley (1988: 18) observes, all of the points used to support such a late date are debatable, leaving the time of the composition of the book of Job an open question. As Cheney (1994: 275) concludes, the linguistic factors that appear to be Aramaic may more likely have been intended to indicate ancientness or foreignness.

Unity

Just as scholars are sharply divided over the authorship and date of composition of the book of Job, so also there is a wide variety of positions about the unity of the text. The interpretive alternatives range from a single author who wrote the book to a collection of numerous texts that were brought together in some undetermined fashion. In light of the range of options, it is wise to keep in mind the methodological counsel of Gordis (1978: 578): “The existence of one book of Job is a *datum*, while the theory of two books is a *hypothesis*. Thus, the burden of proof rests upon the proponent of the new theory. Its power to persuade depends upon the degree to which it is free from difficulties of its own. Even more important is the extent to which it offers a more coherent interpretation, or, to borrow a term from the philosophy of science, a simpler and more elegant explanation of the phenomena being investigated.”

Andersen (1976: 41–42) argues that unity is not an essential feature of divine inspiration. Consequently, the question of the unity of the book of Job must not be decided on a priori theological grounds, but must be answered by investigating the evidence within the text. The most

prominent feature of the extant book is the division between the prose framework and the poetic dialogues. Many scholars have concluded that the portrayals of Job in the two sections cannot be reconciled, because in the framework he is a model of patience, but in the dialogues he sounds defiant against God (Crenshaw 1986: 305–6). In addition, the poem of praise to wisdom in chapter 28 and the speeches of Elihu in chapters 32–37 frequently are viewed as interpolations that interrupt the flow of the dialogue section (Whybray 1998: 22). In light of these factors, the majority of scholars holds that the original kernel of the book contains the dialogues between Job and his friends. At some subsequent time the remaining poetic sections were added, and finally the editor reworked an old epic account in order to provide a theological and life setting for the text (Hartley 1988: 24).

Even though the disunity of the book typically is assumed, there are some weighty arguments for its unity that should not be dismissed. As Murphy (1999: 114) points out, there is no extant manuscript evidence of anything but the content of the book as it stands. The earliest textual evidence, from the Septuagint and the Targum of Job, supports the present sequence of chapters and verses. Thus, the burden of proof falls upon those who contend that the book of Job originally was different from what the extant record of transmission validates. The proposed compositional histories, then, are marked by subjective and hypothetical claims rather than by conclusive proof.

In fact, a close reading of the book of Job reveals clear design and unity. After analyzing the narrative plot of the book, Habel (1985: 35) concludes, “The book of Job reveals an underlying structure which gives coherence to the work as a literary whole. Prologue, dialogue speeches, and epilogue are integrated into a total artistic work through this plot structure. This unity, however, extends beyond the narrative plot to include terminological, thematic, and literary features. The integrity of the work is evident in its overall construction, the setting of its characters, and the interrelationship of its several parts.” This evidence of literary unity cannot determine whether a single author composed the text in this unified fashion or the final redactor skillfully brought all the constituent parts together into an integrated whole (Dhorme 1967: xcvi–xcix). It does, however, subvert the claim that the text as it now reads must be rearranged and spliced together in order to make sense of it.

The juxtaposition of the prose framework and the poetic dialogues is not an unfortunate anomaly; rather, it is a literary pattern employed by many texts in ancient Near Eastern and world literature. Prominent texts such as the Code of Hammurabi, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Decameron* (Harrison 1969: 1039; Habel 1985: 25) use a frame as an interpretive context for the embedded text. As Whybray (1998: 11)

remarks, placing an extended poem within a prose narrative is not at all unfamiliar in ancient Near Eastern literature, so the prose-poetry-prose structure is actually an argument in favor of the intended unity of the entire book of Job.

A careful reading of the book reveals that the prose framework and the poetic dialogues are necessarily linked together. Clines (1989: lviii) astutely notes, "It is improbable that the prose narratives ever formed an independent whole; for the narrative of the arrival of the three friends in 2:11–13 is plainly designed to preface the speeches, and Yahweh's closing address to the friends (42:7–8) makes no sense unless the friends had been speaking words for which God could reproach them." In a similar way, the poetic dialogues lack rationale and context apart from the interpretive key provided in the prologue, and they find closure only in the words of the epilogue. In particular, the assessment of Job by Yahweh both in the prologue (1:8; 2:3) and in the epilogue (42:7–8) underlies the intense questions of the dialogues, and an accurate assessment of the main character cannot be made apart from these divine evaluations (Janzen 1985: 23).

The poem in praise of wisdom in chapter 28, the speeches by Elihu in chapters 32–37, and the speeches by Yahweh in chapters 38–41 frequently are regarded as later additions to the dialogues. Each of these sections, however, contributes to the overall argument of the book of Job. The poem in Job 28 is a transition from the three rounds of dialogue to the three monologues by Job (29–31), Elihu (32–37), and Yahweh (38–41). This serene interlude that follows the heated exchanges between Job and the friends serves to provide theological perspective. Their debate is over, and yet they have not found wisdom. The final verse of Job 28 states that the fear of the Lord is wisdom, thus setting the stage for Yahweh's entrance in chapter 38. Humans cannot discover God's wisdom by their own reasoning, so he must speak if wisdom is to be achieved. Job 28, then, is "intended to prepare Job and the audience to hear Yahweh's words by teaching explicitly that Yahweh alone can reveal insight into the true order of the universe" (Hartley 1988: 27).

The speeches of Elihu also serve an important function in the unified message of the book (Waters 1999a). In other biblical texts, young wise men such as Joseph and Daniel saved the day when the recognized authorities had failed, and Elihu tries to assume that role (Gowan 1992: 92–94). After deferring to the older men who represent traditional wisdom rooted in experience, Elihu inserts himself into the discussion as the voice of youthful insight. Elihu evaluates the dialogues, concluding that both Job and the friends were wrong. According to Elihu, Job regarded himself as more righteous than God, and the friends had failed to refute Job adequately. As Elihu proceeds in his turgid monologue, it

becomes evident through his numerous allusions and quotations that he is primarily rehashing the earlier speeches. Neither the older wisdom nor the youthful perspective, then, is sufficient to resolve Job's problem. Elihu, however, also touches on several themes that point ahead to the speeches by Yahweh. Thus, without stating it explicitly, the author suggests that if an answer is to be found to Job's predicament, Yahweh must speak. At the same time, "the long delay caused by Elihu's lengthy speeches leads the reader to despair of Yahweh's appearance. The more distant is Job's summons for Yahweh, the less likely it is that such an eventuality will take place" (Wilson 1996b: 92). In the overall structure of the book of Job, Elihu clears the stage so that Yahweh can make his entrance after all human resources have been found wanting.

Far from being a secondary accretion, as many scholars claim, the speeches by Yahweh in chapters 38–41 are the dramatic climax to the book. These speeches are addressed to Job alone, and thus they answer Job's plea in 31:35. Using the time-honored technique of the wise teacher, Yahweh instructs by asking more than seventy questions, an approach that is foreshadowed by Elihu in 37:14–20. The fact that Yahweh does not indict Job for sin demonstrates that the friends have been erroneous in their assessment of him. The cumulative effect of the divine questions indicates that although Job is innocent, he is also ignorant of the ways of Yahweh. This leads to Job's admission of his ignorance and retraction of his suit against Yahweh in 42:1–6. The speeches by Yahweh, then, are an integral and necessary part of the structure of the book.

Literature

The book of Job is arguably the premier example of literary excellence in the Bible, as it combines grand themes with exquisite language and intricate structure. As a piece of literature, however, it does not fit into any single literary genre, but instead is unique in its form. Andersen (1976: 33) notes well that "the book of Job is an astonishing mixture of almost every kind of literature to be found in the Old Testament." In particular, it combines proverbs, hymns, laments, nature poems, legal rhetoric, and other literary forms into a unified composition that has no precise equal. In light of this, LaSor (1996: 487) concludes, "So important, in fact, is this book's genre that it must not be fit into any preconceived mold. It does weep with complaint, argue with disputation, teach with didactic authority, excite with comedy, sting with irony, and relate human experience with epic majesty. But above all, Job is unique—the literary gift of an inspired genius." Even though Westermann (1981) acknowledges the various components of the book, he argues strenuously that

within the narrative framework the dominant genre of Job is lament. In his analysis, he draws comparisons between the content of Job and the constituent parts of psalmic lament form.

When the book is read as a unity, the prose framework most closely parallels the epic narrative form found in the historical books of the Old Testament. The epic genre, however, is modified significantly by the wisdom themes that dominate the disputations of the book (Hartley 1988: 38). In contrast with the brevity and objectivity that typify Old Testament narrative, the plot of the book of Job moves forward through poetic speeches that invite the reader into the thoughts and feelings of the characters (Habel 1985: 26).

A difficult interpretive question for the book of Job is the relationship of the narrative to factual history. Does this book record the literal account of the calamity that overwhelmed Job at a specific time and place, along with transcripts of the actual words spoken by Job and his friends as they endeavored to come to terms with this tragedy? Or, rather, does the book communicate theological truth through the means of imaginative literature?

It must be acknowledged at the outset that in the Bible theological veracity is not directly correlated with literary genre. For example, parables—that is, imaginative narratives constructed for a specific purpose—are used in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:1–4) and most notably in the New Testament by Jesus in order to communicate truth in highly potent ways. Often, these literary fictions were employed for strategic purposes that would not be served as well by actual historical references. Nathan, then, constructed a story about a poor man with his beloved lamb, knowing that David's childhood as a shepherd in a family of modest means would cause him to identify with the poor shepherd against the oppressive neighbor. By this means, Nathan was able to use fiction to communicate the theological truth of David's guilt and bring him to the point of repentance. It may well be that Job is a *mashal*, "a wisdom saying or story that illumines some enduring condition or recurring experience/situation by way of analogy" (Stek 1997: 444).

On the other hand, the historicity of the book of Job must not be denied on a priori grounds. The biblical allusions to Job in Ezek. 14:14, 20 and James 5:11 do not state that he was a fictional character, but rather refer to him just as a historical figure would be indicated. In addition, the introduction to the book is comparable to the beginning of 1 Samuel, which certainly purports to record historical events (Dillard and Longman 1994: 207). Thus, the question of the historical factualness of the book of Job must be decided by a careful consideration of the data in the book.

The opening paragraph of the book uses a literary pattern that finds close parallels both in historical narrative (1 Sam. 1:1) and in imaginative parable (2 Sam. 12:1). What is striking, however, is that the author sets the book outside of Israel, in the land of Uz, and introduces Job as a man who is not in the covenant family. The introduction proceeds to describe Job's family and possessions in ideal terms. Job himself is portrayed as the epitome of righteousness (1:1), an assessment twice endorsed by Yahweh (1:8; 2:3). Although the evidence is not definitive, the details of the initial verses of the book hint that the opinion of the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Baba Batra* 15a that Job is a parable could well be accurate.

Additional internal evidence comes from the poetic dialogues. Dhorme (1967: c) argues that the dialogues have the tone of real conversation, in that each speaker follows his own ideas rather than replying in detail to what the others have said. Even though that may be true in general terms, the artistic qualities of these poems appear to be explained better by conscious crafting rather than artful spontaneity. Consequently, Archer (1974: 460) concludes, "The main body of the text reads like a poetic and highly artistic composition, employing language which would not normally be used by persons speaking extemporaneously in a real life situation."

The dialogues in some respects parallel the wisdom disputation form in which the speakers attempt to demonstrate their superior intellectual skill in a contest with their peers. In seeking to win debate points, the speakers employ an extensive range of literary, logical, and rhetorical devices. In the case of the book of Job, the speakers draw heavily from nature imagery, ancient mythology, verbal irony, and a brilliant array of literary techniques (Habel 1985: 60) to make their cases. This intricate design suggests that the book is not a transcript of the actual, unprepared conversations between Job and his friends. The book of Job, rather, is better explained as a divinely inspired work of imaginative literature in which the author explores the lofty theme of the problem of evil by setting forth an ideal case study and then constructing a series of speeches that represent the best efforts by humans to resolve the issue. By this means, the book of Job is able to transcend the necessary limitations inherent in any actual human example in order to focus on the theological issue in its most comprehensive dimensions.

Structure

Although many critical scholars have endeavored to construct a detailed compositional history of the book of Job, the fact remains that

the extant text of Job is the only text supported by actual documentary evidence. When this text is read carefully, its profound structural integrity emerges. At the most basic level the book of Job follows the familiar pattern of a story, with the exposition in the prologue, the complication in the dialogues, and the resolution in the epilogue (Clines 1989: xxxvi). More specifically, this story demonstrates the classic form of comedy as it “moves from idyllic beginning through catastrophe and a vast dialectical terrain back to an end which is a transformed version of the beginning” (Janzen 1985: 4).

The prose prologue and epilogue comprise an *inclusio*, in which the features of Job’s life in the beginning of his experiences are recapitulated in the ending. Within this envelope structure is the artfully crafted poetic section of the book. Job and his friends engage in three cycles of speeches (chaps. 3–14; 15–21; 22–27), in which Job responds in each cycle to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar in turn. Throughout the three cycles there is a steady increase in the hostility and hardening of the contrasting positions of the speakers. The speeches of the friends become shorter as they find Job resistant to their instructions, and thus the dialogue collapses (Newsom 2003a: 88). In addition, the strophic quality of the speeches deteriorates, so the disarray found in the final cycle gives the appearance of being intentional (Gladson 1993: 234), rather than being necessarily attributable to extensive textual corruption, as many scholars allege.

The interlude in chapter 28 is designed to refocus the attention on God’s wisdom. The harsh rhetoric and emotional outbursts of the dialogue cycles might well have obscured the main point, so the author brings the reader back to the foundational reality that wisdom can be found only in the fear of the Lord (28:28). This pivotal chapter is designed by the author “to look back across the dialogue, to comment upon its adequacy or inadequacy, and perhaps at the same time to act as the prelude to the rest of the book which climaxes in the speeches on divine wisdom in chapters 38–41” (Davidson 1990: 4).

The remainder of the poetic section is comprised of three extended monologues. In chapters 29–31, Job presents his final assertion of innocence, culminating with his dramatic negative confession, punctuated by his signature (31:35), by which he calls on God to either punish or acquit him.

In chapters 32–37, the previously silent Elihu bursts upon the scene. He finds the arguments of both Job and the friends lacking, but in his own speeches Elihu does not significantly move beyond what has been said previously. In the structure of the book, however, he prepares the way for Yahweh to appear, especially by his concluding hymn in chapter 37, which anticipates the rhetorical questions probing nature that

dominate the divine speeches in chapters 38–41 (Davidson 1990: 55). McCabe (1997: 80) observes well, “The Joban author uses Elihu to serve as a transition from the dialogue to the Yahweh speeches. As a transition, the Elihu speeches serve a twofold purpose of summarizing the content of the dialogue, with many of Elihu’s ideas serving as a recapitulation of earlier views, and of preparing for the God speeches. With Elihu’s summary role, the Joban author basically uses him to review the key issues of the debate, Job’s innocence and God’s justice. With Elihu’s preparatory role, the Joban author significantly uses him to provide a theocentric perspective of God’s control of the natural realm and to serve as a theological foil for God.”

The long-awaited appearance of Yahweh introduces the dramatic climax toward which the whole book has pointed. At last Yahweh speaks to Job, as Job has repeatedly desired. What is remarkable is that Yahweh does not answer the questions that Job has been asking, but rather uses his own questions to set Job’s situation within the vast context of the mysterious divine wisdom. In this light, Job recognizes that although he is innocent of sin, in contrast to the charges of the friends, he is at the same time ignorant of the full range of God’s intimate activities with his world. Stump (2001: 522) concludes,

It is a mistake, then, to characterize God’s speeches as demonstrating nothing but God’s power over creation. The speeches certainly do show God’s power; but, equally important, they show God having personal interactions with all his creatures. He relates to everything he has made on a face-to-face basis, as it were; and in these personal interactions, God deals maternally with his creatures, from the sea and rain to the raven and the donkey and even the monstrous behemoth and leviathan. He brings them out of the womb, swaddles, feeds, and guides them, and even plays with them. Most importantly, he talks to them; and somehow, in some sense or other, they talk to him in return. These speeches thus show God as more than powerful; they show him as personally and intimately involved with his creation; they portray him as having a mother’s care towards all his creatures, even the inanimate ones.

Consequently, Job withdraws his demands for God to answer him on his terms.

The prose epilogue in 42:7–17 concludes the book on a note of resolution. Job’s property, family, social standing, and intimacy with God are restored. Yahweh publicly affirms Job before the friends who had charged him with sin. Job lives to see four generations of his descendants, and he dies as an old man and “full of days”—the ancient equivalent of living happily ever after.

Setting

As with so many interpretive issues in the book of Job, its setting is debatable. In terms of its physical location, the story is set in Uz, an undetermined area outside of Israel. Janzen (1985: 5) suggests plausibly that this setting “long ago and far away” may well have been a deliberate attempt to present the problem of evil in general human terms by placing the story in a non-Israelite setting. The other biblical references to Uz are consistent with a location east of Israel. Smick (1988: 853) argues that the considerable Aramaic flavor of the book, as well as references such as Gen. 10:23 and 22:20–22 that link Uz with the Arameans, could mean that Job and his friends lived in northern Mesopotamia, near the region of Aram-Naharaim. On the other hand, the preponderance of indirect evidence appears better to point in the direction of Edom as the physical setting for the book of Job (Day 1994: 393–94). Uz and Edom are directly connected in Lam. 4:21, and in Jer. 25:20–21 they are included in a group of peoples along with Philistia, Ammon, and Moab. The Septuagint version of Job contains an appendix that places Job on the border of Idumea and Arabia (Reed 2001: 42). In the ancient world, Edom was renowned for its wisdom (cf. Obad. 8–9), so it would be reasonable for this book, with its discussion of the problem of evil, to be set there. Stek (1997: 444) concludes, “So, Job is a man of the distant past (having associations with the ancient patriarchal world) and from a far-off place (the other side of the desert regions bordering Israel on the east). These factors suggest a ‘once upon a time in a land far away’ type of story from a heroic age.”

As discussed already, the time of composition and the temporal setting of the book do not necessarily have to be the same. Various details in the book have prompted some scholars to suggest several possible times for its setting, including the time of the judges (27:12; cf. Judg. 21:25), the time of Solomon (with the Sabeans in 1:15 as a purported allusion to Sheba), and the Babylonian period (the mention of the Chaldeans in 1:17). The weight of the textual evidence, however, appears to support a setting for the story in the patriarchal age or even the prepatriarchal age. Although the deity in view is clearly identified as Yahweh in the prose framework and in the speeches of chapters 38–41, the speakers themselves use the archaic divine titles of El, Eloah, and Shaddai, which may suggest a setting prior to the time of Yahweh’s self-revelation to Moses in Exod. 6:2–3 (Habel 1985: 39–40). Job’s possessions and retinue of servants bear close resemblance to those of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the length of his life is comparable to theirs. Furthermore, minor details such as Job’s priestly intercession for his family (1:5), and the *qēšîṭâ* currency (42:11), found elsewhere in the Bible only in the time of

Jacob (Gen. 33:19; cf. Josh. 24:32), point to a temporal setting at least as early as the patriarchs.

Purpose

The book of Job does not explicitly state its purpose, but the purpose may be discerned by considering clues embedded in the text. One recognizable purpose for the book is to challenge the mistaken assumption that personal sin is always the cause of suffering. Job's friends, holding to a rigid theology of retribution, reason from the fundamental premise of practical wisdom that if wisdom leads to life and folly leads to death, then every case of suffering presumes prior personal sin. Waters (1999b: 150–51) observes, "The traditional wisdom of Job's day saw the concept of retribution as a fixed systematic formula for judging the condition of a nation or the life of an individual. Therefore it limited God to predetermined actions in dealing with people's responses to Him." Job rejects their assessment of his guilt, but he agrees with them in his assumption of the reliability of practical wisdom. The prologue and the epilogue make clear, however, that both Job and the friends have accepted a premise that, although true in general terms, is too limited to account for all of life. God's rule of his world cannot be reduced to the tidy formula of rigid retribution theology.

A second purpose is to explore human limitations in probing the issue of divine justice. One of the striking features of the book is that the action occurs simultaneously on two stages. As Job is living on earth, first in delightful prosperity and then in devastating pain, he is unaware of the parallel events transpiring in heaven. The prologue discloses to the reader that, beyond the knowledge of Job, actions by Yahweh and Satan are affecting the experience of humans. As Smick (1988: 858) notes, "The reader views the drama from the divine perspective where he learns of God's secret purpose to expose the falsehood of the Accuser and prove Job's faith." As Job wrestles intellectually and theologically with his condition, he finally places his case in the hands of God (31:35)—a clear admission that its resolution lies outside the limits of human understanding.

In addition, the book reveals that as the sovereign ruler of the universe, Yahweh is free and beyond human comprehension. Although the practical wisdom theology of retribution accurately summarizes in general terms how God orders the world, the book of Job demonstrates that God's ways may at times transcend his normal pattern of operation (Whybray 1999: 243). In other words, the sovereign God is not a captive to a rigid law of retribution, but rather is free to do what appears

mysterious to humans. In fact, as Lacocque (1996: 139) observes, the unpredictable intervention of God is an essential aspect of his rule over the world: “The universe is no closed system governed by immutable laws. In order to survive, the world and each of its elements are in need of the personal intervention of God. Retributive justice assumes by its own deceptive simplicity a universe that is itself simple. Even Job thought that he was living in a ‘finished’ world, where good and evil are woven into the fabric of the cosmos. YHWH responds by describing the complexity of the world. Things are not what they seem, not even the most insignificant.” This fact opens up the prospect of grace, in which God favors those who are undeserving of anything but his judgment. God’s freedom also lies behind exceptional cases like that of Job, where suffering afflicts a person who has lived in such a way that he would reasonably expect divine blessing.

Anderson (1986: 594–95) remarks appositely that in addition to the theological and philosophical issues that it addresses, the book of Job probes the existential issue of the nature of the divine-human relationship. In the prologue, Satan cynically charges that Job’s goodness, which has so impressed Yahweh, is merely a ploy to get divine blessing on his life. Satan argues that if the blessings were removed from Job, he would curse Yahweh. Thus, the underlying issue of the book is whether Job’s relationship with God is indeed contingent upon the blessings that he has received, or whether he will hold on to God in the face of his apparent abandonment. From Job’s perspective, it appears that God has forsaken him, and that pain surpasses all of his other losses. When Yahweh breaks his silence in chapters 38–41, Job realizes that the relationship between them is indeed intact. Job’s acknowledgment of his ignorance in 42:1–6 proves that Satan’s charge has been illegitimate. Only after that does Yahweh restore Job’s fortunes.

Theme

The book of Job is marked by the breadth and depth of its themes. Unlike Proverbs, which focuses on the practical matters of personal and social ethics, Job reflects the universal scope of Old Testament wisdom as it probes the deepest theological and philosophical questions. Habel (1985: 61) notes, “Job and his friends explore numerous realities of their world, including the ground of knowledge, the nature of the wicked, the human condition, the role of friends, the analogy of nature, the rule of God, and the moral order.” Certainly, there are other ancient texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia that address many of these

perennial issues, but Job towers above them in its literary excellence and theological insight.

A careful reading of the entire book reveals that Yahweh transcends human categories in governing his universe by wisdom. Job and his friends endeavor unsuccessfully to explain Job's situation in terms of the retribution theology of practical wisdom. The book of Job demonstrates that although practical wisdom is reliable to a certain extent, it must not be taken as the sum total of divine wisdom. The wisdom of Yahweh also includes aspects that are mysterious to finite humans. Consequently, humans must not confine Yahweh to their tidy theological formulas or logical constructs. Commenting on the speeches of Yahweh in chapters 38–41, Childs (1979: 540) notes, "The divine response serves to direct the attention of the reader—regardless of the context in which he now stands—back to the person of God himself whose wisdom is of a different order from all human knowledge. The divine response thus provides the ultimate critical judgment on wisdom." Just as Yahweh's questions in chapters 38–41 convince Job that there is much in the natural world that is beyond human comprehension, so also there is much in the plan of God that transcends human understanding. Clines (1995: 70–71) reasons well: "If it is Job's perspective that we adopt, the friends' speeches are entirely misconceived. If it is the Lord's perspective in the final chapter that we adopt, the unambiguous judgment upon the friends' arguments is that they 'have not spoken of me what is right' (42.7). And if it is the narrator's perspective that we adopt, then everyone is in the wrong, for Job as much as the friends has been labouring under the illusion that his sufferings must have something to do with his sinfulness, real or alleged—whereas the prologue to the book has made it clear that it is solely for his piety, and not for any wrongdoing, that Job is suffering."

When compared to the other prominent exemplars of Old Testament wisdom, Job teaches that the perplexities of life cannot be resolved from a human perspective alone, as Qohelet endeavored in his search under the sun, or within the parameters of practical wisdom alone, as the language of Proverbs might suggest. Instead, Job demonstrates that there is mystery and wonder in Yahweh's world, and true wisdom must acknowledge and embrace that aspect of reality. It would be inaccurate to conclude that the book of Job totally rejects the theology of retribution that permeates much of the Old Testament legal, historical, prophetic, and practical wisdom literature. Although the book of Job upholds the general truth that Yahweh blesses those who are righteous and punishes those who are evil, especially in the restoration of blessing to Job in the epilogue (Dhorme 1967: cli), it also supplements that typical pattern with the divine freedom to work in ways that to the finite human mind

appear in conflict with the principle of retribution. McCann (1997: 20) discerns astutely that Job addresses a key dilemma of theology: "It seems that human beings, including those who explicitly identify themselves as God's people, have an inevitable propensity to want to tame God, to contain God in neat and tidy retributitional schemes—in short, to turn theology into anthropology. For this is precisely what the traditional theory of retribution does. Ironically, in attempting to assert God's sovereignty, it removes the necessity of talking about God at all, since everything is really determined finally by *human* behavior. God loses God's freedom and it simply becomes impossible to speak of anything like *grace*—a major dilemma! It is precisely this dilemma which makes the Book of Job profoundly and perennially important." To comprehend the full biblical position, the speculative wisdom of Job and the practical wisdom of Proverbs must be read together, as each contributes valid insights about how Yahweh rules his world (see Perdue 1994: 137–38).

The fact that Yahweh is the final speaker, and that he asks questions rather than giving definitive answers, indicates that the focus of the book of Job is on God. The book does not end with a neat, tight answer, but instead leads back to faith in Yahweh. All questions, even those beyond human comprehension, find their ultimate answer in God himself. As Job learned, humans can trust God, and they must trust God, even when they cannot understand his mysterious ways. Childs (1979: 539) concludes, "The divine response does not deign to address any of Job's complaints nor to enter into the discussion of why the innocent suffer. Instead, the one point is made over and over again that Job cannot possibly comprehend what God is doing. The sharpest possible limitations are set on human wisdom, personified in Job's appeal to his own experience, to comprehend the divine."

The book of Job also provides a rare glimpse into the activities of Satan as he endeavors to drive a wedge between God and his people. The prologue describes how Satan (literally here, "the Satan") is the accuser who attempts to call into question the integrity of humans such as Job who are seeking to live in a way that honors God. As the case of Job demonstrates, this adversary working within the freedom granted by the sovereign Yahweh schemes to undermine the faith and destroy the joy of those who live for God. One source of suffering, then, is the malicious activity of Satan as he opposes God's plan by afflicting his people. By this means, the book of Job is an adumbration of the doctrine of Satan that is developed much more clearly in the New Testament.

Throughout history the book of Job has been read and studied particularly by theologians and philosophers because it surfaces the perennial problem of evil: If there is a God who is all good and all powerful, then

why do innocent people suffer in his world? Retribution theology, which extrapolates the patterns of practical wisdom into a rigid formula, denies the problem of evil by saying that suffering is always explained by prior personal sin. This position was assumed and articulated by Job's friends, but Job insisted that it was invalid for his situation. Other scholars have posited that the problem of evil can be resolved by denying either that God is good or that he is omnipotent. In either case, God is diminished either from absolute moral rectitude or from sovereign power.

Although the book of Job does not structure its answer to the problem of evil in precise theological or philosophical language, a careful reading of the text discloses several insights that combine to provide a solution. First, it demonstrates that some suffering falls outside of retribution. Job's friends insist on double retribution: not only are the just rewarded and the wicked punished, but also "those who are suffering affliction must be sinners who deserve the suffering" (Habel 1985: 61). Yahweh's assessment of Job in both the prologue and the epilogue, however, clearly shows that this is not the case in Job's situation. Job shows that in some situations there is human suffering that is not caused by personal sin.

A second answer to the problem of evil is that Satan uses suffering to destroy the faith of God's people. In the book of Job, Satan insists that Job serves Yahweh only because of the blessings that he derives from God. Satan claims that if Job were to suffer affliction, he would curse God rather than serve him. Given divine permission to test his assertion, Satan proceeds to destroy Job's possessions, family, health, and relationships. Satan's ultimate purpose is to bring Job's faith in Yahweh to the point of collapse by the means of intense pain and loss.

Despite Satan's malicious attempts to destroy Job's faith, God uses that very crucible of suffering that Satan intended for destructive purposes to strengthen Job's personal godliness. Just as Joseph recognized in retrospect that what his brothers intended for evil, God meant for good to preserve many people (Gen. 50:20), so also Job through his harrowing experience comes to comprehend the ways of Yahweh more deeply than ever before. Suffering, then, is not always punitive, but rather may be instructive (Andersen 1976: 69).

In the final analysis, the book of Job answers the question posed by the problem of evil by affirming that humans cannot comprehend fully the ways of God. Rather than compelling God to act in accordance with the tidy demands of human logic, Job presents a God who is mysterious. As Job realizes that he cannot answer the barrage of questions addressed to him by Yahweh in chapters 38–41, he acknowledges that he, in his finite humanness, is ignorant of the ways of the sovereign God (42:1–6). Daiches (1988: 57) notes well, "In an outburst of spectacular cosmic

poetry the voice of God hammers home the point that the goings-on in the universe are far beyond the wit of man to comprehend; that nature was not created for man and has its otherness and its mysteries that man can never penetrate; and it is against this background of miracle and mystery which dwarfs man that the problems of human suffering must be set." Refusing to resolve the conundrum of the problem of evil by insisting on rigid retribution, or diminishing God's goodness, or reducing God's power, the book of Job leaves this problem squarely in the realm of mysteries of God that cannot be discerned by finite human minds. In doing so, it directs the reader, as Job, back to God himself rather than to a theological or philosophical solution.

Prologue (Job 1–2)

The prose prologue provides the interpretive framework for understanding the rest of the book. By providing an objective assessment of Job's character, the prologue makes it clear that Job is indeed suffering unjustly, whereas a reading of the dialogues alone could lead to the misconception that Job was self-righteous (Smick 1988: 878). In addition, by disclosing the two stages of action in heaven and on earth, the prologue enables the reader to possess understanding that Job himself did not possess as he struggled through his painful situation.

Job's Character (1:1–5)

In simple language that could be used for either historical narrative or imaginative fiction, the chief character and his lifestyle are introduced. The setting for the story is Uz, a location either in the region near Haran or, more likely, in the general area of Edom. What is of particular significance is that Uz is outside of Israel, so the setting for this book and its message transcend the covenant nation (Moberly 1999: 10). Clines (1989: 10) reasons, "By leaving open the question of his race, the book effectively makes his experience transcend the distinction between Israelite and non-Israelite, Jew and non-Jew." In a similar fashion, Job is presented without the customary genealogical data that is found in the historical narratives when a major character comes on the scene, as, for example, when Abram is introduced in Gen. 11:26–30. This absence of precise family information may suggest that Job is intended to represent humanity as the author portrays the problem of the suffering of the righteous in its starkest terms through the medium of Job's experience (Scheindlin 1998: 11).

Even though Job's lineage is left undefined, the introductory paragraph goes on to describe his character in telling detail. It is evident that Job is a man of deep piety in his personal, family, and societal life. The fourfold description in 1:1, which later is affirmed by Yahweh in 1:8 and 2:3, portrays Job's devout moral character in terms that correspond to the epitome of practical wisdom. He is blameless, or a man of integrity having no moral blemish, totally devoted to what is godly and good. In Gen. 17:1, being "blameless" is used in connection with walking before God—that is, a life defined by close fellowship with the Lord. In addition, Job is upright, in that he lives according to God's requirements. Job also fears God, because his life choices and attitudes demonstrate respect for God's character and standards. This predisposition is regarded in the wisdom literature as the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10; Eccles. 12:13; Job 28:28). Moreover, Job turns away from evil, for he stays away from that which God hates (cf. Prov. 16:17; Ps. 1:1). This sterling description of Job does not necessarily imply sinlessness, but certainly it presents him as a man of extraordinarily high moral character. In the larger scriptural context, if Job is a historical figure, then he must be a sinner to some degree. In that case, the question of the book would revolve around the misproportion of Job's suffering in the light of his substantial righteousness. If, on the other hand, the book of Job is imaginative literature, then the author would be setting forth a test case in which a totally righteous human is afflicted with the ultimate in suffering in order to examine the issues posed by the problem of evil to their maximum theoretical extent.

Just as Job is distinguished by his exemplary character (1:1), so also he has no equal among his peers in his possessions (1:2–3). He has a large family, including seven sons and three daughters. His physical possessions include vast numbers of oxen for agriculture, camels for trading caravans, sheep and donkeys greater in number than Jacob had, and very many servants. With this array of holdings, Job is characterized as the greatest of all the men of the east. Unstated, but clearly implied by the premises of practical wisdom, is that Job is living under the blessing of God, for as Prov. 10:22 states, "The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it" (see Wharton 1999: 12).

Verses 4–5 present an example of Job's impeccable piety. Job's sons used to host a round of feasts in which their sisters joined them in eating and drinking. Job regularly offered sacrifices in intercession for them, in case they had cursed God in their hearts. The motif of cursing God foreshadows Satan's claim that Job will curse God if divine blessing and protection are withdrawn from him (1:11; 2:5) and the urging by Job's wife that he curse God and die, and so be released from his suffering (2:9). Job's function as a priest for his family also anticipates his role

as intercessor for his friends when he offers a sacrifice for them so that Yahweh may accept them (42:8–9).

This introductory paragraph, with its idyllic tone, sets the stage for the immeasurable calamity to come. In every way, Job has lived an exemplary life blessed by the favor of Yahweh, but that blissful existence will endure unexpected and cataclysmic upheaval.