

Introduction:

*If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?
Why have you made me your target?
Why have I become a burden to you?
(Job 7:20)*

This rhetorical question is spoken by Job after God has killed all his children and his livestock, and afflicted him with a skin disease. Job's lament is emblematic of the central question discussed by Job and his three friends. The question is a theme in the Old Testament: how can God remain good despite the fact that he allows evil and human suffering to exist? Job's friends argue that God would only afflict Job with pain if he had committed some grave act of human disobedience meriting punishment. Job, however, raises two complaints against God, the "watcher of humanity." For one, Job knows he has done nothing wrong, and he wonders what he could have done to become a "burden" to God and deserve such suffering. Second, Job asks why God is so concerned with human actions in the first place—why he watches humanity's faults and punishes them in turn. Just as Job's lament is rhetorical and open-ended, so this question and theme is not explicitly answered in the Old Testament.

Who Watches the Watchmen?**Chapter 1**

1 In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

2 He had seven sons and three daughters,

3 and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

4 His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them.

5 When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.

6 One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them.

7 The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it."

8 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

9 "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied.

10 "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land.

11 But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

12 The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

13 One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house,

14 a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby,

15 and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

16 While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

17 While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

18 While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house,

19 when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

20 At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship

21 and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."

22 In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Chapter 2

1 On another day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him.

2 And the LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it."

3 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason."

4 "Skin for skin!" Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own life.

5 But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face."

6 The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life."

7 So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.

8 Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes.

9 His wife said to him, “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!”

10 He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. **Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?**” In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

11 When Job’s three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.

12 When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.

13 Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Summary

Job is a wealthy man living in a land called Uz with his large family and extensive flocks. He is “blameless” and “upright,” always careful to avoid doing evil (1:1). One day, Satan (“the Adversary”) appears before God in heaven. God boasts to Satan about Job’s goodness, but Satan argues that Job is only good because God has blessed him abundantly. Satan challenges God that, if given permission to punish the man, Job will turn and curse God. God allows Satan to torment Job to test this bold claim, but he forbids Satan to take Job’s life in the process.

In the course of one day, Job receives four messages, each bearing separate news that his livestock, servants, and ten children have all died due to marauding invaders or natural catastrophes. Job tears his clothes and shaves his head in mourning, but he still blesses God in his prayers. Satan appears in heaven again, and God grants him another chance to test Job. This time, Job is afflicted with horrible skin sores. His wife encourages him to curse God and to give up and die, but Job refuses, struggling to accept his circumstances.

Three of Job’s friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, come to visit him, sitting with Job in silence for seven days out of respect for his mourning. On the seventh day, Job speaks, beginning a conversation in which each of the four men shares his thoughts on Job’s afflictions in long, poetic statements.

Job curses the day he was born, comparing life and death to light and darkness. He wishes that his birth had been shrouded in darkness and longs to have never been born, feeling that light, or life, only intensifies his misery. Eliphaz responds that Job, who has comforted other people, now shows that he never really understood their pain. Eliphaz believes that Job’s agony must be due to some sin Job has committed, and he urges Job to seek God’s favor. Bildad and Zophar agree that Job must have committed evil to offend God’s justice and argue that he should strive to exhibit more blameless behavior. Bildad surmises that Job’s children brought their deaths upon themselves. Even worse, Zophar

implies that whatever wrong Job has done probably deserves greater punishment than what he has received.

Job responds to each of these remarks, growing so irritated that he calls his friends “worthless physicians” who “whitewash [their advice] with lies” (13:4). After making pains to assert his blameless character, Job ponders man’s relationship to God. He wonders why God judges people by their actions if God can just as easily alter or forgive their behavior. It is also unclear to Job how a human can appease or court God’s justice. God is unseen, and his ways are inscrutable and beyond human understanding. Moreover, humans cannot possibly persuade God with their words. God cannot be deceived, and Job admits that he does not even understand himself well enough to effectively plead his case to God. Job wishes for someone who can mediate between himself and God, or for God to send him to Sheol, the deep place of the dead.

Job’s friends are offended that he scorns their wisdom. They think his questions are crafty and lack an appropriate fear of God, and they use many analogies and metaphors to stress their ongoing point that nothing good comes of wickedness. Job sustains his confidence in spite of these criticisms, responding that even if he has done evil, it is his own personal problem. Furthermore, he believes that there is a “witness” or a “Redeemer” in heaven who will vouch for his innocence (16:19, 19:25). After a while, the upbraiding proves too much for Job, and he grows sarcastic, impatient, and afraid. He laments the injustice that God lets wicked people prosper while he and countless other innocent people suffer. Job wants to confront God and complain, but he cannot physically find God to do it. He feels that wisdom is hidden from human minds, but he resolves to persist in pursuing wisdom by fearing God and avoiding evil.

Without provocation, another friend, Elihu, suddenly enters the conversation. The young Elihu believes that Job has spent too much energy vindicating himself rather than God. Elihu explains to Job that God communicates with humans by two ways—visions and physical pain. He says that physical suffering provides the sufferer with an opportunity to realize God’s love and forgiveness when he is well again, understanding that God has “ransomed” him from an impending death (33:24). Elihu also assumes that Job must be wicked to be suffering as he is, and he thinks that Job’s excessive talking is an act of rebellion against God.

God finally interrupts, calling from a whirlwind and demanding Job to be brave and respond to his questions. God’s questions are rhetorical, intending to show how little Job knows about creation and how much power God alone has. God describes many detailed aspects of his creation, praising especially his creation of two large beasts, the Behemoth and Leviathan. Overwhelmed by the encounter, Job acknowledges God’s unlimited power and admits the limitations of his human knowledge. This response pleases God, but he is upset with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar for spouting poor and theologically unsound advice. Job intercedes on their behalf, and God forgives them. God returns Job’s health,

providing him with twice as much property as before, new children, and an extremely long life.

Analysis

The Book of Job is one of the most celebrated pieces of biblical literature, not only because it explores some of the most profound questions humans ask about their lives, but also because it is extremely well written. The work combines two literary forms, framing forty chapters of verse between two and a half chapters of prose at the beginning and the end. The poetic discourse of Job and his friends is unique in its own right. The lengthy conversation has the unified voice and consistent style of poetry, but it is a dialogue between characters who alter their moods, question their motives, change their minds, and undercut each other with sarcasm and innuendo. Although Job comes closest to doing so, no single character articulates one true or authoritative opinion. Each speaker has his own flaws as well as his own lofty moments of observation or astute theological insight.

The interaction between Job and his friends illustrates the painful irony of his situation. Our knowledge that Job's punishment is the result of a contest between God and Satan contrasts with Job's confusion and his friends' lecturing, as they try to understand why Job is being punished. The premise of the friends' argument is that misfortune only follows from evil deeds. Bildad instructs Job, "if you are pure and upright, / surely then [God] will rouse himself / for you" and he later goads Job to be a "blameless person" (8:6, 8:20). The language in these passages is ironic, since, unbeknownst to Job or Job's friends, God and Satan do in fact view Job as "blameless and upright." This contrast shows the folly of the three friends who ignore Job's pain while purporting to encourage him. The interaction also shows the folly of trying to understand God's ways. The three friends and Job have a serious theological conversation about a situation that actually is simply a game between God and Satan. The fault of Job and his friends lies in trying to explain the nature of God with only the limited information available to human knowledge, as God himself notes when he roars from the whirlwind, "Who is this that darkness counsel / by words without / knowledge?" (38:2).

The dominant theme of Job is the difficulty of understanding why an all-powerful God allows good people to suffer. Job wants to find a way to justify God's actions, but he cannot understand why there are evil people who "harm the childless woman, / and do no good to the widow," only to be rewarded with long, successful lives (24:21). Job's friends, including Elihu, say that God distributes outcomes to each person as his or her actions deserve. As a result of this belief, they insist that Job has committed some wrongdoing to merit his punishment. God himself declines to present a rational explanation for the unfair distribution of blessings among men. He boasts to Job, "Have you comprehended the / expanse of the earth? / Declare, if you know all this" (38:18). God suggests that

people should not discuss divine justice since God's power is so great that humans cannot possibly justify his ways.

One of the chief virtues of the poetry in Job is its rhetoric. The book's rhetorical language seeks to produce an effect in the listener rather than communicate a literal idea. God's onslaught of rhetorical questions to Job, asking if Job can perform the same things he can do, overwhelms both Job and the reader with the sense of God's extensive power as well as his pride. Sarcasm is also a frequent rhetorical tool for Job and his friends in their conversation. After Bildad lectures Job about human wisdom, Job sneers, "How you have helped one / who has no power! / How you have assisted the arm / that has no strength!" (26:2). Job is saying that he already knows what Bildad has just explained about wisdom. The self-deprecating tone and sarcastic response are rare elements in ancient verse.

Such irony not only heightens the playfulness of the text but suggests the characters are actively responding to each other, thus connecting their seemingly disparate speeches together. The poetry in Job is a true dialogue, for the characters develop ideas and unique personalities throughout the course of their responses.