

PROLOGUE
SETTING THE SCENE
JOB 1-2

Introduction

Introduction to the Prologue

The prose prologue introduces us to the various characters of the drama. The stage is constructed on two levels. The lower level represents this earth; the upper level represents heaven. On the lower level centre stage is Job, with his unnamed wife and his three companions. We, the audience, are watching this world where we have to live out our lives. We are watching Job as he struggles to find answers to the questions that life throws up at us all. We are aware of the upper stage and the decisions made there by God, decisions which (according to the understanding of the time) determine everything that happens on earth (see pages 95-96). Job and the others have to work out their lives within the limits of the human condition, a condition that cannot see into the mind of God.

We discover that God is testing Job as he tested his people in their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land (and as we are all being tested):

Remember the long way that YHWH your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.

– Deuteronomy 8:2

Job and the others on the lower stage are not party to heaven's designs. In this upper level we are introduced also to a character called 'the Satan'. Once the prologue is complete, we are left with Job on the lower stage where we have to struggle to find meaning. The upper stage is in darkness till the final act of the drama, but we are aware of the fact that as we are watching Job, so is God. We should realise that God is also watching us as we either resist the questions posed by the drama or allow ourselves to be drawn into them, for Job is Everyman. It is we and our lives we are watching. It is our questions that are being explored in the drama that is unfolding before us.

The lower stage (1:1-5)

¹There was once in the land of Uz a man whose name was Job. He was blameless and upright, who feared God and kept clear of evil.

The name Uz is associated with Aram (see Genesis 10:23; 22:21), but also with Edom (Genesis 36:28; Jeremiah 25:19-20; Lamentations 4:21). Though the location of Uz is uncertain, what is certain is that the drama takes place outside the Holy Land.

This raises the question: Why did the author choose a foreigner as his central character? Was it to confront the narrow idea that God reveals himself only to Israel? Was it because the question affects everyone, and so he wanted to keep it on a universal stage? Was it that this enabled him to place words on Job's lips which would have sounded scandalous on the lips of an Israelite?

An interesting insight into the name Job ('iyyôb) is given by Ezekiel, the prophet whose ministry took place in the early years of the Babylonian Exile (593-571BC).

When a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it, and break its staff of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it human beings and animals, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job, these three, were in it, they would save only their own lives by their righteousness, says the Lord YHWH.

– Ezekiel 14:13-14 (see 14:20)

Like Noah and Daniel, Job appears to be a hero of ancient tales, including this tale which the author has chosen to use as the setting for his inquiry into the relationship between suffering, divine providence, and sin.

The name 'Job' may be related to the word 'enemy' ('ôyēb) underlining the fact that God seems to be treating him as an enemy by treating him so cruelly. It may be related to the word 'penitent'('wb) in that Job learned finally not to question God.

Job is described as being 'blameless' (דָּםִּי, tom) in the sense of complete, and 'upright' (יָשָׁר) in the sense of 'straight': honest in all his dealings. His relationship with God is also completely admirable: he 'feared God'. This is the standard way of speaking of a person who lives with a profound sense of awe at the presence and action of God, and who faithfully carries out God's will: 'he kept clear of evil'. The following texts indicate something of the thrust of the expression 'fear of YHWH' as we find it in the Hebrew Bible (see also pages 9-10):

The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom.

– Proverbs 9:10

The fear of YHWH is the fountain of life.

– Proverbs 14:27

The fear of YHWH is hatred of evil.

– Proverbs 8:13

Do not be afraid. God has come only to test you and to put fear of YHWH upon you so that you do not sin.

– Exodus 20:20

Happy are those who fear YHWH, who greatly delight in his commandments.

– Psalm 112:1

Let those who fear YHWH say: His steadfast love endures forever.

– Psalm 118:2

YHWH looks on those who fear him, on those who hope in his love.

– Psalm 33:18

It is important for the drama that from the start we see Job as someone whose behaviour is not such as to explain the suffering which he will undergo as divine punishment for sin.

The Lower Stage (1:1-5)

²He had seven sons and three daughters.

Job has the perfect number of male and female children (see 1Samuel 2:5; Ruth 4:15). Traditionally this was seen as proof of divine blessing, and so of Job's good life which God is rewarding.

³He possessed seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred she-asses, and a large number of servants. He was the richest man in the Orient.

His wealth, too, was traditionally seen as a sign of divine blessing:

Happy are those who fear YHWH, who greatly delight in his commandments ...
Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever.

– Psalm 112:1, 3

The rising of the sun in the east accounts for the mystical dimension attached to the word 'Orient'. When the Deuteronomists wanted to speak of the wisdom of Solomon in the highest terms they wrote:

Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east.

– 1Kings 4:30

⁴His sons used to organise banquets in one another's houses in turn; and they would invite their three sisters to dine with them. ⁵When the celebrations had run their course, Job would have them come for purification: he would rise early in the morning and offer a burnt offering for each of them, for he said, 'Perhaps my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their heart'. Job did this every time.

A likely setting for the banquets is the ancient festival of the Ingathering which took place in autumn at the end of the agricultural year. Before the winter break the farmers had a seven day celebration, thanking God for the harvest and praying for the autumn rains (see Exodus 34:22).

There is no mention of priests. Job offers the sacrifice himself. The setting is in the patriarchal period before the institution of the priesthood.

Job is so meticulous in carrying out his religious duties that he offers sacrifice just in case his sons may have sinned, even unconsciously.

The Hebrew translated 'curse' here is actually the word 'bless' (בָּרַךְ, *bārāk*). This was a common scribal practice to avoid having the word 'curse' next to the word 'God' (see also 1:11; 2:5,9).

The Upper Stage (1:6-12)

God is imagined as holding court in heaven. Prior to the emergence of monotheism, the people of Israel, like their neighbours, were polytheists. They thought of YHWH as the High God.

God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.

– Psalm 82:1

This kind of projection from the earthly court of kings was common in the ancient world, including the Bible.

I saw YHWH sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. And YHWH said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ Then one said one thing, and another said another.

– 1Kings 22:19-20 (see Psalm 89:6-7)

As monotheism took root, these lesser gods were thought of as divine attendants and messengers (‘angels’; see Job 38:7; Psalm 29:1; Zechariah 6:5).

The use of the definite article in ‘the Satan’ (see also Zechariah 3:1-2) indicates that what we have here is a title (not yet a proper name). It has been suggested that behind this dramatic character is the system of spies that was so prominent in the running of the Persian Empire. He is reporting back to God, having done his rounds. We are reminded of the following from Jeremiah where YHWH says::

Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look around and take note! Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth – so that I may pardon Jerusalem.

– Jeremiah 5:1

As his name indicates, the responsibility of the Satan (שָׂטָן, ha śātān, ‘the accuser’) was to alert the king if he found anyone not obeying the king’s edicts (compare Psalm 109:6; Zechariah 3:1). The Satan does not have the characteristics attached to the word ‘devil’: he does not tempt or entice to evil.

As a character in the drama does he represent what we experience as the dark side of God, the actions of God that we find confusing? Does he represent the people and the events that cut across our path, in what seems a random fashion, bringing suffering and pain?

‘One day the gods came to present themselves before YHWH, and the Satan also joined them.’

⁷YHWH said to him, “Where have you come from?” He replied, “From the earth. I have covered the length and breadth of it, checking on how things are going there.”

⁸YHWH said to him, “Have you given attention to my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth: blameless and upright, who fears God and keeps clear of evil.”

⁹The Satan replied, “And you think that his religious attitude is not because it is in his own interest? ¹⁰You yourself have favoured and protected him, with his family and with all his property! You have blessed his labours, and his possessions have increased in the land.

¹¹But you touch him and cause damage to his possessions, and I bet he will curse you to your face.”

¹²YHWH said to him, “Very well, do whatever you want with his things; but do not touch him!”

And the Satan went out from YHWH’s presence.

The Satan has been carrying out the king’s commission by moving around the earth, checking for unrest, disobedience or rebellion. The Hebrew for ‘doing his rounds’ is שׁוֹטֵט [šûṭ] – which may be the root from which ‘the Satan’(ha šāṭān) is derived. שׁ (š) and שׁוֹ (š) are dialect variants of the same Hebrew consonant.

God is portrayed as being very proud of Job. “Servant”(verse 8) is used to describe the weaker party in a covenant.

The Satan makes the point that being blameless, upright and religious is fine, but Job is this way because he sees it as being to his own advantage. The tradition is full of assurances that a person who obeys God will be blessed in every way:

YHWH your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate.

– Deuteronomy 16:15

The Satan suggest a test, confident that he will be proven right and that Job will soon lose his religious attitude if things start going bad for him.

God accepts the bet. Virtue is revealed only when it is tested. One thinks of Abraham, who stood up to the test when he showed that he was willing to offer up his only son when he thought (wrongly) that God wanted it that way (see Genesis 22). The promise could go on only if Abraham believed in God and not in God’s gifts, no matter how precious or essential they seemed.

The Satan leaves the presence of YHWH with God’s permission to put Job to the test. We are keen to see how Job will react.

Meanwhile, back on the earth, Job has no idea of the plan hatched in heaven.

The Lower Stage: Job is tested (1:13-21)

The most well-known people called ‘Sabeans’ [שָׁבִיִּים, verse 15] in the Biblical story are from southern Arabia (‘Sheba’, modern Yemen; see Genesis 10:7; 25:3; Isaiah 60:6; Jeremiah 6:20; Ezekiel 27:22; 38:13; Psalm 72:15). This does not help locate Uz, however, as Genesis 10:7 and Psalm 72:10 also speaks of ‘Seba’ [שֵׁבָא] which appears to be located to the west of the Red Sea (modern Iritrea; see Isaiah 43:3; 45:14).

‘Lightning’ (verse 16) translates ‘fire of God’ (see 1 Kings 18:38; 2 Kings 1:12).

The ‘Chaldeans’ (verse 17) first appear in history in the ninth century Assyrian records. The Neo-Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadrezzar is called ‘Chaldean’ in the Biblical record (see Jeremiah 37:11; Daniel 2:10; 5:30).

The dry, hot sirocco (verse 19) blows into Palestine from the east, from the Arabian desert.

The three catastrophes (verses 15-19) are just the kinds of things that can happen at any time, whether we are speaking of the violence inflicted by human beings, or a freak happening of nature.

Job’s response is to tear his garments and shave his head – both customary gestures of mourning (see Genesis 37:34; Isaiah 22:12; Jeremiah 7:29). He knows that eventually he will lose all when he returns to the womb of mother earth (see Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 12:7). He knows too that he is completely dependent upon God, whom he praises, while accepting whatever God wills.

Job comes through the first trial intact.

¹³One day his sons and daughters were eating and drinking in the eldest brother’s house, ¹⁴when a messenger came to Job and said to him, “The oxen were plowing and the asses were feeding beside them, ¹⁵when some Sabeans fell on them, put the servants to their sword, and made off with the animals. I alone escaped to tell you.”

¹⁶While he was still speaking, another came and said, “Lightning fell from heaven and struck and killed the sheep and the servants. I alone was able to escape to tell you.”

¹⁷While he was still speaking, another came and said, “A band of Chaldeans, in three groups, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and put the servants to the sword. I alone was able to escape to tell you.”

¹⁸While he was still speaking, another came and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking in their eldest brother’s house, ¹⁹when suddenly a mighty wind came across the desert and struck the house on all four sides. The house fell on the young people, and killed them. I alone was able to escape to tell you.”

²⁰Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, ²¹fell to the ground and said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return.

YHWH has given, YHWH has taken away; blessed be the name of YHWH.”

²²In spite of everything, Job did not sin or accuse God of acting unwisely.

The Upper Stage (2:1-7; see 1:6-12)

¹One day the gods came to present themselves before YHWH, and the Satan joined them. ²YHWH said to him, "Where have you come from?"

The Satan replied, "From the earth. I have covered the length and breadth of it, checking on how things are going there."

³YHWH said to him, "Have you given attention to my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth: blameless and upright, who fears God and keeps clear of evil. Though you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason, he still persists in his integrity."

⁴The Satan replied, "Skin after skin! All that a person has he will give to save his life..

⁵But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face."

⁶YHWH said to him, "Very well, do what you like with him; only spare his life."

⁷And Satan went out from YHWH's presence.

The verbal repetitions (see 1:6-12) make memorising easy and are typical of folk tales.

Pope (page 20) offers the following comment on the proverb 'skin after skin' (verse 4).

The human heart is well protected, the most inaccessible part of man's body; only God can search the heart and probe man's inward parts, Jeremiah 17:9-10. Thus man's heart, the seat of his affections and inmost being, is protected by a series of walls, as the inner chamber of a labyrinth, a 'chamber within a chamber', 1Kings 20:30, 22:25. Only the outer wall has been touched; cf 1:10. The Satan wants permission to penetrate Job's outer defences and put his very being in jeopardy. The Lord thus gives the Satan leave to get under Job's skin, to do anything to him short of extinguishing his life.

The Satan's words: 'All that a person has he will give to save his life', remind us of Jesus' words:

What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but forfeit your life?

What can you barter to get it back?

– Matthew 16:26

This is the last we hear of the Satan.

The Lower Stage (2:7-10; see 1:1-5; 1:13-22)

The ‘terrible affliction’ [אֲרָפָה, שֶׁחִינ] is what afflicted the Egyptians in the sixth plague (see Exodus 9:9-11). In Leviticus it is less serious than the scaly skin disease (wrongly called ‘leprosy’) in that it required only one week’s quarantine (see Leviticus 13:18-23; Deuteronomy 28:35; 2Kings 20:7 = Isaiah 38:20). Job lacerates his body with the potsherd as a sign of grief (verse 8).

Job’s wife (mentioned only here) holds the traditional view that God causes whatever happens.

I am YHWH, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe; I YHWH do all these things.

– Isaiah 45:6-7

She is angry with God for striking Job down, in spite of Job’s extraordinary goodness. Such an unjust God, for her, is not worth blessing. Since no one can oppose God, her husband might as well curse God and die. Job’s virtue remains intact.

⁷He struck Job with terrible afflictions from head to toe.

⁸Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

⁹Then his wife said to him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.”

¹⁰But he said to her, “You speak like a fool. If we accept from God what is good, should we not accept also what is bad?” In spite of everything Job did not sin with his lips.

Job’s friends (2:11-13)

‘Eliphaz’ (‘God is fine gold’) is also the name of the ‘son’ of Esau and the ‘father’ of Teman (see Genesis 36:11, 15, 42). Teman (‘southland’) is in Edom, south-east of Judah. ‘Shuah’ is the name of a ‘son’ of Abraham, a ‘brother’ of Midian and an ‘uncle’ of Sheba and Dedan (see Genesis 25:2). Shuah is on one of the main trade routes through the Syrian desert, north-east of Judah. ‘Zophar’ (only here) may mean ‘a small bird’. Naamah may be in Arabia.

They come from the east, from every direction, to support Job with their ‘wisdom’. Their gestures show that they join him in mourning his situation. The effect of the ‘seven days and seven nights’ of silence (see Genesis 50:10; 1Samuel 31:13) is to get us, the audience, to feel the long, intolerable silence, that only Job can break.

¹¹His three friends – Eliphaz from Teman, Bildad from Shuah, and Zophar from Naamah – having heard of the terrible things that had happened to him, set off from where they lived, and together went to share his grief and to comfort him. ¹²When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they burst into loud weeping; they tore their robes and threw dust over their head towards heaven. ¹³They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, without speaking a word, seeing how awful his suffering was.

