

JOB

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The author of this literary masterpiece of the ancient world was not the first to struggle to find some meaning in human suffering. There are texts from Egypt, Mesopotamia (both Sumerian and Akkadian) and Syria (Ugarit) going back to the second millennium BC that witness to the desire to explore this basic human question. The standard 'wisdom' was that suffering was caused by the gods, and there was little hope of us poor human beings finding out why the gods would will things this way. Since the gods have the power, the best we can do is to pray that a god might look favourably upon us and put an end to our suffering.

Israel was committed to the belief that there is only one God who decided what would happen in their lives, and that is YHWH, the God who had entered into a special covenant with them. This simplified things considerably, for they did not (in theory) have to worry about pleading for the help of all the other gods that their neighbours were concerned to placate. The people of Israel shared the assumption that was prevalent in the Ancient Near East that prosperity was a proof of divine favour, and misfortune was a proof of divine disfavour. If they suffered as a people, or if one of the community endured suffering, they, like their neighbours, concluded that it must be God's will. Because they worked on the basic premise that YHWH is just, the only way they could make sense of suffering was to see it as a punishment for sin. The only meaningful response to suffering was to repent of sin and cry out to God for relief.

Examples of this mentality abound in the Torah and in the Prophets. A few examples should suffice. The following from Exodus is typical.

You shall worship the YHWH your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you. No one shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send my terror in front of you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you.

– Exodus 23:25-27

When they were not blessed, and when they were conquered by their enemies, they concluded that this must have been because they were unfaithful, with the result that YHWH was angry with them and was punishing them. We find the same mentality in Leviticus 26 (see also Deuteronomy 28):

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land will yield its produce, and the trees of the field will yield their fruit ... And I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down, and no one will make you afraid; no sword will go through your land. You will give chase to your enemies, and they will fall before you by the sword ... And I will walk among you, and I will be your God, and you will be my people.

But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments ... I will bring terror on you; consumption and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away. You will sow your seed in vain, for your enemies will eat it ... I will bring the sword against you, executing vengeance for the covenant ... and you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land will be a desolation, and your cities a waste.

But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors ... then will I remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

This mentality is basic to all the prophets. Jeremiah lived through the destruction of Jerusalem (587BC). Since God's justice could not be questioned, the only conclusion possible was that God raised up the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem as punishment for sin.

Psalm 1 assures us that those who obey God's will 'prosper in all they do' (compare Jeremiah 17:5-8). The obvious conclusion is that those who were seen to be prospering must be good people, while those not prospering must be bad. Psalm 37 declares:

YHWH knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will abide forever;
they are not put to shame in evil times, in the days of famine they have abundance.
But the wicked perish, and the enemies of YHWH are like the glory of the pastures;
they vanish – like smoke they vanish away ... I have been young, and now am old, yet
I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.

– Psalm 37:18-20, 25

That people who witnessed the suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of those who acted contrary to the covenant would question this standard 'wisdom' should not surprise us. Psalm 73 (see page 69) explores the issue, as does Qohelet in Ecclesiastes, but nowhere is the question explored more passionately and more thoroughly than in the Book of Job.

If we wish to benefit from Job's insights we must be aware of two basic assumptions that he shared with his contemporaries. He questioned the suffering of the innocent, but he did not question either of the following assumptions. This sets limits to his contribution.

1. It is God who determines everything that happens in our lives

Job does not question the general principle that God rewards the good and punishes the sinful. Based on his own experience, however, he does question any unqualified connection that necessarily links prosperity to goodness and suffering to sin. This is the outlook of his 'friends' and he demolishes their arguments. When, in the end, God intervenes, Job is vindicated and the traditional view espoused by his 'friends' is declared by God to be wrong. However, neither his 'friends' nor Job question the assumption that whatever happens is willed by God. That is simply taken for granted, and this is the context within which the key problem is explored: How can a just God allow the innocent to suffer?

In the light of Jesus' revelation of God, we need to question the idea that God controls everything that happens. Jesus reveals God as love. When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it does not control. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. The idea of God controlling, however, is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he didn't punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control.

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Jesus' contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong.

In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: 'Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end' (1Corinthians 13:7-8). We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, by *loving*. When creation is open to God's action, beautiful, 'miraculous' things happen. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is essentially free and not determined. We experience this. When we open ourselves to welcome God's providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God's gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love.

When the author of Job looked at suffering, he asked: How can a just God will an innocent person to suffer? We have learned that that is the wrong question. Why someone suffers is a question for, among others, the medical profession. The theological question is not 'Why is God allowing this?', but 'Where is God in this suffering?' When we look at Calvary we do not ask 'Why is God causing Jesus to be crucified?' We have come to see that decision as one made sinfully (and so, by definition, against God's will), by the religious leaders of the day and the governor of the occupying forces. To answer the theological question we look, not at the high priest or Pilate, but at Jesus. We know that where there is love, there is God. God is revealed in the person of Jesus and in those on Calvary who chose to be open to God's inspiration. Had the author of Job known Jesus, he would have asked a different question. If we are going to appreciate the contribution made by the Book of Job to our understanding of suffering, we must read his words within the limited context he shared with his contemporaries.

Death as the end of human life

There is a second assumption within which the author of Job was working. This assumption, too, has been revealed as wrong by Jesus. The author of the Book of Job inherited from his tradition the notion that human life, which depends on the life-breath given by God, ends with death when 'the life-breath returns to God who gave it' (12:7). Job and his contemporaries (including the peoples of Mesopotamia, but not Egypt) believed that the dead go down into the shadowy and lifeless existence of Sh^e'ol (Hades, the Pit).

My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.

– Psalm 88:3-5

The dead do not praise YHWH,
nor do any that go down into silence.

– Psalm 115:17

Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you;
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.
The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day;
fathers make known to children your faithfulness.

– Isaiah 38:18-19

Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades
in place of the living who give thanks?
From the dead, as from one who does not exist,
thanksgiving has ceased; those who are alive and well
sing the Lord's praises.

– Sirach 17:27-28

People prayed that God would preserve them from death and the underworld:

My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

– Psalm 16:9-11

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

– Psalm 49:15

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

The notion of resurrection from the dead, which included the notion of a continuance of communion with God (and therefore a continuance of life) beyond the grave was espoused by some members of the Jewish community, but this was centuries after Job, and continued to be disputed into the first century AD (see Acts 23:8).

This idea of life beyond death grew out of faith in the fidelity of God. The historical situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of pious Jews at the time of the persecutions instigated by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167-165BC). It seemed impossible for God not to reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

– Daniel 12:1-2

Our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance.

– 2Maccabees 7:36

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Another witness to a belief that physical death is not the end of life, at least for those who have proved faithful to the covenant, is the following text that was included in the Isaiah scroll. It probably comes from the same period as Daniel and 2Maccabees. We read:

The dead do not live; shades do not rise — because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them.

– Isaiah 26:14

This fits with the tradition, and the author of Job would have been completely at home with it. However, the text goes on to say something that cuts across an assumption that is basic to everything written in Job:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

– Isaiah 26:19

The author of Job takes it for granted that death is the end of life, the end of communion with God.

Are not the days of my life few? Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort before I go, never to return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos where light is like darkness.”

– Job 10:20-22

Mortal human beings lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep.

– Job 14:12

My spirit is broken, my days are extinct, the grave is ready for me.
If I look for Sheol as my house, if I spread my couch in darkness,
if I say to the Pit, ‘You are my father,’ and to the worm, ‘My mother,’ or ‘My sister,’
where then is my hope? Who will see my hope?
Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust?”

– Job 17:1, 13-16

One dies in full prosperity, being wholly at ease and secure,
his loins full of milk and the marrow of his bones moist.
Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted of good.
They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them.

– Job 21:23-26

There is no place in his thinking for reward or punishment beyond the grave. If the righteous are not rewarded in this life, they are never rewarded. If the unrighteous are not punished in this life, they never have to suffer the consequences of their behaviour. Again and again he portrays death as the ultimate leveller. He accepts it as a fact that God wills the finality of death, and sees that it calls into question much of traditional teaching, which asserts that good is always rewarded and evil always punished, and that suffering, therefore, is necessarily a proof of sin.

Before moving on from this matter, it is important that we who choose to believe in life beyond death do not allow this belief to soften, romanticise or help us avoid the bewildering, and, in a real sense, ‘ultimate’ fact of death. Belief in the resurrection transcends death, it does not remove it. Death is the end of the only kind of experience we know. When he came up against it, Jesus shuddered to the depths of his being. On the cross he experienced abandonment, including from God. He still cried out to the one he called ‘my God’, but he faced the reality of death. We can see beyond Job, but we would be unwise not to listen to its author when he confronts us with the awful reality of death.

The Book opens (chapters 1-2) and closes (42:7-17) with a prose narrative. The author of the poetry (3:1 - 42:6) seems to have fitted his reflections into a traditional story of a man who, having come on hard times, places his trust in God, who intervenes to bring him relief and reward him for his trust. According to Marvin H. Pope in his commentary on Job in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1965, 1973, page xxiv) this is the opinion of most critics. As we will see, there are differences between the prose narrative and the poetic drama in the way God is named and portrayed as well as in the way Job is portrayed. Chapters 32-37 are a later insertion. Other sections, notably chapters 21-27 show signs of being unfinished. The Book of Job is a work in progress, and part of its attraction is that it does not come up with tidy, pat answers to what is clearly a profound dilemma.

What is clear is that the poet is not satisfied with the traditional, simplistic, doctrine of retribution. He faces the terrible, and to him, senseless, suffering that inflicts the human race, and he argues successfully against those who try to defend it by repeating the traditional ‘wisdom’. In the process of his exploration, undertaken with considerable passion, he unveils a God who is mysterious, who arouses strong feelings of rebellion, but finally submission. One thing that emerges clearly from his struggle is that man is not the measure of everything. We must not close in on ourselves. Perhaps his greatest contribution to the human search is to get us to look honestly at our experience and not be satisfied with unyielding dogma. He also encourages us to look outside ourselves at the world, and to see nature, not as a proof of order and predictability, but as filled with the wonder of its Creator. This does not answer our quest for meaning when we suffer, but it might stop us being self-absorbed and imploding into despair.

There is no consensus on a date for the composition. Pope suggests (page xl) that the best guess for the dating of the central poetic dialogue section is the seventh century, which would make it pre-exilic. Others argue from the Aramaisms in the language, and the connections with other Biblical texts, including, perhaps, the exilic writings of the Isaiah School (Isaiah 40-55) to a date some time in the fifth century BC. The arguments are not conclusive. In any case the timing of the composition is not of prime importance, since the poetry explores a question that belongs to every age and is as relevant today as it was whenever it was composed.

As we struggle with Job to find some meaning in suffering, we find ourselves connecting with Jacob. To enter the Promised Land Jacob had to struggle with his demons (Genesis 32:24-32). He carried the scars of that encounter for the rest of his life, but he did enter the land. Job doesn’t find any final answers to his question, but he does come to a point of acceptance, and through acceptance finds liberation.

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Job comes to realise, like the temple singers responsible for that part of the Isaiah scroll that was composed on the return to Judah from exile in Babylon, that God never left him in his suffering: ‘In all their afflictions, he too was afflicted’ (Isaiah 63:9). The psalmist, too, has YHWH declare: ‘I will be with them in their trouble’ (Psalm 91:15). Or, as the Book of Wisdom states: ‘Wisdom descended with him into the dungeon’ (Wisdom 10:13).

If Job was composed after the return from exile, its author may be reflecting on the struggle of his people who were plunged into the terrible suffering of the devastation of their country and exile. This left them scarred, but, against all the odds, and in a way that they could think of only as miraculous, they were back in the Promised Land – ‘the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them’ (Deuteronomy 1:8). The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God of Israel – had proved faithful to them. The faith that the author of Job has in God is not a simple one, nor is it a faith that avoids the difficult questions. It is all the more profound for that.

This translation and commentary is heavily dependent on a translation and commentary by L. Alonso Schökel and J.L. Sicre Diaz (*Giobbe: traduzione e commento*, Borla, 1985; not available in English). On page 713, they offer a definition of a ‘faithful translation’:

Fidelity is not literalism, nor paraphrase, but rather an asymptotic attempt [i.e., one that gets closer and closer to the original without ever actually touching it] to recreate a text as close as possible to the original text. This complex task requires the capacity to re-create a new text, with new semantic fields [the words of the new language having their own history and connections with other words in the language], different symbolic openings [openings into the symbolic world that are not necessarily identical with those of the original language], and original linguistic structures. It is precisely here that we find the ‘betrayal’ (Italian: ‘tradimento’) inherent in every ‘translation’ (Italian ‘traduzione’). Between the delicate penetration of the original text and the emergence of the translated text is inserted the work of the translator which requires creative method and inspiration, discipline and improvisation. To translate the poetry of Job “without adding anything or taking anything away, while conserving as much as possible the shape of the original and its finesse” (Luis de León) is certainly an ideal never to be put aside.

It has been good to have their Italian translation as a guide.