

Job, I

Let us go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we thank You for this evening. We thank You for a beautiful day today and wonderful weather that again reminds us of Your goodness and grace to us and reminds us of the hope of heaven, when we will dwell in a new heaven and a new earth. We thank You for the new life that we see in the spring. We thank You also that You are a loving God who takes delight in engendering new life in those who formerly did not know You. We thank You for the preceding work of Your Holy Spirit in people's lives that prepares them to hear the message of good news and draws them to Yourself. Father, I pray that You would be with all the new believers in Your church around the world. I pray that You would establish them in their faith, that what they have done, what they have said, what they have heard and what they have learned would not be snatched away but that it would germinate in their lives and grow up to be a strong and vibrant plant that will bear good fruit. Lord, I pray now that You would be with us as we consider Job, which is such a challenge and yet also such a comfort to us. We ask, Father, that You would teach us its messages clearly. All along the way may we be sensitive to the leading of Your Spirit. May all that we think, say, and do bring honor to You and not ourselves. For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Job is "one of the grandest things ever written with pen," as the 19th century writer Thomas Carlyle describes it. "A noble book," he continues, "all men's book. It is our first and oldest statement of the never-ending problem of man's destiny and God's ways with him here in this earth. There is nothing written, I think, in the Bible or out of it of equal literary merit." Thus people often sing the literary praises of Job, but were it not such a book of theological profundity I do not think its literary merits would raise quite such adulation from its readers. As a literary masterpiece, however, we should expect it to be challenging. It is not an obvious book. It is a challenging book. As with so many of these wisdom books, it draws us in and asks us to think long and hard about its central messages. I think it is fair to say "messages" because it does have various messages.

What about Job the man? Perhaps that is where we should begin. As we approach the book of Job it is fitting that we begin with the man Job. Who was this man, Job? The only information we have about this man is in the book of Job. But we can talk a little about questions that hover around him. We will go from the ridiculous to the sublime, I hope, as we move more toward a consideration of content. But we need to start with a few questions that may arise in your own minds. One is, what is the meaning of the name? This is often a pertinent question when we are dealing with Old Testament narratives or Old Testament books in general. Here are a couple of examples of names that are pertinent to the people's lives: Elijah, "My God is Yahweh," Elisha, "My God saves." We see how these names are pertinent to the men's ministries. Think of Elijah on Mt. Carmel contesting the prophets of Baal and their taunting question, "Who is God?" Well, Elijah's very name says it. "My God is Yahweh, Yahweh is my God. He is the true God." Yahweh, by the way, is what we think might be the appropriate pronunciation of YHWH, LORD, rather than Jehovah. Does the name Job mean something? There have been various suggestions, and though we are not sure, some of the things it might mean are very appropriate. One suggestion has been that it means "where is my Father?" That was certainly a question that would have been on Job's lips in one form or another. Another suggestion is that the name may mean "one who turns back to God," or "one who repents." At the end of the book Job does repent in dust and ashes: "I cover my mouth and repent in dust and ashes." Another suggestion has been that it comes from the Hebrew word that means "enmity" or "to be at enmity," so that the name Job would mean "the assailed one" All of these make sense: "where is my Father," "the one who repents," "the one who is assailed."

We do not have the information that would allow us to choose between them at this point, but these are some possibilities.

What about the historicity of the man Job? Are we to view Job as a historical person, a real person who actually existed? Or is he only a literary character, the creation of a wonderful theologian philosopher? Is he more like a character in one of Jesus' parables, a parabolic creation, than an historical individual? There is some evidence that would suggest the historicity of Job. Job 1:1, literally translated, begins this way: "There was a man ..." This is similar to other phrases that we encounter in notable historical books. At the beginning of 1 Samuel we read, "There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham ..." This is obviously dealing with historical characters. Judges 17:1 begins in a similar manner. And so it has been observed that it is typical of preambles, the introductions to histories, to begin this way: "there was a man," as opposed to something else that might suggest a different literary type. So that is one small point in the favor of the historicity of Job. Another point might be the fact that generally in ancient Near Eastern, extra-biblical literature, the name Job, or something very close to that, is well known as a personal name. Job was a name that was for real individuals. It is not necessarily some kind of mythic name. This is another piece of evidence, perhaps, for the historicity of Job. Other evidence can be found in Ezekiel 14:14 and 20: "even if these three men—Noah, Daniel and Job—were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD. [...] As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if Noah, Daniel and Job were in it, they could save neither son nor daughter. They would save only themselves by their righteousness." Now, whether you regard this as an evidence of Job's historicity would depend on how you regard the historicity of Noah and Daniel. But I take this as suggestive of three historical individuals. This, I think, is more evidence of the historicity of Job. Also, James 5:10-11 says, "Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy." Job is mentioned right after the prophets. This would, I think, suggest that the writer of James would regard Job as a prophet. Certainly we regard the prophets as historical individuals.

Having said all that in favor of viewing Job as a historical character, let me pose a question. Is it vitally important that Job be historical? What would be lost if this book were a theological/philosophical literary work on the issue of innocent suffering? What would be lost? To my mind, it would be astonishing—of course, God is capable of constructing such a piece of literature—but it would be astonishing if a human instrument of God were capable of this kind of expression if he had not suffered something along these lines. And I think it would lessen our sense of empathy with Job if he were only a fictional character. Therefore I am inclined to take the book as historical. But let me just say this: you will find some evangelical scholars who will say that is not necessarily the case, that Job's historicity is not particularly important. There is a sense in which it is less important that the book of Job be historical than many other passages in Scripture.

Throughout the Old Testament we have the sweep of redemptive history, a redemptive history that begins in the garden with Adam and Eve and sweeps on down to Christ. It is a continuous history. There are certainly gaps in the genealogies and some structuring of those genealogies, but it is a continuous history of God's redemptive acts in history. If we were to take sections out of that continuous story and say, "Well, this is not historical and this is not historical, and the other thing is made up," then we would have a problem. It seems that this history needs to be united and seamless. Job, however, is not really integrated into that redemptive history in quite the same way, although there are some interesting linkages that some have tried to make. There may be some cross references that would pull this

tangentially into the sweep of redemptive history. But that which is central in God's redemptive acts I think we need to stand up for as being historical. But historicity is not as integral to that which is peripheral to that redemptive sweep. It could be that this is a masterful literary work that teaches us these truths. Again, I do believe that Job is a historical book, but I do not think that this particular issue is a test of reformed doctrine because many, many reformed believers and scholars would not hold to the historicity of the book of Job. Both Job and Jonah are a little outside the redemptive historical line. It is kind of like if you are in an art gallery and all the paintings in one room relate to historical events, perhaps even in sequence. If you leave that room and go into another room then you are not sure how you should understand those paintings. And, in a sense, Job and Jonah are in that different room. They are not as integrated into the sweep of redemptive history as the other books. However, there are the little cross references, such as the mention of Jonah in Kings.

Let us talk about the historical setting. Again, my inclination is to take this book as an historical account, or a record of an historical event, in the life of an historical individual. The setting seems to be much like the patriarchal age, the age of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is much evidence that Job is actually set in the patriarchal age. One indication of the patriarchal age is that Job's possessions are measured in livestock rather than gold and silver (1:3). Secondly, Job performs priestly functions, which is typical of the patriarchal period when the fathers, the patriarchs in the family, would sometimes build altars and offer sacrifices (1: 5). Job's lifespan of 140 years is a patriarchal type life span. There are also some details in the text such as the mention of a particular kind of money or jewelry, called *kisita*. The *kisita* is mentioned elsewhere only in Genesis and Joshua. We need to be cautious that, if this is a fictional account, it could have simply been cast in the patriarchal time period. That is one possibility. It is also the case the indications I have mentioned as pointing toward the patriarchal age could point to many different times and cultures. Most of these indications could even be found in some cultures today in which possessions are measured in livestock, for example, or where patriarchs perform priestly functions of a sort. So again, these are just hints in the direction of seeing the account as taking place or being set in an early time.

That is a little about Job the man. What about Job the composition? Job could have been written any time from the time of Moses to the time of Ezra. Again, I think it was written earlier, but we do not know for sure. What about comparative literature? Sometimes we can get a hint from that in terms of when this kind of literature might have been written. Nothing else exactly matches the book of Job. There is nothing quite like it. In fact, some people think that Job is unique among the literatures of the ancient Near East, and certainly as a part of God's word it is unique. But there are other works that pose similar questions: in Sumerian, Acadian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and other languages. All of these works ask the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Certainly these books do not come anywhere near matching Job in terms of theological insight and depth. But there are some surface similarities between them. And some of these works come from quite early periods, which suggests that it is quite possible that Job would have been written early as well. None of these, as I said, is a true parallel, for none measures up to the depth, breadth, tone, and theology of Job. Thus we might say that Job's puzzlement has a lengthy chain of precedent but no sign of direct ancestry. Job did not descend from other literatures, but there are others that bear some resemblance to Job. David Kline in his commentary puts it this way: "Many individual motifs in the book of Job are to be found in non-biblical literature, but no text can with any possibility be regarded as a source or ancestor of the biblical book." It is, in that sense, unique.

There is no indication given in Job as to the author. We are simply not told. It does appear that the author was an Israelite, a servant of YHWH. In the prologue and epilogue the covenant name of Israel's God, YHWH, is often mentioned. However, in the dialogues, in the poetical portion in the middle of the

book, that name is never used except in 12:9. This makes sense that Job and friends would not use the name of YHWH, the covenant name of the God of Israel, as they are described as men of the East. This does not mean they are not talking about the same God, but they did not know Him as YHWH at this time. But the writer of the book seems to have been a servant of YHWH, if not an Israelite himself. Job does take place outside Israel. Some scholars assume that the author must have had experiences similar to Job, both in suffering and in divine encounter. If that is the case then maybe the author was Job. Whether it was someone like Job or Job himself, we really have no way of knowing. We do know that the author was thoroughly versed in wisdom literature and in wisdom techniques. And, humanly speaking, we have to say he was a genius. Theologically speaking we simply say he was inspired.

The structure of Job: chapters one and two are the prologue and the epilogue is 42:7-17. The prologue and the epilogue are in prose or narrative and the rest is in poetry. Job's friends come and sit in silence with him for seven days. He finally breaks the silence with his opening lament in chapter three and then the dialogues begin. There are three cycles of dialogues between Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, with Job responding each time. It goes back and forth between the three friends and Job—through three cycles. In the middle of the book there is an interlude on wisdom (chapter 28). After that interlude on wisdom we have three monologues: the first by Job; the second by Elihu, an angry young man who has some interesting things to say; and the last by the Lord in His appearance to Job in chapters 38-42. Job goes from lament through dialogue, dispute, and even defiance, to contrition in the end.