

Job

by Kurtis Peters

The book of Job (long “o”) is tricky. In the opening chapters we find a man who seems to be perfect and is rewarded for being so. Then Satan arrives and convinces God to let him “test” Job’s faithfulness with afflictions and the death of his children and all his worldly goods. Job laments what has happened and asks God for an answer. He gets rebuked by his friends (for many chapters), but maintains his innocence. Then someone named Elihu appears from nowhere to rebuke him and then Job gets rebuked by God in a whirlwind talking about sea monsters. When Job finally admitted that he had spoken incorrectly, God gave him double what he had had in the first place. It’s a story that is difficult to reconcile with what we know from much of the rest of the Bible.

Some basic notes follow here that will hopefully make some sense of the book:

Job fits nicely into a preexisting genre of wisdom material from the ancient Near East. There are other poems (much older) that deal with a righteous sufferer who is trying to understand the reason for their suffering. The book of Job is Israel’s take on the matter. It is, therefore, commonplace to wrestle with this question. Some call it “the problem of suffering,” but it is better to think of it as the problem of unjust suffering of the righteous person. Seen against this background, and given the sparse information about the setting for Job, it is unlikely that this book was ever meant to be understood as historical fact, at least in the way we think of history today. This somewhat eases the tension of the end of the book when Job gets

double what he had started with, as if all the new children and animals etc. were a quick fix to losing his children in the first place. The narrative parts of the book are more like a parable than a realistic story about a real person.

The book is mostly poetry. There will be lots of poetic repetition. It is also wisdom literature and so there will be lots of speculation about how things work or why things happen the way they do. There are different forms of wisdom literature. Some take the form of proverbs, simple sayings about life that often hold true but cannot be pressed too far. The book of Job seems to be an argument with this proverb-type of wisdom. Job’s friends insist that since something bad happened to him he must have done something wrong. Job denies this and argues back that he is blameless.

Being blameless, just, or upright does NOT mean “morally perfect.” Moral perfection was not the normal way to evaluate a person’s quality in ancient Israel. Rather, the emphasis was on proper behaviour. For Job to be blameless and upright meant that he followed all social and religious decorum appropriately (perhaps better than anyone else). He would presumably still have sinned, but would have performed the appropriate ritual actions to atone for that sin, etc.

Satan. Believe it or not, Satan was always all that bad. By that I mean that Satan wasn’t always thought of as being bad. During much of the time of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament,

the Israelite people seem to have allowed for a divine court of sorts, at the head of which Yahweh sat. Yahweh was ultimately in control. However, there were lesser beings who acted somewhat of their own will, but ever in subservience to Yahweh. Satan, or, actually “the satan,” was one of those. The term “satan” means “the accuser.” It is courtroom language. Given that this person is known simply by the name of their function – the accuser – it is likely that this was his only role. He was not the enemy of God. Of course, by the time of the New Testament, other associations are made with this figure, but at least here the satan is simply part of the divine court and essentially works for God.

The whirlwind and the Leviathan. God eventually responds to Job and mostly tells him that he cannot possibly understand the intricacies of how the world works. This is a traditional answer to the “righteous sufferer” problem in the ancient Near East. God then goes on to describe the majesty of the Leviathan, the fearsome sea monster whom no one but God can tame. This strange image serves two purposes. One, it demonstrates God’s might. Two, and more importantly, it recalls a common ancient Near Eastern story of creation whereby a creator god needs to fight against this Leviathan/Sea Monster/Sea God in order to create the world and provide for humanity’s flourishing. Though Job may not understand his suffering, this last image is one that claims that God really is in the business of defeating chaos and bringing about safety and order.

For a very interesting interpretation of the book of Job, watch Tree of Life. ✨