

## Meditation on the Book of Job

The Book of Job is a work of unparalleled magnificence and power. Its depth of thought and feeling, its shining moments of insight, and the transcendent poetry of the central section all give this a unique place, not only in Scripture but in all of world literature.

This Book also stands apart in terms of its historical setting. On the one hand, certain aspects of Job's life sound much like the life of Abraham. Job's wealth, like Abraham's, was based on numbers of domestic animals. Like Abraham, Job offered his own sacrifices to God without a priestly intermediary. For reasons such as these, many scholars have set the Book in Abraham's time during the middle Bronze Age (2000-1500 B.C.).

Nevertheless, The Book of Job itself offers no historical specificity. Within the Old Testament, where geographical and chronological specificity are common, the introduction of Job has all the vagueness of the traditional opening "Once upon a time in a faraway land." We are told only of "a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job" (Job 1:1).

The location of the land of Uz is uncertain, but it was more likely in Edom than in Israel. The name Uz appears several times as an Edomite name (Gen. 36:28; 1 Chr. 1:42). Associating Uz with Edom makes sense. Job's three friends appear as wisdom teachers, and Edom was famous for its wise men (see "Wisdom in the Ancient Near East" at Prov. 22:17). Indeed Job's first friend, Eliphaz the Temanite, also has an Edomite name (see Gen. 36:15, 16). If Job was an Edomite, then he would not come from the time of Abraham, since the Edomites descended from Abraham's grandson Esau.

Besides a geographical setting that is possibly Edomite and at least non-Israelite, all that the Book of Job provides is the intellectual setting of the wisdom tradition. The wisdom setting is by far the most important context. The Book both speaks within and speaks against the sages, as represented by Job's three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. As these friends try to "comfort" Job, they present the wisdom worldview in speeches that are little more than strings of proverbs. And when Job opposes the friends, he opposes some of wisdom's basic assumptions.

Most significantly, Job rejects wisdom's view that the world is orderly, that all is arranged according to just principles. Job's tragedy is not just. Righteousness does not always result in good fortune. Bad things do happen to good people. His friends' argument - that Job must have sinned to deserve such suffering - only indicates the poverty of this particular aspect of wisdom teaching. Job also rejects the idea that wisdom is to be sought from tradition. If his three friends represent the teachings of tradition, he wants nothing to do with it (Job 12:2,3).

Nevertheless, Job does not give up his search for enlightenment and never completely gives up his hope for justice. Nor does he surrender his faith in knowledge by experience. Indeed, it is experience that he seeks; he demands that he be allowed to see God, to present his complaint before Him. Job's wish is granted in God's majestic appearance and speech (Job 38-41). Not all of Job's questions are answered, but it is enough for Job to have experienced God Himself.

The Book of Job belongs in the context of Israel's wisdom tradition, but at what point in the long history of Israel's wisdom? The story of Job was evidently known to the prophet Ezekiel, preaching in exile in Babylon, who used Job as an example of righteousness (Ezek. 14:14, 20). More certain than when Job's story takes place or when the Book of Job was written is that it came to prominence during and after the Babylonian captivity. It is not hard to imagine why. A people stunned by the destruction of all that they had held dear - their nation, their city, their temple - dealt with the same questions that Job himself confronted.

Since a definite historical setting for the book of Job is unknown, one can read the book in light of the suffering of the Exile and the questions the exiles faced. The prologue (Job 1; 2 ) concerns the question of Job's motive for serving God. Satan insinuates that people lead upright lives because of

selfishness, not because of love of God. God, however, expresses His complete confidence in His servant Job before the hosts of heaven, citing Job to prove that a person can live a blameless and upright life.

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