

Thematic Essay

The book of Job was meant to be a direct challenge to the “normal” view of God and His relationship with us. The book’s title character, Job, is quite possibly the most righteous man on earth, so God allows great suffering into Job’s life to show that he is truly righteous. In the matter of a few verses, Job not only loses his family, but he is also afflicted with a terrible disease. The earliest copies of Job were written in the Babylonian exile, when the people of Israel were suffering for some reason they could not understand. The traditional view of God, as shown in both Deuteronomy and Judges, told the people that God would deem either the entire nation good or evil, depending on whether or not they had obeyed him as a nation. Job seeks to break down this way of thinking, saying that not only is fortune individual for each of us, but our suffering is not related to our moral behavior.

Comment [ 1]: Two-part thesis

It’s important to note that Job never once accuses God because of the things done against him; he simply wants to know why he has lost everything. One of Job’s friends, Bildad, asks him, “Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children sinned against him, he delivered them into the power of their transgression. If you will seek God [...] surely then he will rouse himself for you” (Job 8:3-6). Though his friends continually tell him that he must have sinned, and in doing so deserved his punishment, Job cannot find any fault in himself. In chapter 13 Job states:

Only grant two things to me, then I will not hide myself from your face:  
withdraw your hand far from me, and do not let dread of you terrify me.  
Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me. How many are my iniquities and my sins? Make me know my transgression and my sin (Job 13:20-23).

The God presented here is shown in stark contrast with the God of Deuteronomy, where He is presented as a much more simple, almost cause and effect like

personality. When the people of Israel were told by Moses to enter the Promised Land, they were afraid of the people who occupied the territory. In Deuteronomy it states, "But you were unwilling to go up. You rebelled against the command of the Lord your God [...] When the Lord heard your words, he was wrathful and swore: "Not one of these, not one of this evil generation-shall see the good land" (Deuteronomy 1:26, 34). We see that God operates on a set system: if you obey him and do what he asks, you will prosper; if you do not obey then you will suffer. It's this simple law that Job's friends state over and over; he must have done something wrong to deserve his punishment. They simply cannot understand any other reason why God would allow suffering, much like the people of Israel during the time of the Babylonian exile.

**Comment [ 2]:** Use single quotes to indicate a quote within another quote ("The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.'")

**Comment [ 3]:** Good connection.

Much like the author of Deuteronomy, the writer of Judges wanted to convey that any and all of Israel's troubles were produced by their sins. Again it was a simple matter of cause and effect that God operated on. In chapter 3 of Judges it says, "Then the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (Judges 3:12). Later on it's shown that when the people cry out to God and ask for forgiveness, he delivers them. "But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man" (Judges 3:15). Only a chapter later, the people of Israel go back to their old ways. The book states "The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabith of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor" (Judges 4:1-2). This back and forth scenario resonates throughout the entire book of Judges and echoes the same ideas presented in Deuteronomy. The authors of these books clearly wanted to give a sense of stability to God's action; they wanted to give defined causes to Israel's suffering. The writer of Job seeks to challenge this thought; he believes God's actions are too much for the human mind to understand. When God finally confronts Job near the end of the book, He states:

Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor. [...] Then I will also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can give you victory (Job 40:6-14).

In Job, God's reasons for Job's suffering are His own; He tells Job that he could not possibly understand divine reasoning. In other words, the things that happen to us are not solely dependent on how good we are. Sometimes bad things happen to good people.

The book of Ecclesiastes stands in opposition the three books mentioned above. Its author claims that the suffering we encounter is simply a part of life. In the first chapter of the book the author writes, "It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see all is vanity and a chasing after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight" (Ecclesiastes 1:13-15). We see that the writer certainly has a different view on life than the authors of both Deuteronomy and Judges. While both of those books place human suffering in their own hands, Ecclesiastes presumes that God has put suffering into our existence no matter what we do; it's the prevailing theme of life. This has a similar tone to what Job cries out when he is being tormented. He says, "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? Why were there knees to receive me, or breasts for me to suck? Now I would be lying down and quiet; I would be asleep; then I would be at rest" (Job 3:11-13). Both authors argue that there is no point in human existence; if life is so meaningless why should we even be born? Another similarity between the books is the rather abrupt change of tone in their last chapters. After chapter upon chapter of loathing and questioning life, Ecclesiastes ends with a much brighter statement. The conclusion states "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil"

(Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). In a similar matter, only even more abrupt, the ending of Job tries to give the reader a happy ending after showcasing all of Job's suffering. The author writes, "And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord have Job twice as much as he had before" (Job 42:10). The church could have easily added both endings on at a later time to bring the readers' thoughts away from the overall depressing nature of the books. To ignore the troubling nature of the books would be a disservice the original authors thought; they wanted people to think about God in a new way.

Comment [ 4]: Yes. Thank you.

Though Job and Ecclesiastes are probably my two favorite books in the Bible, there is certainly room for books like Deuteronomy and Judges. They seek to give us a set law; some sort of pattern to work with and some people desire this. I don't think the author of Job wanted to completely tear down all that these books had set up; he simply wanted people to think about God a bit differently than they had before. It's not the standard "do good works and you will live long and prosper" (star trek quote intended) that was set forth in previous books. The writer of Job wants to leave us with the idea that you cannot define God; He doesn't operate in patterns. There is a purpose to His actions, but it is far beyond us; I personally would much rather think of God in that way than any other.

Comment [ 5]: Again, thanks!

Comment [ 6]: Very nicely argued; you do a good job of putting the whole question of biblical suffering into the post-exile context. I especially like your discussion of tacked-on endings (much like the newer ending of Mark).

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