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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 03: JOB – 1

BIBLICAL READINGS:

Read the course citations from the book of Job as you study the units on this book.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK:

The book of Job (pronounced “Jobe”) is included in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, known as the *Ketuvim* or “Writings.” In Christian Bibles, Job is included with Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs as the first book of the “wisdom writings.”

AUTHOR AND DATE

The author of the book of Job is unknown, as is its date. While some scholars think it was written between the 7th and 4th centuries BC (see Note 1), there is internal evidence in the book that it might be much older. Job appears to have lived in the patriarchal age before or around the time of Abraham. The book tells us that Job lived for 140 years after the events it describes (42:16), giving Job a total lifespan of some two hundred years. This great age is commensurate with the lifespans of the patriarchs mentioned early in human history where Abraham, for example, is said to have lived for 175 years (Genesis 25:7-8).

There are other clues that support a very early date for Job. Job was a common West Semitic name in the second millennium BC, around the time of Abraham. The Sabeans and Chaldeans mentioned in the story (1:15, 17) were nomads in Abraham’s time, but not later. Job contains no reference or allusion to Israel, the tabernacle, or the Mosaic law, and the social and religious aspects it describes are characteristic of the patriarchal age. For example, Job’s great wealth is measured not in terms of silver or gold, but by the livestock he owned (1:3; 42:12), as was the case in patriarchal times (for example, Genesis 12:16 and 30:43). The book of Job uses the word *shaddai* (“The Almighty”) for God – a name that was commonly used in patriarchal times. Just like Abraham and his immediate descendants (Genesis 22:2; etc.), Job functioned as a priest, offering sacrifices for his own family (Job 1:5). Literary works similar in some ways to the book of Job were written in Egypt and Mesopotamia around the time of the patriarchs.

These and other details are consistent with a narrative written in patriarchal times rather than one written about them later. That is why the book of Job is sometimes regarded as the oldest book in the Bible – written before the books of Moses that begin our Bible today. But even if the book was written down later in its present form, the story on which it was based is clearly a very old one.

STRUCTURE AND NATURE OF THE BOOK

The book of Job consists of three major sections: a short prose prologue or introduction, and a short prose epilogue or afterword, which frame the poetic dialogues and monologues that are the main part of the story. This combination of prose and poetry is not unusual in the Bible where discussions and reflections on wisdom were often placed in poetic form.

Within the central poetic section of the book there are clear sub-sections. After a monologue by Job, there are three dialogues between Job and his friends followed by a closing monologue by Job which asks: “Where can wisdom be found?” (28:12) and concludes that it has been hidden (28:21). This core of the book is followed by a speech by the character Elihu, who argues for God’s justice and righteousness (chapters 32-37), and two speeches by God himself (chapters 38-41).

While some have attempted to argue that different parts of the book were composed at different times, recent biblical studies have tended to favor the view of the book's unity.



Job and his Friends by Ilya Repin, 1869

Although the author of Job was probably an Israelite, the story is set outside of Israel – perhaps in southern Edom or northern Arabia – but the location of “the land of Uz” is not known for sure, and “Uz” may have been a general term for the area east of Israel (1:3 and Jeremiah 25:20-21). Job also contains a number of allusions to the major ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt – both of which had stories of suffering individuals, though none of these were closely similar to that of the book of Job (see Note 2).

The language of Job has a large number of words and grammatical forms not found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and the twelfth-century Jewish scholar Ibn Ezra concluded that the book must have been written in some other language and translated into Hebrew. Some modern scholars have suggested that the foreign words and foreign-looking forms are literary devices designed to lend authenticity to the book's distant setting, but this view seems unlikely.

CHARACTERS AND ROLES IN THE BOOK

Job: According to the prophet Ezekiel (sixth century BC), Job was a man renowned for his righteousness, along with Noah and Daniel (Ezekiel 14:14). Early Jewish commentators regarded Job as a prophet of the Gentiles, but nothing is known of him outside the biblical account. His wealth is described as considerable.

Job's Wife: According to one Jewish tradition Job's wife was Sitidos or Sitis – a name which may have the same root as the word Satan in Hebrew or be based on Sotah (“unfaithful wife”). However, although she is often thought of in negative terms, we should remember that she had suffered all the same losses as Job and still stayed with him during his physical affliction.

Job's Daughters: The book of Job tells us that his daughters were not only beautiful but were also heirs of Job's estate along with their brothers (42:15). This was not possible later under the Mosaic law if a man's sons were still living (Numbers 27:8), showing another indication of the story's antiquity.

The Sons of God: In many cultures of the ancient Near East, the “Sons of God” were lesser gods of the pantheon. In Israel, the term was used of angelic beings who were part of a heavenly “council.”

The Satan: Note that the Hebrew uses the definite article, showing this is a title rather than a name in the book of Job. “The Satan” means “the accuser,” and the being appears as a kind of prosecuting attorney in the heavenly council. The Bible uses the same term for one who brings charges against another in a human legal court (Psalms 109:6).

Eliphaz the Temanite: Teman was in Nabataean territory near the famous city of Petra in present day Jordan. As we will see, much of what this first of Job's friends has to say can be summarized in his statements: “Who, being innocent, has ever perished?” (4:7) and “Blessed is the one whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty” (5:17). In other words, Eliphaz implies that Job must have sinned, and he should accept his punishment so that God would accept him again.

Bildad the Shuhite: Shuah was a son of Abraham and Keturah, and an uncle of Sheba and Dedan, which implies a southern origin for the second of Job's friends. Bildad agrees with the outlook of Eliphaz, but adds a twist – that Job's children may also have sinned and brought destruction on the family: “Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right? When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin” (8:3-4).

Zophar the Naamathite: Naamath may possibly be the same as Jebel el Na'amaeh in northwest Arabia. The third of Job's friends follows the same arguments as Eliphaz and Bildad, and also stresses that Job doubtless has done something to offend God in some way, and that God should not be faulted because he doubtless was punishing Job less than he deserved: “Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves” (11:6 ESV).

Elihu: Following the speeches of the three friends and Job's replies, a fourth man, Elihu, appears and speaks. Elihu is identified only as the “son of Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram” (32:2) but appears to be a servant of God. In chapters 32-37 Elihu condemns Job's three friends, justifies God, and also confronts Job: “He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God. He burned with anger also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong” (32:2-3). Elihu accused Job not of wrongdoing, but of not seeing God's wisdom and purposes. Importantly, Elihu was the only one of Job's friends who was not reproved by God (42:7).

PERSPECTIVE AND OUTLOOK OF THE BOOK

The arguments of Job's three friends are all versions of the ethical understanding of ancient Near Eastern peoples (and many others since then) that all human suffering is a result of sin or of angering God/the gods. Both the ancient Israelites and their neighbors believed that they suffered because of divine inattention, that God or the gods turned away from those who offended them in some way. This is termed the retribution principle – that we suffer because of what we have done. There was a fundamental difference in the understanding of the principle, however. In most ancient cultures people believed the gods were angry with them not as a result of their ethical or moral failings, but because they had failed to be attentive to the gods and had not supplied enough sacrifices, for example. In this polytheistic worldview it was not always clear which god had been offended or what the offense was, and those who suffered often attempted to appease the god or gods by means of prayers, magical incantations, or gifts such as extra sacrifices.

The biblical approach was very different. In ancient Israel those who suffered often presumed it was a result of their moral failings and sins, and the basic understanding that everything goes well with the righteous and ill with the wicked is frequently found in the Wisdom Literature – it is clear in the opening psalm (Psalm 1:1-6) and throughout the Proverbs, for example. This idea is not biblically untrue in the sense that the Bible does teach that a great deal of suffering in the world is self-caused and the end result of individual or corporate sin (Genesis 3:1-19; Isaiah 1:1-9; etc.). But the book of Job looks at the question of suffering more deeply to examine what other reasons there might be for the misfortunes we experience and observe in the world. It is this penetrating depth that gives the book of Job a unique position among the biblical wisdom books and ancient world literature as a whole. We will consider what the book of Job teaches us in this regard in the next unit of this course.

* Note 1: A late date for the book of Job is often suggested due to the presence in the work of Aramaic words which might indicate that the book was composed as late as the Babylonian captivity or afterwards when Aramaic replaced Hebrew in everyday speech. But that presumption has been challenged, since numerous Aramaic inscriptions have come to light from the second millennium BC. Thus, the presence of Aramaic words in Job does not detract from the many internal indicators of an early date for the composition.

* Note 2: Although a so-called "Job motif" of a suffering righteous person has been said to appear in ancient Mesopotamian texts such as the Sumerian text known as "A man and his god," the Babylonian text known as the "Babylonian Job," and Egyptian texts such as the "Dispute of a man with his Ba," these texts are really only parallel in that they look at the question or fact of human suffering. The book of Job remains unique not only in its format, but also in its ascription of the possibility that suffering might sometimes be the result of other, more profound, factors.

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Background Basics

1. In what way is the book of Job unique among the "suffering man" stories of the ancient Near East?
2. Why is the central section of the book of Job in poetic form?
3. Who was Elihu in the book of Job and why is he significant?

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