

God, Evil and Suffering

Week 2: The book of Job

The Book of Job is a central point of reference for any theological discussion about God and suffering. It appears to be the only book in the bible that offers anything like a direct approach to the question “why do bad things happen to good people?”. It has been commented on more than nearly any other book in the bible, although serious thinkers have come to very divergent conclusions about what its central message might be.

The book seems to come in three basic sections: a short prose prologue, that introduces Job, Satan and God, and the idea that God has allowed the Satan – the Accuser – to test Job’s righteousness by attacking him. Then there are the poetic dialogues, which mainly consist of a length back-and-forth between Job and his friends, until God finally appears and addresses Job. Then there is another short prose section, which recounts how Job’s fortunes are restored. Biblical scholars are undecided about how to understand the relationship between the different parts of the book, or whether some portions of the book are older than others. For the purposes of our discussion, we will treat the book as whole – or try to, at least, because it’s not easy to figure out what the book as a whole might be saying.

To get a sense of some of the main issues that emerge in the Book of Job, let’s think about some of the relationships between the characters in the book.

1.

First of all, let’s consider the relationship between God and Satan – the accuser. This is recounted in the prose prologue to the book, and is not referred to at all in the poetic dialogues that make up the bulk of the book. That’s an important detail, because Job and his friends do not know what we, the readers of the book know. They don’t know that Job is being tested, that he is being attacked by Satan, with the express permission of God.

The story begins with a point of disagreement between God and the accuser concerning the nature of Job’s piety: does Job, as Satan puts it, “fear God for naught?” Or, might it be that his devotion is motivated by his good fortune? Perhaps, the accuser implies, Job’s devotion and righteousness is really focused on his own prosperity – the desire to keep it, and protect it. After all, Job is so concerned to avoid sinning that he even makes sacrifices on behalf of

his children, after they've had a feast. So God's decision to allow Satan to destroy Job's prosperity, children, and eventually to afflict his body, is motivated by the need to prove this point to Satan: that Job's love of God is authentic, not self-interested. If Job remains pious even after disaster has struck, then the authenticity of his worship will be beyond doubt, and Satan will have been proved wrong.

What should we make of this? At one level, this seems to present God in an odd light: insecure, and vulnerable to the suspicions planted by the Satan; willing to allow the worst suffering simply to prove a point. But there might be a deeper point here, because the question of reward and retribution is central to the whole book, as we will see.

In fact there is a deep puzzle here: one central theme in the Hebrew Bible is the link between righteousness and reward; sin and retribution: God is the one who rewards and punishes appropriately. The book of Proverbs is one expression of this basic idea, or the famous words from Deuteronomy chapter 30:

'See I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD, your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.'

But the very existence of this scheme brings with it a problem: perhaps we worship God out of fear, or insecurity, or even greed. If those who fear the Lord are *always* rewarded, and the wicked are *always* punished, then righteousness will always be in one's own interests. And this might mean that no-one – perhaps not even God! – can ever know what motivates a person's righteousness. In other words, it could seem that the retributory scheme seems to threaten the possibility of disinterested relationship between God and people.

The question of motivation had become important issue around the time of the first Hebrew prophets, like Amos and Isaiah. The prophets denounced those who concerned themselves only with the external matter of religious practices. As Isaiah put it: "these people draw near with their mouths and

honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote.”

In a sense, then, the conversation between God and Satan is a question about the heart: how deep does Job’s piety go? Does the promise of prosperity for the obedient mean that his obedience is a form of prudence, acting in such a way as to ensure his ongoing health, prosperity and well-being? God agrees to let Satan test this, so as to resolve the dispute, by removing his health, prosperity and well-being.

2.

Now, let’s think about the relationship between Job and his friends. Job is not informed about the wager between God and the Satan, so, from Job’s perspective, his sudden downfall appears to be “for nothing”, or without a reason. But this is precisely what Job’s friends contest: they claim that his suffering is *not* “for nothing”; it *must* be a just punishment for some hidden sin. And if this is the case, then the best response for Job will be repentance.

For his part, Job begins by lamenting his situation, and after refusing to curse God, as his wife suggests, he curses instead the day he was born. But then Job begins to protest that God has turned against him, despite his innocence. In response to these protests, Job’s three friends insist that God treats people in accordance with their righteousness, rewarding the obedient and ensuring the downfall of the wicked. In response, Job only increases the vehemence of his protest, and in the end, Job and his friends mainly seem to talk past each other, with the friends simply repeating the same point over and over: if God seems to be against Job, it must be because of his sin, and designed for his correction. And Job doesn’t really address the friends a great deal, either – he tends to direct his speech back to God, who is the only one who could provide a satisfying response to his complaint. In fact, a fair portion of Job’s complaint does not concern the sufferings that he has undergone at the hands of Satan, at all: it concerns the accusations of his friends, which he experiences as persecution.

So we can note that there is a parallel between the two disagreements – the one between Job and his friends, and the one between Satan and God. On the one hand, the question at stake between God and Satan is whether there is a hidden reason for Job’s piety, in the sense of a motivation; does Job fear God

“for naught”? On the other, hand, the issue between Job and his friends is whether there is a hidden reason for Job’s suffering, in the sense of a cause, or purpose.

And both these questions are related to the idea of a retributory scheme, where disaster follows sin, and prosperity follows righteousness, ruled over by God. If the relationship between God and humans is governed by this scheme, or rule, there is always the chance that worship is secretly motivated by desire for reward, or fear of punishment. God cannot be confident that he is worshipped authentically – perhaps the people worship with their lips, knowing that he is listening, whilst their hearts are far from him. And at the same time, if the events of life *are* governed by this scheme, in accordance with some hidden divine wisdom, then there is always the suspicion that if someone is suffering it is because they *must* have sinned – because someone like Job cannot be suffering “for naught”. So belief in the retributory scheme changes how we see suffering our own, and that of others. Right from the start, then, in the Book of Job, the question of how we understand the significance of our own suffering is inseparable from how others understand our suffering, and suffering in general.

Another important thing to say is that in some sense, Job himself seems very conflicted about this belief. In one sense, he is challenging the friends’ commitment to this scheme: he claims to be an exception to the rule that they believe in. It is as if he is saying: it *can’t* be true that God punishes the wicked, and protects the righteous, because my suffering is not in proportion to anything I’ve done. His own experience counts against the scheme. But at the same time, his complaint is based on the view that God *should* protect the righteous, and bring disaster to the wicked – his view of what is just motivates his complaint. It’s because he thinks that God *should* reward, or protect, the righteous, and yet hasn’t, that he is so indignant.

3.

How about the relationship between God and Job? Unfortunately, sometimes the strangeness of what happens in the book is missed in simple summaries. In the prose prologue, God seems to be proud of Job – highlighting him to those who walk in the heavenly court, including the accuser. And at the very end of the book, God restores to Job double all that had lost, and “blessed the latter

part of Job's life more than the former part". Mysteriously, God also says that Job—and only Job—has "spoken right of me". In contrast, God is displeased with the speech of Job's friends, and commands them to offer sacrifices so that he will not deal with them "according to their folly". In fact, intriguingly, God only restores Job's fortunes *after* he has prayed for his friends.

But the book seems to remain unclear on exactly how and why Job has spoken rightly of God. When God finally does answer Job, it seems as though God is rebuking him. God speaks from the middle of a storm, and the main thrust of the message is to emphasise God's transcendent rule over all creation. God poses a series of rhetorical questions to Job, all of which emphasise Job's incapacity to fully understand or judge over God. But what is strikingly absent from God's speech is any mention at all of the central point over which Job and his friends are arguing. *Is Job being punished?* Does God, as the friends claim, reliably bring about the downfall of the wicked, and watch over the righteous? In his final speech, God makes no mention of this at all. So it could seem as though this is another case of a conversation that doesn't really happen: God does not address Job's complaint, at least, not in any obvious way.

Job's response to God, after his speech from the storm, is brief, and seems to involve Job affirming God's claim that Job has spoken of what he did not understand. It might even seem as though Job has, after all the protesting and complaining, finally repented, as his friends had urged him from the outset. He says:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes."

Unfortunately, though, it is not clear exactly what Job is repenting of, and what this has to do with God's claim that Job has spoken well of him. And, to make matters more difficult still, the question of how to translate these verses into English is very controversial, and there is a wide range of scholarly opinion on this question.

But however we understand the nature of Job's 'repentance', we are left with a key question, at end of the book. Why is God pleased with Job, and displeased with his friends? Given that Job is, in some sense, the hero of the

book, it could make sense to say that God somehow approves of Job's defiant attitude, his refusal to accept that just because he is suffering, he must therefore have sinned. In this vein, we might think ahead to Jesus' and his disciples interaction over the man born blind. The disciples are looking for some connection between suffering and sin, and ask whose sin is being punished. Jesus refuses all connection between suffering and sin, and instead treats the blindness as an opportunity to glorify God. Perhaps, then, we should understand God's approval of Job, and God's displeasure with the friends, as a challenge to the very idea that suffering has anything at all to do with righteousness or unrighteousness. It was a test, that is, an opportunity for God to display Job's righteousness.

But then, what are we to do with the fact that God does seem to rebuke Job, quite fiercely. And that Job does repent. What is he repenting of; and what does this have to do with the fact that Job has to offer sacrifices on behalf of his friends? What have they done wrong, exactly, if, in the end, Job really did need to repent, in dust and ashes?

The ambiguity is increased when we realise that Job himself is never told about God's agreement with Satan: Job does not know that he has been tested, or why. His fortunes are restored – although, of course, nothing can compensate him for the children he has lost, and nothing that Job receives from God can compensate Job's children. But Job, at the end of the book, is none the wiser as to why he suffered as he did.

4.

Before we look at some attempts to interpret the book as a whole, it might be helpful to make a few obvious observations about what the book emphatically does not do, or, how it differs from ideas or theories that have become common the Christian world:

- Sometimes Christians have tried to explain suffering caused by the natural world through the idea of a fall, so that once sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, and that the consequences of sin somehow spread through the natural world, so that the natural world itself is 'fallen'. The Book of Job does *not* do this.
- On the contrary, the Book of Job actually assumes that the natural order, as it is, is a sign of God's wonderful power; in the context of God's speeches to Job at the end of the book, it would not really make sense

to talk about a 'fallen' natural order, because it is the natural order to which God appeals when he answers Job.

- Equally, sometimes Christians have tried to explain some kinds of suffering with reference to the idea that there are spiritual powers in rebellion against God; so that – for the time being, at least - the work of Satan and other demonic powers conflicts with what God wants and intends for the world. This, in a way, is connected to attempts to explain or understand the relationship between God's goodness and suffering through the idea of free will: if Satan and the demonic powers are created free, then there is a sense in which God is not responsible. God could not conceivably create free beings and at the same time determine what those beings do.
- But the Book of Job does not do this, either: Satan's activity is very specifically allowed by God, as an exception to what would otherwise happen: Satan is very much God's servant, in the prose prologue. And in the end, God's speech from the storm undercuts any idea that God is not ultimately in charge of everything.
- Having said this, the book of Job *does* associate suffering with the activity of Satan, but Satan is not rebelliously causing havoc in the world in a way that God is unable to control, due to his respect for free will; again Satan is specifically given permission to cause certain harms to one person.

So whatever one makes of these two ideas as sources of explanation for the suffering in the world – the appeal to the consequences of the fall; the appeal to Satanic power – the Book of Job can't be the main support for them.

What we should make of the book – what it is saying, remains quite mysterious and contentious, I think. I'd like to finish by considering consider some of the interpretative problems that appear in the book, and some of the options for resolving them.

Firstly, we can ask whether we as readers supposed to take God's response to Job as a satisfying one? Is the vision of God's mastery of the natural world that Job is presented with a satisfying response to his existential protest against innocent suffering? We might put the point like this: has Job *learned* something – and if so, what? The strange thing is that God's speech to Job emphasises things that both Job and Job's friends have explicitly *agreed* upon a number of times: that God is the creator and ruler of all things. But Job was not

arguing with his friends about whether or not God was the creator of all things, they were arguing about whether or not Job deserved to suffer in the way that he did.

Secondly, what exactly did Job get right?! Job spoke well of God, we are told. But *what* was it that was right? Was it some particular thing he said, or the attitude with which he spoke? Or, was it what he did *not* say – his consistent refusal to agree with the friends in their attempts to explain his suffering? Or perhaps it was just Job's final words that God approves of: when he admits that he has uttered what he did not understand; and repents in dust and ashes.

Finally, what are we supposed to make of the restitution of Job – recounted in the prose epilogue to the book right at the end? Is this Job's reward, for having endured the test? Or, does this mean that the retributory scheme that the friends remain committed to is infallible after all – that, *in the end*, the righteous will get what they deserve, and the wicked will, *eventually*, be ruined? But if that is true, then it seems as though really it was the friends that spoke well of God – they, after all, are the ones wholeheartedly committed to the reliability of the sin-punishment pattern.

Our view of what the book, as a whole, might have to teach us, will depend on how we resolve these, and other, issues. We find that commentators have come to very different conclusions about what the book, as a whole, has to teach us. I'll just briefly introduce three examples.

Let's start with a striking and controversial example, from two Jewish philosophers: the 20th century Jewish philosopher, Ernst Bloch and the contemporary philosopher, Hami Verbin. Bloch says that the important thing about Job is that when Job addresses God, he stands on moral ground, and appeals to justice. In contrast, when God answers, his answer is completely *amoral* – it is just an appeal to the impressiveness of creation. In other words, the striking thing, on Bloch's account is the moral emptiness of God's reply – the book is the predecessor of atheism; it is humans learning that they must be morally independent of religious authorities; that whatever raw power lies behind the physical universe, moral judgement is up to us, and there is no judge in the heavens waiting to give each what they deserve. Similarly, Hami suggests that the end of the book we are to conclude that God, in a sense, has failed to answer Job, and Job comes to accept this. Job came to God with a moral complaint, and all God could come up with was an appeal to power.

However, many Christian commentators have found something profound and moving in God's reply to Job at the end of the book, and in Job's repentance. For example, the Catholic philosopher Eleonore Stump, thinks that Job's final words help us to see the significance of God's speech from the storm. Job says: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you." Stump thinks that the powerful point here is that Job is given *not* an answer to his question, but an *encounter* with the God he has been worshipping. He receives the dignity of being addressed, person to person, by that God. His suffering, and his persistence in seeking God, have mysteriously been used to draw him into deeper relationship to God. He remains in the dark about the nature of his suffering, but he has been allowed to address God, and to be addressed in turn. Perhaps, then, this is the lesson of the book: that suffering is somehow a route into a deeper understanding of God, even if it remains unexplained.

Another possibility is to see the book as reflecting a tension within the ancient Hebrew worldview, one that is not ultimately resolved at all. The biblical scholar Walter Bruggeman points to a conflict happening within the pages of the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand we have what Bruggeman calls 'the core testimony', which is that God is faithful and just, and keeps God's promises to Israel. But on the other hand, we have a 'counter-testimony', which challenges this, and calls it into question, through the Psalms of lament and even Job's protest. The Book of Job is the most significant expression of this counter-testimony, and this is perhaps why the heart of the book seems to be the speeches of Job and his friends – rather than the 'happy ending' at the end of the book, which can seem rather superficial by comparison. Bruggeman suggests that we should see the thought of the Hebrew Bible as a result of the tension between these two strands, or testimonies – it is a productive tension, and reflects a problem that we ourselves have to live with, and through.

That should be enough to briefly introduce the puzzle of the book of Job – and we will have time in our seminar, and in the course as a whole, to explore how we ourselves deal with the issues with which the book is concerned.