Job: Introduction and Commentary on Job 19

Adapted from "Job," Basic Bible Commentary, by Gregory M. Weeks

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Introduction
The moment you open the book of Job, you enter a mysterious world. Strange words and phrases bombard your senses. A shady character named Satan challenges God. An old man curses his sores and calls the Lord a variety of ancient names. When God speaks, it's not in any manner we recognize. The divine voice is heard over the roar of a whirling dust storm.

In spite of this alien nature—or perhaps because of it—the book of Job has a magnetic quality. When Rabbi Kushner wrote his best-selling book When Bad Things Happen to Good People a few years ago, he began with an interpretation of Job. In so doing, he continued a millennia-old tradition: When people suffer, they turn to the experiences and wisdom found in this ancient book. In journeying with Job as he wrestles with cruel and unexplainable pain, people encounter God in a new and different way.

This same opportunity is open to us. If God is to speak to us in this manner, though, our eyes must first grow accustomed to the unfamiliar world of Job.

Job: The Man and the Legend
Job was the central character in a popular story circulated in the ancient Middle East (the region around the Mediterranean Sea that included Egypt, the Sinai peninsula, and Canaan). Job was a wealthy man living in Uz, which possibly was the ancient country of Edom, an area east of Palestine in the Syrian desert. He was a semi-tragic figure in that he encountered intense—and undeserved—hardships. He lost possessions and health, and became a social outcast. Throughout these sufferings, brought on as a result of a heavenly dispute, Job did not “curse God.” In the end, consequently, his possessions, health, and status were restored.

The biblical writers were well acquainted with this story. References to Job were made by Ezekiel (14:14, 20) and James (5:11).

As was the custom in ancient Middle Eastern literature, the name signifies the nature and action of the character. Job has been traced to a variety of meanings stemming from both Hebrew and Arabic roots: one who is at war with God; one born to be persecuted; and the repentant one are possible interpretations.

How the Book Was Written
As Israel lived with its neighbors, it was natural that ideas and experiences of those countries found their way into Israelite culture. The Hebrew sages reflected upon these impressions within the context of their faith in the Lord (Yahweh). The result was the
Wisdom Literature found in the Old Testament. This literature is philosophical, with an emphasis upon teaching: Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, several psalms (1, 34, and 92, for example), and parts of other books.

Job is included in this wisdom tradition. In the early sixth century B.C. the Babylonians enslaved the citizens of Judah and deported the useful ones to Babylon. This period of biblical history, known as the Exile, was traumatic, causing a crisis of faith for those who believed in God's providential care.

It was against this historical backdrop that the book of Job was written. A wise man/poet of Judah found the ancient legend to be an appropriate vehicle by which to examine faith in God in light of the national catastrophe. The tale he appropriated and edited may be found in the prose portions at the beginning and the end of the book (1:1-2:13; 42:7-17). The first part describes Job's sufferings and his virtuous character, while the last portion depicts the restoration of Job's fortunes. The poetic section in between reveals the poet's painful crisis of faith.

The exception to this is the section containing Elihu's speeches. These chapters (32:1-37:24) are viewed by many scholars as being foreign to the original poem. They were probably penned by a later hand.

The Theme of the Book
It is popular to say that the central thrust of the book of Job is dealing with the question, "Why do the righteous suffer if there is a loving God?" This is actually, however, a sub-theme. The major motif instead is the larger question, "What is the nature of faith—how are we to relate to God?"

The poet verbalizes, through the mouths of Job's friends, the popular theology of ancient Israel. Put simply, this theology is: Do good, and God will reward you; do evil, and God will punish you. This is the idea of divine retribution.

Job's replies to his friends, on the other hand, refute this simplistic theology. He stubbornly maintains his righteousness, asserting that his suffering cannot be based on anything he did. If Job is correct, then the theology of his friends—and of the ancient Hebrews, somewhat—has become bankrupt.

Stripped of such an easy view of faith and the world, how, then, can one approach God? This theme is a reflection of the times in which the poet wrote. The nation was in shambles. The old principles and certainties had been turned upside down. Through the words of Job the poet searches for a faith that will discover God in the midst of fear and chaos.

The Structure and Text of Job
The bulk of the poetry section—the part sandwiched between the prose beginning and ending—consists of the dialogue between Job and three “friends” who come to console
him: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. The conversation follows a set form: Eliphaz speaks, Job replies; Bildad speaks, Job replies; Zophar speaks, Job replies.

This forms a cycle of speeches, and there are three such cycles. (The third cycle, 22:1-27:23, is not complete, containing only the speeches of Eliphaz and Bildad, along with Job's replies.) Preceding and following this series of speeches, Job gives a pair of eloquent soliloquies regarding his suffering (3; 29:1-31:40). A fourth friend, Elihu, follows Job's last soliloquy. Instead of conversing with Job, he makes a long series of speeches (32:6-37:24).

The poetry section concludes with the dialogue between God and Job. God makes two speeches, with Job responding to each. With this conversation the conflict is resolved, leading to the prose conclusion.

The Hebrew text of this poetry section is very poor in places. As can be seen in the footnotes in the NRSV, translators in many instances had to make educated guesses regarding the meaning of a word or phrase. In addition, the third cycle of conversation between Job and his friends appears abrupt and illogical in places. …

**A Hint on Reading the Book of Job**

To enter Job's world is to enter an environment alien to us. Consequently, while it is important to get a clear understanding of a passage, at times this is impossible. Ancient ways of looking at the world, corruptions in the text of Job, and uncertain Hebrew words and phrases assure us of this.

Using another instrument—your own experience—will help you deal with such a limitation. Read Job with one eye on his world and another on your own world. Read the book with an understanding of your own pain and the pain of those around you. Ask yourself if the words you find on Job's lips or on his friends' have ever been on your own.

The gap between Job's world and ours—made by the centuries that have passed since the poet first scratched on parchment—is enormous. Reading the book with your own experiences just under the surface will help bridge that gap. By doing this you will share the poet's wrestling with the Lord, and his ultimate victory will be yours as well.

**Introduction to Chapters 18-19**

Bildad's first speech (chapter 8) to Job was biting. A fiery preacher by nature, this friend tried to persuade the sufferer through a "hellfire-and-brimstone" sermon.

As noted in Part 5, the second cycle of speeches is characterized by each side realizing that the other will not change. They consequently give up on each other. In Bildad's second speech (chapter 18), he retires his preaching role: Job will never repent.

Bildad, freed from needing to help Job see the light, now expresses himself freely. What he attempts is simple: Put Job in his proper place. He criticizes the sufferer for
questioning the wisdom of him and the other two (18:2-4). He then fills the rest of his speech with several images descriptive of the fate of the wicked. These images, though, are but slightly veiled references to Job. His anger burns deeply, and one can almost detect glee in his voice as he paints the picture of destruction.

Bildad portrays himself as a pedantic and bitter man. There is little new in the address. On the contrary, in addition to harping again on the theme of divine punishment, he uses phrases similar to those in his first speech. He also cuts the speech short, as he did his first one. His anger, or the fact that he runs out of images, contributes to this.

Job's response (chapter 19) is both predictable and surprising. He responds to Bildad's insults with insults of his own (verses 2-3 and 28-29). He also continues indexing how God is pursuing him, a theme in his previous speech (16:11-14).

What is new in this discourse is that in the middle of it he collapses. His anger at his friends and at God had been enough to drive him in his defiance. But now we hear, Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends (19:21a).

As he recalls how all have forsaken him, it is simply too much. His pride breaks, and he beseeches the three men—the ones who are his fiercest tormentors. He still needs human company.

It is important to note that as he tries to persuade them, he once again voices a heavenly hope. He expresses confidence in an emerging Redeemer, or vindicator (19:25). Earlier, he had hoped for an arbitrator (9:33) who could restrain God's power. He next dreamed of a witness who could vouch for him (16:19). Now, he looks toward a Redeemer who can administer justice (see the commentary on 19:25 below).

In terms of critical consideration, Bildad's speech is fairly clear, while Job's contains murky passages: Verses 4, 17, 20, and 26-27 are very difficult to understand. Their structure, along with their phrases, is so complicated that an accurate interpretation is impossible. They reflect the mind of a depressed and anxious man. …

Rebuke of Friends (19:1-6)
Although these verses criticize his friends, the anger has receded. The predominant tone, in keeping with the rest of the chapter, is one of lament: Job is saying, in essence, “Look at what is happening to me, and how you've hurt me!”

Job begins by sarcastically using Bildad's expression, how long (see 18:2). Compare break me in pieces (NRSV; NIV, crush me) with 18:4.

Ten times (verse 3) is a poetic way of saying repeatedly (see Numbers 14:22). The phrase is not to be taken literally.

Discovering the exact meaning of verse 4 is impossible. It may mean that only Job knows whether or not he has sinned; his friends, who are accusing him, have no such
knowledge. It may also mean, taken in light of the following verses, that God is making Job's "sin" remain with him; hence, there are unjust grounds for continued persecution.

Job's friends may be blaming Job, but they should blame God, since God is unjustly dealing with him (verses 5-6). Net may refer to the ancient pagan creation legend. The sea monster Leviathan, symbolic of chaos, was trapped in the net of a god (see the commentary on 3:8 and on chapter 41).

**Lament of God's Injustice (19:7-20)**
Job further elaborates on this theme from his previous speech (16:7-14). He continues viewing God as a vicious soldier relentlessly attacking him (verses 7-12). The intensity with which Job feels this violence is conveyed in the brutal language he uses. God has walled up, set darkness, stripped, taken, uprooted, and kindled.

In verses 13-20 Job lingers on the last and most painful horror thrown at him by the rampaging deity: the curse of a life devoid of any family or social support. Note the totality of the loneliness experienced by Job in this section. He mentions all those who could possibly lend support but do not.

Verse 7: Job no longer believes the one thing he previously thought undeniable, namely, that the Almighty is a deity of justice. God has forsaken the cause of the powerless.

Compare walled up my way (verse 8) to hedged in, 3:23.


Compare he breaks me down (verse 10) to he breaks me with breach upon breach (16:14). My hope may refer to his children (see 18:16-19).

Verse 12: The soldier imagery of God, a favorite of Job, runs throughout the book. (See 10:17; 16:14; 30:12.)

The difficulty with verse 17 is seen in comparing the NRSV and NIV translations with the KJV: My breath is strange to my wife, though I entreated for the children's sake of my own body. Many scholars feel the rendering in the KJV is more accurate. Job is describing the repulsiveness of his appearance: the stench of his horrible breath and decaying body. This description parallels verse 20, where Job returns to describing his body. Such descriptions point to God's wrath.

The first part of verse 20 has roots in some lament psalms (see Psalm 22:17). It is a graphic depiction, along with other places in Job (2:7; 7:5; 16:8; 30:17, 30), describing the results of the disease ravaging him. The phrase in the second part of the verse has become a modern proverb. It may mean that he is starving to death because his teeth have fallen out and he can only eat with the skin of his teeth, namely, his gums.
Expression of Hope (19:21-29)

Job has frightened himself with the preceding description of his lonely plight. It is more than he can bear. Desperately overlooking his knowledge that his friends will never change, he grovels before them, pleading for understanding companionship (verses 21-22). In an almost bizarre turn, he tries to force them to help him. He asserts in the remaining verses (23-29) that he will be justified after all. His friends, hence, should show compassion or they will meet the sword of divine wrath (verse 29). This foreshadows the conclusion of the book (42:7-10).

This request must have stunned his friends, since Job is irrationally asking them to abandon their theology. They believe that no one should befriend one who has been touched by the hand of God (verse 21).

Verse 22b carries the meaning, “Why do you verbally abuse me, seeing that I am suffering enough in the flesh?”

In verses 23-24 Job is forcefully expressing his certainty in his own innocence.

Although Redeemer (Vindicator) sometimes refers to God (see Isaiah 63:16), it also refers to a relative who avenges a person who has been wronged (2 Samuel 14:11) and to one who administers justice on behalf of the weak (Proverbs 23:10-11). It should here (verse 25) be seen in the context of Job’s earlier desire for a divine being who can stand up to God on his behalf.

Verses 26-27. These notoriously difficult verses seem to express the hope that God—after being confronted by the Redeemer—will turn favorably to Job. The sufferer again voices his irrational desire for a life after death; compare this to 14:13-17. Perhaps because he senses the impossibility of this, he expresses his impatience for the work of his Redeemer: My heart faints (NRSV; NIV, yearns) within me!

His friends’ “sin” is not just found in their hurting him. It also lies in their belief that Job is guilty: The root of the matter is found in him (verse 28b; NRSV; NIV, the root of the trouble is found in him).