

An Introduction to Job

Who?

Within the text of the book of Job, there lurks a mystery: the mystery of the disappearing and suddenly materialising characters. Exploring this mystery allows us some insight into the questions scholars have raised when seeking the book's author.

First of all, there is the question of the character of 'the satan', or 'the accuser'. In Hebrew, this character is named 'Hasatan (הַשָּׂטָן)', which implies a counsel for the prosecution in a legal context, but of most interest for our purposes, after making his case in the first two chapters, 'the accuser' disappears. Given the overall structure of Job, where we have a prose intro, a long poem, and then a closing piece of prose, one might expect 'the accuser' to reappear at the end, but he never does.

As we delve further into the book's structure, we notice that the central poem itself follows a pattern. We have a speech by Job, followed by speeches from each of his three friends, or advisers. Job speaks, then Eliphaz speaks, then Bildad speaks and finally, Zophar speaks. This pattern repeats three times ... or does it? Not quite. In chapter 26, Job delivers his lines, but just when we expect Zophar to come in, he vanishes.

So, we have two characters mysteriously vanishing, but that's not all, because, just when we've got used to the structure of Job, in comes Elihu, without any warning, and offers up a monologue of his own. Two vanishings and an unexplained appearance. What are we to make of this?

These mysteries have led to a great deal of scholarly debate about the composition of Job. Some people believe that the disappearances can be explained by saying the book consists of an ancient folk story, to which has been added a poem, part of which is lost. A later writer, trying to reinterpret the poem, has then inserted Elihu to sum up the arguments and take the theology in a new direction. The trouble with this hypothesis is that it is also widely agreed that the book of Job marks a high point for Hebrew poetry. This is brilliant stuff. If it's so great, then, it makes more sense to suppose a single author, or at the very least a single editor who knew exactly how to make great literature work.

When?

Treating the book of Job as a single piece of work does the most justice to the poetry, but it does not point us to exactly by whom, or when it was written. Estimates for its date range from the 10th Century BC to the 2nd, so at some point during those 800 years is the most likely.

Unlike other books of the Bible, Job makes no references to historical events to help us out on this score. One way of estimating its date is to look at the theme of suffering and ask when the Israelites might have been pondering such material. This could place it at some time during the Babylonian exile, but, to complicate this estimate, the reference to the 'heavenly beings' in chapter 1, verse 6 is unique in biblical literature and likely to be older than the exilic period.

What we do know is that Job is set in the land of Uz, which was not in Israel and the character's only other mention in the Hebrew Scriptures is in the book of Ezekiel, where Job is named in a list of righteous non-Israelites. The inclusion of Job in the Bible, therefore, points to the fact that the Israelites believed they could learn lessons from foreigners as well as that righteous foreigners could have a relationship with *their* God. As we saw in Genesis, the Hebrew bible is not all about exclusivity.

Why?

It's difficult to answer the questions 'who?' and 'when?' for the book of Job, but 'why?' is probably more straightforward. This complex and brilliant poem is a piece of philosophical wrangling with the question of why bad things happen to good people. In a way, it's fitting that we don't know when Job was written, because its theme of suffering is timeless.

In Job we see also how human rationalisations of suffering fail to provide answers to the problem. First, Job's three friends give up in their attempts and then Elihu arrives with a new approach, which is equally futile. In the book of Job, the answer to the question of suffering is only found when we see the world as God sees it, a vision which the anonymous author of Job wonderfully captures in some of the most powerful poetry of the Bible.