An Introduction to The Book of Job

“Tomorrow, if all literature was to be destroyed and it was left to me to retain one work only, I should save Job.” (Victor Hugo)

“…the greatest poem, whether of ancient or modern literature.” (Tennyson)

“The Book of Job taken as a mere work of literary genius, is one of the most wonderful productions of any age or of any language.” (Daniel Webster)

High praise indeed for a book that is not all that well known (and rarely read) in Christian churches. Most of what Christians know about the long-suffering Job is from the Epistle of James in our New Testament: “You have heard of the patience of Job and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” (Jas 5:11) That segment of verse is familiar to almost everyone who attends church services. It is, however, not a very balanced view of Job since it ignores about nine tenths of the verses in the telling of his story. What most people know of Job is basically what James tells us and that is merely the beginning and the end of the story. James conveniently leaves out the juicy parts in the middle. The vehement (and very nearly blasphemous) protests of the supposedly patient Job will shock many of you. After reading this book in a study group, you may come away with a different perspective of just how patient old Job really was. Thus we have one of the reasons to study this amazing piece of literature.

Job is the first of the five books commonly referred to as “The Books of Poetry”. These include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. They are written in a poetic style, in contrast to the narrative style of most of the other books of the Old Testament. Although they do not rhyme like a Dickinson verse when read in today’s English translations, they are, nonetheless poetical. These books are also referred to as “Wisdom Literature” (especially Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes). Oswald Chambers (1874-1917) offered this concise summary of the five books and what they teach:

- Job - How to suffer
- Psalms - How to pray
- Proverbs - How to act
- Ecclesiastes - How to enjoy
- Song of Solomon - How to love

My first serious reading of Job took place shortly after finishing Rabbi Harold S. Kushner’s huge best-seller When Bad Things Happen to Good People sometime back around 2004. In chapter two of that amazing little book on suffering, he writes that “[Job] is a hard book to understand, a profound and beautiful book on the most profound of subjects, the question of
why God lets good people suffer (Kushner, 37).” Reading Job after reading the Rabbi’s book made me look at Job’s story in a different light. God chose to make Job suffer. No, He did not afflict him with boils or kill his children, He let Satan do that. But God permitted it to happen to this honest, upright, God-fearing man. And this brings to light a point made by Kushner (to his eternal credit). He does not shy away from an issue that has always bothered me and perhaps bothers many: “The Bible, after all, repeatedly speaks of God as the special protector of the poor, the widow, and the orphan, without ever raising the question of how it happened that they became poor, widowed, or orphaned in the first place (51).” A study of the Book of Job may help us to better understand why these things still happen in our world. As he says in the title of chapter three: “Sometimes, There is No Reason.”

Since we have recently (and painfully) completed a study of Isaiah this next point is made. In his exhaustive study of the book of Job (written as part of the Anchor Bible Series), Marvin H. Pope tells us that “…Job is in a sense the type of any and every man who experiences the mystery of seemingly senseless and undeserved suffering. The notion that Job, like the Suffering Servant of Yahweh in Isa 52:13 – 53:12, represents the nation of Israel in a sort of historical allegory is intriguing. (Pope, 35)” That likelihood is diminished when you realize that Job is a descendent of Esau but the comparison is still very alluring. As Christians, we hijacked the Suffering Servant as a precursor to our own Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. I am quite certain that there are members of the Jewish faith who might argue with us for doing so using Professor Pope’s rationale. That is just another note to ponder while reviewing this text.

Author: To be precise – we’ll never know with any degree of certainty. The editors of the Zondervain study Bible claim that Job was not the author but that whoever he was (or they were), the author was an Israelite. They base this claim mainly on the fact that the Israelite covenantal name, Yahweh (the Lord), is used more than 25 times. Pope in the Anchor Bible Series writes that “it is scarcely possible to speak of the ‘author’ in the modern sense of the word since… virtually all biblical books are composite in some degree (37).” Many Jewish sites that I have researched claim Moses himself as author. To my first point – we’ll never know for sure.

Date: Two dates are involved. Rabbinical opinions range from the era of the patriarchs (circa 2100 to 1550 BCE) down to the Persian period. Some believe that Job lived in the time of pre-Judaic Abraham, predating even Moses. Like the patriarchs he lived more than a hundred years. Job’s wealth, like that of the patriarchs, was measured in cattle and slaves. The mention of the raids by Sabeans and Chaldeans would match this to the second millennium BCE as well.
Language: There are more rare words and words that occur only once in Job than in any other book in the OT. Therefore, the book is difficult to translate because of these unusual words and the style of the writing. Even the pre-Christian translators (those of the Septuagint or LXX) seem to have been somewhat flummoxed since the Septuagint version of Job is about 400 lines shorter than the Hebrew version. Pope’s exegesis relied heavily on recently discovered (as of 1974, that is) Ugaritic texts upon which some believe that the story is based. Like the authorship – we will probably never know if we are reading an accurate depiction of the story as it appeared when first written on parchment.

Theological Themes and Message: When good people suffer, the human spirit struggles to understand. Zondervain’s editors pose a question for the ages: “If God is almighty and “holds the world in his hands” and is truly good, how can he allow such an outrage? (NIV, 727)” The possible answers to that question are troubling to say the least. If we choose three possible answers they might be 1. God is not almighty. 2. God is not (always) just. He has a mean streak in Him. 3. Humans can be innocent and still suffer. For the Jews of ancient Israel, however, these were unacceptable concepts. It was indisputable to them that God was almighty, that He is perfectly just and that no human is without sin of some sort. Therefore, any evil visited upon Job must have been deserved. In the world of Job’s contemporaries, every person’s suffering was seen as a measure of their guilt in the eyes of God.

As modern Christians we might find that concept harsh and unfeeling. Are we bound to suffer while spending time here as mortals? Is the concept of evil inescapable? Susan Garrett, writing for the Presbyterians Today in March 2005 explains it this way:

"...Paul writes, "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Paul is saying that God regularly turns even bad things to good ends. When we affirm God’s providence, we are announcing our confidence that “God provides for the world by bringing good out of evil, so that nothing evil is permitted to occur that God does not bend finally to the good” (Study Catechism, question 22). Thus God permitted Joseph’s brothers to take him captive, but though they meant it for evil "God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20).”

As a separate part of this introduction I am including a re-print of this very informative and well-written article by Garrett. It is worth the time it takes to study the concepts she puts forth as we commence our study of The Book of Job.

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I. JOB’S DISTRESS (1-3)
   A. HIS PROSPERITY (1:1-5)
   B. HIS ADVERSITY (1:6-2:13)
   C. HIS PERPLEXITY (3)
II. JOB’S DEFENSE (4-37)
   A. THE FIRST ROUND (4-14)
      1. Eliphaz (4-5) - Job’s reply (6-7)
      2. Bildad (8) - Job’s reply (9-10)
      3. Zophar (11) - Job’s reply (12-14)
   B. THE SECOND ROUND (15-21)
      1. Eliphaz (15) - Job’s reply (16-17)
      2. Bildad (18) - Job’s reply (19)
      3. Zophar (20) - Job’s reply (21)
   C. THE THIRD ROUND (22-37)
      1. Eliphaz (22) - Job’s reply (23-24)
      2. Bildad (25) - Job’s reply (26-31)
   D. YOUNG ELIHU SPEAKS (32-37)
      1. Contradicting Job’s friends (32)
      2. Contradicting Job himself (33)
      3. Proclaiming God’s justice, goodness, and majesty (34-37)
III. JOB’S DELIVERANCE (38-42)
   A. GOD HUMBLES JOB (38:1-42:6)
      1. Through questions too great to answer (38:1-41:34)
      2. Job acknowledges his inability to understand (42:1-6)
   B. GOD HONORS JOB (42:7-17)
      1. God rebukes his critics (42:7-10)
      2. God restores his wealth (42:11-17)