

Faith & Worship Unit 18 Project — The Book of Job by Michael Prince

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The first question you might ask is why study Job? Job is a longer than average book of the Old Testament- roughly equivalent to the books of Samuel or Kings. For a book of this length it is unique in being devoted to one subject- and that a matter of constant concern to Christians, the problem of pain. However it rarely appears in the lectionary. Has it anything to say to us?

Job is one of the 'Poetic Books' along with Psalms, Proverbs Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon and was probably written in the 5th-7th century BC.

Job is usually regarded as a fictional book. It features a man from Uz- though the location of Uz is not known,

Job(Ayyub) is one of 25 prophets named in the Quran. His story is similar to that in the OT except that his 'comforters' are his brothers.

In the OT he is a rich, successful and righteous man who suffers a series of tragedies, losing his family, wealth and good health in a series of hammer blows of fate brought about by Satan, with the consent of God, in order to test the strength of his faith.

The first two chapters and last eleven verses of the book, (prologue and epilogue) are in prose and the remainder in verse.

The prologue sets the scene and describes Job's torments and suffering. Job's response to the loss of his family and possessions is expressed at 1, 21.

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.

When he loses his health he comments similarly at 2, 10:*shall we accept good from God and not trouble?*

Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Termanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite arrive to sympathise and comfort Job. They sit with him and do not speak for seven days.

The verse section starts at 3.1 and until Ch 27, 23 a series of frank discussions takes place.

The three friends hold that God is almighty and God is just so Job must face up to the wrong he has done and crave God's forgiveness.

The Book of Proverbs asserts that our actions produce consequences.

Job's 'comforters' have distorted this to say that bad consequences must be caused by sinful actions.

Job makes the same error and insists he has been treated unfairly and has nothing to repent for. He wants to put his case to God in person. Job is famed for his patience but is this really the case? After the

dignified resignation of Ch.1 v 21 and Ch.2 v.10 he spends 16 of the next 25 chapters complaining about his treatment.

Is this patience?

Perhaps not as we understand it but it is perseverance in faith. Job loves and trusts God but cannot understand his treatment. He longs for an answer from the God he loves. In this he is more faithful than his comforters for whom there are no questions to be answered. In Chapter 19 verses 23-26 Job shows his ultimate faith:

O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock for ever!

For I know that my redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.

Job's words and the deaf ears of his friends bring home the intense loneliness of sorrow. 'Laugh and the world laughs with you; cry and you cry alone.'

Job speaks constantly of the past- he believes he has no future. He is close to despair but crucially does not give up.

Chapter 28 which seems to stand on its own is a poem about wisdom which reaches a climax in verse 28: *The fear of the Lord- that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.*

Chapters 29-30 see Job summing up in his defence comparing the life that he had with his present state of humiliation and sorrow, and in Chapter 31 refuting his friends' accusation that he had earned his ill-fortune by a sinful life.

Chapters 32- 37 feature Elihu, a young man who is angry with Job for his self-justification and with the three friends for failing to convince him. In essence though Elihu has little new to say.

In Chapters 38-39 The Lord speaks to Job questioning him about creation and nature, question after question. In Ch 40 verse 1: *The Lord said to Job:*

"Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!"

Then Job answered the Lord, "I am unworthy, how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer- twice but I will say no more."

God goes on to rebut Job's claims of injustice by presenting images of the monsters Behemoth and Leviathan, representing the supreme forces of evil and challenging Job to bring them to heel. God seems to be saying: 'I wrestle constantly with the forces of evil- don't tell me how to do my job.'

It is important to consider the Jewish attitude to the Book of Job. The Jews know more than anyone about undeserved suffering:

David Ariel in *What do Jews Believe?* (1996) writes (p.105):

God's answer to Job is the classical answer of Judaism to the question of human suffering. God is transcendent and his nature is unknowable. We can relate to Job's anguish and loneliness. God's silence about the fairness or injustice of his fate leaves him in a state of religious despair. Trust in God can never be again taken for granted.

Yet the voice within the tempest strangely brings Job the desolate peace of a man who accepts his fate and the abyss between human and divine understanding.

The very existence of God as the creator of the universe gives our lives meaning. The only way to make our lives bearable when we cannot find answers is to recognise that some answers are beyond us.

And what message is there for us?

One message for Job and for us is humility. There is much we cannot know but so often those who worship God behave as if they have all wisdom.

But for Christians Job has a particular message for us. Job is a blameless man subjected to suffering and almost despair. Job had wealth and happiness and was robbed of both, but Jesus had the supreme wisdom and goodness of God and yet was made to hang and suffer.

In the story of Job, but unknown to him is the presence of Satan who has inflicted Job's suffering on him though with the consent of God.

In considering Job I could not help thinking of the man in Leicester, a devout Moslem whose house was burnt down and family murdered by people seeking revenge, but at the wrong house. But there are countless other good people who are suffering in the wars of the Middle East.

God is almighty and ever-loving but he does consent to the forces of evil having their way. In *John for Today* by Neil Richardson, writing of John 6, 70-71 he says (p105):

.....there is a divine providence at work even in Judas' betrayal of Jesus, because, even the devil, it is implied, serves the purposes of God.....in his betrayal are focussed the difficult questions of human free will and responsibility, and the place of evil in the purpose and providence of God.