

JOB AS A WHOLE :: The book of Job is one of the most complex in the Bible. Translating the poetic Hebraic vocabulary is attune to trying to translate Shakespeare into a foreign language. The book is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to date in terms of the time and place of composition. The first verse, which situates the whole story, is more like the vaguely open-ended "once upon a time" than a specific datation like we see in the gospels. The book opens and ends with prose: a narrative story telling of who Job is, how he came to be in this story, and then what happens after the whole experience. In between the book is all poetry asking questions that are rhetorical, theological and existential. I'm convinced that the reading of Job is more about the form than the content, it's to be read as literature more than history. It's much more about and entering into the story and the questions it asks, then it is about looking for specific historical dates and sociological constructs to compare to our own of today.

Theology is talk about God. The great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas begins his great work *Summa Theologiae* from the assertion that "we cannot know what God is but only what God is not." He's saying that God is a mystery. It's not unknowable, but rather a mystery that is revealed in scripture, life, experience of the divine and wrestling with human life. The Liberation Theologian Gustavo Gutierrez says that "the revelation of the mystery of God leads to its proclamation to every human being." When the mystery is revealed to us in explosive glimpses and unexpected whispers we are then pushed and pulled to proclaim, share and testify to both the mystery and how it reorients our life, setting us into motion as the new creation.

The story of Job, of the wager between God and the Satan over the paragon of a righteous human being: Job, has to be read on its own terms. It comes from the time of the Exile, when the Israelites were captive, foreigners in a foreign land, forced to assimilate to a different culture and to adopt belief in a pantheon of foreign gods such as Marduk (chief god of the Babylonian pantheon), and Nebo (son of Marduk who was the chief god of the Assyrian pantheon). The story is primarily told in a back and forth of questioning. Job speaks, then a friend of his, then Job, then another friend. Throughout the whole give and take are numerous repetitions, which are essential to notice as literary devices. The questioning of who God is and what Job has done, ends with the intervention of God who basically asks "who are you to question me?"

The beginning chapter set ups the questioning meditation on doubt and silence, as well as suffering and theodicy: the question of divine goodness and providence in the light of the persistent existence of evil.

THERE WAS ONCE A MAN IN THE LAND OF UZ :: the beginning of the book seems to signal the "long ago and far away" character of the story. No one knows where Uz was. The story doesn't seem to be rooted in history. Nevertheless, it asks important questions, including the Satan's: Do we love God for what we get out of the relationship, or do we love God for who God is?

Job 1:1-22

New Revised Standard Version | (NRSV)

¹ **THERE WAS ONCE A MAN IN THE LAND OF UZ** whose name was Job. That man was **BLAMELESS AND UPRIGHT**, *one who feared God and turned away from evil.* ² There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. ³ He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. ⁴ His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵ And when **the feast days** had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their **HEARTS.**" This is what Job always did.

⁶ **One day** the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and *Satan* also came among them. ⁷ The Lord said to *Satan*, "Where have you come from?" *Satan* answered the Lord, "From *going to and fro* on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." ⁸ The Lord said to *Satan*, "Have you considered **MY SERVANT** Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a **BLAMELESS AND UPRIGHT** man *who fears God and turns away from evil.*" ⁹ Then *Satan* answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? ¹⁰ Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹ But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." ¹² The Lord said to *Satan*, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So *Satan* went out from the presence of the Lord.

¹³ **One day** when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, ¹⁴ a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, ¹⁵ and the *Sabeans* fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁶ While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁷ While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The **Chaldeans** formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁸ While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, ¹⁹ and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you."

²⁰ Then Job arose, **tore his robe, shaved his head**, and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹ He said, "**Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD.**"

²² In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

Luke 17:5-6

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶ The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

BLAMELESS AND UPRIGHT :: "the first word carries the sense of perfection in terms of completeness while the second is connected with the idea of straightness." (M. Pope) These two words are often associated with each other in the First Testament: "May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in you." Psalm 25:21 | "Mark the blameless, and behold the upright, for there is posterity for the peaceable." - Psalm 37:37

one who feared God and turned away from evil ::

repeated in verse 1:1 and 1:8 and 2:3 this expression is the classic Hebrew way of describing a person that is righteous, following and loving God, walking the way of Yahweh. Fear means more respect than terror. Consistently this moment from faithfulness to God and rejection of evil are juxtaposed in the First Testament: "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil." Proverbs 3:7 | "The wise are cautious and turn away from evil, but the fool throws off restraint and is careless." Proverbs 14:16 | "By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord one avoids evil." Proverbs 16:6

the feast days :: we easily forget that the expression "feast days" means high holy days in terms of Hebraic culture, the particular times in which worship of Yahweh was prescribed and expected. Job does the sacrificial job of the priest as Balaam did in Numbers 29:36. The author is telling us again that Job is righteous, walking in the way of Yahweh, blameless in his faith: a paragon of righteous faith.

One day :: biblists suspect that this day is New Year's Day (Rosh Hashana) when the good are immediately inscribed in the book of life and the wicked are blotted out. It's the time at which Yahweh renews the covenant. In Mesopotamian culture it's the day in which the pantheon of the gods assembled to determine destinies for the coming year. Is this an intended comparison between different theological views of the divine in the exile? The Mesopotamians saw this as the assembly of the godly court before the chief god. It implies that *the Satan* is part of this royal and divine court, gathered to report back to the chief divinity.

HEART :: in the First Testament "heart" rarely refers literally to the bodily organ, but rather to the center of the human being's thoughts, emotions and being...more like what we call both our heart and our soul.

Satan :: probably best translated "accuser," it's more of a title than a name. In chs. 1-2, the word always occurs with the definite article. According to the text the Satan's job is to investigate human beings and report on their activities. This is also present in the text of Zechariah 3:1-2. The verb from which the word "the Satan" derives means "to roam, or rove" giving an implication that *the Satan* is to roam the world and report back to god. A play on words is thus intended in 1:7 in which *the Satan* replies that he has been *going to and fro*.

MY SERVANT :: many others persons through whom Yahweh intervenes in the world are designated specifically as servants of the Lord including Moses, (Exodus 24:31) David (2 Camel 7:5, 8), Isaiah (Isaiah 20:3) , the prophets and even Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 25:9).

went out from the presence of the Lord :: the Accuser leaves and is no longer present implying that God is fully in charge, or behind, what transpires next: the suffering of Job.

Sabeans :: an ancient people speaking an Old South Arabian language who lived in what is today Yemen, in the south west of the Arabian Peninsula, identified with the biblical land of Sheba.

While he was still speaking :: notice the use of repetition

Chaldeans :: or the Babylonians, the people and empire who conquered, destroyed and carried both Judah and Israel off into captivity.

tore his robe :: this was a culturally appropriate physical expression of grief and brokenness. We witness it throughout both testaments: Genesis 37:34, Joshua 7:6, 2 Samuel 1:11, Ezra 9:3, 5 and Esther 4:1.

shaved his head :: this was also a culturally appropriate physical expression of mourning. We witness it throughout both testaments: Isaiah 22:12, Jeremiah 7:29, Ezekiel 7:18, Amos 8:10)

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away :: this expression evokes the notion of the human condition as expressed throughout the First Testament from just after the eating of the fruit in the Garden of Eden...up unto what Paul tries to say about all being sinful. Other expressions of our human reality include:

"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Genesis 3:19

"As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands." Ecclesiastes 5:15

"Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them".. because all must go to their eternal home, ... and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. 8 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity." Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

"Hard work was created for everyone, and a heavy yoke is laid on the children of Adam, from the day they come forth from their mother's womb until the day they return to the mother of all the living." - Sirach 40:1

"²¹ But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ[d] for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, - Romans 3:21-23

BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD :: this benediction occurs also in Psalm 113:2 "Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time on and forevermore."

AS YOU READ AND REFLECT ON THESE TEXTS:

☞ What grabs your attention, shimmers or troubles you in this text?

☞ God finds the "perfect" human being in Job. The dialectic question asked by the story is then is such faith freely given? Does Job love God for what God does for him? Or does Job worship Yahweh freely, independent of what can be attained through it, because Yahweh is intrinsically worthiness to be loved?

☞ Does Job receive this suffering from God, or is Job participating in the agony that God knows through God's covenantal relationship with creation? Put in another way, in your own life do you experience times of suffering in your life despite your faith, because of your faith, independently of your faith?

☞ We can observe that people generally fall away from God in "easy times" and turn back to God in "hard ones." How does that relate to the opening of the story of Job? How do you relate to that? Do we love God for what we get out of the relationship, or do we love God for who God is?

☞ How do you struggle with faith in God's presence, purpose and goodness? What might you need to let go of in order to let God be God, not just the God you imagine?

My reading of Job is heavily influenced by

Gustavo Gutiérrez. *On Job God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*

J. Gerald Janzen. *Job*

Marvin Pope. *Job*