

Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

H. Job: the mystery of innocent suffering

Activity 8.11

It would be a great advantage to have read the book of Job through, perhaps several times, before embarking on this section.

Nobody knows who wrote the book of Job nor how it came to be written. It is the story of a man who lived in the land of Uz – but nobody knows where Uz was. Nor does the book tell us when Job lived.

Moreover, nobody is sure what the message of the book is meant to be. On the surface it deals with the problem of innocent suffering, but it also opens up a range of other topics: disinterested obedience to God under testing, social oppression, religious experience, pious charity, the nature of God and humankind's relationship to him.

For Anthony Hanson, the fundamental question of Job is: 'How can someone be righteous before God?' The question of Job's supposed innocence raises the deeper question of whether anyone can be said to be innocent at all and whether anyone has a right to stand before God. For Bernhard Anderson, the subject is the character of a person's relationship with God. If it is about suffering, as it appears to be, the book offers no simple, straightforward answer. Perhaps before we can appreciate the message of this book and discern what it is saying, we need to have sat where Job sits.

H1. The structure of Job

The Plan of Job

1 Narrative Prologue

2 *the reader is told why Job is suffering*

3 Job' First Soliloquy

he wishes himself dead

"First Cycle of Speeches"

4 Eliphaz

5

6 Job

7

8 Bildad

9 Job

10

11 Zophar

12 Job

13

14

"Second Cycle of Speeches"		
15	Eliphaz	30 <i>he protests his righteousness</i>
16	Job	31
17		32 Elihu: pompous and long-winded
18	Bildad	33
19	Job	34 <i>he insists he has solved the problem</i>
20	Zophar	35 <i>the purpose of suffering is discipline</i>
21	Job	36
"Third Cycle of Speeches"		37
22	Eliphaz	38 Yahweh's First Speech
23	Job	39 <i>the incomprehensibility of Creation</i>
24		
25	Bildad	40 Job's acknowledgement
26	Job	and Yahweh's 2nd speech
27	Job	41 <i>pedestrian and limited in scope</i>
but some seems to belong to Zophar		
28	Independent Wisdom Poem	42:1-6 Job's repentance
29	Job's Second Soliloquy	42:7-end Narrative Conclusion

The book is written almost entirely in poetry but has a prologue and epilogue in prose. Successive commentators have been puzzled because of what they see as a discrepancy, even contradiction, between the message of the poetical parts of the book and the prose parts. The prologue and epilogue present a simple and straightforward explanation of Job's suffering, portraying him as enduring his trials patiently and setting everything right at the end, when Job is rewarded for his righteousness. In contrast, in the poetry Job is anything but patient: he rails against what he sees as divine injustice and repeatedly demands that God come and explain himself.

Chapters 3 to 27 are arranged in three 'cycles'. There is an opening speech from Job, then each of Job's three companions makes a speech to which Job replies. The third cycle appears to be incomplete: there is no speech of Zophar, but some of the things Job says are the kind of things we would have expected Zophar to have said.

Chapter 28 is a magnificent poem on divine wisdom but has no relation to the problem of Job. In some ways it anticipates the speeches of God in chapters 38 to 41, thus giving the 'answer' of the book before the end.

Elihu is introduced abruptly in chapter 32. He is not mentioned in the book's opening nor in the epilogue. His speeches are markedly less good poetry than the rest of the book and he has a different ready-made explanation of suffering to the other companions, namely that suffering is intended as a discipline. Although one older commentator called Cornill thought that Elihu's contribution should be seen as the answer of the book, few others have agreed with him. Many think that the Elihu speeches are a late addition.

Towards the close of the book are two speeches of Yahweh. The first is magnificent; the second is pedestrian and seems completely redundant to the argument.

Thus it appears that the book is a compilation. First, there was a folk-tale about the sufferings of a righteous man called Job, who actually appears as a legendary character in Ezekiel 14:14 and 20. This story has been used as a basis to investigate the problem of suffering either by one writer or a group of writers. At some stage in the formation of the book, the original folk-tale has then been added as the prologue and epilogue. Whether the authors have actually come to a conclusion is open to question!