

Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

H2. Job: The message of the prose passages

The introduction takes up chapters 1 and 2 and the epilogue chapter 42:7-end. By the end of the introduction the three companions have been introduced but we hear nothing of what they say to evoke the Lord's wrath at 42:7. Either the account of the conversation has been replaced by the poetical passages or, more likely, the prose passages have been specially composed to frame the poetry. But this provokes the question: if the prose passages were composed with the poetry in mind, why should there be a discrepancy between the two? Or perhaps, the discrepancy is not so great as first appears ...

The introduction begins with the presentation of Job as an exemplary righteous character: not only 'blameless and upright' but also prosperous, which was a sign of God's blessing. He is so pious that he even offers sacrifices on behalf of his children 'just in case' they have inadvertently sinned.

In verse 6 the scene switches to the divine council and we are given a glimpse of Job from the heavenly point of view. One of the council is 'the satan' or 'adversary'. His accusation is that Job's piety is not disinterested: the reason he fears God is that God is blessing him in return. In other words, the prologue begins by posing a question to the orthodox view that pious conduct leads to blessing. The prologue asks, is this actually the case, and, if so, should it be?

Satan is given permission to test Job, which he proceeds to do. In chapter 1 he takes away his cattle, sheep and children and Job responds in an exemplary righteous way: his prosperity has all been the gift of Yahweh, who has a perfect right to take it away, so he continues to bless the Lord (verse 22).

Since that failed to work Satan applies for permission to go further (notice that the infliction of suffering is firmly under the Lord's control). In chapter 2 he afflicts Job with loathsome sores. This time, to test Job even further, his wife urges him to give up being pious since it is getting him nowhere, but Job continues to respond in his exemplary pious way, refusing to blame God for his troubles.

Finally in the introduction the three friends are introduced. We are told nothing about them other than their names. Teman is an Edomite place-name, so we can infer that Eliphaz came from Edom, which had something of a reputation for wisdom (Obadiah 8-9). The other names tell us little more, though since they are probably not Israelite they may point towards the international outlook associated with the wisdom teachers. The three companions come to sympathise with Job in his troubles. They sit with him on the ground for three days, saying nothing, which was a very good thing to do because as soon as they open their mouths (in the poetical section) they contribute to Job's suffering.

The conclusion tells us that Job has survived the test. His companions are disgraced and Job has to pray to Yahweh to prevent him from punishing them. Job is given precisely twice as much livestock as before; he has the same number of sons and daughters, but his daughters are extremely beautiful. He lives a long life of 140 years and sees his great-grandchildren; in other words, he enjoys all the conventional blessings of a righteous man.

So what is the problem? Only that, as we have seen, the poetry appears to turn the neat scenario of the prologue and epilogue on its head. In the prologue, despite all the bad things that happen to him, Job does not sin with his mouth. The poetry opens with Job cursing the day of his birth. However, we have already seen that the supposedly pedestrian and orthodox prologue in fact raises a fundamental question right at the start. Perhaps the disjunction between the two is not so great as we might suppose.