

The patience of Job

The next section of the Old Testament is a collection of writings that contain wisdom and poetry. The book of Job is the first of these, and probably the oldest, for the Hebrew language of Job is archaic and difficult to translate. There are clues that Job lived before the Exodus – his advanced age at death, the way his wealth is measured in livestock, and the place names such as Uz and Teman which provide links with Genesis.

The story of Job is set out in the form of a play, with a prologue, an epilogue, and three rounds of speeches by the four main characters. In other words, there was a real historical character named Job, but the book is presented as a drama written later portraying his great trial by suffering (just as Shakespeare wrote a play about the death of Julius Caesar).

Job was a believer in God, like Abraham. He offered sacrifices, and he and his friends came together for worship. They called themselves “sons of God”, 1:6, and came “to present themselves before the Lord”. These statements link back with those people before the Flood who “called upon God’s name” in Genesis 4:26 and 6:2, and the references to worship in “the presence of the Lord” in Genesis 4:3 and 4:16. Job had seven children and a fortune in cattle and sheep, and was an important elder or judge in his community. Typical of human nature, there was one among the group who envied Job’s prosperity. The Bible calls him “satan”, a Hebrew word that means an enemy. He complained to the angel of the Lord. “He only serves you”, he moaned, “for what he gets out of you!” To prove him wrong, but at the same time to test Job’s faith, the Lord gave him the power to afflict Job with a series of calamities that brought him close to dying. Job accepted these troubles as

coming from God (see 2:10), and would have persevered in his trust in the Lord had not his three friends arrived on the scene. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar intended to comfort Job in his sufferings. However, their conclusion that his problems were the direct result of some heinous sin he had committed, grated on his ears. “You have only to repent”, they bleated, “then God will forgive you and your prosperity will return”. But Job knew that he had done nothing seriously wrong. Their link between sin and punishment was too facile. Though all human suffering is the consequence of Adam’s sin in the beginning, our particular sorrows are not necessarily the outcome of a bad life, and conversely wicked people, as Job reminded them, are often rich.

Job writhed under their false accusations, and complained bitterly he had no opportunity to justify himself before God, who seemed blind to his tears. At the end of the book, God spoke. He did not provide a reason why Job had been made to suffer. He simply pointed out that He operates on a scale and at a level high above our comprehension. We must simply trust Him, believing He knows what is best for us, and wait until the reasons for His actions become clear. The fact is, God often allows us to suffer, as He did Job, to stretch our faith. Jesus himself experienced false accusations, but quietly accepted his trials as part of God’s plan, without complaint. God’s son, says the New Testament writer to the Hebrews, “learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him”. Hebrews 5:8, 9.

In the epilogue, Job acknowledges he has no human rights in the presence of God, and graciously forgives his narrow-

minded friends. He recovers from his illness, and the sun shines on his life once more.

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