

General Comments on Job

Literal versus Literary

When discussing the book of Job in class it is common for questions to arise regarding how literally the book can be taken and whether or not there really was a Job. James 5:11 and D&C 121:10 (see also Ezek. 14:14-20) are commonly brought up as proof-texts in an attempt to say Job was a real person, even though the references doesn't require this at all. They are making a comparison, and not making any direct reference to the person of Job or requiring the person of Job to exist.

A careful reading of the book of Job makes it clear it is to be taken as literature, and not history. The book is arranged in a dialogue where five characters present and defend various points of view in turn. The dialogue is framed by explanatory text which the reader, but not the characters, is privy to (ch. 1-2, 42). Had the characters been privy to it, there would have been no dialogue. It closes with 5 chapters of material where God speaks to Job and sums up His views on the preceding dialogue (ch. 38-42), after which Job repents and confesses his foolishness.

Does this preclude a literal ancient Job? Of course not. But it does preclude a literal reading on this text as accurate documentary of an actual event. The intent of the book is not to relay a series of historical facts or literal events. It is to discuss the nature, causes, and purpose of afflictions and suffering, and the human psychology surrounding it. The text explores the psychology of Job as he is afflicted and suffers, and the psychology of his four friends who are not suffering themselves but observing his suffering.

The underlying premise of the book is that the person suffering is not really in a position to be able to accurately or fairly determine the cause, reason or purpose behind their suffering. And, friends who surround the suffering person should accept and console the sufferer without judgement or attempts to ascribe reason or meaning for the suffering. Instead, the friends should wait for the suffering individual to reconcile themselves to God and figure it out themselves.

Literary Context

As noted above, the book of Job is very much literature, as it is a carefully crafted dialogue. The ancient Jewish

commentaries on the Torah, the Mishneh Rabbas, are arranged similarly as are many non-Jewish philosophical texts, both ancient and modern. The book of Job also draws heavily on the Wisdom Literature of the Jews, especially Proverbs 1-9. Thus, familiarity with these texts will assist in the understanding of the book of Job. For example, compare Job 5:17 with Proverbs 3:11-12, compare Job 28:12-21 with Proverbs 3:13-26, and Job 28:22-28 with Proverbs 8:22-31. These are some of the more blatant examples. The more familiar the reader is with the Wisdom Literature of the Jews, the easier it will be to understand the obscurities of the text at hand, cf. 2 Ne. 25:5.

Misconceptions About Job

The general idea about Job is that he is an incredibly longsuffering and very patient guy who puts up with being afflicted and never turns on God. This is simply not the case at all. Job is a righteous man, but he will also be the first one to tell you he is righteous (16:14-17). Thus, he is self-righteous and prideful (6:24). He demands throughout the dialogue that he is completely innocent and utterly free of any sin (6:1, ch. 31). He insists God has done him wrong and that his afflictions are unjust (10:1-7, 19:1-6). He even goes so far as to accuse God of caprice (ch. 24), all the while considering himself righteous enough to see God's face (19:26)! During the dialogue Job is only too eager to return slap for slap when his three friends accuse him of wickedness (19:21-29). Job is not patient and longsuffering at all. He is an arrogant, self-righteous jerk who was afflicted because he needed to be humbled. And, fortunately for him, he ultimately is (42:1-6).

The dialogue in the book of Job from ch. 3-31 is a very contentious exchange. If we were to put this on film or on the stage it would be a lively argument where Job and the three old friends are yelling and accusing each other (Eliphaz's accusation, 4:1-11; Zophar's accusation, 11:13-15; Bildad's accusation, 8:20). All, the while the younger Elihu sits and watches silently until the very end when he simply cannot take it anymore (32:2-3), and thus the sharp rebuke of ch. 32-37 which silences the other four and sets the stage for God to step in and speak His mind in ch. 38-42. Job is definitely not the patient, meek, passive character he is generally thought to be, quietly extolling the virtues of God as he is being afflicted, insulted and harassed. That is not Job at all. Job is prideful, brash, and contentious. It is not until the last chapter, after being humbled by God, that Job become penitent.

Translations

The KJV does a fair to mediocre job in this book, and the KJV on 19:26 is simply infamous. Most modern translations do substantially better, but the clearest rendering is the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation. Many of the subtle nuances of the insults, slights, and innuendo come through clearly in the JPS.

Primary purpose of the book of Job: The Futility of Theodicy

The text of Job is an argument over [theodicy](#), absent Israelite religion (note the lack of Abraham, Moses, Israelite Covenant Theology, Israelite history, etc.). When God appears in the end of the book, He does not answer the question of theodicy, but points out how egocentric and foolish the argument between Job and the three "friends" has been. Elihu gets a pass from God, presumably because he is more correct than the other three.

The central point is human attempts at theodicy are fundamentally self-serving and ignorant. Attempts at discerning why people suffer and philosophizing over the problem of evil are ultimately reduced to self-justification and fault-finding each other and God. What people really need is to be humble and contrite before God, like Job ends up in ch. 42.

The fundamental problem with theodicy is the human penchant for defining "evil" in a self-serving way and then faulting God for committing or allowing these evil acts. It is an exercise in human pride and arrogance. We treat God like a vending machine: If He doesn't give us what we want in exchange for what we are willing to give, then we fault Him, get angry at Him, or reject His existence. All based on a what we think He should be like, or what we think He should do.

In a less personal and more philosophical debate, people argue God allows innocent children to suffer all kinds of ills, sick people to die and all sorts of things like this, which aren't human-derived moral evils, but are fundamental flaws in the created reality of an all-beneficent, all-powerful, all-knowing God who should be able to prevent or stop such things from happening. Where the LDS audience sees this as a necessary consequence of a fallen world, most of the rest of Western religions see this as a real problem.

The book of Job doesn't answer any of these questions. It shows the human point of view is intrinsically flawed and so limited in scope (ch. 38) that we are not capable of understanding or grasping God's greater perspective on these things. In the beginning, in the start of creation, we rejoiced over the world as it was and would be and praised God and His creation (cf. 38:7). But, now that we are living on it, we are complaining about how difficult and unfair it seems to us. All the while God is above us and above creation in every sense.

A side argument is the role of Israelite religion in addressing some of the fundamental problems of theodicy. The book of Job operates in a world absent Israelite religion, but was certainly written by an Israelite for Israelites. There is considerable theological content to address the problems of suffering and evil in Israelite religion (e.g., the Fall of Adam, covenant theology of Lev. 26 and Deut. 28, redemption, etc.). By presenting a set of characters who are ignorant of or outside of Israelite religion, the Israelite reader can spot flaws in Gentile reasoning that Israelite religion helps explain. Thus, the book of Job shows the Israelite reader what their religion has to offer.

Another side issue for the reader who is a member of the LDS Church is that for us this discussion is largely irrelevant. Why? Because Lehi discusses and puts it to rest in 2 Ne. 2 in his final admonition to his son Jacob. There he explains from a large scale what the purpose and necessity of suffering is. Alma's discourse to the people in the land of Gideon also presents the purpose of suffering as being a means of participating in the atonement, in developing a relationship with the Savior, but also being a means of developing empathy in the individual for others who are suffering (cf. Alma 7:11-12)

The result is we as a Church largely see theodicy as a non-issue. Yes, naturally, there are circumstances where acute suffering causes questions over the particular nature or necessity of some specific events. But, by and large, it is not something we labor over. We accept the Fall was a necessary and ultimately good thing, and the trials and tribulations of mortality are necessary evils and part of an intended and deliberate process.

Secondary purpose of the book of Job: Psychology

Part of Job's message is to look at the psychology of the afflicted and those around them. The arguments between Job and the three older friends start out relatively benign and get progressively worse and more obnoxious each round. The idea is that when we try to solve other's problems and determine purpose and meaning in other people's suffering, we are going to get it wrong and just make things worse, as the person becomes defensive.

The setting of Job and the friends is that of a [Shiva](#), where the mourners sit together for a time, traditionally up to a week. Job is mourning the loss of his family, and his own suffering as well, and the friends attend to him seven days in silence (cf. 2:13) and then Job starts speaking. The purpose of the friends is to support the mourner. However, in this case, they are making things progressively worse by misdiagnosing the causes of Job's suffering.

The message to friends and relatives of mourners is they need to not attempt to solve the mourner's problems or prescribe meaning or purpose to their suffering. Rather, they need to allow the mourner to figure that out themselves in their conversation with God.

This secondary purpose is the reason the book of Job is so long, as it develops a series of arguments that start out benign and then get increasingly bitter and contentious as the conversation continues. If it weren't for this development in the dialogue, the entire book could be 5 or 6 chapters long.

General Overview of the Book of Job

Ch. 1-2 The reader is informed that God permits Satan to harass Job. The reason why God permits this is not given, it is little more than a capricious test of his faithfulness. Job who was wealthy is made destitute, his family is killed (ch. 1), and he is ultimately afflicted with disease (ch. 2).

Ch. 3-31 Job in his misery is approached by four friends, the three older friends enter into a contentious debate with Job over why he is being afflicted, while the fourth younger friend Elihu remains silent. They accuse him generally of being wicked and therefore his afflictions are just. Job in turn accuses them of being wicked and demands that he himself is righteous and the afflictions from God are unjust. What sorts of things are they accusing Job of? One would assume his laundry list repudiation in ch. 31 is intended to address their insinuations

(see also 22:5-9 and 4:4-6 for Eliphaz's direct accusations). The arguments are contentious, tedious, repetitive and elaborate, intentionally making a mockery of philosophical debates of this type.

Ch. 32-37 Elihu is disgusted by the behavior of and argument between the others and breaks his silence (cf. 32:1-3). He tells Job that his sin is self-righteousness and pride, and he is in no position whatsoever to question God. In doing so he silences both Job and the three friends.

Ch. 38-41 God steps in and questions Job's accusations against Himself. God points out how transcendent and powerful He is by revealing some of His Creation to him, and asks Job how it is he thinks he can counsel Him. Job confesses he is nothing before God.

Ch. 42 God accepts Job's confession and restores all that was taken away from him. God then tells the three older friends to repent. Elihu gets a pass.

Structure

The text is structured as a round of three arguments, repeated three times.

Narrator's frame, beginning (ch. 1-2)

First Round of Arguments (ch. 3-13)

3	Job's death wish
4-5	Eliphaz
6-7	Job responds to Eliphaz
8	Bildad
9-10	Job responds to Bildad
11	Zophar
12-13	Job responds to Zophar

Second Round of Arguments (ch. 14-21)

14	Job's death wish
15	Eliphaz
16-17	Job responds to Eliphaz
18	Bildad
19	Job responds to Bildad
20	Zophar
21	Job responds to Zophar

Third Round of Arguments (ch. 22-37)

22	Eliphaz
23-24	Job responds to Eliphaz
25	Bildad
26-31	Job responds to Bildad
32-37	Elihu (Zophar has left the argument?)

God Concludes the Argument (ch. 38-42:6)

38-40:2	God speaks
40:3-5	Job responds to God
40:10-41:34	God speaks
42:1-6	Job responds to God

Narrator's frame, ending (42:7-17)

Cast of Characters

None of the characters are Israelites. They are all from different, distant, Gentile lands. We have Job of the unknown land of Uz (maybe Aram?), we have his three old friends Eliphaz the Temanite (i.e., an Edomite), Bildad the Shuhite (i.e., and Arabian), and Zophar the Naamathite (i.e., and Arabian), and then we have his one young friend Elihu the Buzite, apparently of the family of Buz, son of Nahor who was brother of Abraham (cf. Gen. 22:21). And, lets take a look at their names (provided by Strong's and then Easton's when two are given):

Job	"hated" or "persecuted" or maybe "repentant"
Eliphaz	"My God is (fine) gold"
Bildad	"confusing (by mingling) love"
Zophar	"sparrow" or "chirping"
Elihu	"He is my God"

God (Elohim), not the Lord (YHWH)

Job's name is appropriate for the text, as he egocentrically portrays himself as unfairly hated and persecuted by man and God. The three older friends have names that suggest idolatry, mixed loyalty, and insubstantial speech. Then the younger friend, who just happens to be related to Abraham, has a name that suggests quite the opposite. If we take this dialogue to be a Jewish representation of Gentile theology, then these characters would represent their respective nations. Job and the three older friends all make significant mistakes in theology and end up being reproved by God. However, Elihu reprimands Job and ultimately has his position endorsed by God Himself. Elihu is the young kid on the scene who remains quiet until the end and then speaks rightly, kind of like Israel's position among their Gentile neighbors.

Condensed Dialogue: selections for classroom use

Since the text is much too long for a single class, here is a shorted version summarizing what is happening in the text, so the class can get the overall message. It starts with the Narrator, takes selections from the rounds of arguments, then has the Lord chastising Job, and ends with the Narrator.

Narrator

Summarize ch. 1-2

Job, wealthy and prosperous. Offers sacrifices for his kids, in case they sin (1:5). What about himself?

God and Satan enter into a wager over Job.

When family and wealth lost, resigned to fate, but is fatalistic and self-centered in the calamity of loss (1:21). What about grieving over his family?

When the suffering hits him personally, he attributes all good and bad to Lord (2:10), which is flawed theology, stews on it for seven days, and then breaks silence (ch. 3).

(2:9-13)

9 Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die. 10 But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips. 11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that was come upon him, they came every one from his own place; Eliphaz the Temanite, and Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite: for they had made an appointment together to come to mourn with him and to comfort him. 12 And when they lifted up their eyes afar off, and knew him not, they lifted up their voice, and wept; and they rent every one his mantle, and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven. 13 So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.

Job (3:3, 11, 20)

3 Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.

11 Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?

20 Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul;

Eliphaz (4:3-8)

3 Behold, thou hast instructed many, and thou hast strengthened the weak hands. 4 Thy words have upholden him that was falling, and thou hast strengthened the feeble knees. 5 But now it is come upon thee, and thou faintest; it toucheth thee, and thou art troubled. 6 Is not this thy fear, thy confidence, thy hope, and the uprightness of thy ways? 7 Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off? 8 Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.

Job (6:2-4, 24-25)

2 Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together! 3 For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea: therefore my words are swallowed up. 4 For the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit: the terrors of God do set themselves in array against me.

24 Teach me, and I will hold my tongue: and cause me to understand wherein I have erred. 25 How forcible are right words! but what doth your arguing reprove?

Bildad (8:2-6, 20)

2 How long wilt thou speak these things? and how long shall the words of thy mouth be like a strong wind? 3 Doth God pervert judgment? or doth the Almighty pervert justice? 4 If thy children have sinned against him, and he have cast them away for their transgression; 5 If thou wouldest seek unto God betimes, and make thy supplication to the Almighty; 6 If thou wert pure and upright; surely now he

would awake for thee, and make the habitation of thy righteousness prosperous.

20 Behold, God will not cast away a perfect man, neither will he help the evil doers

Job (10:1-3, 7-8)

1 My soul is weary of my life; I will leave my complaint upon myself; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. 2 I will say unto God, Do not condemn me; shew me wherefore thou contendest with me. 3 Is it good unto thee that thou shouldest oppress, that thou shouldest despise the work of thine hands, and shine upon the counsel of the wicked?

7 Thou knowest that I am not wicked; and there is none that can deliver out of thine hand. 8 Thine hands have made me and fashioned me together round about; yet thou dost destroy me.

Zophar (11:2-6, 13-15)

2 Should not the multitude of words be answered? and should a man full of talk be justified? 3 Should thy lies make men hold their peace? and when thou mockest, shall no man make thee ashamed? 4 For thou hast said, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in thine eyes. 5 But oh that God would speak, and open his lips against thee; 6 And that he would shew thee the secrets of wisdom, that they are double to that which is! Know therefore that God exacteth of thee less than thine iniquity deserveth.

13 If thou prepare thine heart, and stretch out thine hands toward him; 14 If iniquity be in thine hand, put it far away, and let not wickedness dwell in thy tabernacles. 15 For then shalt thou lift up thy face without spot; yea, thou shalt be steadfast, and shalt not fear:

Job (13:1-6, 15-18)

1 Lo, mine eye hath seen all this, mine ear hath heard and understood it. 2 What ye know, the same do I know also: I am not inferior unto you. 3 Surely I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God. 4 But ye are forgers of lies, ye are all physicians of no value. 5 O that ye would altogether hold your peace! and it should be

your wisdom. 6 Hear now my reasoning, and hearken to the pleadings of my lips.

15 Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him. 16 He also shall be my salvation: for an hypocrite shall not come before him. 17 Hear diligently my speech, and my declaration with your ears. 18 Behold now, I have ordered my cause; I know that I shall be justified.

(19:2-6, 21-22)

2 How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words? 3 These ten times have ye reproached me: ye are not ashamed that ye make yourselves strange to me. 4 And be it indeed that I have erred, mine error remaineth with myself. 5 If indeed ye will magnify yourselves against me, and plead against me my reproach: 6 Know now that God hath overthrown me, and hath compassed me with his net.

21 Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me. 22 Why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh?

(27:2-6)

2 As God liveth, who hath taken away my judgment; and the Almighty, who hath vexed my soul; 3 All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils; 4 My lips shall not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit. 5 God forbid that I should justify you: till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me. 6 My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live.

Narrator

Summarize ch. 31 - Job says, "If I have committed any of this long laundry list of sins, then it would be fair, but I haven't!"

(32:1-5)

1 So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. 2 Then was kindled the wrath of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the kindred of Ram: against Job was his wrath kindled, because he

justified himself rather than God. 3 Also against his three friends was his wrath kindled, because they had found no answer, and yet had condemned Job. 4 Now Elihu had waited till Job had spoken, because they were elder than he. 5 When Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, then his wrath was kindled.

Elihu (32:6-10)

6 And Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite answered and said, I am young, and ye are very old; wherefore I was afraid, and durst not shew you mine opinion. 7 I said, Days should speak, and multitude of years should teach wisdom. 8 But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding. 9 Great men are not always wise: neither do the aged understand judgment. 10 Therefore I said, Hearken to me; I also will shew mine opinion.

(33:8-10)

8 Surely thou hast spoken in mine hearing, and I have heard the voice of thy words, saying, 9 I am clean without transgression, I am innocent; neither is there iniquity in me. 10 Behold, he findeth occasions against me, he counteth me for his enemy,

(35:2)

2 Thinkest thou this to be right, that thou saidst, My righteousness is more than God's?

(36:5-7, 17)

5 Behold, God is mighty, and despiseth not any: he is mighty in strength and wisdom. 6 He preserveth not the life of the wicked: but giveth right to the poor. 7 He withdraweth not his eyes from the righteous: but with kings are they on the throne; yea, he doth establish them for ever, and they are exalted.

17 But thou hast fulfilled the judgment of the wicked: judgment and justice take hold on thee.

Lord (38:2-6)

2 Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? 3 Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. 4 Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. 5 Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? 6 Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof;

(40:2)

2 Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? he that reproveth God, let him answer it.

Job (40:4-5)

4 Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. 5 Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further.

Lord (40:7-9)

7 Gird up thy loins now like a man: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. 8 Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous? 9 Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him?

Job (42:2-6)

2 I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. 3 Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. 4 Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. 5 I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. 6 Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Lord (42:7)

7 And it was so, that after the Lord had spoken these words unto Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for

ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath.

Narrator (42:10-17)

10 And the Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. 11 Then came there unto him all his brethren, and all his sisters, and all they that had been of his acquaintance before, and did eat bread with him in his house: and they bemoaned him, and comforted him over all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him: every man also gave him a piece of money, and every one an earring of gold. 12 So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. 13 He had also seven sons and three daughters. 14 And he called the name of the first, Jemima; and the name of the second, Kezia; and the name of the third, Keren-happuch. 15 And in all the land were no women found so fair as the daughters of Job: and their father gave them inheritance among their brethren. 16 After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, even four generations. 17 So Job died, being old and full of days.