**Job**

The Book of Job is quite unique in the Bible and read by people who would never look at any other part of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It starts and ends with prose nar­ratives describing an overturn of Fortune; Job has everything, sons, wealth, flocks, servants, and suddenly he loses it all. At the end, everything is restored. The main substance, though, lies in the poetry between, dialogues and monologues in which Job and his companions, then God himself, debate the question "why do the innocent suffer?"

This was a familiar question, across Mesopotamia and Egypt similar debates are found, and in the prophets and Psalms too the question is raised. But this book goes much further in its challenge to conventional religion. Many parts of the Old Testament suggest that the person who obeys the Law of the Lord will be blessed with success, health and wealth, that suffering is a punish­ment for sin. Job simply stands there and objects that he has done no wrong, that death is a mystery, that as a human being he is entitled to some answers.

One day when Job’s sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother’s house, a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, “The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, “The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, “Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother’s house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.”

In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Job said: "If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas‑‑ no wonder my words have been impetuous. The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison; God's terrors are marshaled against me.

“Does a wild donkey bray when it has grass, or an ox bellow when it has fodder? Is tasteless food eaten without salt, or is there flavor in the white of an egg ? I refuse to touch it; such food makes me ill.

"Oh, that I might have my request, that God would grant what I hope for, that God would be willing to crush me, to let loose his hand and cut me off! Then I would still have this consolation‑‑ my joy in unrelenting pain‑‑ that I had not denied the words of the Holy One.

"What strength do I have, that I should still hope? What prospects, that I should be patient? Do I have the strength of stone? Is my flesh bronze? Do I have any power to help myself, now that success has been driven from me? A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty. But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams, as the streams that overflow when darkened by thawing ice and swollen with melting snow, but that cease to flow in the dry season, and in the heat vanish from their channels. Caravans turn aside from their routes; they go up into the wasteland and perish. The caravans of Tema look for water, the traveling merchants of Sheba look in hope. They are distressed, because they had been confident; they arrive there, only to be disappointed. Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid. Have I ever said, `Give something on my behalf, pay a ransom for me from your wealth, deliver me from the hand of the enemy, ransom me from the clutches of the ruthless'?

"Teach me, and I will be quiet; show me where I have been wrong. How painful are honest words! But what do your arguments prove? Do you mean to correct what I say, and treat the words of a despairing man as wind? You would even cast lots for the fatherless and barter away your friend.

"But now be so kind as to look at me. Would I lie to your face? Relent, do not be unjust; reconsider, for my integrity is at stake. Is there any wickedness on my lips? Can my mouth not discern malice?"

*The Book of Job teaches by not giving any solution. The friends of Job, in long speeches presenting the "orthodox" arguments to explain the existence of pain and suffering, are the original "Job's Comforters" (no comfort at all).*

Then Job replied: "How long will you torment me and crush me with words? Ten times now you have reproached me; shamelessly you attack me. If it is true that I have gone astray, my error remains my concern alone. If indeed you would exalt yourselves above me and use my humiliation against me, then know that God has wronged me and drawn his net around me.

"Though I cry, `I have been wronged!' I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice. He has blocked my way so I cannot pass; he has shrouded my paths in darkness. He has stripped me of my honor and removed the crown from my head. He tears me down on every side till I am gone; he uproots my hope like a tree. His anger burns against me; he counts me among his enemies. His troops advance in force; they build a siege ramp against me and encamp around my tent.

"He has alienated my brothers from me; my acquaintances are completely estranged from me. My kinsmen have gone away; my friends have forgotten me. My guests and my maidservants count me a stranger; they look upon me as an alien. I summon my servant, but he does not answer, though I beg him with my own mouth. My breath is offensive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own brothers. Even the little boys scorn me; when I appear, they ridicule me. All my intimate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me. I am nothing but skin and bones; I have escaped with only the skin of my teeth.

"Have pity on me, my friends, have pity, for the hand of God has struck me. Why do you pursue me as God does? Will you never get enough of my flesh?

"Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever!

"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes‑‑I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"

*The imagined reply of God, when it finally comes in chapters 38-40, is not a reply but a challenge to the limits of the human mind and physical power in comparison with the God who is seen as the maker and ruler of all that exists.*

Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone‑‑ while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

"Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, `This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'?

"Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place, that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it? The earth takes shape like clay under a seal; its features stand out like those of a garment. The wicked are denied their light, and their upraised arm is broken.

"Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this.

"What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years!

"Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle? What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth? Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass? Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens when the waters become hard as stone, when the surface of the deep is frozen?

"Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up dominion over the earth?

"Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, `Here we are'? Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens when the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth stick together?

"Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?

“Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn? Do you count the months till they bear? Do you know the time they give birth? They crouch down and bring forth their young; their labor pains are ended. Their young thrive and grow strong in the wilds; they leave and do not return.

“Who let the wild donkey go free? Who untied its ropes? I gave it the wasteland as its home, the salt flats as its habitat. It laughs at the commotion in the town; it does not hear a driver’s shout. It ranges the hills for its pasture and searches for any green thing.

“Will the wild ox consent to serve you? Will it stay by your manger at night? Can you hold it to the furrow with a harness? Will it till the valleys behind you? Will you rely on it for its great strength? Will you leave your heavy work to it? Can you trust it to haul in your grain and bring it to your threshing floor?

“Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread its wings toward the south? Does the eagle soar at your command and build its nest on high? It dwells on a cliff and stays there at night; a rocky crag is its stronghold. From there it looks for food; its eyes detect it from afar. Its young ones feast on blood, and where the slain are, there it is.”

*There is, God seems to say, no explanation for human suffering. Or if there is, it is too difficult for humans to understand. Instead, the Lord talks at length about the marvels of nature. Job simply submits to the superior Mystery and all his losses are restored.*

Then Job replied to the Lord:

“I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. “You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought on him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring. The Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters. After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so Job died, an old man and full of years.