

ABIDE

DISCOVERING YOUR OLD TESTAMENT



A STORY OF SUFFERING

AN INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY

Welcome to the first of the poetical books! We have made it to the second major section of the Old Testament. Because we are entering into an entirely new section, we'll begin our introduction in a different format so that we can dig a little deeper into what it means to be in the poetical section of the Bible.

What you first need to know is that just because we are in a poetical section, it does not mean that you will not find poetry in other places. It just means that this is the literary form that most dominates the five books that make up this section. If you remember, the literary style is like listening to different inflections in a conversation. If you are warning an individual of danger and you call out their name, you'll use a tone that is consistent with the situation. If you are using that same person's name in a regular conversation, then your tone of voice is going to be completely different.

This is the best way to think about the different literary forms. The literary form we just moved from are the historical books and they are written in the 'prose' form. In other words, they are written in just everyday speech and narrative. As we move into the form of poetry, we'll see something different.

The form of poetry is rooted in experience. That is to say, what you are reading is the experience of the heart. Therefore, some of what you see in poetry is extreme or exaggerated in order to get the reader's attention to what the heart is doing or what someone is going through.

Another difference when attempting to sift through the difference of poetry and prose in relation to the Bible, is the fact that in the Bible you are dealing with Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poetry is completely different from English poetry. English poetry has to do with rhythm and rhyme more than anything else. However, Hebrew poetry has to do with parallelism or construction and doesn't rhyme at all. This is the bedrock of this style of poetry. That said, Hebrew poetry is much easier to translate than English poetry. If a certain person wanted to translate English poetry properly, they would have to try to make the sounds similar in order for it to make sense. But because poetry in Hebrew has to do with parallels and not rhyme, it can be understood immediately after translation.

However, there is a catch. There are different forms of Hebrew poetry for which you need to be on the lookout. The reason it is important to know these forms is because they can determine how one interprets the Bible. Let's go through these forms, and for each an example will be provided:

- 1) **Comprehensive**- This is the most common form of Hebrew Poetry and offers a balanced repetition. A good example of this is found in Psalm 46:1, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

In line one, you see the words, “God is our refuge and strength...” This is a starting statement, but the Psalmist wanted to give an additional or more comprehensive thought to go along with this, and so you read, “... a very present help in trouble.” The second phrase balances the first and provides the reader with a more comprehensive understanding by way of parallelism.

2) **Elaborative**- This type of parallelism takes a phrase and elaborates on the thought exponentially in order to make the most powerful statement possible. An example of elaborative poetry can be found in Proverbs 30:17, “The eye that mocketh his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it.”

Notice how there is no question as to what is being discussed here. A child who dishonors his parents is the subject, and strong, elaborating information is given for clarity as to what the result will be in terms of this lifestyle.

3) **Contrastive**- In this form of poetry, the first line or passage will contrast with the parallel portion. Psalm 1 can be used as an example for this form. In the first 3 verses you see the characteristics of the righteous, and then in the latter 3 verses, you see the contrasting truth of the ungodly. Here are verses 3 and 4 that speak to this contrasting disposition, “And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever he doth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.”

It is easy to see the parallel contrast. The righteous do one thing, while the unrighteous do another.

JOB

Now that we have a better grasp on Hebrew poetry, let’s take a look at our first poetical book: Job.

Aside from being believed to be the oldest book of the Bible, many believe this book to be the oldest book written in the world. Whether this is definitively the case or not, we’ll never know on this side of eternity, but what we do know is that for as old as this book is, it will never be out of date.

The matters spoken of in this book could not speak any more clearly about the confusion and heartbreak that sometimes exists among God’s people.

However, while the message is clear, some of the teachings in the book of Job are not always easy to understand. There are a couple of things that should be a warning to us as we sift through the pages of Job.

First, there is a danger of taking all of poetry literally. The Bible is the inspired word of God, and such as it is, God also catalogs the failures and thoughts of error possessed by some of His people. Job is no exception. Some of Job’s reasoning at first is not to be applied to our life because Job is in error in some of his explanations. Furthermore, some of Job’s friends are in error in their advice given to him. Therefore, especially in poetry where there is exaggeration (due to the nature of poetry), it is important to remember when attempting to make theological conclusions.

A second danger people run into is attempting to apply western, modern thinking to Job’s ancient eastern thinking. These schools of thought are very different which makes this book particularly hard to understand if it is not approached with the correct mindset.

With this introduction, let’s dig into the book a bit and see what we can find out about this man named Job.

How to Think About Job

If you don't need Job's message right now, just wait a while and be patient... because sooner or later, you will.

Job is the literal narrative of a man who struggled with the age-old question, "Why do bad things happen to people who love God?" Job can't understand why God allowed certain suffering in his life, and then didn't answer him when he prayed. Job wanted to know why he had to suffer in silence and in this book you find him wrestling with these kinds of issues. The style expressed to highlight and bolden this question is in a dramatic, poetic form of literature.

This is still a question that we hear today quite often. Because evil is seen or even experienced, the question is posed in a false dichotomy of thought that either God is all powerful, but He is not all loving because He allows evil into the world, or God is all loving but He is not all powerful because He doesn't stop the evil in the world.

However, Job explains that God is both, as we see his story unfold to the end. By the time Job gets an answer, he finds that God is all powerful and all loving and that it is by God's sovereignty over all things that point to our answers to all questions.

As for the breakdown of the book, Job can be easily be seen in three main divisions:

The Background (Chapters 1-3): In these chapters you are let in on a very rare and ancient conversation in the cosmos. This is the kind of conversation that scares you because of how high above us that it is, but one that you still want to listen to.

In this narrative portion, you are introduced to God and Satan speaking to each other about the condition of mankind and Satan mentions how corrupt we are. Suddenly, God causes Job's name to come up in conversation. Before you know it, Job becomes the test case for righteousness as God allows Satan to afflict Job.

Now, we have a supreme advantage over Job at this point. We are immediately made aware of this conversation, but Job has no idea that it exists. At this point, Job was just living life, completely unaware of what was taking place.

The Trouble (Chapters 4-41): This is where the poetry enters the literature and the extreme evil enters Job's life. Satan begins his assault on Job on every front, except where God had instructed Satan not to.

Also in this section, you're introduced to a few friends of Job. We'll speak more about them in a moment, but Job calls these friends, "miserable comforters" and it is extremely important that you pay attention to what is going on in these conversations.

Then, in the latter part of the book (chapters 38-41) God finally speaks up and tells Job to take a look around and look a little more closely at the power of God that was constantly surrounding him.

The Submission (Chapter 42): Job is finally brought to a place of repentance in his life, and also prays for the life of those friends who had made an accusation against him.

What to Look for in Job

You can spend years in the book of Job and not dig out the full meaning contained in this book. But in its most basic message, 'what to look for' becomes fairly obvious in reading this story because the important features that begin to take shape correspond with the three major sections of the book.

Job's Confusion: Once again, after the 'cosmic conversation' between God and Satan took place, and then action was taken by Satan against him, Job felt his world ripping apart as he began to lose his family (every member except his wife), his wealth, his prominence, and his health. In a short amount of time these disasters were levied against Job. He held on for a time, but eventually to his astonishment, not only was he experiencing loss, but also silence as he began to petition God for answers to all that was happening to him.

Obviously, this caused Job a tremendous amount of confusion as he sat suffering, and eventually wishing that he had never been born. The combination of tragedy and silence was nearly driving him insane and feeling like his suffering was unreasonable and was without purpose.

Job's Conversation: Aside from his wife telling Job just to 'curse God and die' we are introduced to a few more conversations. Starting in chapter 4, we're introduced to a few 'friends' Job had in his life that at first seemed to help, but eventually turned to gross error in their quest to help him.

What you are eventually reading in these conversations is how all of Job's friends are trying to find the 'secret sin' that Job committed in order to bring this kind of evil (because after all, evil only visits us because of sin— or so they think). And this is all while Job is in intense agony.

You'll notice the arguments appear in rounds during this section. One friend will speak up, and Job will answer, then another will speak, then Job will answer. And on and on this goes with these men.

Eliphaz— You meet this fellow in 4:1, and he represents the 'voice of experience.' If you have ever experienced something, this fellow can explain why. It has been said that he is a religious moralist. This man is always comfortable with having an answer and always says "I know..."

Bildad— By the time you get to 8:1, you learn about this man. Bildad is the 'voice of tradition.' He knows all of the wise things that have been said and is well versed in the art of moral legalism.

Zophar— Zophar is the friend that takes a 'dogmatic' approach and is always sure that this is how it is" in all that he answers. You first get to meet him in verse 11:1, and he represents the 'voice of assumption.' He assumes he is right and will not have it any other way.

Elihu— You will read quite a while before you get to this individual. You don't see Elihu until chapter 32, but when you do see him, you'll notice that while much of what he says is correct, he is still very suspicious of Job's situation and you can find hints of judgment all throughout his conversation. He is the 'voice of arrogance.' Evidently, this is a younger man and he along with the others are telling Job, "Why don't you just admit what you did wrong, repent, and get right with God."

God— At the end of the book, God finally gets involved in the conversation. Starting in chapter 38 all the way to chapter 42, the conversation involves just God and Job, and you'll immediately notice that it is God who does all the talking. In God's response to Job, you should also notice that every speech God gives to Job involves creation. God's majesty, might, and design in creation was all God gave Job in response to his questions, and not one time did God ever tell Job why He allowed all of the trouble in his life.

In Chapter 38 God told Job, "I am the One who created the universe..."

In Chapter 39 God told Job, "I am the One who controls the universe..."

In Chapters 40-41 God told Job, "I am the One who comprehends the universe..."

Job's Confession: By the time God is done with Job, all he had to say was, "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" (42:3). And then, "Wherefore, I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (42:6)

Job told God, "I'm not worthy to answer..." and "I have sinned in my thinking and response to You, God..."

Then you have a great passage on Job being instructed to pray for His friends because of their error, and God blessing Job in a way that Job had never been blessed before.

What to Gain from Job

Just Because You Can't See God's Plan, Doesn't Mean God is Not Working— Once again, you and I know the conversation that took place outside of Job's presence between Satan and God, but Job had no idea. Neither did Job know of the glory God would get through this experience nor the countless number of people helped by this message. Job could not see anything. But there God was— working on Job and at the same time, God received every shred of glory as Satan was put to shame, Job increased in faith, and God's people praised His name!

Just Because You Can See Suffering, Doesn't Mean There is Sin Attached— Jesus said that "...rain falls on the just and the unjust" and to point our finger where there is no evidence to support such a claim or an attitude is sinful, misguided nonsense. In those moments, we need to give encouragement when we can give it, but mostly just keep our mouths shut and mourn with a brother and sister who is hurting. Job's friends did a significant amount of unnecessary wounding all because they associated suffering with wrongdoing.

Just Because You Hear People Mention God, Doesn't Mean that They Speak for God— This is important to remember if you're ever in a place of suffering or spiritual confusion. People say all kinds of foolish things in an attempt to speak for God, and if we're not on guard, those kinds of voices can start diluting the truth and causing a serious amount of doubt. Oh, they may name God in their talk, but they do not speak for God. Make sure to know God's truth and find those who display real spiritual wisdom if you need additional advice.

Just Because You Don't Get an Answer, Doesn't Mean that God is not Enough— This is a truth that Job came to realize. Once again, Job never got an answer, but instead gained fuller revelation of the One who had all the answers. You see, it's okay not to know as long as you know that God knows.

What the last part of this book teaches us is that you can look at creation— you can look and see God's awesome display of power, precision, prominence, and permanence and know that if God can handle the vastness of the universe and all that it contains down to the tiniest molecule, then God can handle anything that happens in our life.

In fact, from this passage, we learn that it is God who orchestrates and controls all that enters our lives. He is the one who allows our lives to be afflicted and He is the One who sets the boundaries in that affliction.



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