

God trades bets with Satan over the resilience of Job's faith under pressure. What comfort can there be in this ancient attempt to answer one of religion's greatest questions? This revised edition retains the Question Mark cartoons used in the original booklet edition of this article (published 1991).



"...questions that many people run away from"

What comfort Job?

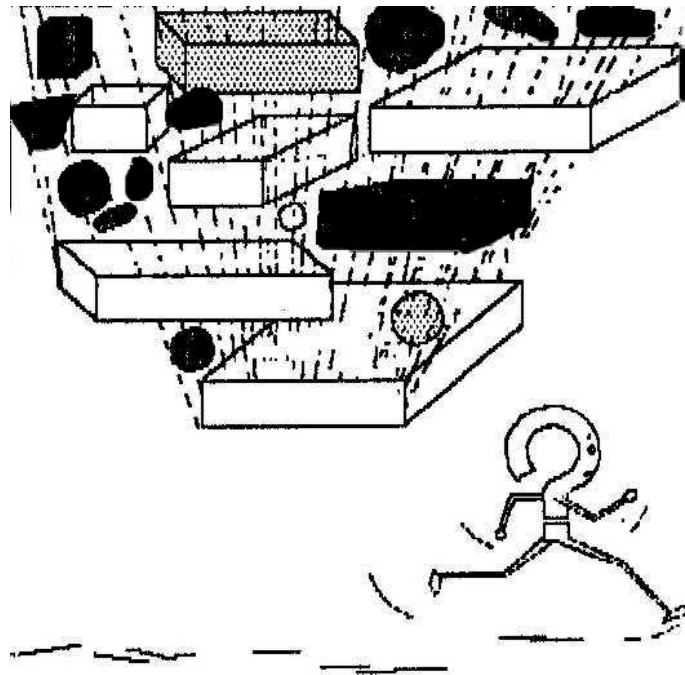
Job's harrowing experiences are related in a unique book, which is one of the stranger inclusions in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Job was a good man who suffered everything that cruel fate could throw at him and came through his time of trial with honour. His book addresses questions that any people run away from, but which honest believers are forced to face. Most people who have lived as far as adulthood come to recognise that life is not fair. Some people prosper and enjoy good health, while others face grief and poverty; but it is not necessarily the good who prosper or the bad who suffer. Meanwhile, all of us are constantly being made aware through personal knowledge, news reports, and gossip of all kinds of undeserved suffering caused by tyranny, crime, negligence, accident and natural disaster. If God is good, does his failure to banish injustice and suffering prove that he lacks real power? Could such a weak divinity really be "God" at all? On the other hand, if God is omnipotent, does the continued existence of evil prove him to be unjust? The book of Job faces these issues and comes to some unexpected conclusions.



This book has an unusual profile for an Old Testament story, because it does not talk about Israel, its religious form is not distinctly Jewish, and it consists almost entirely of dialogue. Furthermore, we have no idea who wrote the book and it provides few clues to its place and time in relation to history or archaeology. In brief, Job's story is that he was singled out for trials as the result of an extraordinary argument in the heavens. We see God and Satan trading bets to determine Job's fate! He then loses his cattle to rustlers, his sheep to a mysterious fireball and his children and their families to a tornado. We cannot tell from the context whether this tale is based on actual events or whether the parable is entirely fictional. However, we can see that the writer had thought long about the question of how suffering and evil fit in with belief in an omnipotent but righteous God.

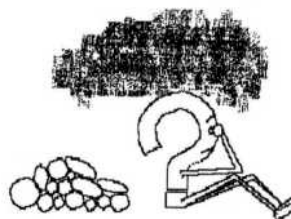


Job was a good man by any standards. He was meticulous in his personal conduct and scrupulous in the use of his wealth. He was an honest businessman, a wise father and a loving husband. We can be sure about the consistency of his private life because we have the testimony of his wife. In her extremity she told Job to "curse God and die"... an understandable outburst which has prompted sexist comments from some people who have known little of her suffering. But Job's wife was faithful to him and showed by this anguished cry that she believed absolutely in Job's goodness and saw no reason to blame him for the misfortunes which had come upon them. She saw his suffering as an undeserved injustice, and she knew better than anyone did what Job was really like.



*“ setbacks came on him in quick succession
like a pile of bricks and stones falling from the sky*

Job’s level of misfortune was as extraordinary as his goodness. Most of us know people who have lost children; but Job lost all his sons and their families in one night. We have met people who have suffered financial loss; but Job fell from great and well-earned wealth into utter poverty as the result of three separate tragedies that happened on that same fateful evening. We may know people whose ill-health or disability turns their lives into epics of agony; but Job fell suddenly and unexpectedly into a diseased condition which was at the same time painful, and so repulsive that he could scarcely bear his own stench. The hero of this tale was not given time to adjust to a gradual decline in his fortunes. All these setbacks came on him in quick succession like a pile of bricks and stone falling from the sky. In the course of a few days he was brought down from the greatest security and comfort to the deepest distress. If anyone had cause to lose faith, it was Job.



*“By the town rubbish dump
he sat in deep shock”*

But faith was not just another of Job's possessions; it was deeply etched into his nature so that no action of the adversary could take it away. Despite all his pain and destitution, his reliance on and hope in God remained intact. By the town rubbish dump he sat in deep shock without speaking for seven days; but his trust in a righteous creator was solid. When he eventually spoke, it was to bemoan his misfortune and to regret that he had been born; but he did not discard his God or even slander him. That was when his next problems walked into the story. There in public view sat this respected local dignitary whose sudden

fall challenged the theology of the town's leading religionists. They were determined to protect their dogmatic principles at all costs. So they came to argue with Job.



The book of Job is not easy reading because of the convoluted arguments of the four "comforters". Their objective was to argue with Job rather than to comfort him, though they convinced themselves that they were trying to help him. But their idea of helping Job was to persuade him to accept their scheme of belief. If only Job would accept their theology his problems would go away, so they believed. But life is not meant to fit theology, because life comes first. Useful theology draws evidence from the complex events of life and seeks to explain what is there, rather than what 'ought to' be there. When we put concepts into first place we hurt people, which is what the comforters did to Job. Despite the evidence and Job's assurances of his sincerity, they tried to convince Job that his own sins had caused his suffering. Some comfort!



The personality of Job is unusual in literature because he is a good man who has an effective lead part. Most writers struggle with the virtuous characters in their stories because goodness can appear dull. But Job's virtue was real and uncluttered by self-satisfaction. He even has the best lines in the story, demonstrating remarkable faith in extremity, and they are worth repeating here, using the poetic language of the "King James" edition...

"Naked come I out of my mother's womb,
and naked shall I return thither
the LORD gave and the LORD hath taken away;
blessed be the name of the LORD"

"Though he slay me,
yet will I trust in him"

"For I know that my redeemer liveth,
and that he shall stand
at the latter day upon the earth
And though after my skin worms destroy this body,
Yet in my flesh shall I see God"



Apart from these celebrated lines, many of the arguments used by Job and his proud companions are tortuous or even tiresome; but the eventual conclusion was in Job's favour because it was God who had the lost word. Job's fortunes were restored twofold, and his God, his wife and his own conscience vindicated his character. So who took the blame for what happened? It is tempting to be simplistic and throw the blame on Satan as the one who administered Job's suffering. The devil is unfashionable these days, but many religionists still use him as a convenient explanation for all the world's problems. The book of Job does not back such views. Satan, to be sure, was the executioner of Job's misfortunes, but he did not act independently. The writer believed that Satan was subject to God's rule. Yes, Satan was the adversary, but God could have refused permission for the attacks, and didn't. We cannot explain this paradox by retreating into convoluted arguments about God's 'permissive' or 'directive' will, as if that makes a difference. Natural justice decrees that if a person in authority gives permission for an action they must bear responsibility for what is done. God took the blame for Job's sufferings.



As the dialogue in the story moves to and fro like a verbal ball game the centre of play is always God. What is he like? How does his justice work? Why did he allow these misfortunes? Eventually the story contrasts these futile arguments with God's own view spoken directly and audibly. Notice how Job's 'religious' comforters react in terror when they meet the ultimate subject of their arrogant theology! But God's intervention did not aim to terrify. He confirmed Job's innocence and rebuked those who had slandered him. But he also had some heavy words of advice for the sufferer. It was not Job's wrongdoing that brought on the disasters, but even he was confused about the supposed link between suffering and guilt. No, said God, the ways of the universe are far more complex, and there are other ways of looking at these matters than to search for someone to blame. "Were you there when I made the world?" God asked. Did you see...? Do you know...? Can you understand...? Job's complaints revealed his narrow perspective. If he could stand back and view the panorama of time and space, his sufferings would appear in a different light.



*"The question was not...
whether God was fair"*

The question was not whether Job deserved the evil, or even whether God was fair in inflicting it, but whether in the end the sufferings would still seem to be evil. When a parent withholds a privilege or fails to prevent a disappointment, the child may see it as a punishment; but the parent is wisely allowing growth, recognising that the life for which the child is being prepared may be hard. A key moral implied in the Job story is that God's allowance of suffering is neither negligent nor accidental but purposeful and creative.



What comfort then is there in Job? By airing all these arguments the writer looked at the underlying question from most possible angles, but he states his conclusion in allegorical terms. Job's position at the end of the story was better than at the beginning - so what about the question of blame? The writer of this book concludes that Job did not deserve the disasters that fell upon him, and implies that any person, however moral and noble, could suffer as much as Job for no reason at all. That is not a particularly comforting moral, though we know from experience that it is true to life. The writer never mentions Job's parentage; so he does not view them as causes of delayed 'judgement'. He portrays Job's wife steadfastly supporting her husband and proclaiming her belief in his goodness - so he lays no blame at her door. He uses the wife to show that Job was not guilty of secret misdemeanours. The author even relieves Satan of ultimate blame by showing how he received permission for what he did to Job (even if the scene about the heavenly barter is far-fetched!). The implication of this parable is that the ultimate blame for Job's suffering can only rest with God. But 'blame' is the wrong word in this context, and that leads us to the real point of the story. God allowed the disasters, and by the principles of authority he therefore bore responsibility for them. But the evil was not ultimately evil. The hope, which the story reveals, is that eventually we will all find deeper meaning in our pain. Just as surgery may cause pain before it produces evident healing, so the effects of sin, disease, disaster and suffering can eventually lead to healing of a deeper kind. Hope may sometimes

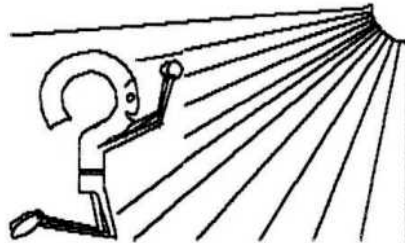
seem far away but, in God's eventual plan, the last state of mankind will be better than the first.



But even that grand thought may fail to give comfort, focusing as it does on a future that we can only hope for. Behind all this lies another question, which is really more important than the one we tend to ask first. It is a question about the nature of men rather than God, and is embedded in the 'far-fetched' gambling scene that opens this drama. "Would Job worship you if he got nothing out of it?" asks Satan. It is a question that turns the old religious conundrum on its head. The challenge is not to show whether a righteous God would allow suffering, but whether a suffering man would remain righteous. Will we remain faithful to God if we lose our job, our health, our friends and our livelihood? How resilient is our faith?



The debate could be broadened to cover all ethical motivation and explore the doubt whether there is really a difference between mankind and the other animals. Are there really such things as abstract virtues, or are they elaborate covers for self-seeking motives (Richard Dawkins' "Selfish Gene"). If we trace our altruism back to its roots, will we find that it conceals a self-centred desire to fill our stomachs and propagate our genes by enlisting the support of other members of our species? Could our goodness even be rooted in a primeval desire to invoke the gods' support and guarantee the harvest? If all reward and hope is stripped away, suggests Satan, mankind will abandon his virtue and desert his God. Job didn't and neither have millions of other suffering saints through the ages. The trials, injustices, disasters, and sufferings we endure enable us to demonstrate that we have grown beyond our animal nature. Sufferings give us the opportunity to prove that faith, hope and love are realities, without hidden motives. They discover whether, in the depths of our being, there is truly a spark of the divine which motivates us by the assurance, when all other proofs seem to fail, that there is God.



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