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JOB

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CONTENTS

Abbreviations 4

THE BOOK OF JOB

Introduction 5

Text and Commentary 9

Prologue (1:1–2:13) 9

First Round of Speeches (3:1–14:22) 15

Second Round of Speeches (15:1–21:34) 39

Third Round of Speeches (22:1–31:40) 54

Elihu Speaks (32:1–37:24) 74

The Speeches in the Storm (38:1–42:6) 83

Epilogue (42:7-17) 98

Conclusion 100

Review Aids and Discussion Topics 105

Index of Citations from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 108

ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles

Amos—Amos

Bar—Baruch

1 Chr—1 Chronicles

2 Chr—2 Chronicles

Col—Colossians

1 Cor—1 Corinthians

2 Cor—2 Corinthians

Dan—Daniel

Deut—Deuteronomy

Eccl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes

Eph—Ephesians

Esth—Esther

Exod—Exodus

Ezek—Ezekiel

Ezra—Ezra

Gal—Galatians

Gen—Genesis

Hab—Habakkuk

Hag—Haggai

Heb—Hebrews

Hos—Hosea

Isa—Isaiah

Jas—James

Jdt—Judith

Jer—Jeremiah

Job—Job

Joel—Joel

John—John

1 John—1 John

2 John—2 John

3 John—3 John

Jonah—Jonah

Josh—Joshua

Jude—Jude

Judg—Judges

1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings

Lam—Lamentations

Lev—Leviticus

Luke—Luke

1 Macc—1 Maccabees

2 Macc—2 Maccabees

Mal—Malachi

Mark—Mark

Matt—Matthew

Mic—Micah

Nah—Nahum

Neh—Nehemiah

Num—Numbers

Obad—Obadiah

1 Pet—1 Peter

2 Pet—2 Peter

Phil—Philippians

Phlm—Philemon

Prov—Proverbs

Ps(s)—Psalms

Rev—Revelation

Rom—Romans

Ruth—Ruth

1 Sam—1 Samuel

2 Sam—2 Samuel

Sir—Sirach

Song—Song of Songs

1 Thess—1 Thessalonians

2 Thess—2 Thessalonians

1 Tim—1 Timothy

2 Tim—2 Timothy

Titus—Titus

Tob—Tobit

Wis—Wisdom

Zech—Zechariah

Zeph—Zephaniah

The Book of Job

The book of Job is vivid testimony to pain, a plea for justice, and a wrenching theological debate about suffering and its causes. Central to this debate are questions about the roles God and humans play in causing human suffering and whether divine-human relationship can proceed in the midst of overwhelming anguish. Like a riddle, the text grasps readers' minds and emotions, inviting them to participate in Job's story and to work toward their own solution to the dilemmas of both Job and his friends.

Literary features

The book's literary components do not fit easily together. It sets conflicting characters and discordant speeches side by side without providing interpretive clues. But rather than producing a mish-mash of ideas, the resulting tensions summon readers to engage in Job's struggle, to stay with him on the ash heap and stand with him before God in search of healing. Because the book refuses to leave our present understandings intact, reading means undertaking mental and emotional labor. Job and his friends argue with each other in dense, beautiful poetic speeches, and they complain at length to wear the reader down. In the process, the poems bring us into Job's despair and his friends' frustration and growing rigidity.

But the effort required to read and study the book is worth it because the book's unsettled nature puts us either in Job's place or in sympathy with his friends or, perhaps, both. Precisely because it refuses to settle for easy answers about any of its subjects, the book of Job is a classic of world literature.

Most interpreters believe the book as we now have it is a composite, built upon an ancient tale about an innocent sufferer. The outlines of Job's story were well known across cultures in antiquity. Peoples of the ancient Near East produced several texts with affinities to the biblical book where an innocent person undergoes suffering, argues with the gods, and is inexplicably restored to well-being. Job also appears by name in a biblical list of heroes (Ezek 14:14, 20), adding to the sense that his basic story was widely known.

It is likely that a writer in ancient Israel took this folktale, adapted it, cut it open, and then set the poetic speeches in the midst of it. The prose

narrative appears in the prologue (1:1–2:13) and epilogue (42:7-17). By using both forms of literature, folktale and poetry, the book presents a totality of suffering, an overwhelming portrait told from outside by a third person narrator in the prose and from the inside in the poetic testimony of Job and his friends. The prose describes Job's external losses, while the poetry portrays Job's more internal sufferings.

Poetry is particularly suited to the task of spiritual struggle because its dense imagery, compactness of speech, and allusiveness create an artistic world something like music. It appeals to the full humanity of readers, summoning forth our own ghosts, unsettled sorrows, and hidden angers. It can transport us into realms of spirit and lead to new discoveries. But the poetry of Job makes best sense when read in the context of the prose narrative that lays out the book's initial problem. Job is an innocent person yet enormous catastrophes befall him because of a deal made in heaven. This predicament gives rise to the poetry.

The prose and the poetry belong together, but there are great differences between them. In the prologue, for example, Job is patient and trusting while his friends are silent. By contrast, in the poetry Job is furious and impatient and his friends flood him with words. This is one of the many gaps that raise questions about characters and their motivations, thereby engaging us in Job's plight.

Job's poetry uses a great deal of legal imagery as a way for Job to imagine that God might acknowledge his innocence. Job appeals to a third party to assist him in his search for justice because his informal appeals to God seem to produce nothing but more sorrow. He declares legal oaths of innocence by which he offers his self-defense at the end of his speeches. But legal language is only one way Job voices his complaints. Language of creation and observations from the world of plants and animals help him build his protests.

Much of Job's speech takes the form of lamentation. Over one third of the book of Psalms and the entire book of Lamentations are laments. These are prayers in the form of complaint. The one who prays cries out to God in pain, describes various forms of affliction, and seeks redress. Laments are a form of truth-telling to God. They open up rather than deny suffering, and they present to God the affliction of the one who prays and demands action. In Old Testament laments, anger at God and fury close to blasphemy are instruments of fidelity because they keep the relationship with God alive in the midst of suffering. They are acts of faith that God cares for the afflicted and can bear to hear the truth. By using laments, Job grows strong and courageous as he clings to God under the worst conditions.

Wisdom literature

The book of Job belongs in a grouping of biblical books called the wisdom literature that includes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon. These books differ from other biblical literature in their attention to daily struggles of ordinary human life. By contrast, the prophetic books speak of God's word to the people, and the historical books tell of God's actions on behalf of Israel. Wisdom starts neither with God nor with large political and national events, but from human efforts to live wisely from day to day. Life's challenges give rise to theological reflection, not the other way around. Job is merely going on with his daily life when disasters overtake him, and those events propel his theological questions. In wisdom thinking, at least in the book of Proverbs, faithful living should yield material blessing. When Job loses everything, his fidelity to God is suspect.

Job's cultural world

Job lived in a different cultural world from that of contemporary Western readers, though people in tribal communities on various continents may find many affinities with aspects of the book. Job lived in a community-oriented culture. The family and clan were of high value, and one sought to become wise and learn proverbs in order to create harmony for in the community, not for self-advancement as in individual-oriented cultures.

Israel's culture as reflected in Wisdom literature was deeply concerned about the authenticity of speech, about proper use of the tongue, and about wise sayings or proverbs as a key to right behavior. Proverbs are short sayings that were instruments of wise living and the storehouse of tradition. Because the culture was an oral one, the right use of words was critical for communal well-being. Wisdom drawn from animal and plant life instructed humans in how to maneuver in daily life and how to contribute to the community. Both Job and his friends apply proverbs to his situation, but their proverbs usually conflict with one another.

Other features of Israel's culture important for understanding the book include the values of honor and shame. Shame was a communal judgment, often implicit, that one's behavior or attitude brought dishonor to the community. To be shamed means one has been disrespectful of persons or basic values in the community. Job begins the story as a most honorable person, but his disasters cause him shame and isolation from his friends. He loses his good name and his community no longer recognizes his honor, isolating him and causing him great anguish. Many Asian and African cultures structure themselves with similar values.

Outline of the book

The book divides into the following literary units:

The Prologue (1:1–2:13)

Three Rounds of Speeches among Job and His Friends
(3:1–14:22; 15:1–21:34; 22:1–31:37)

Hymn to Wisdom (28:1-28)

Job's Self-Defense (29:1–31:37)

Elihu's Speech (32:1–37:24)

The Encounter with God in the Storm (38:1–42:6)

The Epilogue (42:7-17)

The Book of Job

I. Prologue

1 Job's Piety. ¹In the land of Uz there was a blameless and upright man named Job, who feared God and avoided evil. ²Seven sons and three daughters were born to him; ³and he had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred she-donkeys, and a very large household, so that he was greater than anyone in the East. ⁴His sons used to take turns

giving feasts, sending invitations to their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵And when each feast had run its course, ▶ Job would send for them and sanctify them, rising early and offering sacrifices for every one of them. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Job did this habitually.

The Interview Between the Lord and the Satan. ⁶One day, when the sons ▶

PROLOGUE

Job 1:1–2:3

The prose prologue begins with a depiction of a contented Job, residing in security, wealth, and domestic tranquility. A narrator describes events that move through the slow but complete unraveling of these good things and end in grief on the ash heap. Events alternate in the five scenes between earth and heaven; events in heaven determine what happens on earth. The narrative unfolds in highly stylized fashion with sparse detail and repeated patterns typical of a folktale. The effects of this narrative style are to present a hammering sequence of events that shatters Job's world and leaves many unanswered questions about divine and human characters and their motivations.

1:1-5 Job's goodness

The opening scene takes place on earth where every detail contributes to a portrait of Job as innocent man, beloved of God. The narrator calls him

▶ This symbol indicates a cross reference number in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See page 109 for number citations.

of God came to present themselves before the LORD, the satan also came among them. ⁷The LORD said to the satan, "Where have you been?" Then the satan answered the LORD and said, "Roaming the earth and patrolling it." ⁸The LORD said to the satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him, blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil." ⁹The satan answered

the LORD and said, "Is it for nothing that Job is God-fearing? ¹⁰Have you not surrounded him and his family and all that he has with your protection? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his livestock are spread over the land. ¹¹But now put forth your hand and touch all that he has, and surely he will curse you to your face." ¹²The LORD said to the satan, "Very well, all that he has is in your

"blameless and upright," one who "feared God," and "avoided evil" (1:1). To "fear God" is a common term of the wisdom literature that has less to do with fright before God and more to do with right relationship with God. "Fear of God" is not easy to translate into English but conveys qualities of obedience, reverence, and awe before God. One commentator calls it a synonym for true religion. Job's fear of God marks him as a wise and righteous man. His large family and vast wealth in animal holdings confirm his blamelessness and special relationship with God. In antiquity, material wealth signified that its bearer was a worthy recipient of divine favor.

Job's uprightness receives further confirmation from the size of his family and the peaceful generosity of his children. His seven sons invite his three daughters to their feasts, showing their hospitality to exceed the bounds of their culture where women had little status. And perhaps most indicative of Job's righteousness is a detail in which he exceeds all obvious requirements of care for his family by offering sacrifice on behalf of his children in case they have sinned "in their hearts" (1:5). In its spare telling, the story leaves readers to ponder Job's behavior. Is he an overly scrupulous parent? Does he act to protect the children? Or is this one more instance of his absolute devotion to God? The folktale genre of the prologue, however, may preclude suspicions about Job's character, for folktales typically tell actions as straightforward events to be taken at face value. The next scenes support the view that fidelity alone motivates Job.

1:6-12 Deal in heaven

The action starts when messengers, called "sons of God," come before "the LORD" in the heavenly court. Heavenly courts with semi-divine beings of the spirit world appear elsewhere in the Old Testament (1 Kgs 22:19-23; Dan 7). Among the heavenly messengers is "the Satan," whose name means "the adversary," an official court title, not a proper name. He is not yet the demonic figure of later Jewish and Christian thinking, but one of the Lord's

power; only do not lay a hand on him.” So the satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.

The First Trial. ¹³One day, while his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their eldest brother, ¹⁴a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys grazing beside them, ¹⁵and the Sabeans carried them off in a raid. They put the servants to the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” ¹⁶He was still speaking when another came and said,

“God’s fire has fallen from heaven and struck the sheep and the servants and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you.” ¹⁷He was still speaking when another came and said, “The Chaldeans formed three columns, seized the camels, carried them off, and put the servants to the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.” ¹⁸He was still speaking when another came and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their eldest brother, ¹⁹and suddenly a great wind came from

faithful servants, though it is easy to see from his role here how he might later come to personify evil.

The Lord starts the action by asking the Satan if, when traveling to and fro on the earth, he had noticed “my servant Job” (1:7). Should readers still question Job’s innocence, God’s authoritative boasting repeats the narrator’s assessment of Job’s innocence. Job is “blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil” (1:8). The Satan, however, suspects Job is faithful only because God has given him good things. He accuses God of purchasing Job’s fidelity, for if God were to remove them, “surely [Job] will curse you to your face” (1:11). The Hebrew word translated “curse” means literally “to bless,” but here “bless” is a euphemism, that is, a polite way to say the opposite.

Without hesitation and without debate, the Lord gives the Satan control of Job’s life with one caveat—he is not to touch Job. Why God acquiesces to this deal is not clear. It may be that refusing the Satan’s challenge would cause God shame in this ancient Israelite culture where honor is of high value. Or it may be that God is so confident of Job’s loyalty that a positive outcome of the deal seems assured. Whatever God’s reasons for abdicating power, Satan goes forth to loose tragedy upon Job.

1:13-22 Job’s first test

Back on earth, catastrophes roll over Job in quick succession. In simple, unadorned prose, the story unfolds in parallel episodes so each disaster appears like the one before in a persistent drumbeat of loss. Events concerning Job’s children form a literary frame around his other losses (1:13, 18-19). By setting the other disasters during one of their feasts, the text creates a foreboding sense of doom and foreshadows the fourth and most horrible

across the desert and smashed the four corners of the house. It fell upon the young people and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you.”

Job’s Reaction. ²⁰Then Job arose and tore his cloak and cut off his hair. He fell to the ground and worshiped. ²¹He said,

“Naked I came forth from my
mother’s womb,
and naked shall I go back there.
The LORD gave and the LORD has
taken away;
blessed be the name of the
LORD!”

²²In all this Job did not sin, nor did he charge God with wrong.

2 The Second Interview. ¹One day, when the sons of God came to

present themselves before the LORD, the satan also came with them. ²The LORD said to the satan, “Where have you been?” Then the satan answered the LORD and said, “Roaming the earth and patrolling it.” ³The LORD said to the satan, “Have you noticed my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him, blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil. He still holds fast to his innocence although you incited me against him to ruin him for nothing.”

⁴The satan answered the LORD and said, “Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. ⁵But put forth your hand and touch his bone and his flesh. Then surely he will curse you to your face.”

⁶And the LORD said to the satan, “He is in your power; only spare his life.”

of Job’s devastations. A messenger comes to announce each tragedy and says, “I alone have escaped to tell you” (1:15, 16, 17, 18). And “He was still speaking when” the next messenger appears with a similar report. Finally, in the horrible climax, the narrator gives extra description to the children’s destruction. A great wind destroys the house where they are feasting and kills all of them. Within a few verses, Job loses everything in a whirlwind of calamity, a blitz of overwhelmingly bad news.

To this point in the telling, Job has made no response to any of the reports, but then in customary rituals for expressing grief, he tears his clothes, cuts his hair, and falls upon the ground. At last he speaks in carefully balanced sentences typical of Hebrew poetry. “Naked I came forth . . . naked shall I go back . . . The LORD gave . . . the LORD has taken away” (1:21). Then he blesses God’s name. Job does not curse God and the narrator confirms that Job does not “sin, nor did he charge God with wrong” (1:22).

2:1-6 Another bad deal in heaven

The story might have ended in the previous chapter where, even in the aftermath of the unrelenting assault upon him, Job proved himself blameless and upright, a God-fearer, and a refuser of evil. Instead, when the heavenly messengers come before the Lord again, the tension escalates. The narrative follows the first heavenly scene of the previous chapter, but with some important changes. Again God asks the Satan where he has been

The Second Trial. ⁷So the satan went forth from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with severe boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.

Job's Reaction. ⁸He took a potsherd to scrape himself, as he sat among the ashes. ⁹Then his wife said to him, "Are you still holding to your innocence?

Curse God and die!" ¹⁰But he said to her, "You speak as foolish women do. We accept good things from God; should we not accept evil?" Through all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

Job's Three Friends. ¹¹Now when three of Job's friends heard of all the misfortune that had come upon him, they

and if he has seen his "servant Job" who remains "blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil" (2:3). In still a further affirmation of Job, God accuses the Satan of manipulation in order to harm Job "without cause."

The Satan replies "skin for skin," a short saying that probably means, if you harm someone's skin, they will harm yours in turn. His principle of human behavior is that people may remain faithful when you take their things or their loved ones, but if you attack their bodies and threaten their lives, they will do anything. The Satan applies his principle to Job, insisting that Job will "curse you to your face" (2:5). Again without explanation, God relinquishes Job into the Satan's power. The only constraint on Satan is that he preserve Job's life.

2:7-10 Job's second test

Satan goes forth again and afflicts Job with severe boils that cover his body. To convey the horror of Job's physical condition, the narrator mentions the simple detail of a potsherd, a piece of broken pottery Job uses for wound-scraping as he sits on the ash heap (2:8). Job's nameless wife appears only in this scene, but her question intones a theme of both the prologue and the book. "Are you still holding to your innocence?" she asks. The Hebrew word translated "innocence" also means "integrity" or "wholeness" in the sense of deeply held honesty and blamelessness. Job's wife's motivations have provoked debate among interpreters. When she advises him to curse God and die, is she betraying him? In the ancient world, people believed cursing God brought certain death. Does his wife want him to die because she cannot bear to see him suffer? Or is her question a literary device to provoke Job's response? Everything comes from God, he proclaims, so should we not accept both good and evil? Job has passed the second test in patient fidelity.

2:11-13 The friends

Job's three friends hear of his tragedy and travel to see him, but they do not recognize him, so altered is he by his suffering. So stunned are they,

