Exegetical Analysis of Job 3, the Relationship Between God and Man

Aaron Shelton
LeTourneau University
Biblical Poetical Books
BIBL 3303
Dr. Andy Woodring

Date Due: November 30, 2012
Date Submitted: November 30, 2012
Outline:

I. Introduction

II. Historical Context
   A. Issues of Structure and Unity
   B. Date and Provenance
   C. Job and Ancient Near Eastern Tradition

III. Literary context
   A. Job 3:1-26
      1. Chapter 1-2 Narrative
      2. Style
         a) Prose Introduction
         b) Lament

IV. Meaning
   A. Proper Division of Chapter 3
   B. Job 3:1-26 Analysis

V. Theological Significance
   A. Relationship Between Man and God
   B. Communal Understanding

VI. Application
   A. “Why questions”
   B. Suffering
Job is easily one of the most memorable characters in the Old Testament. His suffering is timeless and people can often relate to him during times in their lives when they feel as if the whole world is crashing down on them. They find his words extremely relatable and refreshing in times of hardship. Yet many people don’t see Job for who he really was. A cliche that has come into Christian circles is the “patience of Job” which is to surpass all anxiety. However, when we look at the text we find something incredibly different. “Job the rebel, who debunks the piety of his friends and boldly accuses God of injustice” (Newsom, 319). Over the centuries people have accused Job of blasphemy and think it is embarrassing to see a man in moral outrage towards God. They had also admired Job’s honesty and noticed his retraction of such claims in the end. Who is Job? What does he have to teach? Within the next few paragraphs I will explain how the historical and literary contexts provide a new idea of the relationship between God and man. We will look into how this idea revolutionizes how we think about theology and conclude with some practical applications for today. By the end of my writings it would be my hope to walk away from this enlightened and comforted in relationship with God and understand that God isn’t here to see people suffer, but is a God of grace, peace, and love.¹
**Historical Context**

When reading Job there are various angles in which Job seems to present his content. It doesn’t take a biblical scholar to notice the fact that Job seems to have some issues with structure and unity. Many different scholars have proposed views with which to remedy the disunity in Job, most of which have to do with the roles of Job 3 and Job 28-31. The question in Job 3 concerns whether it serves as a transition from the narrative form to the dialogue or as the beginning of the dialogue. This reveals an interesting relationship between the prose and poetic sections and how one is to read the book to begin with. The various dialogues in Job promote the idea that the book formed in various stages. This concept of formation is as follows: Stage 1 consisted of the oldest form of the book. The story that was told orally from generation to generation includes the pious Job. Stage 2 is considered to be the work of an Israelite that found the original tale to be deficient in which he added a framework of ambitiousness. This includes the section of Job that no longer shows him as a pious man standing by, but portrays him as a man who challenges God's treatment. Stage 3 was written by another author considerably later who found Job unsatisfactory because of his triumph over his friends. This author inserted the Elihu speech to provide a defense against Job’s arguments. Stage 4 consisted of edits made by scribes that found Job’s language

---

2 Content adapted from The New Interpreters Bible.
3 Sections in which Job laments or speaks from his perspective.
4 Stage progression adapted from The New Interpreters Bible.
5 This stage contains chapters 1-2 as well as 42:7-17.
6 This stage contains chapters 3-31:37 and 38-42:6.
far too blasphemous, therefore they added some of Bildad and Zophar’s speeches into Job’s mouth. Not all scholars agree with this idea of transitional adaptations and there are far more than just this. However, this suggested method of creation has a major issue. How are we supposed to read the book as it now exists today? Many scholars won’t consider this view because it begins to question canonicity, yet the evidence does promote a multiple authorship work.⁷ “Interpretively, the important issue is not how the book attained its present form but how the shape of the book contributes to its meaning” (Newsom, 323). When looking at these inconsistencies interpretively they pose only minor issues. The major issue becomes how to read the major schism of prose and poetic parts. Newsom believes this juxtaposition is intentionally designed to show that this isn’t to be read as one single coherent narrative but rather the same story being told from multiple angles and perspectives, ultimately contributing to the understanding of the book. Now focus must be shifted to social, moral, and religious values of characters. It is also important to consider the nature of piety, how the relationship between man and God is to look, and the proper stance toward suffering.

The previous section shows that there are some difficult questions to answer within Job, since some parts have been composed at different times. Estimates for the date of the book range from 200 BCE to 700 BCE.⁸ The difficulty here in determining the date of authorship comes from the fact that many of the issues and religious values of Job would be found in only one era. The most persuasive aspect for this year range is the reference to Satan in chapters 1-2 which has closest parallels in the early post-

---

⁷ The Elihu speeches being the most convincing.

⁸ Except for the Elihu speeches. Their composition depends on their presence in the Aramaic translations. They date from the first century CE but could have taken place as early as the second century BCE.
exilic period. Discovering who Job was written to is another issue in itself. Since there is no external evidence showing who the book was written to, internal evidence must be used. From the writings in Job it is clear that the book is best associated with wisdom literature. It parallels Proverbs and Psalms at times, most known for its statement “Fear the Lord.” Also, from the time spent on aristocratic life, it was most likely written for the upper class, yet its words can be beneficial to everyone. It also contains aspects of ancient near eastern (ANE) tradition which will be examined in more detail.

The question of whether or not the majority of Job’s work originated in Israel has been answered. We know that his works did not originate in Israel, however there aren’t any direct parallels with other ANE tradition because they are far too general. There are two areas to look into. The first is a comparison with Mesopotamian liturgical texts. These writings come from the second century BCE and talk about a sufferer who praises his god for deliverance.\(^9\) Much more significant are the striking similarities in form and content between Job and the Babylonian Theodicy. This text is a wisdom text written around 1000 BCE which was very popular around the Hellenistic period. It consists of dialogue between a sufferer and his friend in poetic form. The speeches house quite similar content. They also have stark differences which are expected. It is very unlikely that the author of Job simply copied this text. It is more likely that he knew of various wisdom narratives passed down and adapted the initial story. This knowledge doesn’t make this text any less valuable since its words are still valid and true.

\(^9\) Some of these are the Sumerian composition known as “Man and His God: a Sumerian Variation on the Job Motif” and the Babylonian text “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom”.
Literary Context

Before looking extensively look into Job 3, we need to establish some literary context. The prologue of Job is absolutely essential to the formation and success of the book. Within the first two chapters the author introduces the main character, Job of Uz. “Within a few strokes of the pen he sketches the heavenly council, the challenge from the Accuser, and Job’s loss of his wealth, his family, and his health” (Alden, 45). The author presents rare words, unusual order, repetition, parallelism, and special numbers seamlessly within a masterful prose.10 “The stark simplicity of the narrative contrasts markedly with the depth of the problem addressed” (Hartley, 64). There is also a very interesting fact within this section of the prologue that Job never discovers: he was a test case. Job, God, and Satan know that he is innocent, yet even innocent people question their sanity when faced with loss after loss. Nevertheless, Job comes out victorious as a hero of faith. This leads us to the beginning of chapter 3, where Job gives a fairly long speech wishing he was never born. Yet we find an abrupt shift in style. This transition from prose is filled with beautiful poetry and striking imagery. Job laments in chapter 3 but soon shifts to dialogue. Chapter 4 begins with a response and discussion that will last much of the book before shifting back to prose in chapter 38 to conclude the narrative.

10 Prose that slowly fades into poetry.
Meaning

The meaning of Job is pretty straightforward and under the circumstances it is justified. Job lost his wealth, his family, and his health in one blink. However, there are some discrepancies in how to divide up chapter 3. Traditionally, chapter 3 has been divided into three parts. However, in the past few decades Fishbane’s study on the nature of curses has shown that the curse itself is contained in two sections, vv. 3-13 and 14-26.

“Further support for dividing the chapter at v. 13 is the parallel imagery and language in vv. 13 and 26. In both sections Job expresses his ardent longing for inner rest. Also, vv. 11-13 are balanced by vv. 24-26; in them Job describes his sorrowful state. And vv. 3-10 along with vv. 14-23 have Job searching for death. Finally, these two divisions consist of 26 lines each. The chapter then may be classified as a curse-lament” (Hartley, 88-9).

This shows that this isn’t the first dialogue, but it instead expresses Job’s basic wish that God would grant him relief from his suffering.

Job begins his section of lamentation as a brief introduction cursing the day of his birth because it represented the path of his entire life, which had led to his present distress. He then progresses to curse his birth using skillfully crafted poetry. He regrets the moment of his birth, showing a distinction from the birth itself. He doesn’t appear to be suicidal but it seems unlikely this hasn’t crossed his mind. Rather, he wishes that things would have been different and that he would not have seen the light of day. Job then begins to lament his need for rest. Job’s futile curses progress from the day of his

---

11 It is divided as follows: vv. 3-10, 11-19, 20-26.

12 He still views life as a divine gift.
birth to the first moments of life. Just as he wishes the day was darkness and time was erased, he also wishes that life had been death. Why? Because in this it would have at least brought peace. In this section, Job also talks about kings and princes who labored to obtain wealth and build cities but lay without them in death. Similarly, he compares slaves and weary prisoners with the way that death removes social position. He then continues to lament his suffering by asking “why” questions. Continuing to reflect his miserable state he contrasts themes of light and death. This leads to chapter 4 where Job and his friends engage in dialogue, which continues on until the transition back to prose in chapter 38. Within chapter 3 there are major theological issues that warrant discussion.

**Theological Significance**

Job presents a series of thought-provoking questions that have to do with how to process life and how to view God. Ultimately, there is one major question from this text: why does Job reverence God? “Traditional religion often talks about the blessings that come from piety and obedience to God, and Satan’s probing question asks whether such expectations subtly corrupt the relationship between human beings and God” (Newsom, 334). Should one serve God unconditionally and without question? This is debated throughout Job as he wrestles with the fact that he is doing what God requires of him, he hasn’t sinned, he is innocent, and still all this is happening to him.

---

13 It is interesting as the author lays the foundations for some puzzles that will be answered later in the wisdom sections.
Job tries to work out this concept with his friends and with God but no conclusion is reached. Even the end of the book doesn’t really answer this theological question. Job proved to be faithful in the end, but now this is a question for each and every one of us. What Newsom suggests is an interesting take on the issue. He proposes that the truth in a complex question can only be spoken by a plurality of voices that cannot be merged into one, because they come from different experiences and perspectives. Instead it is found when all these voices collide. What is found? The pressure for us to choose how we will live.¹⁴ Job, as he chooses how he will live, consequentially also decides how he will view God. He observes all the various issues and still concludes that he must choose God because it is right. Therefore he sees God as good, righteous, and just even in dire circumstances. What the author of Job is trying to teach is not simply the qualities of God. The author is trying to show that the significance of the choice is appreciated when it comes from other perspectives and people who have made different choices. It makes Job’s theological inquiry require the perspectives of others. “By closing in a manner that frustrates closure, the book signals that the conversation it has begun about the nature of divine human relations is not finished but requires a new community of voices”¹⁵ (Newsom, 338).

¹⁴ The Bible says that we are to be reverent to God even in the worst of times. Job suffered worse than most of us will ever suffer yet at the same time he had to make a conscious choice to forsake the temptation to abandon God and to remain faithful.

¹⁵ I am not sure how much I agree with this, but I found this particular take both challenging and refreshing. Sure we know some of the qualities of God, but when that is questioned down to your core, it is refreshing to see a man choose to still remain faithful, even when God doesn’t seem to have remained faithful.
Application

With this theological concept rolling around in our minds, we also begin to wonder how this applies to our lives. Why does God cause suffering and evil to those who are righteous? Are we supposed to trust God when everything falls apart? How do we wholly and unconditionally love God in the midst of the world falling down on us? These aren’t easy questions to answer and most people won’t like the answer that follows. God causes evil and suffering to fall on the righteous in order to grow them, to grow others, and to test their faith. What should our response be? Job shows us that we are to reverence God. Even in times that seem like nothing is going right. Job doesn’t enjoy his testing; he cries out to the Lord, curses His name, and accuses Him of being no better than Satan. But in the end he realizes that God is indeed still good. Wayne Grudem talks about how Job didn’t sin or charge God with wrong (Job 1:22). Job complained about his condition and asked for it to be removed and also asked where God was, but was unable to blame God since He is not capable of doing wrong. However, He does use evil to bring about His will. “To blame God for the evil that he had brought about through secondary agents would have been to sin. Job does not do this, Scripture does not do this, and neither should we” (Grudem, 148). Therefore, we know that God doesn’t cause the evil, but he does allow it for our growth and the growth of others. Job had many awful things happen to him, perhaps for his own growth but more importantly for the growth of millions of followers of God to come. People get encouragement from stories like these where someone comes out the other side victorious even when the world is against them. We are called to trust God when things
seem to be the darkest. Paul shows us that we should remain faithful because God will also remain faithful. We can have hope even when nothing else goes right, because we know God is just, graceful, loving, and faithful to save us even if this salvation isn’t in our physical lives.

**Conclusion**

Job was a man of incredible faith and perseverance. He might not have understood why things were happening to him, and he certainly wasn’t afraid to cry out to the Lord for the injustices that were being brought into his life. Ecclesiastes shows us that the righteous will suffer under the wicked. Job experienced this firsthand, yet his faithfulness was rewarded in the end for his reverence to God. Within this paper we looked at the historical and literary context, evaluated the meaning of Job 3, and looked at some of the theological issues it raised. We also learned that the proper response of turning to God in humility, trust, and prayer is essential. God is God and we are not. Job would agree with this statement but add one last thing — blessed be the name of the Lord.
Bibliography


Notes adapted from ESV Study Bible