CHAPTER 1

Job 1–2

LISTEN to the Story

1:1In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man
was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. 2He had seven
sons and three daughters, 3and he owned seven thousand sheep, three
thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys,
and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all
the people of the East.

4His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they
would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5When a period
of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to
be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for
each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God
in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.

6One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and
Satan also came with them. 7The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you
come from?"

Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going
back and forth on it."

8Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?
There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who
fears God and shuns evil."

9"Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. 10"Have you not
put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You
have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread
throughout the land. 11But now stretch out your hand and strike every-
thing he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

12The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your
power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

13 One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking
wine at the oldest brother's house, 14 a messenger came to Job and said,
"The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, 15 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!"

16 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!"

17 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!"

18 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, 19 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!"

20 At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he
fell to the ground in worship 21 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."

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

2:1 On another day the angels came to present themselves before the
LORD, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him. 2 And
the LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"

Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming throughout the earth, going
back and forth on it."

3 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?
There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who
fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you
incited me against him to ruin him without any reason."

4 "Skin for skin!" Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own

life. [5]But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face."

[6]The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life."

[7]So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. [8]Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes.

[9]His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!"

[10]He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"

In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

[11]When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. [12]When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. [13]Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Listening to the Text in the Story: "The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer" (Babylonian; also known as "The Babylonian Job" or "Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi"); "A Righteous Sufferer's Prayer to Nabu"

Why do bad things happen to good people? This is a question that is raised in the opening chapters of the book of Job. It was a question that troubled many in the ancient world just as it continues to trouble us today. We know that the wisdom of the ancient sages was shared far and wide, across national and cultural boundaries, and so it is probable that Job's author and first audience were at least vaguely familiar with some of the thoughts of foreign sages on this topic.

We know that the problem of suffering was examined across all ancient cultures from the ancient Near East. From late Bronze Age Ugarit (c. 1500–1200 BC) we have a poem about a righteous sufferer which, although only

preserved in a damaged form, presents a tale of a man who finds himself suffering at the hands of the gods he worships and seeks to learn why.[1]

The Akkadian text "Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi"[2] (the opening words, which are also translated to provide the English title: "I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom") expands on the format of the shorter Ugaritic text and includes a vivid description of a person (named Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan) suffering and so is frequently cited as a parallel to Job. There are indeed some quite striking parallels to Job.[3] In the Akkadian "Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi," the sufferer first loses all his material possessions and is then afflicted with all manner of diseases (which are assigned a supernatural origin).

In spite of these parallels, there are significant differences between Job and "Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi." The latter is essentially a poem of praise of Marduk (who is the "Lord of wisdom" of the title) for delivering his servant and also incorporates magic and incantations. Perhaps most significantly, however, is the reason for Shubshi-meshre-Shakkan's suffering, which appears to be the direct result of some "sin" or act of neglect committed against Marduk, as suggested on tablet III, lines 58–61, which, although only partially preserved, do reveal enough to warrant such a conclusion:

> . . . my sin . . .
> . . . my iniquity . . .
> . . . my transgression . . .
> He caused the wind to carry off my acts of negligence.[4]

This is further clarified in another line associated with tablet III, which reads "let the one who was negligent of Esagil learn from my example."[5] In the end, Shubshi-meshre-Shakkan's suffering appears to fall under the notion of retributive justice. The work does not represent an exposé of the failure of the wisdom movement to account adequately for the suffering of the innocent as the book of Job does by presenting the sages and their arguments (from the mouths of Job's friends) and then having God state that they are wrong.

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1. The tablet is designated RS 25.460 and known as "The Righteous Sufferer" or "A Hymn to Marduk." See Yoram Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age*, ed. Theodore J. Lewis, Writings from the Ancient World 29 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 165–75.

2. A Babylonian text also known as "The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer" or "The Babylonian Job."

3. Direct parallels will be discussed in the relevant passages throughout the commentary.

4. Amar Annus and Alan Lenzi, *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi: The Standard Babylonian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*, SAACT 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 39.

5. Annus and Lenzi, *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, xxiv. "Esagil" was the name for the temple of Marduk in Babylon.

A closer thematic parallel for this Akkadian text would be one of the psalms of thanksgiving. W. G. Lambert suggests that it would be better described as a Babylonian *Pilgrim's Progress* than as a close parallel to the book of Job.[6]

In spite of the various similarities, the story of Job introduces some unique elements. The most significant is that Job's monotheism raises unique problems of theodicy.[7] Yahweh is not like the gods of the nations—there are no other deities upon which blame for suffering can be leveled! Furthermore, Yahweh has revealed himself through his law. He has made it clear how his people should live and promised them good if they were obedient. So when good, faithful people suffered, it raised questions about why they were suffering, questions that are more acute for worshipers of Yahweh than for those who believed in a diverse pantheon of gods whose behavior was not always entirely predictable or consistent.

One of the closest parallels to Job is found in the "Righteous Sufferer's Prayer to Nabû," an Akkadian prayer text in which a wealthy man who finds himself nearing death defends his righteousness and asks why Nabû his god has abandoned him, calling for Nabû to save his life. As a prayer, it presents the predicament of the speaker but does not find a resolution, and so it reflects the book of Job to the point where Yahweh speaks to Job. There are, of course, differences. Aside from the relative brevity of the prayer, there is little to indicate that the sufferer believes that his troubles have been inflicted on him by Nabû, whereas Job assumes that Yahweh stands behind his troubles from the very beginning. Nonetheless, the general theme of the prayer is remarkably close to that of Job.[8]

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6. W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 27. Hurowitz says: "it should not be compared with Job or called a 'Poem of the Righteous Sufferer' as is often done. Both Job and Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan suffered immeasurably even while they considered themselves righteous and wondered why they were so afflicted, but this is the full extent of the similarity. In the end Job comes out blameless while Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan is found lacking. In a broken context he speaks of 'my sin . . . my iniquity . . . my transgression . . . my negligence' (arnī . . . initta . . . šertī . . . egâtīja; III 58–61), and in fact he was worshipping the wrong god. He may have been ignoring Marduk inadvertently or out of ignorance but that was enough." See Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "Is Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi Wisdom Literature? A Review Article of: Annus, Amar and Alan Lenzi, Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi: The Standard Babylonian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer," *JHebS* 11 (2011), https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2011.v11.r53, https://jhsonline.org/index.php/jhs/article/view/16488.

7. Note that Simo Parpola argues that the Assyrians were essentially monotheists worshiping Ashur and that their other "deities" were instead aspects or attributes of Ashur; see Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997), xix–xx.

8. The text of the prayer, translated by Alan Lenzi, is available online at http://akkpm.org/P338383.html.

EXPLAIN the Story

The opening chapters of the book of Job set the scene for all that will take place in the remainder of the book. Here we meet Job and are told by both the narrator and God himself that Job was "blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1, 8). We are given a glimpse into God's royal court in heaven so that we may know that what befalls Job is not the result of his sin—in fact, quite the reverse! Job is such an exemplary person that his motives are questioned, and the disasters that befall him serve to show not his sinfulness but that his motives are pure.

Introducing Job (1:1–5)

The syntax of the opening words to the book of Job, "In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job," finds its closest parallel in two places in the Bible: in Nathan's parable (2 Sam 12:1) and Joash's fable (2 Kgs 14:9).[9] This suggests that the story of Job is introduced as some form of parable. Since parables were staples of wisdom teachers in the ancient world, this is hardly surprising. The idea that Job's story, at least as it is presented here, is not a verbatim record of historical events should not be a surprise to us—after all, the bulk of the book presents the characters speaking entirely in poetry, and real people do not debate in poetry! This is not to say that there was no historical Job any more than the modern musical *Hamilton* undermines the historical existence of Alexander Hamilton. Rather, it means no more than that this version of his story is stylized by the author. The existence of this poetic account of Job's life neither proves nor disproves the existence of an historical Job.

Scholars are unsure about the precise location of Job's home Uz. Most conclude that it lies somewhere near Edom (see Jer 25:20). The precise location is, however, less important to the story than the fact that it indicates that this tale is not set in Israel. This, along with a number of other clues, indicates that this story is set in patriarchal times (see the introduction on Date). Why would the Bible include a story from outside Israel in patriarchal times? One possibility is that the author wanted the reader to know that what we learn in Job is not something new; it is something God's people ought to have known from the beginning, and the mistakes of Job's friends—mistakes repeated by

9. Hartley, *Book of Job*, 65n1, suggests 2 Sam 12:1 and Esth 2:5 as parallels and says "nor does it signal that the account is fictional." Clines, however, explains why Esth 2:5 is not a true parallel; see David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, WBC 17 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 9.

many throughout history—should never have been made and should not now be made.

The remainder of these opening verses introduce us to Job himself. The name Job does not appear to be a Hebrew name—fitting with the non-Israelite setting of the work—but the name does appear in other literature from the ancient Near East. Precisely what his name means is unclear—it could mean "where is my father" (perhaps in reference to God as his father and hence an implicit appeal for divine help), or else it could be related to the Hebrew word for "hate" and hence mean something like "the hated one." Whatever its derivation, the text does not attribute any explicit significance to his name, so perhaps we ought not to place too much weight on it either.

We are told that Job is "blameless and upright." For modern readers this and the subsequent descriptions of Job raise the question of whether we are being told that Job was sinless, for the remainder of the Bible makes it quite clear that no human being is sinless (and for Job, see Job 7:21; 13:26; 14:16–17). This question, however, goes beyond what we are told. That Job is blameless and upright indicates that he is both forgiven for any sins he may have committed (and so not held to blame for them) and one who seeks to live out a godly life (and hence upright). This is possible for a sinful human being because God has made a way for anyone to be blameless. In the Old Testament this involved sacrifices, which pointed to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. What we do see later in this chapter is that Job is scrupulous in offering sacrifices for sins (Job 1:5). Consequently, Job is "blameless and upright," and assuredly we should not expect him to be punished for sins dealt with through sacrifices already made.

The final clause tells us that Job feared God and turned from evil. Fearing God is elsewhere in the Bible the mark of both the righteous and the wise (cf. Prov 1:7). While it is certainly true that "fear" should be understood more as an attitude of respect and awe, it is probable that it should retain some amount of actual fear in the face of God who is supremely powerful and ultimately determines the course of one's life. The response of Isaiah to his vision of God in Isaiah 6 provides a salient lesson: Isaiah was a faithful servant of Yahweh, yet that did not fully prepare him for his encounter with God, at which point he cries out, "Woe to me, I am ruined!" Fearing God is a natural outworking of knowing who he is!

The author is at pains to assure us of this point: Job has not done anything to warrant the terrible events that are to unfold. There is nothing in his life that demands God's wrath. What is about to be unleashed on him is in no way a punishment for sin. The author states it here but also records God

stating it explicitly later in this and the next chapter (Job 1:8; 2:3). It is vital to understand and remember this, for much of the later dialogue between Job and his friends turns on this very point. Too many readers throughout history have forgotten this point and wound up, like Job's friends, blaming Job for the trouble that befalls him.

In verses 2–3 the author turns to describe the blessings Job enjoys: he has seven sons, and it should be recalled that seven conveyed notions of completeness. So, aside from having many sons, which Psalm 127:3 notes is itself a blessing, Job has just the right number. He also has three daughters, a number significant primarily because it gives him a total of ten children, and powers of ten seem here to be used to express the notion of abundant blessing (7 sons + 3 daughters = 10 children; 7,000 sheep + 3,000 camels = 10,000 animals; 500 yoke of oxen (where a "yoke" refers to a pair of oxen) + 500 female donkeys = 1,500 working animals).

A brief note about Job's camels may also be helpful. For quite a while scholars argued that camels were not domesticated until some time in the first millennium BC, and so the Bible's references to camels in more ancient settings were thought to be clearly anachronistic. More recent research has overturned this thinking, and it is now held that camels were domesticated at least early in the second millennium BC. In light of that, references to camels here and elsewhere in texts set in ancient times should no longer be assumed to be anachronistic.[10]

As would seem appropriate to Job's personal righteousness, we are told that he was wealthy. In the ancient world, wealth was often considered a sign of divine approval, and Job is presented as, in all ways, the perfect example of the upright and righteous man who feared God and shunned evil. This depiction of Job sets the stage for all that is to follow.

The final clause of verse 3 summarizes the point the author has made thus far: Job is the greatest of all the people of the east. The reference here to the "east" places this story in patriarchal times, as this is where the bulk of humanity is said to have lived before Abram began his westward journey to the promised land. The point is thus not that there were better people in the west but that Job was outstanding in his godliness in a world so ancient that even the author of the book of Job could think of it as "ancient."

The narrator next informs us in verses 4–5 that Job's sons would hold regular feasts. The frequency with which these events took place is not particularly

10. See, most recently, Martin Heide and Joris Peters, *Camels in the Biblical World*, HACL 10 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021).

clear (the NIV's "on their birthdays" is woodenly "each on his day," which could refer to their birthdays as the similar "his day" does for Job in Job 3:1, or simply to them taking scheduled turns to host a feast). It is clear, however, that these feasts would last for several days ("a period of feasting" in v. 5 is rendered woodenly "the days of the feast"). The point of the text is simply to state that Job's children participated in regular, elaborate celebrations and to record Job's response.

The word "curse" in verse 5 (and also later in 1:11; 2:5, 9) translates the Hebrew verb *brk*, meaning "bless." The author uses the word euphemistically, perhaps to avoid explicitly associating the verb "curse" with God, but perhaps also to catch the attention of the reader (see further below on 1:9–11). The book of Job is a wisdom text, and as such we ought to be prepared to think carefully about the way the story is told.

These verses serve two functions: they set the scene for verses 18–19 below and they illustrate Job's piety. Job is meticulous in ensuring that his children remain blameless to the extent that he offers sacrifices even when he is not certain that they have sinned. Job's attention to detail and scrupulous sacrifices assure us that he is worthy of the description "blameless and upright." The point is not that Job is actually sinless (see 7:21; 13:26; 14:16–17), but that his sin is dealt with in accordance with what God requires and that his piety and devotion to God ensure that he wholeheartedly seeks to live in accord with God's precepts—he was, as it were, the model citizen par excellence. Job here is also depicted as being acutely aware that to curse God is a most egregious sin, a point that becomes important as the Satan will later insist that Job would be willing to curse God given the right circumstances.

Behind the Scenes: God's Heavenly Court (1:6–12)

The second scene in the book of Job takes us into a heavenly setting that depicts a royal court where the king, Yahweh, is enthroned before his attendants and courtiers (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19–22; Dan 7:9–14). The author uses the name of God to make it clear to the reader that this non-Israelite from patriarchal times serves the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We already know who this God is and what he is like. The story of Job connects to this history of the true God whom we know from his activities throughout history. The author begins with the presumption that we are already familiar with his character in his story. Furthermore, as a text about wisdom, our reading of this text is to be subject to the fundamental principle to be employed when interpreting wisdom, namely, that "the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov 1:7, NIV modified). Overlooking these points leads some readers to

infer the entirety of Yahweh's character from the very limited presentation of the prologue of Job. While it is unfashionable to speak of what an ancient author knew, it is hard to dispute the point that the author of Job expected the audience to know who Yahweh was and, when reading the text, to include that information as they sought to understand what was written. To exclude that information is to misread the book. But Job is not a standalone book; it is inextricably connected to the larger context of the remainder of the Old Testament.

Into this heavenly court come the "sons of God," a reference to angelic beings. Among them is one described by a specific title, "the Satan," who is most likely here counted as one of their number, although the word "also" (Hebrew *gam*) and Yahweh's first question in the next verse could give the impression that the Satan is not normally to be found here.[11] Although frequently taken as a name, the Hebrew term here is more likely a title describing the role this particular angelic being undertook. Unlike names in the Old Testament, the word is preceded by the definite article.[12] It is also worth noting that the Hebrew word *satan* appears elsewhere without reference to the Satan (for example, see Num 22:22 where the angel of Yahweh opposes Balaam).

The Hebrew word *satan* refers to an adversary or opponent of some form. Traditionally the Satan is Yahweh's adversary despite being clearly subordinate to him. The manner in which he will address Yahweh in the coming verses shows little of the deference that would seem appropriate before the divine king. In the end, the Satan's presence here is intriguing. The scene that unfolds is somewhat reminiscent of a judicial setting where Job's faith is on trial with the Satan filling the role of the prosecutor.

By the time of the New Testament, Satan was universally recognized as a supernatural being who opposed Jesus and sought to derail his mission. As the Satan here opposes Yahweh, it seems probable that, while we don't yet have a fully developed (or revealed) understanding of this figure, there is nonetheless some connection between the Satan in Job and Satan who stands in opposition to God in the New Testament.[13]

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11. Note that Crenshaw argues that the Hebrew particle *gam* implies that the adversary is an intruder, see James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 2010), 92. Contrary to this is Christopher A. Rollston, "An Ur-History of the New Testament Devil: The Celestial שׂטן (*Śāṭān*) in Zechariah and Job," in *Evil in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Chris Keith and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, WUNT 2.417 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 1–16.

12. See Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* 2 vols. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993) §137b.

13. Clines says, "Although [Satan in later Jewish and Christian theology] is clearly derived from [the Satan in Job], it would be best to ignore the later development of the figure when establishing the nature and role of 'the Satan' in Job" (Clines, *Job 1–20*, 19).

Yahweh initiates the dialogue in verse 7 with a question for the Satan: "Where have you come from?" Doubtless Job's readers have always been aware that such a question was not necessary for an omniscient God, but we as readers are not blessed with all knowledge, and so the storyteller uses this opening dialogue to provide us with critical information.

The Satan's answer raises some questions. He says that he had been "roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it." David Clines suggests that the first verb, translated "roaming," refers to travels that are purposeful, but this may not be an inherent quality of the verb so much as a consequence of the contexts in which it is found. Nonetheless, the response of the Satan lets us know that he has been traversing the world of humans. Whether he was actively looking for something or someone is not clear, although in light of the subsequent discussion it has been plausibly suggested that part of the Satan's job description may have been to assess the piety and faithfulness of human beings. This makes sense of Yahweh bringing Job to the Satan's attention in the next verse.

God identifies Job as his servant (1:8). Although servant language is used frequently throughout the Bible, there are only a very few individuals explicitly described by God as his servant: most frequently Moses (Josh 1:1, 13, etc.) but also Abraham (Gen 26:24), Joshua (Josh 24:29; Judg 2:8), Isaiah (Isa 20:3), Eliakim son of Hilkiah (Isa 22:20), the servant of Yahweh in Isaiah (Isa 42:19; 43:10), Zerubbabel (Hag 2:23), and David (1 Chr 17:4).[14] At the very least, then, this draws attention to Job as special. And this point is made quite explicit: "There is no one on earth like him" (Job 2:3).

This highlights an element of this story that is worth emphasizing: Job is not representative of everyone. We cannot automatically identify with Job when we suffer because both the narrator of Job's story and God himself highlight Job's uniqueness—there is no one like him. Already this warns us that Job's story may not function as a theodicy, since Job is a special case.

The remainder of verse 8 presents God's reason for recognizing Job's uniqueness: "he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." This reiterates what the narrator had told us in verse 1—the point is not that Job is sinless or that he has never sinned, as had been made apparent through the account of Job's habitual actions back in verse 4–5.

The Satan's answer (1:9–11) implies that he is aware of Job but argues that his upright life is motivated by self-interest. Job is as Yahweh has described

14. This list includes only individuals explicitly identified by God as his servant, not those described by others as servants of God, nor groups identified as servants.

him simply because of the benefits the relationship affords him: he is protected from harm ("Have you not put a hedge around him") and has had his endeavors in all areas aided by divine intervention ("you have blessed the work of his hands"). The Satan proposes that Job's true motives can easily be revealed through a simple test: take away the blessings he has been given and then "he will surely curse you to your face."

This last phrase is key in what follows, where the measure of Job's response will be found in his spoken response to Yahweh. The Hebrew text (and the Old Greek translation of it) literally read "bless you to your face," but scholars almost universally agree that the author has used "bless" here as a euphemism for "curse" in order to avoid actually writing the words for "curse" together with God's name (the same thing happens in 1 Kgs 21:10, 13). The other way to read it would be with "bless" used sarcastically, but the result is the same. The Satan is establishing the means by which his argument will be proven, and in each of the two tests of Job it is in Job's ultimate vocal responses (Job 1:20–22; 2:10) that we shall be able to assess the truth or falsity of the Satan's claims.

The scene that takes place in the heavenly court ends in verse 12 with Yahweh granting the Satan permission to strike Job's possessions (including his children). This response, however, immediately prompts the question: Why does God allow the test to proceed? Surely God could simply assert that he knows the heart of Job and knows that his devotion is not ultimately motivated by selfish concerns.

The initial answer to this question lies in the fact that Job is not a historical account but a wisdom tale—it is designed to teach the audience something. At that level, the story seeks to address a deeply ingrained belief that individual human suffering is the direct consequence of individual sin. That this belief is deeply ingrained is apparent from the number of times it appears throughout the Bible, raising its head explicitly in the Gospels when Jesus addresses the question (e.g., Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–3). All too frequently today we still ask what we have done to deserve difficult times when they befall us. This warrants more than brief rebuttal. The point needs to be made clearly and repeatedly, and this is what the author of Job does for us.

Yet herein lies a further clue to something more that is happening in Job, something that is not immediately apparent on the surface of the story. One of the main points of the book of Job is that governing history is a complex task beyond the scope of human understanding. If we, the audience of the book, were to understand everything about Job's suffering, we would be in danger of failing to appreciate this major point of the book. Consequently, there are a number of clues throughout the book that point to the fact that more lies

behind Job's suffering than merely this test prompted by the Satan's claims. Job's suffering will demonstrate that God truly does know his servant, but it will also serve some other purpose—a purpose we can only speculate upon.[15] In this way we, like Job, must come to the realization that we live in a vastly complex universe and should not expect to comprehend all that God is doing. We must, in the end, trust that God works in all things for the good of those who believe.

Job's First Test (1:13–19)

The scene is set for the unfolding tragedies that are inflicted upon Job. Verse 13 begins with the same words, "One day," that introduce verse 6 (cf. 1 Sam 1:4; 14:1; 2 Kgs 4:8, 11, 18) and, rather than identify a specific feast, simply inform us that Job's actions happened on the occasion of one of the feasts. The reference to the feast day envelopes the reporting of the disasters with the feasting of Job's children mentioned at the beginning and end of the reports.

That the events are reported to Job by messengers makes it clear that Job is not physically present to witness any of these events. This serves a couple of purposes: it allows the reports to be delivered in rapid succession so that neither the audience nor Job has any real time to process the significance of the events as they are reported. It may also have allowed this account of Job to have been a performance, like a play, wherein the complex depictions of disasters are replaced by simple reports of them.

Each of the reports to Job follows the same pattern: something happened and only the reporting messenger escaped with his life. The rapidity of the reports is underlined by the conjunctive phrase "while he was still speaking." Each disaster is reported by a single survivor, described as a "messenger"—the same word (Hebrew *mal'ak*) elsewhere in the Old Testament is used to refer to angels (e.g., Gen 48:16; Exod 23:20; etc.). Here, however, it is clear that these individuals are human, for they are each the sole survivor from among Job's servants.

Four disasters are reported to Job, of which two are attributed to people and two to divine causes. The first is the attack of the Sabeans resulting in the loss of Job's oxen and donkeys. The designation here for this group is also used of the Queen of Sheba who visits Solomon (1 Kgs 10), a place identified with modern-day Yemen. However, the identification here is not unproblematic—the description of these Sabeans as a marauding band prompts many to question a simple identification of these attackers with Sheba. In the end,

15. Shields, "Malevolent or Mysterious?," 255–70.

the precise identification of the Sabeans is of little import to the story that unfolds. Perhaps the one point that can reasonably be made is that the attack would seem so surprising that its unexpected nature reflects something of the supernatural manipulation going on behind the scenes.

The second disaster is described as "a fire of God." The same expression appears elsewhere in 2 Kings 1:12 to describe fire called down by Elijah, which consumes fifty soldiers (a similar but not identical expression is found in 1 Kgs 18:38). This description is in keeping with the biblical understanding that God is sovereign, so that even though we know that these disasters befall Job at the Satan's behest, ultimately they do so only because God has permitted them.[16]

The third disaster arrives at the hand of the Chaldeans. While this term is used to refer to members of the Neo-Babylonian Empire of the mid-first millennium BC, the account here does not appear consistent with an imperial force. Rather, the use of the term here designates a more ancient nomadic group to which Assyrian annals make reference.[17] The description of their attack on three fronts reflects a known military strategy (see Judg 7:16; 9:43; 1 Sam 11:11; 13:17) that establishes both their number and experience in carrying out such attacks. Job's camels were taken and servants stood no chance against them, as all bar one were slaughtered.

The final and greatest disaster is the loss of Job's children. While not explicitly ascribed to a supernatural source, the description of a wind that strikes four corners of a house together with such force that it destroys the building and kills all the occupants clearly points to a supernatural origin.

At the completion of seven brief verses, all Job's possessions and all of his family—bar his wife—are gone. The relentless, unremitting reporting of the disasters to Job leaves us reeling. The Satan has executed his task with overwhelming efficiency, allowing neither Job nor the audience to recover or even to respond. There was no other way to take all that Job had that could have struck him harder and tested him more, and so all eyes are now on Job to see whether he will bear out the Satan's claim or remain faithful to God.

Job's Response to His Losses (1:20–22)

Job's immediate response is presented in actions not words: he tore his robe and shaved his head. Both acts reflect traditional expressions of mourning in

16. It may also be that the Hebrew word *'elohim* here functions as a superlative with the meaning "an intense fire"; see D. Winton Thomas, "A Consideration of Some Unusual Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew," VT 3.3 (1953): 209–24.

17. See Clines, *Job 1–20*, 32–33; Alan R. Millard, "Daniel 1–6 and History," *EQ* 49.2 (1977): 69–71.

the Bible. For tearing one's robe see, for example, Genesis 37:29; Joshua 7:6. Although tearing one's robe could be a quick response, shaving one's head (see Isa 15:2; 22:12; Jer 7:29; etc.) would not have been. That the act itself was proscribed by the Law (see Deut 14:1) reminds us that this story is set outside of Israel and before the time of Moses. Job's deliberate and slow actions reflect thought and intention—Job's response is not rash but derives from thoughtful and faithful reflection of what he has experienced in light of his relationship with God.

Job's final physical act, falling to the ground to worship, preempts his spoken response. The words that describe Job's act here—falling to the ground and worshiping—are repeated identically in 2 Samuel 1:2, and similar expressions are found in Joshua 5:14; 1 Samuel 20:41; 2 Samuel 14:4, 22; 2 Kings 4:37. Surprisingly it is only Job's act that is directed toward God—the term translated "worship" in this verse more generally refers to bowing down before a person of greater import as an act of obeisance. This makes it clear that Job's response here is not an involuntary response to his pain (as could well be expected in the circumstances) but a deliberate act aimed toward God in recognition of his status.

Job's reply, when it finally comes in verse 21, is brief but powerfully emotive. His words are echoed later by the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 6:7 and are a recognition that all that we have in this world comes ultimately from God, and there is nothing we can hold on to and take with us (a point also noted by the Teacher in Eccl 5:15). Both Job and the narrator of the story recognize that nothing in this universe that happens does so apart from God's sovereign rule, and so Job attributes his loss to Yahweh rather than the Satan or the various human agents described in the narrative.

The most significant words in these verses are the last: "may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21). The Satan had predicted that Job would curse Yahweh, but Job's words vindicate both Yahweh and Job: he does not curse, but instead he blesses (Hebrew *brk*; the word translated "be praised" in the NIV is often elsewhere translated as "bless"). The challenge appears to be over. Job's faith has been shown to not be self-serving and has stood up to the most devastating losses. To emphasize this point the narrator offers his own conclusion: "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (1:22), and this will be reflected in Yahweh's own words to the Satan in Job 2:3.

The Satan's Second Challenge and Test (2:1–6)

The opening scene of Job 2 is strikingly familiar, more or less a verbatim repeat of Job 1:6–8. Yahweh explicitly notes that the Satan's claim that Job's faith was

self-serving has been shown to be false. Rather than concede defeat, however, the Satan proceeds to argue that the test needs to be extended.

The meaning of the Satan's initial response—"skin for skin"—is itself not entirely clear. It is probably a colloquial or proverbial phrase familiar to the original audience, although it appears nowhere else in the Bible. Its meaning is clear from the context: Job is still preserving his own interests in order to remain healthy. Deprive him of his health and he will then certainly curse God and so prove that his faithfulness was merely self-serving.

The Satan's wording here is also enlightening: it is Yahweh who is to "stretch out your hand and . . . he will surely curse [*brk*] you to your face" (Job 2:5) Throughout the prologue it is clear that the ultimate responsibility for Job's fate lies in Yahweh's hands and that the Satan has no independent power to do anything to Job. Even though the Satan is the instrument of affliction, Yahweh, the Satan, and even Job himself (see 2:10) all recognize that it is ultimately entirely contingent upon Yahweh's sanction. The notion of divine sovereignty is never questioned in the book of Job. So once again, God allows the Satan to further test Job to prove this point. In chapter 1 the Satan was prevented from harming Job himself. This limitation is removed but replaced with another preventing him from taking Job's life.

In this context, the prohibition against taking Job's life appears to be a merciful constraint, but Job will not come to see it this way, for by the time we reach 6:8–10, Job will be longing for God to allow him to die.

Job's Second Test (2:7–8)

The Satan's actions are described more succinctly than in the previous chapter, requiring only one verse. While there is no indication of the timeframe for Job's affliction, the terse description gives the impression that the onset is rapid. Many readers have wondered what precise malady afflicted Job, but the text simply describes symptoms: "painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head" (2:7).

The remainder of the book does provide some further light on Job's symptoms and the effects of this disease. The very first is that Job presumably finds some relief from scraping the sores with a broken piece of pottery (2:8; whether this is physical or psychological relief is not made clear). David Clines summarizes some of the other references to Job's disease as including

> the repeated eruption of pustules (7:5) and blackening and peeling off of the skin (30:30) are the most definite signs in the poem of a skin disease, and correspond to the itching purulence mentioned here. Other symptoms

> are more general: emaciation (19:20), fever (30:30b), nightmares (7:14) and sleeplessness (7:4), weeping (16:16).[18]

In addition to these, the reference to strangling in Job 7:15 may suggest that his illness also manifested itself in breathing difficulties.

Perhaps the most helpful detail lies in the fact that the precise phrase, "painful sores" (Hebrew *shekhin ra'*), together with a reference to the extent of the sores, appears as one of the curses for disobeying the covenant in Deuteronomy 28:35 in language strongly reminiscent of Job's affliction:

> The Lord will afflict your knees and legs with painful boils that cannot be cured, spreading from the soles of your feet to the top of your head.

This strong linguistic connection may well have been deliberate, such that Job's author wants to note that, while disobedience to the covenant may result in this malady, suffering from such extensive painful boils is itself not proof that one has either broken the covenant or (in Job's case) committed some sin that would result in this condition. On the other hand, the association would have also helped the audience appreciate the perspective of Job's friends. Their claim that Job was suffering as a consequence of disobedience was clearly not entirely irrational but rather a conclusion that appears a reasonable application of the covenant with which they (i.e., the audience) were familiar—and perhaps just the sort of reasoning they would themselves be tempted to apply when they encountered anyone suffering in this way. The stage is set so that such thinking will be appropriately nuanced in the minds of the audience as Job's story unfolds, if not in the minds of Job's friends.

While we know that Job's condition will not prove to be terminal (Job 2:6), Job did not know this. Job was faced with the very real possibility that the condition was incurable (cf. Deut 28:35), such that Job now faces the expectation that he will live the remainder of his life in this condition. His response needs to be seen in the light of this possibility to understand its full impact.

The final note in this verse indicates that Job is sitting among the ashes. Ashes are often associated with mourning (e.g., 2 Sam 13:19; Esth 4:3; Ps 102:9; Isa 61:3; Jer 6:26; Ezek 27:30), so this is an appropriate place for Job to sit—aside from the fact that, having lost everything, he has nowhere else to sit.

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18. Clines, *Job 1–20*, 49.

Job's Second Response (2:9–10)

Thus far Job has not spoken in response to his new affliction. Until he does speak, the outcome of the challenge the Satan has put to Yahweh cannot be decided. This situation is resolved with just a few words from Job's wife. The first thing to note is that she begins by acknowledging that Job's integrity stands—thus far he has done nothing to warrant condemnation. While her advice—"Curse God and die!"—aligns her with the Satan by encouraging Job to curse God, it seems that she offers this advice in response to the suffering Job as a possible way of escape, probably thinking that death is better than living in this condition, and that cursing God would result in Job's death (cf. 1 Sam 3:13).

Job's wife woodenly says, "bless [*brk*] God and die" and, while most readers recognize here another example of the euphemistic use of "bless" in place of "curse," some have made alternate suggestions that are more charitable toward Job's wife. Nonetheless, Job's response makes it clear that we should understand her use of "bless" in the same way as the Satan's.

It is also apparent that Job's wife expects that, were he to curse God, he would die as a result. The alternative—that she is suggesting that Job should curse God and then take his own life—makes little sense. (Why then curse God? Why not simply tell Job to end his life?). Either way she is essentially encouraging Job to commit suicide and thereby to end his misery, but Job has no hesitation in rejecting her suggestion (although in the next chapter Job will come close to contemplating this again).

Another example of a wife speaking to her husband like this is found in the Hittite story "Appu and His Two Sons":

> Appu's wife questioned their servants: "He has never had success before. You don't think he has now had success, do you?" The woman went and lay down with Appu with her clothes on. Appu awoke from his sleep, and his wife questioned him: "You have never had success before. Have you now had success?" When Appu heard this, he replied: "You are a woman and think like one. You know nothing at all."[19]

Job's wife's comment demands a response from Job, and so it is forthcoming. He begins with a rebuke to his wife. Notably he does not say she is foolish, just that she is speaking as one of "the foolish women" would. He recognizes that her response may have arisen under duress, and we as readers ought to recognize that, to a large part, she too has shared in Job's suffering.

19. "Appu and His Two Sons," trans. Harry A. Hoffnew Jr. (*COS* 1.58:153).

Who are these "foolish women" to whom Job refers? The writer seems to identify them as a specific group through the use of the definite article, "the foolish women," but the precise identity of the group is not spelled out. David Clines suggests that this should be understood to refer to lower-class or common women as opposed to the higher class among whom Job and his wife would normally mix.[20] While this may be the case, there is only enough information to be certain that "the foolish women" were those who were not God-fearing (as Job was) and who offered advice without reference to any relationship with the living God (cf. Ps 14:1).

Job proceeds to elaborate on why his wife has spoken foolishly by offering an explanation of his thinking: "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10). His response makes it clear that he continues to recognize that, behind all that happens, is God. The Satan may have been the instrument through which his affliction arrived, but nothing would have happened to him if God had not allowed it. Job recognizes this, and neither the narrator nor God himself demur.

While the word translated "trouble" here has a broad range of meanings, including "evil," that is, in a moral sense, here it seems to refer to anything bad. The book opens by noting that Job turns away from trouble (1:1, 8; 2:3 where the NIV translates the same word with "evil") but also describes the boils that afflict Job with the same word in 2:7 (where the NIV translates it by "painful").

As in chapter 1, the narrator notes Job's faithful response: "In all this, Job did not sin in what he said." Job has been vindicated in his own words and in the words of the narrator. The concluding words to this comment, that Job "did not sin in what he said" may give the impression that the narrator is leaving open the possibility that Job did sin in some other way, but the emphasis is actually a response to the Satan's challenge, which anticipated Job's fall from grace through a verbal response as stated in verse 5: "he will surely curse you to your face."

The first challenge resulted in Job losing all of his possessions; the second results in affliction to his entire body. There is no room in either case for the Satan to return to argue that the testing was not complete. And while we might almost expect the Satan to return to issue another challenge, he does not. The point has been made, the claims of the Satan have been decisively disproven, and Yahweh's faith in his servant has been justified. Job is not a servant of Yahweh merely for the benefits he reaps from the relationship.

If the Satan doesn't return for a third round, we might wonder why Job's

20. Clines, *Job 1–20*, 53–54.

suffering continues. That is a good question worth pondering that we shall return to in the Live the Story section below.

The Arrival of Job's Friends (2:11–13)

The prose prologue closes with the introduction of Job's three friends. While this account follows in quick succession to all that has preceded it, there is likely some delay—news of Job's predicament would have taken time to reach the friends, and then they would have to make arrangements to meet up and visit Job.

It is not entirely clear where the friends are coming from. Teman, Eliphaz's home, is referred to elsewhere (e.g., Gen 36:34; Amos 1:12; Obad 9; etc.) and was an important town in Edom. Neither Shuah nor Naamah are easily identifiable, but it seems likely that these, too, were to be found in Edom. Their names are also not typically Israelite and seem to also be connected to Edom. The name Eliphaz appears in Genesis 36 as the father of Teman and eldest son of Esau, which further strengthens the connection with Edom. While various suggestions for the meanings of their names have been made, they do not appear to have any significant relevance to the story that unfolds.

The aim of the friends, to comfort Job in his affliction, begins something of a theme in the book. To comfort is an appropriate response in situations like Job's, and the friends' aim is noble. We shall learn, however, that they fail to fulfill their task, providing no real comfort to Job (cf. Job 16:2; 21:34) despite Job's need and desire for comfort. Ultimately, it is only at the end, following God's words to him, that Job will finally be comforted and be able to begin to rebuild his life (see comments on Job 42:6).

When they do eventually arrive and see Job, he is unrecognizable and so we, as readers, realize just how significant Job's transformation has been as a result of his affliction. Their response is to tear their robes and sprinkle dust on their heads. This echoes Job's own response to the first set of tragedies reported in Job 1:20 but adds to it what is most likely another mourning rite, that of throwing dust over one's head (cf. Josh 7:6; 1 Sam 4:12; Lam 2:10; etc.). After this they sit with Job, in silence, for seven days.

Seven days seems to be a typical period of mourning in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 50:10; 1 Sam 31:13), but this may also be a simple reference to the fullness of time. Silence (or, more precisely, not speaking, as they may well have continued their weeping) itself is a common response to tragedy in the ancient world—probably both an empathic response as well as an expression of shock at his state. One such example is found in tablet III of the "Poem of the Righteous Sufferer":

Heavy was his hand upon me, I could not bear it!
Dread of him was oppressive, it [me].
His fierce [pun]ishment [ ], the deluge,
His stride was . . . , it . . . [ ].
[Ha]rsh, severe illness does not . . . [ ] my person,
I lost sight of [aler]tness, [ ] make my mind stray.
I gro[an] day and night alike,
Dreaming and waking [I am] equally wretched.
A remarkable young man of extraordinary physique,
Magnificent in body, clothed in new garments,
Because I was only half awake, his features lacked form.
He was clad in splendor, robed in dread—
He came in upon me, he stood over me.
[When I saw him, my] flesh grew numb.
[ ] "The Lady(?) has sent [me],
[ ]."
[ ] I tried to tell [my people],
"[ ] sent [for me]."
They were silent and did not [speak],
They heard me [in silence and did not answer].[21]

In tablet III of "The Great Cairo Hymn of Praise to Amun-Re," the netherworld is referred to as the "Land of Silence" and elsewhere Osiris, the Egyptian god of the dead, is referred to by the epithet of "Lord of Silence."[22] These backgrounds suggest that the response of Job's friends is more profound than merely not knowing what to say to him. They see him as being as good as dead.

LIVE the Story

Should We Identify with Job?

Job suffers greatly. He loses everything he owns. He loses his children. He loses his health. Suffering and loss are central to the story of Job. We all suffer too, and this shared human experience and a desire to find some application for the story of Job in our lives prompts us to ask how Job's suffering informs our own suffering.

21. "Poem of the Righteous Sufferer," trans. Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.153:489–90).
22. "The Great Cairo Hymn of Praise to Amun-Re," trans. Robert K. Ritner (*COS* 1.25:39, 100).

The first thing to note, however, is that in some important respects we are not like Job. Job is singled out by the narrator and by God as being "the greatest man among all the people of the East." He was blameless and upright, feared God, and turned away from evil. He was exceptional and unlike anyone in his generation. Job was confident that he had not done anything to warrant the trouble that befell him. None of us can truly make that claim. None of us are likely to be singled out by God as unparalleled examples of godliness. And so, when difficult times come upon us, we cannot be certain that they are not some form of discipline, or punishment for a sin we have committed, or persecution for our faith, or something else altogether. We cannot be certain unless God reveals to us the reason for our suffering.

Furthermore, as readers of the book of Job, we are privy to a series of events taking place in heaven, where we discover that, at least in part, Job's suffering is a result of his exceptional piety and goodness. There is no way that any similar debate has taken place in heaven over our status, so at one level we cannot be suffering for the same reason that Job suffers.

These considerations all lead to the conclusion that we cannot identify with Job. But perhaps in this we are premature. For in some ways we are like Job. While Job was confident he did not deserve the suffering that had come upon him, he did not know—and he never found out—why he suffered. When we suffer we rarely discover why bad things are happening, at best only imagining vague generalizations or unsubstantiated suppositions as the rationale for the suffering. In this way we are like Job. We often share his ignorance surrounding the real reason behind our suffering.

And, like Job, we are right to look for a reason for the suffering. If we subscribe to the same worldview as Job—at least in so far as that worldview is founded upon the conviction that there is a sovereign Creator who is responsible not only for the formation of the universe but also for its ongoing sustenance—then the things that take place in our lives are not random or meaningless. There is a purpose, as Paul makes clear in Romans 8:28, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him." That is, not merely in *some* things but in *all* things. And if we believe that and the many other passages in the Bible that make it clear that God oversees even the most apparently insignificant events of this world, then the only logical conclusion is that there is a reason for our suffering, and there was a reason for Job's suffering.

And furthermore, as will become clear in the discussion below, Job's troubles are not solely the result of the wager between God and the Satan—something else is going on. So in the end Job suffers for unknown reasons just as we do. So in this, too, we are like Job.

So the answer is we are both unlike and like Job. There are lessons to be learned for each of us, but they are not going to be about why we suffer. The one foundational lesson about suffering that we must learn from Job is that, without specific divine revelation, we cannot know precisely why we are suffering. We cannot simply view our personal suffering as the inevitable outworking of some personal sin. It may be that it is, but it may also be that it isn't. The idea that our own troubles are penalties for our own sins is pervasive throughout human history. Jesus encountered it in his day (see Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–3). The story of Job, however, warns us that this connection is not certain—some suffering in the world and in our lives does not arise from our own personal sinfulness.

Job and Jesus

If there are some ways that we are like Job, then there are also ways in which Job, the innocent man who suffered, both resembles Jesus and differs from him. Most obviously is that very point that this man Job did not suffer as he did for his own sins. While there is no doubt, reflecting on the consistent teaching of Scripture, that Job was a sinner and so needed to be saved from the consequences of his sin, the book of Job makes it very, very clear that the suffering of Job that it records is not the result of his sin—the point is made by both the narrator of the story and by God himself in the prologue. That is why we have the background we read in the prologue: this man was blameless and upright and feared God. His suffering came about, at one level, in response to the Satan's claim that Job was only pious out of self-interest—there was no true devotion to Yahweh, there was no love for God, just love for self that sought to manipulate God into blessing him. In light of this, God agreed to allow Job to be tested to prove his true motives—even though, of course, God knew Job's heart all along. But had the tale here ended with a simple assertion by God, then neither Job nor we would have learned the lessons the book teaches.

So it is clear that this suffering wise man, Job, did not suffer for his own sins. Such circumstances ought to immediately remind us of Jesus, the greater one who also suffered although innocent. Job establishes a precedent within the Bible for innocent suffering. His story makes it clear that it is possible for an innocent person to suffer and for that suffering not to be the invariable consequence of one's individual transgressions. The story of Job taught that the idea of an innocent person suffering was viable and prepared God's people, a people who—like almost all religious people through history—held strongly to the notion that God dispenses justice and that suffering was an instrument

of that justice, for the idea that it was indeed possible for an innocent person to suffer.

This, in turn, allowed for a vital step in the preparation God was making for the coming of his Messiah. For his Messiah would not only be one who was innocent but suffered. No, he would be an innocent who suffered *vicariously*—who suffered in place of others—and who suffered *voluntarily*. And this idea, that the Messiah would ultimately be a king who served others by suffering in their place, was an idea that would also be revealed to God's people in the course of time. This next step in the story of salvation would be revealed in Isaiah, well before the arrival of the one to whom the words pointed:

> [4]Surely he took up our pain
> and bore our suffering,
> yet we considered him punished by God,
> stricken by him, and afflicted.
> [5]But he was pierced for our transgressions,
> he was crushed for our iniquities;
> the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
> and by his wounds we are healed.
> [6]We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
> each of us has turned to our own way;
> and the LORD has laid on him
> the iniquity of us all. (Isa 53:4–6)

Thus the suffering innocent Job pointed to the suffering innocent servant who would die to save his people from the wrath of God. As we listen to Job's story it is thus appropriate to ponder the innocent one who would come after Job and give thanks for the story of God we journey through as we read Scripture, and our place in it.

Who Is (the) Satan in Job's Life and Ours?

In these chapters of the book we are introduced to a character designated *the Satan*. While most scholars do not read back into Job what we know of Satan from the New Testament, we should not think that this character in Job does not inform later understanding of Satan. As a result, when we read about Satan in the New Testament, it is appropriate to acknowledge some link back to the prologue to the book of Job.

So, in Luke 22:31–34 we find Jesus warning Simon Peter that he will face trials at the hand of Satan:

> "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."
>
> But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."
>
> Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."

In this passage we hear that Satan continues to act in accordance with the way the Satan of Job's prologue behaves—testing the faithfulness of God's servants. While this establishes a pattern of behavior for Satan, it cannot be warrant for claiming that all difficult times in our lives are the direct result of us being "sifted as wheat." The book of Job makes that point: most of the time we simply do not have the data required to determine precisely why a particular event—whether it be suffering or anything else—takes place in our lives. Without specific divine revelation we cannot definitively know why we are suffering in any particular instance.[23]

Beyond this, when thinking about difficult circumstances in our own lives, we ought to remember that Satan's activities are completely circumscribed by God's sovereignty. As in Job, Satan is constrained by God and can only act as God allows. Although many focus on Satan—and it is right to recognize that supernatural forces are at work in the world—God's people ought to be wary of overly focusing on Satan and his activity in the world and in our lives. When we remember the opening chapters of Job and the limits imposed on the Satan there, and when we remember that Job appropriately looks to God for answers and nowhere else, we ought also to focus on God as the one who has the power over all that happens in our lives.

What Is God up to in Job 1–2?

Many people—from renowned biblical scholars to the writers of the satirical animated TV show *South Park*—have been troubled by God's behavior in the opening chapters of the book of Job.[24] For example, Roland Murphy stated that "it raises a nagging question: what kind of a God is this who is willing to prove a point of honor by sorely afflicting a faithful servant."[25]

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23. For discussion of the ancient Near Eastern background to the character of the Satan, refer to the subsection on the Satan in the Characters section in the introduction.

24. The story of Job is recounted (after a fashion) in series 5, episode 6, of *South Park* in an episode entitled "Cartmanland."

25. Murphy, *Tree of Life*, 36.

A cursory reading of the opening chapters might well lead us to question God's character, but it is important to look a little deeper to understand the full scope of the events as they unfold. Superficially, concluding that Yahweh behaves in a dubious manner appears to be quite reasonable. At this point, however, it is important to understand something of the literary genre we call wisdom literature and the implicit consequences of this form of literature have for understanding the text as we read it. Wisdom literature is subtle, and its true meaning is not necessarily going to become apparent without doing a little more work. After all, Proverbs 26:7 notes that

> Like the useless legs of one who is lame
> is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.

This proverb makes it clear that anyone—even a fool—can quote a proverb (i.e., a wisdom saying), but that does not make one wise. Wisdom derives not from memorizing wise sayings but rather from understanding them and knowing when to heed the warning and when to ignore it (see Prov 26:4–5 where the true wise person will use wisdom to determine when it is appropriate to answer the fool and when to keep silent). Applied to Job, it becomes clear that anyone can read the words of the book, but only the wise will understand the true meaning.

Furthermore, the sages, as we are told by Proverbs 1:6, taught using "riddles." Their teaching was not always straightforward; understanding it involved the application of intellect and an approach shaped by the reader's fear of God (Prov 1:7). Reading wisdom literature without the appropriate presuppositions results in a misreading of the text. It is, to adapt the words of Proverbs 26, to read as a fool!

How does all of this shape our understanding of what is taking place in the book of Job? There are a few considerations. First, perhaps here we have encountered an example of the riddles of the wise. The problem is that this apparent behavior of Yahweh—causing an innocent man to suffer just to win a bet with the Satan—does not fit well with what we know of him from the remainder of Scripture. In light of the demand that the beginning of wisdom is to be found in the fear of Yahweh, this ought to give us pause. We need to proceed with caution and look carefully before jumping to any conclusions.

Sometimes when watching a TV show or movie, my wife asks if I think that there is likely to be another twist in the plot. At that point I check how much time remains until the end of the show. If there are only a couple

of minutes left, I assume nothing new will happen; but if there is still half an hour left, I conclude that something else will happen before the end. In the book of Job we have already learned that suffering is not necessarily the consequence of sin—a lesson that will be reinforced through the remainder of the book. However, we ought also to realize that this is unlikely to be the sum total of the book's message, for there are yet forty chapters that lie before us.

So clearly, we should dig deeper into this riddle. There may be multiple paths we could take, but perhaps the most profitable is to note that those who see a problem with Yahweh's behavior here do so based on the single assumption that the prologue reveals to us the full reason for Job's suffering. Hence the question we need to ask is whether the account of the exchange between Yahweh and the Satan does indeed provide a complete explanation for all that happens to Job. The answer to this must be "No," for a number of reasons. First, Job's suffering does not cease at the point when Yahweh's case has been proven. Although there were two separate days on which the Satan came into Yahweh's presence to make accusations against Job, there is no third day. The Satan does not return to claim that God needs to adjust again the challenge with the claim that if only God would allow Job's suffering to continue for a few months, then the Satan's point will be proven. No, the challenge was over in Job 2:10. Yahweh's faith in Job has been vindicated, and the Satan's allegations have been shown to be without merit.

Why, then, does Job remain destitute and diseased? That he does so remain suggests that more is going on than merely that which was explicitly described in the opening chapters.

Strengthening this observation is the fact that nothing that takes place in the remainder of the book is presented as an attempt to encourage Job to curse God and so fulfill the Satan's goal. The friends, as we shall see, repeatedly insist that Job ought to repent, but repenting—even unnecessary repenting—is hardly tantamount to cursing God. In addition, when Yahweh eventually does appear to answer Job, all that he has to say is designed to highlight Job's ignorance and hence show that he is unqualified to question the way that Yahweh is running the universe. Job remains ignorant of the reasons for his suffering—even more than we as the readers of his story (who were at least given part of the answer in the prologue). The book of Job repeatedly insists that some of God's ways remain beyond human understanding (see Job 28; 38–42), so it makes good sense to acknowledge that the author has deliberately written a tale in which the reader shares in Job's ignorance and thus (hopefully) shares in his realization that the universe is incredibly complex beyond human

understanding.[26] After all, the reason Job's story is recorded for us is so that we will learn the lessons that Job learned!

The point of all of this is that any judgment made about God's character based solely on the events recounted in the prologue is premature. The design of the book and the nature of wisdom (see Reading Job as Wisdom in the introduction) imply that there is more going on and that Job's suffering persists for reasons never revealed either to Job or to us. The one point that is made perfectly clear, however, is that Job did not suffer as a consequence of some sin he had overlooked. That is ruled out so that when the debate begins in Job 4, we should realize that the friends do not understand any more than we do, despite the certainty with which they speak and despite even their claims to special revelation (see 4:12–21).

26. For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Shields, "Malevolent or Mysterious?," 255–70.