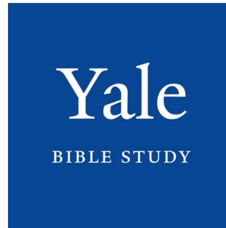

Wisdom Literature

Job: The Prologue

More than any other book in the Old Testament, the book of Job is recognized as a classic of world literature. The image of the righteous Job sitting on a dunghill and scratching himself with a potsherd has seemed to many to be an apt characterization of the human condition. It has fired the imaginations of such diverse luminaries as Martin Luther, Immanuel Kant, William Blake, and D. H. Lawrence. In modern times it hs inspired novelists and dramatists, including Robert Frost, Archibald MacLeish, and Elie Wiesel. Nonetheless, the book has its share of literary problems

The book consists of a narrative introduction or prologue, followed by a series of poetic dialogues and a narrative conclusion or epilogue. The prologue sets the stage by telling how Job lost everything in a single day because of an arrangement between God and Satan. At first, Job's piety is not shaken. Then three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, come to visit him. The greater part of the book is taken up with their exchanges with Job. These exchanges become repetitive, and the Greek translators shortened the book without loss to the story line. Some of the material in chapters 26-27 is confused: some parts of a speech that is attributed to Job should actually be attributed to the friends. Chapter 28 interrupts the dialogues with a poem on wisdom. Job concludes the dialogue with his friends with a lengthy speech in chapters 29–31.

At this point a new character, Elihu, enters the fray, angry both at Job and at the three friends because of their failure to silence him. Elihu's speech runs to the end of chapter 37, but it adds little or nothing to the arguments of the three friends.
Moreover, Elihu is not mentioned in the epilogue to the book. The consensus of scholarship is that Elihu is a secondary addition.

The book reaches its climax in chapters 38–39, when God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind. Job responds submissively in 40:3-5, but God continues with another speech in 40:6-41:34. Again, Job submits with a brief response (42:1-6). The book concludes with a prose epilogue.

The main problem presented by the book is the tension between the dialogues and the prose narratives. In the prologue, Job is a model of patience and resignation. At the beginning of the dialogues, however, Job explodes by cursing the day he was born. Throughout the dialogues, the friends defend the justice of God as axiomatic, while Job questions it at every turn. Yet in the epilogue God rebukes the friends, telling them "you have not spoken of me what is right, as

my servant Job has" (42:7). Most scholars assume that the prose frame reflects an older folktale, in which Job was consistently patient. In the book as we have it, however, the introductory story sets up a problem but does not resolve it. Moreover, the epilogue does not quite match the introduction, since it is concerned with the friends rather than with Satan. The traditional story, then, is adapted for its present context. It is not simply reproduced. It is used as a building block in a new composition, in which both narratives and dialogues play integral parts.

The date of composition is uncertain. The language of the prose tale points to a date no earlier than the sixth century b.c.e. The language of the dialogues is archaic, but this may be a matter of poetic style. The role of Satan points to postexilic sources (Zechariah, Chronicles). An Aramaic paraphrase, the Targum of Job, from Qumran dates to the third or second century b.c.e., so the biblical book must be older than that. Most scholars date it to the sixth or fifth century. Like the wisdom of Proverbs, Job has a timeless quality that has enabled it to speak directly to people of different eras.

The Prologue (1:1-2:13)

Job is exceptional among the characters in the Hebrew Bible in that he is not an Israelite. He is located in "the land of Uz," which most scholars assume was located south of Israel, in the region of Edom (cf. Gen 36:28; Lam 4:21). The specific location is not important to the story, except insofar as Job is situated in "the east" (1:3), and not in Israel. The international perspective is typical of the older wisdom literature. In Ezek 14:14 Job is linked with Noah and Danel (Daniel) as legendary righteous men. Noah is a biblical figure but prior to Abraham, and not properly an Israelite. Danel is known from the legend of King Keret in Ugaritic (Canaanite) lore. The Israelite origin of the book of Job, however, is shown by use of the name YHWH for God.

When we first meet Job, he is "the greatest of all the people of the east." His greatness is shown by his wealth and an ideal family. Even God acknowledges that he is blameless, and a model of the fear of the Lord.

Job's life changes because of the intervention of Satan. Satan here is not yet the Devil, as he becomes in later tradition. He appears in two other books in the Hebrew Bible. In the Book of Zechariah, chapter 3, he brings accusations against the High Priest Joshua. In 1 Chronicles 21:1 he incites David to take a census of Israel. In Job, he is a member of the heavenly council, but functions as a roving prosecuting attorney, who goes to and fro upon the earth to ferret out wrongdoing and put humanity to the test.

Satan's attention is drawn to Job by the boast of YHWH: "Have you considered my servant Job?" (1:8). Satan's response cuts to the heart of the popular theology of the ancient world: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" All over the ancient Near East the reigning assumption was that wealth and prosperity went hand in hand with right living. Satan suggests that true righteousness should be disinterested. YHWH, rather chillingly, hands his faithful servant over to Satan to be tested. The first test involves not only the loss of all his property, but also the

death of his children. Job remains unfazed. Satan, however, is not impressed. He wagers that if God touches Job's person, Job will curse him to his face. The Lord, obligingly, says, "He is in your power; only spare his life." Even his personal affliction, however, does not immediately break down Job's patience, despite the taunting of his wife. Only when he is confronted by his "friends" does his piety crack.

The significance of this opening scene should not be missed. God admits to Satan that "you incited me against him to destroy him for no reason" (2:3). This admission must be kept in mind throughout the dialogues. Job does not know why he is being afflicted. A Hellenistic Jewish writing, called the *Testament of Job,* thought that this was inappropriate, and had God reveal to Job in advance what he was going to do. Armed with that knowledge, Job has no problem in maintaining his composure. In the biblical book, however, Job enjoys no such revelation, but the reader is privileged with the "inside story" of what is really going on.

Job's patience disappears at the beginning of the dialogues. He may not quite curse God, but he curses the day he was born, which comes close, as it suggests that life is an affliction and not a blessing. "Why is light given to one in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death and it does not come?" At this point, Job is simply expressing the anguish of a person who is suffering with no prospect of relief. He has not yet begun to express anger or impute blame. His first speech belongs to the general tradition of lament literature, although it is exceptional in its bitterness. The closest analogies come from Mesopotamian literature, notably the Babylonian poem "I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom." These poems are respectful towards the gods, and emphasize the need to perform proper cultic acts. The analogy to Job lies in the distress of the poet and in the recognition that the god's ways are inscrutable. The closest parallel to Job is found in the Babylonian Theodicy, from about 1100 B.C.E.

The friends, however, turn out to be models of precisely how not to comfort someone who is suffering. Job only wants sympathy, companions to comfort him by their presence. The friends make the elementary mistake of trying to rationalize his suffering and suggesting that he is somehow at fault. The first speaker, Eliphaz, is quite polite: "if one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?" His argument is grounded in traditional wisdom: "Think now," who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the righteous cut off?" (4:7). He appeals to his own experience, but one suspects that his belief is based on dogma rather than on observation. Eliphaz is not suggesting that Job was especially sinful, but he insists that he must have done something. After all, doesn't everyone sin? He recommends that Job confess his sin and appeal to God's mercy. God's punishment is beneficial, in the long run: "Happy is the one whom God reproves" (5:17).

Job responds with unexpected anger, and the dialogues that follow quickly lose the veneer of politeness. Their power derives in large part from the visceral unrestrained tone that pervades them.