

The Book of Job

Session 4: Genre and Structure and the Nature of Wisdom

By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 4, Genre and Structure, and the Nature of Wisdom.

Introduction [00:24-00:57]

Well, the time has come for us to talk about the genre of the Book of Job and its structure. So, here's what we have to think about: is this book real? Some people would answer that question by asking, is it history or fiction? I think that's a false dichotomy. Those are the only two options on the table.

Importance of Genre [00:57-4:16]

And so, we have to think about what the book is doing and how it's doing it. Now that's a question of genre, but we have to understand that genre is a tricky thing. Genre helps us to know how to read a book. You know, if we were reading a mystery, we'd read it differently than if we're reading a biography. If we're reading an editorial, that's different from reading a comic strip. We read things differently when we understand their genre.

But what genre does or an identification of genre positions a piece of literature in a community of like literature. It identifies the things that are like it, and by doing so, it gives us strategies for reading that are based on the group as a whole. That means in order for a genre identification to be meaningful, we have to have other members in the set, otherwise, it really doesn't help us to read.

There's where we run into some problems with Job. On the one hand, we can identify it easily enough as wisdom literature. That's a broad category, but we know that there are many different genres of wisdom literature. Proverb, a proverb is a genre of wisdom literature. That's far different than a dialogue; there could be a wisdom dialogue.

And so, saying it is wisdom literature gives us a broad category and gives us some sense of expectation, but it doesn't really give us a strategy per se.

And that's where we run into a problem with the Book of Job. There's nothing like it. There is no community of literature other than the broad scope of wisdom. It's true, I mean, we have pieces of literature that are dialogues and Job has some dialogue in it. We have pieces of literature that are wisdom hymns, and Job has a wisdom hymn. We have pieces of literature that are discourse, and Job has some discourses. So, it has bits and pieces of genres that we know from other pieces.

But when you look at the Book of Job as a whole, there's nothing like it. There are other books that deal with innocent suffering in the ancient world, but they're really not like Job at all. So, as a result, we have numerous genres within the book. We have a number of similar scenarios in the ancient Near Eastern world, but we really don't have anything that's quite like the Book of Job, which means that we're a little bit on our own outside of those general categories that we can deal with.

Job as a Thought Experiment [4:16-5:57]

It is wisdom literature, and that can guide us through a lot of our questions about reading strategy. One form of wisdom literature, and it's the one that I would like to propose, is the form of thought experiment. In a thought experiment, you propose a scenario. It's a scenario that's carefully constructed to have all the features necessary for an issue to be explored. Again, we find that Jesus does this in the parables. The parables are not an account, a narrative, about real events. They're events that, in some senses, could have been real, but in another sense are not. The details are put together in a particular way to help us to think about an issue. So, a parable is one form of thought experiment.

I don't believe that Job is a parable, but I think that it is another form of thought experiment. In a thought experiment, it's sort of a what-if scenario. What if we had this kind of situation? The point is not to claim that the events in the thought experiment did

happen, but they draw their philosophical strength from their realistic nature of the imaginative device.

Pushing Extremes [5:57-7:28]

Think of this, and it really could happen, but this is more extreme. Everything's extreme in the Book of Job. We'll notice that everything is as stretched to the extreme as it can possibly be. It's those extremes that make the book work. If Job were less righteous, he's kind of a pretty good most of the time, then the book wouldn't work because you could say, "Oh, he did do some things wrong," and that could be the problem. If his suffering were less dramatic, if it had come on gradually or really wasn't so thorough, comprehensive, we might say, "Well, he's suffering a little bit. Everybody suffers a little bit." And, you know, we could account for that perhaps. A little bit of not righteous behavior and a little bit of suffering, and well, that's the world that we often face. But no, no, in the Book of Job, everything's pulled to the furthest extreme. So that no easy answers are left on the table, see that's the strategy. Remove all the easy answers, and you're left to deal with the philosophical idea, the wisdom point.

Job as a Literary Construct [7:28-11:21]

The question about whether the events are real then is misplaced. They're almost put together to be surreal yet to be real enough, but more, more extreme than what we could imagine. Now, let's think through this a bit. If it's a thought experiment, then at least some parts of the book, we would have to just call it a literary construct rather than a real event, a literary construct.

Now there are some parts of the book that everyone has long agreed are literary constructs. The speeches of the friends, people don't talk that way, just extemporaneously. People don't just casually talk in this highly elevated language. Even some of our best rhetoricians don't talk that way. And furthermore, even if they did, even if you could say, well, in the ancient world they did, and these were really smart guys and et cetera, et cetera, there's no stenographer. They don't have stenographers in the ancient

world to sit down there and take it all down. The speeches of the friends are a literary construct. Everyone has recognized that.

But do you see what that does? As soon as we identify some part of the book as a literary construct, we then have to ask the question, how far does that go? How much of it is a literary construct, and how much of it might be just a record of events? Where do you draw the line? And once you've acknowledged that some parts of the book are a literary construct, it doesn't matter where you draw the line because a literary construct is okay in a thought experiment.

Now I do believe that Job was a real person in a real past that he had become well known in the ancient world as a really good person who had really desperate events come upon him. I tend to think that he really is such a person. But I think that this story about him is a thought experiment using this well-known person in order to investigate a wisdom concept. So, I take the basic form of the narrative. No, I shouldn't say that the basic content and the narrative, meaning the life of Job, a man's righteous suffering, are a kind of historical anchor in a real past. But I think that most of the rest of the book is a thought experiment, a literary construct. Again, the use of extremes, and the philosophical issues that are brought to the table, are all to make the point.

God's Words in a Thought Experiment [11:21-12:53]

Now, maybe you're struggling with that idea. Keep thinking about it. Maybe you're not, but maybe my next step will be one that is even harder to swallow. So, think with me, if the book, for the most part, is a thought experiment, a literary construct, is that also true of the speeches of God? Is this also an inspired author, putting words in the mouth of God to address the issue at hand? And what does it say about the opening scene in heaven? Is that also a literary construct? Is that also designed to set up an extreme situation? It may be important to think about it that way. I am proposing that you at least think about it in those terms. Remember, the truth of the book is in its wisdom teaching, that is, what's being affirmed. The truth of the book does not require anything on the level

of historicity. It's a wisdom book. And if it's a thought experiment. It is painted in extremes.

Benefits of Seeing Job as a Thought Experiment [12:53-14:40]

Here's the advantage to thinking about even the scene in heaven as part of the literary construct thought experiment. It'll help us avoid the significant problem of thinking that's how God really operates. If this is a thought experiment, it's just saying, what if such a scene in heaven would open? What if this is the shape the conversation took place? All of that is to set up the scenario for Job. Do you see how this avoids certain things that readers often struggle with in the book? This does not intend to convey a picture of a God who makes a wager with the devil; for some people, that's been a real problem to think that God would work that way. For some people, they look at the book, and they look at their lives, and they say, "Maybe God and Satan are having a conversation about me. Maybe my experiences are because of some divine wager." That is not what we ought to be getting from this book. That is not an option on the table. That's not what this book is doing. These are obviously complicated issues and complex for us to think through. But think about it.

The book is not about Heavenly Discussions [14:40-15:47]

The teaching of the book is not tied to the reality of the events. The teaching of the book is built from the literary scenario that is laid out. And if it's a thought experiment, there's been a lot of creativity going into laying out that scenario. Just try it. Just try it so the easy answers are off the table, and there's room for discussion about how we should think about the world and what God does or does not do. I don't mean what he does or does not do in a session in heaven, but how do we think about God and his responsibility for suffering or how he's not responsible for suffering? How do we think about God's role in the events that we encounter in the world? It's not about what goes on in the heavenly discussions.

Rhetorical Strategy: Structure and the Wisdom Hymn [15:47-20:20]

So, with that kind of thought experiment idea in mind, we want to talk about how the book accomplishes its teaching. This is what we call the rhetorical strategy. It talks about how the book is laid out literarily. The structure of the book is pretty easy to identify. It has a sandwiching effect. We've got a prose prologue with the scene in heaven and Job's experiences. We have a prose epilogue where God restores Job. So those are the two bookends.

In the very middle of the book, we have a hymn to wisdom. Many people have wondered about that hymn to wisdom. In a casual reading, one can easily think that it's Job speaking. Job is speaking in chapter 27. Chapter 28 is the hymn to wisdom. And in chapter 29, Job is speaking. It doesn't introduce a new speaker in 28. And so, some people have assumed that it's just Job speaking straight through.

But there's a problem. The section that ends in 27 is the dialogue section of the book. The section that starts in 29 is the discourse section of the book. This hymn to wisdom is squarely between them. In fact, it provides a transition from the dialogue section to the discourse section. What we find, whether we're looking in the dialogue section or the discourse section, is that nowhere does Job have the kind of perspective that is represented in chapter 28. The hymn to wisdom has a position, a perspective, and insight that Job does not have as a person either before or after. Therefore, it's really out of place in Job's mouth.

The alternative, and one that many people adopt and I agree with it, is that in the hymn to wisdom in chapter 28, the narrator comes back into play. The one who gave us the epilogue, I'm sorry, the prologue and the epilogue, who set up the scene and brings it to the conclusion, has come back into the middle. And he comes back in after we've completed the dialogue between Job and his friends.

That's the dialogue section that starts in chapter three and goes through chapter 27. With Job and his friends kind of alternately talking to one another, and all of that winds down, the speeches get shorter. And in the last one, Zophar doesn't even have

anything to say. He's made his point. He's done. Bildad's is very short. They've kind of run out of steam in the dialogue. Remember, this dialogue is supposed to be taking place among the wisest people known in the ancient world, and you get to the end of it and the hymn to wisdom in a very elaborate and eloquent way basically says, "Is that all you've got? Is that it? Do you think that is wisdom? You haven't even scratched the surface."

And the book then, in that hymn to wisdom, turns our attention from what looks like a discussion about justice. And it says, "No, you're missing it. You're missing it entirely. It's about wisdom." So, the hymn to wisdom, I believe, plays a very significant role in the middle of the book, as it transitions us from dialogue to discourse, as it shows that really the dialogue section accomplished nothing as it brings a narrator back into kind of move us along to the next part. And it helps us to see what the issue really is. We'll come back to that later on.

Dialogues and Discourses [20:20-23:30]

So, we've got our prologue and epilogue. We've got the hymn to wisdom in the middle, and then the major sections are the dialogue and discourse. Dialogue comes first. This is where we find Job and his friends discussing the issues. And so, we have Eliphaz and Bildad, and Zophar, each giving speeches, with Job responding to them. That's the dialogue section. It starts with Job's lament in chapter three and picks up with Eliphaz's speech in chapter four and goes through 27, then to the hymn to wisdom and then the discourses.

The discourses are different from the dialogues because they're not interchanged. And so, here, these are just three characters giving speeches. Job gives his speeches in 29 to 31, Elihu gives his speeches in 32 to 37, and then Yahweh gives speeches and that fills out the discourse section.

So, we have the dialogues and the discourses, which contain lots of the raw content of the book. And then the epilogue draws it all to a close. Now I find this structure helps us to understand the rhetorical strategy. That is, the structure helps us to

work through how the case is being built. I don't see that any of the pieces could easily be left out in the book and still be coherent and accomplish its purposes. Yes, they're very different literarily. You've got narrative; you've got dialogue; you've got discourse; you've got hymn. They're very different, but they all work together, and you can't leave any one of them out and still have something that has a coherent message to it.

So, as we work through the book, we're going to be building the rhetorical strategy. We're going to be looking for the contribution that each part of the book makes because we believe that each part does make a contribution. We are treating the book as a coherent whole as a unity, not something that's been thrown together as a patchwork quilt or with many different hands. That's why I talked earlier about the idea that this may be one of those pieces that comes together as a book. If it's a literary construct, if it's constructed, composed, a thought experiment with a wisdom message and that all the pieces are part of it, this one actually may have been composed as a book. Though, the bards of the ancient world were talented, and they could put this together as a oral piece as well. It would be a lot to learn, a lot to memorize, but the bards of the ancient world did that. Some of the Homeric literature is pretty long itself, and that was passed along orally. So, it's hard to tell, and in the end, it doesn't matter.

Rhetorical Strategy and Authorial Intent [23:30-26:17]

We've got the book as it is. It's got an identifiable, really easily identifiable structure. And that gives it its rhetorical strategy. And so, from that, we're going to try to understand the message of the book.

The rhetorical strategy tells us what the author is doing. The rhetorical strategy is the author's strategy. Again, I'm using author; that's kind of a shortcut here for the communicator, whether oral or written. It's the rhetorical strategy that helps us to see the intention of the author. And it's that intention that has authority. Remember, it's God's authority, but God has vested that authority in a human communicator. And if we're going to get God's authoritative message, we have to get it through the human

communicator. So, we're always looking for what we call the author's intention. What are they getting at?

I believe that part of the author's intention is a thought experiment. Some may differ, and that's okay. It will make a difference. It will affect how we think about different parts of the book. But in the end, that's what we're trying to get to. Remember, faithful interpreters, are pursuing the message of a book that was delivered by God, through a human communicator, a human instrument, to us.

The Bible was written for us, but it was not written to us. And so, we have to try to discern what it is that that human communicator was getting at. That's where we'll find the authority. We don't have the freedom to freelance, to kind of read our own thing into it. We don't have the freedom to say, "Oh, I think the book really wants me to think this way." If you can't get it from the book itself, you're not getting it from God. And then what good is it doing?

So, we pay attention to the genre with all of the problems we've suggested. We pay attention to the rhetorical strategy, all of that, trying to help us to get the best understanding we can of what the inspired book has to say, that the author intended as God communicated through them.

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