

The Book of Job
Session 2: Date and Authorship
By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 2, Date and Authorship.

No Books and Authors [00:21-1:37]

Let's spend a few moments talking about the date and authorship of the Book of Job. Now, even as I introduce that line, we've got problems. We often try to look at various books of the Bible to ask about the date and authorship of the book. Here's the problem: there are no books in the ancient world, and there are no authors in the ancient world. The ancient world is not like our world at all. There's really no such thing as an author who writes a book. Instead of authors, we have authority figures who speak; and we have scribes who write. And, of course, they don't write books. They write documents, maybe a document that's recorded on a clay tablet or on papyrus or something of that sort, even on wax tablets. So, we don't have either books or authors in the ancient world.

Hearing-Dominant Culture [1:37-2:45]

The ancient world is a hearing-dominant world. By hearing-dominant, I mean that they are used to receiving their information through speaking and hearing. That's normal for them. In fact, authoritative words come that way. A spoken, heard message to them carries more authority than a written text. It's just not how we think. Authors today, of course, have intellectual property. There's copyright. There's nothing like that in the ancient world. And so, what we have is a very different world. When we begin by asking about authors and books, we've already forced the conversation into our world instead of being in its world where it belongs.

Authoritative Voice [2:45-4:13]

So, in one sense, we're asking the wrong questions. Most of the books of the Old Testament did not start as books. Of course, I have to amend that most of what we call books in the Old Testament have eventually come down to us as books, but they didn't begin as books. They began as oral speech. They began then, some of them as documents, individual accounts, individual prophecies, and individual psalms, in documents. They don't start out with somebody sitting down to write a book. And yet, what eventually becomes a book is still firmly attached to the authority figures that began that communicative process. But sometimes, it may have been transmitted for centuries before actually being compiled into the books that we have. Yet, even then, the books preserve that authoritative voice from the past. So, books come at the end of the process, not at the beginning of the process. It doesn't start with the book. It ends with the book.

Job as a Book [4:13-4:55]

Having said that, Job may be one of the exceptions. I say that because there's an awful lot in the book of Job that seems like it is a literary construct. That is, it has been put together as a whole piece, not just as one friend's speech and another friend's speech that are kind of kept separate or something. These all work together. So, it may be that Job is one of the few or the only book in the Old Testament that actually seems to have begun as a book.

Writing in a Hearing-Dominant Culture [4:55-6:44]

Now, of course, we may have the tradition of Job, the story of Job, and the narrative that may have existed before. We'll deal with some of those things as we go along. But the book is a highly composed piece of literature. And so, we need to take that into consideration. Now in the ancient world, they weren't tied to morality, speech, and hearing because they were illiterate. Certainly, people probably learned to write at least the basic level. And there are others, of course, that were quite literate, by training and by their profession--scribes especially. But in the ancient world, people didn't need to write.

They didn't need to read. It was a hearing-dominant culture and therefore, nothing in the culture was dependent on them reading or writing. That means even if they learned a little bit of it, they never used it.

It's like some people today who might study a foreign language when they're in high school, and then they never use it. And while they studied it, and maybe it'll do him some good somewhere along the line, they don't remember it. They lose it after a while. It's not something that they really are able to work in that language. It's a lot like that, I think, with reading and writing in the ancient world. They could do some basics, but the operation of society and culture did not depend on people knowing how to read and write. It only depended on some people knowing how to do that.

Role of Scribes [6:44-7:51]

Today lots of people have a basic understanding of the legal requirements in our society, but they're not lawyers. They understand that if they need something done really seriously, they need to go to a lawyer and have a document drawn up. They wouldn't do it on their own. And so, in the ancient world, they had scribes. And when they really needed something written, which wasn't near as much as we do, then they would get a scribe to do it. The documents that were written were not accessible, even if you think of some of the narrative traditions of the Israelites being written down earlier rather than later. If they were, they would have been written down, and they're in scribal archives, and nobody really has access to those. Nobody takes a book out of the library to read it. It just doesn't work that way. So even if they're written into documents, scribes are practicing their work by copying them, things of that sort.

Job as a Literary Construct [7:51-8:44]

So, it's a very different culture, and it's a hearing-dominant culture. The speeches in the Book of Job are highly literate speeches. It strikes us right away; these are not the kinds of things that a lot of people could just speak extemporaneously. It's very flowery prose and sometimes poetry of sorts. But it's a sophisticated level of language.

There are probably some people that can talk like that extemporaneously, but not too often. And so, we tend to think of the speeches in the Book of Job as literary constructs. We'll get back to that issue later on.

Events of Job [early]; Writing of Job [late] [8:44-10:58]

So, we're not really talking about the date of the authorship and Book of Job. If author and book are not really very acceptable labels to use for the ancient world, we'd like to know a little bit about how the book came together. Well, another thing that we have to understand is that we don't have to think that the book was written at the time that Job lived. There are a couple of indicators in the book that Job lives in an earlier, rather than a later period in terms of society around him. But there are also indications in the book that the literary focus of the book is later rather than earlier. That leads us to think that even if Job is dated as a person at a very early period, that doesn't mean that the book is written in that early period or composed; let's use that word as neutral, composed at that early period. The person could be early, and the composition could be late. So, just because we see certain indicators in the Book of Job that he may have been from an early time period, that doesn't mean the book is an early product.

So, when we look at the details in the book, we find some very small things. For instance, it talks about a unit of money that *kesitah* and we only know of that unit of money in earlier periods. That's a pretty small item, especially since we're dealing with a situation outside of Israel, but there you have it. The book also talks about some of the raiding parties as Chaldean and Sabeian. And in some of the research done on the history of the period, that seems to suggest an earlier time period rather than a later one.

Job is a non-Israelite, but the book is written to Israelites [10:58-12:43]

Some thought that the book must be early, meaning pre-Sinai before Moses, because there's no mention of covenant or law or temple. It's true. Those things are not mentioned. Furthermore, we see Job acting as a patriarchal priest. He serves as a priest for the family, and that strikes some as an earlier issue.

But considering for a moment the book is very clear that Job is not an Israelite. If Job is not an Israelite, then we wouldn't expect covenant or law or temple. In other cultures, and other societies outside of Israel, it would be very appropriate in a tribal culture for the patriarch to act as a priest. Those things don't really help us identify date. They only help us to see that it's not an Israelite that we're dealing with. Job is from the land of Uz. And we'll talk some about where that is and if we know where that is. But it makes a strong point that he's not an Israelite. And if he's not an Israelite, those details don't really mean anything.

On the other hand, interestingly enough, the book is written to Israelites, and we can detect that; we'll get to that a little bit later, in a later lecture. We can detect that Israelite orientation, even in a book that is focused on a non-Israelite character.

Date of Composition [12:43-13:12]

So, the date of composition of the book is likely a different date from the date of the events. And therefore, we can't tell the date of the book from the events. If it truly is a book focused on Israelites, then we expect it to be later rather than earlier. And so, we'll be looking at some of those issues.

Job as a Wisdom Book: Enduring Truths [13:12-14:43]

All that having been said, we have to remember that the book of Job is a wisdom book. It's not intended to be just somebody's story. It's intended to be a wisdom book. And the very nature of wisdom literature is that the truths are timeless. That's the very point of wisdom that these are truths that anybody at any time can benefit from. And so, we really have to recognize that in the end, it doesn't matter whether we think of it as oral or written, whether we think of it as a book or a compilation of documents, whether we think of it in literary terms or in rhetorical terms, whether we think of it as Israelite or non-Israelite, early or late, it doesn't make a difference. We're reading the book for its wisdom teaching. Therein lies the authority of the book. And so, that's what we're going

to focus on--the wisdom teaching. And we can safely set the issue of date and authorship aside as not having a, not making a difference in how we read the book itself.

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