

## **The Book of Job**

### **Session 5: Job and the Ancient Near East**

**By John Walton**

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 5, Job and the Ancient Near East.

#### **Review [00:22-2:44]**

The next thing that we need to talk about is how Job and the Book of Job relate to the ancient Near Eastern background in which they exist. We've already talked about the idea that the Bible is written for us but that it's not written to us. It's not in our language. It's not in our culture. It doesn't anticipate our culture or any other culture since that time. So, it doesn't anticipate a Byzantine culture and speak to a Byzantine culture. It doesn't anticipate a medieval culture. It doesn't anticipate a far Eastern culture or an African culture, or an American culture.

It doesn't anticipate a culture, but the needs of people have certain similarities. We need to know God. And so, it's for us to help us to know God and his plans and purposes; to think well and right about God, but it's not to us. It doesn't assume our culture or anticipate our culture.

The book of Job then is fully embedded in the ancient world. Even though it's not indebted to any given piece of literature in the ancient world, it's embedded in it. And that embeddedness means that the conversation is unfolding in that context, that even when the book of Job is taking a different perspective than what others in that time and culture might take, it's still having the conversation in the context of that culture. We've mentioned that Job is not an Israelite. He's from the land of Uz. So, he's not an Israelite, but it's very evident the book is an Israelite book. That is, it is framed by Israelites for Israelites.

#### **Pious Sufferer in Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) Literature [2:44-6:33]**

By talking about, the situation of a pious sufferer, it fits into a category that's known in the ancient world. There are quite a number of pieces of literature that discuss

the pious sufferer. But the answers given in the book of Job are quite a bit different from what we find in the ancient world.

Some of the pieces in the ancient world that follow this kind of pattern is the early Sumerian piece called, A Man and His God. There the person who is suffering confesses himself as ignorant of any offense that he might've committed. His condition is that he suffers from an illness. He's a social outcast. But at the end of the book, sins are identified to him, and he confesses his sins and is restored to health. The philosophy behind that book is there's no sinless child born. In other words, everyone has sins, and it results in a hymn of praise, which is the theology of that book.

An Akkadian Mesopotamian piece is called A Dialogue Between a Man and His God. Again, they're ignorant of any possible offense. The pious sufferer motif is the idea that someone who, on the surface, looks like they've done everything they need to do and that they're pious in all the essential ways, but that they're suffering. And so, in this Dialogue between a Man and His God, this man suffers illness and eventually is restored to health. There's no philosophy offered. There's no divine favor assured.

One of the most famous pieces of the ancient world is called Ludlul bel Nemeqi, I will Praise the God of Wisdom. It's an Akkadian piece and so Babylonian. Here again, we have a character who is conscientious and pious in every way, ignorant of any possible offense. And yet, he finds himself a social outcast. The communication from the gods is unclear. He's suffering from an illness. His protective spirits have been chased away. He talks about demon oppression. And so, he's in this kind of situation. In a resolution of his situation, the god appears in a dream and so informs him. The outcome is he's given a way to make a purification offering that brings appeasement, and his own offenses are born away. His demons are expelled, he's restored to health. This, then again, indicates that he really was not without offense. The philosophy behind this piece says that the gods are inscrutable; who knows what they're doing. And it results in a hymn of praise to the Babylonian god, Marduk.

One final one is called the Babylonian Theodicy. In this one, again, the person claims piety, but his family has gone, and he's suffering poverty. And, in this case, there's really no resolution of his situation. They conclude that the purposes of the god are remote and that you really can't tell what they're doing. It voices the opinion that the gods have made people with evil inclinations and prone to suffering. And so that's simply the way the world is.

### **Ideas in the ANE Sources [6:33-11:02]**

These are some of the more popular pieces that we know from the ancient world. And we can see that they offer a very different perspective on the gods and on the suffering that people experience. So, the answer we find here is divine inscrutability. You can't really know what the gods are doing. The inherent sinfulness of humanity, everybody sins, everybody commits offenses, and therefore in suffering, you can never claim that it was not deserved. Or, even the gods make humanity crooked. Other times they express the idea that nobody can really do everything that the gods require. So, there would always be something that the gods can get angry about.

Generally, in the ancient Near East, there's less of an inclination to assign blame. People are really without information. The gods have not communicated forthrightly. When you talk about Egyptians or Babylonians or Canaanites, or Hittites, the gods have not revealed themselves. And so, there's no clear communication about what they desire, what will please them or what will offend them. There's no sense of that in the ancient world.

Furthermore, people believed that the gods were largely inconsistent. They have their own agendas, and they're capricious. Day by day, they might act differently. And therefore, even though they feel that their situation is the result of the god's neglect or anger or change of mind for one reason or another, they really have no way to think through it all. In the ancient world, they believed that if the gods became angry, they would remove their protection, and as a result, the person would be vulnerable, in

jeopardy from demonic powers or just the forces that are around there. And so, we find that in the piece I've identified as Ludlul bel Nemeqi, after the sufferer has done everything that he can think to do. He has these words: "I wish I knew that these things were pleasing to one's god. What is proper to oneself is an offense to one's god. What in one's own heart seems despicable is proper to one's god. Who knows the will of the gods in heaven? Who understands the plans of the underworld gods? Where have mortals ever learned the way of a god?"

Can you hear his frustration? Can you sense what it would be like to live in such a world, knowing that there are powerful beings who affect every part of life and yet have not told you what they expect of you or what will make them pleased or angry.

Think if you worked in a job like that, where your boss was holding you accountable and yet never made it clear what it was you were supposed to do or not supposed to do. And that you were punished or rewarded based on your guesses. That's very uncomfortable.

I hope this insight helps us to a new appreciation of our God who has communicated and has revealed what will please him or not and who has let us know what he's like and has said that that's not going to change day by day. It should give us a new appreciation, and gratitude that God, in his grace, has communicated to us. So, that's a little bit of what's behind the literature of a book like Job, some of those scenarios. But Job so far transcends them; has so much more to offer.

### **Job has Israelite thinking: 1) No polytheism [11:02-12:12]**

Now, I mentioned that Job thinks like an Israelite, even though he is not an Israelite. Where do we see that? We see it, for instance, in that Job has no inclination toward polytheism whatsoever. That's really strange because in the ancient world, polytheism is the only way to think about the gods. And so, the idea that God is in community, we see a little bit of a community in the opening chapters because of the divine council, but no inclination toward polytheism. In fact, Job makes some affirmations to stand against polytheism. In his oath in Job 31:26, he swears that he has

not lifted up his hands to the sun or moon. That only makes sense in an Israelite context. All the rest of the peoples around routinely worshiped the sun and moon and gladly did so. That wasn't something that was a flaw. So, only in an Israelite context would that be a reasonable claim to make that he had not done that.

## **2) No Curiosity as to which god brings trouble [12:12-12:46]**

The second point is that Job shows no curiosity whatsoever about which god has brought him trouble. He seems to know exactly which God he's talking to, and no others are in the picture to kind of mess up or confuse the situation. He doesn't make any appeal to any other god. Sometimes if one god is giving you trouble, you can appeal to another god to help you out of it. Job does no such thing. He's only working through one God.

## **3) Deserved or Undeserved Punishment [12:46-14:33]**

He thinks in terms of whether his punishment is deserved or not. Now in the ancient world, I've mentioned the various pieces. They do talk about their ignorance of any offense and, therefore, can't imagine what they could have done to bring the anger of the gods. But in the end, they often assume that there was an offense. They just weren't aware of it. They were ignorant of it and that they'd somehow offended the gods. Job thinks in terms of whether his righteousness or offenses actually have earned him this punishment. And it shows a little clearer level of thinking than what you'd find in the ancient Near East. Specifically, kind of on the other side of it, Job is quite certain of his righteousness. In the ancient Near East, they could only be certain that they had done everything they knew to perform the appropriate rituals to keep the god happy.

But righteousness, the way it's portrayed in Job, is really not on the table in the ancient world. The obligations of people in the ancient world were ritual in nature, not some sort of absolute righteousness in abstraction that can be defined. Their only righteousness was in doing whatever it took to please the gods whose demands had not been made very well-known. Job has a good deal of certainty about his righteousness. Again, it gives it a very Israelite feel.

#### **4) The Great Symbiosis Not in Job [14:33-18:24]**

Also, in Job connected to that, there's no suggestion of what I call the great symbiosis. Let me explain that to you. The great symbiosis in the ancient world talks about how gods and people interact. In the ancient world at large, they believed that the gods had created humans because the gods had gotten tired of meeting their own needs. In this way of thinking, gods get hungry, gods get thirsty, gods need clothing, and gods need housing. They are a lot like human beings; they had needs. They had to grow their own food, irrigate their own fields, and build their own houses. And it was just tiring, exhausting work. The gods were tired of it. And so, they decide, we'll create slave labor. We'll create people, and they will meet our needs. We'll create people and they will grow food and feed us. They will make beautiful garments for us and clothe us. And they will build splendid houses, and they'll pamper us in every way. What a great idea. And so, that's what they did. So, people were created so that they would meet the needs of the gods and pamper them.

Now that's one side of the great symbiosis: what people were supposed to do for the gods. But of course, it has the other side, what gods, therefore, had to do for people. Because once they became dependent on people to meet their needs, they had to somehow preserve them. They had to send enough rain so people could grow food to feed the gods and to feed themselves because otherwise, they would die and they couldn't feed the gods. They had to protect them so that invaders wouldn't come and destroy them because then they couldn't feed the gods. So, the gods had to protect their interests by providing for people and protecting people.

So, in that way, there's this codependency that builds up; where the gods depend on the people to pamper them, to meet their needs. And people depend on the gods to protect them and provide for them.

That's a little bit where justice comes into the system because the gods were interested in preserving justice. Not because justice was kind of somehow inherent in their nature, but because if there was mayhem and chaos, and trouble in society, if society

was not ordered and just, then there were all kinds of problems, and people couldn't attend to their task. The task was: to pamper the gods. So, if there were people fighting amongst each other, if society was full of unrest, then the gods weren't being attended to. So, the gods had some self-interest in making sure there was justice, and order in society. So, this is the great symbiosis, this codependency, mutual need, where the gods need people, and people need the gods.

### **5) Does Job Serve God for Nothing?—Israelite [18:24-19:51]**

Now, when the question is put on the table about Job, does Job serve God for nothing? You can see that that hits at the very foundation of this great symbiosis. In the ancient world, nobody served god for nothing. The whole idea of serving god was so that god would return the favor. Their idea of offering the rituals was so that the gods would bring prosperity and protection. Nobody in the ancient world served god for nothing. This shows us how Israelite this book is because the very premise of the question in the book is a premise that denies that the great symbiosis will always be in place or that it is being worked out. Only in Israel could you begin to think in that direction. Job was thinking like an Israelite. There's no concept of disinterested righteousness in the great symbiosis.

### **6) Job's Disagreement with Friends shows he's Israelite [19:51-21:56]**

Furthermore, Job's Israelite thinking is reflected as he enters into a disagreement with his friends. His friends think like ancient Near Eastern folks. They think that Job needs to appease God so that God will give him his benefits back. I call it, getting your stuff back, how to get your stuff back. All of the advice of Job's friends is about, here's what you need to do to get your stuff back. If you do these things, then God's anger will be appeased, and you'll get your stuff back. In other words, they are representing this view which says, "Job, it's really all about the stuff." Whereas the very issue in the book is it's not about the stuff, or does Job really think it's not about the stuff? Is Job's righteousness disinterested? That is, is he really not interested in the benefits but only interested in righteousness? Job's friends keep trying to turn his interest to the benefits of

how he can restore his stuff. If Job listens to them, the whole book falls apart. So, the friends think like ancient Near Eastern people, and Job is showing his sort of Israelite-style thinking by refusing to accept that kind of thinking.

So, Job is not an Israelite, but he thinks like an Israelite. He acts like an Israelite. And so, an Israelite reader will identify themselves with Job's perspectives.

### **7) Book's focus is Israelite: no Ritual Appeasement [21:56-23:24]**

Now, not only that, but the book's focus is Israelite. Not only does Job think and act like an Israelite, but the book's focus is also Israelite. So, for instance, there is no possibility of thinking that there is a ritual offense as an explanation for Job's situation. That's how it would have been in the ancient Near East. That's how it is in all those pieces of literature we looked at. The idea was that there must've been some ritual offense and therefore, there must be some ritual appeasement, some ritual solution. The Book of Job is simply not giving any attention to that possibility. It's taking an Israelite focus.

There's no thought of appeasement as an effective response. The idea is that somehow God is just irrationally angry and needs to be appeased. If it were that, Job wouldn't be calling him into court for an explanation. So, there's no thought of that kind of appeasement. His friends would like him to appease them. Although, again, it's not appeasement in a ritual sense. The book doesn't take that tact. So, even the friends who represent ancient Near Eastern thinking don't propose a ritual solution.

### **8) God's Justice and Job's righteousness is Israelite [23:24-24:51]**

The idea that there is an interest in the book, both in God's doing justice and in Job's righteousness, makes it very unlike the matrix of thinking in the ancient Near East. The ancient Near East would not show interest in those things. The gods do what they do. And so, while they believe that the gods are interested in justice, the idea that somehow the gods have to act with justice is not really in the picture; the gods do what they do. And so, this idea that Job's righteousness, which is indefinable in the ancient Near East, and God's doing justly are in the picture shows an Israelite way of thinking.



Another point that we see in the book is that Job is declared righteous right from the start. Wow, that's unlike anything in the ancient Near East that he would be declared clear. Again, that's one of the extremes of the book. You can see how that pulls all the ancient Near Eastern explanations off the table. If it exonerates Job right from the start, then all of the answers about Job's suffering are no longer available; all the ones that the ancient Near East gives.

### **9) Transcendent view of God [24:51-25:14]**

And finally, one more thing that shows us the Israelite focus in the book is the transcendent view of deity, that God kind of stays above it all. Now again, that could be mitigated depending on how you read that first chapter or two. And we'll talk about that further. But overall, there is a transcendent view of deity.

The book's answers do not hinge on human nature or divine nature, but on God's policies in the world. How does God work? And in that sense, again, it's very unlike what we find in the ancient Near East.

### **ANE Literature is Used as a Foil by the Friends Positions [25:14-26:32]**

The Book of Job, then I would say is not indebted to any piece of ancient Near Eastern literature. It uses the ancient Near Eastern literature as a foil. It wants you to think about it, while it wants its audience to think about the other answers that are given because it's going to show how bankrupt they are. The ancient Near East then is a conversation partner for the Book of Job. The Israelites are very well aware of that broader conversation. The book of Job is entering that conversation, but it's using that as a foil because it's going to take a different kind of position and give an answer that simply was not available in the ancient world, especially because of the way that people thought about the gods in the ancient world. Job's friends represent ancient Near Eastern thinking, but Job resists that, and the book resists it.

**Summary: Job is Distinctly Israelite [26:32-28:32]**

So, let's summarize the distinctly Israelite features. First of all, there is no great symbiosis. God doesn't have needs, and we see that expressed in a place like Job 22:3. Secondly, there's an interest in the justice of God. And again, that would not be as strong an element in the ancient Near East. There's an interest in righteousness as an abstract concept. Job seems to have a sense of personal righteousness that goes beyond what the ancient world could have provided. There are no ritual offenses considered or ritual remedies suggested or pursued, and no appeasement is pursued. Divine wisdom is a major theme and is really the focus of the book. And again, very much unlike what we find in the ancient Near East. In the ancient Near East, it was simply divine right. The gods do what they do. Here the idea of divine wisdom helps us to understand what God's running of the world is like and what his policies are like. Therefore, it helps to think of him differently than how the rest of the people in the ancient Near East thought about their gods.

So, Job is a book that's very much intertwined in the ancient world. It assumes a knowledge of the ancient world, but it takes an opposing viewpoint from what we find in the ancient world. In so doing, it gives us a revelation of God, of Yahweh, that's very different from anything that could have been given about one of the gods in the ancient world.

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