

The Book of Job

Session 26: God in the Book of Job

By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 26, God in the Book of Job.

Introduction: God's Questionable Behavior? [00:22-2:06]

So, now we're getting to a very interesting study. How do we view God in the Book of Job? You know, when you start looking at it, it doesn't look too good. Yes, and again, seeing things in sort of the most basic casual reading way, he seems to have to ask what Satan is up to. He wagers with a man's life. He ruins Job without cause by his own admission, including wiping out his family. He ignores Job's repeated pleas for some explanation of the charges that brought his undoing. He intimidates Job with what is perceived to be an "I'm God, and you are not" speech. He tells him how he made two creatures of legendary power and mystery. What's that all about? He gives him his prosperity back with no explanation or defense. Wow, really? This is the God we worship. It's easy to understand that readers of the book struggle with the picture of God. It looks almost comical if it wasn't so devastating. Is this God's revelation of himself? How do we take these leads that seem to end disastrously?

What the Book Reveals about God [2:06-3:14]

I think we have to reword our search here. Instead of, is this God's revelation of himself, let's ask, what does this book reveal about God? I would propose that when we think about God in the Book of Job, we have to begin with the idea that he, too, is a character just like Job and his friends and his wife are characters. Just like Behemoth and Leviathan are characters. They are characters, and God is a character who has been rhetorically shaped in the literature. The author of the book has shaped the character of God.

Revisiting the Initial Questions about God [3:14-7:08]

Now in consideration then of the seemingly negative characteristics that we've mentioned, let's go through them again. Does God need to be informed about the Challenger's activities? No. The book presents him using conventional thinking about how the heavenly council operates to stage the conversation in the scene in heaven. This is how business proceeds. Yahweh is portrayed by literary characterization. He is portrayed as a royal figure who receives reports from the functionaries to whom tasks have been delegated. Yahweh plays that role. It's a literary motif. We don't need to believe that God actually works that way. Even if you did, there'd be no reason to believe that his question reveals his ignorance. His question is intended merely to receive a report and evoke a response. It sets up the situation. It has a literary role.

Does God involve himself in a wager with the devil? No, on numerous accounts, we've discussed some of them already. This is not offering revelation about how God operates. The literary role played by this, call it a wager, although I don't know that it's that, is to demonstrate from the start that Job's suffering is not the result of anything he has done. That's the foundation. It sets up the scenario that's going to unfold in the book. The question is the important part: Does Job serve God for nothing? All of the rest is set up, a literary setup, so that the issue can be treated.

Does God have to find out what Job's motivations really are? I mean, is this extended book to discover Job's motivations? Does God not know? Does he need to find out? No, he doesn't need to find out. The question being resolved for readers is not, will the most righteous man ever known, maintain his righteousness when the world falls apart? The text offers answers to our questions, not to God's uncertainties. God has no uncertainty about Job. The readers have no benefit in being told that God knows what Job's motivations are and that they're pure because it's not Job who is our ultimate concern. As readers, we are investigating, or we are being led in an investigation of how God's justice interacts with our experiences and circumstances. The book is concerned

with what we need to discover, not with what God needs to discover. Again, the scene in heaven is a literary device to set the questions in motion.

Job as a Play [7:08-8:08]

Does God care about Job? Should we infer God's relative care for Job from his question, "Have you seen my servant Job?" Well, we can't deduce God's feelings about Job from his introduction to the conversation about Job. Everything in the scene in heaven is a literary construct, a device, a scenario designed to set the scene literarily. The characters need to be considered as characters in a play. I'm not suggesting the Job is designed as a play or as a dramatic presentation, but that's how we have to think about the characters. They are being shaped by the narrative, and their actions serve the purposes of the narrative.

Extreme Characterization: God as Irreducible [8:08-12:17]

Does God not care about Job as he launches his ruin? No, we can't deduce that. The literary scenario holds all such assessments at bay. Does God violently wipe out Job's children? There's no reason to consider God as careless with human lives simply to make a point.

The extremes of Job's suffering are portrayed as convincingly as the extremes of his righteousness and prosperity. The extreme is important for the conversation to take place. Nothing less than a total loss would provide the necessary factors for the wisdom instruction that is the focus. If Job just lost his wealth and not his family, you really couldn't talk about the issue. If Job had just lost his wealth and his family and not his health, the conversation wouldn't work. You'd always say, well, he hasn't lost everything. You know, his family was more important than his health. So, he only lost his health or his wealth. Well, at least he's got family. But no, for this conversation to happen, he's got to lose it all.

This is the same sort of thinking that we use when we encounter the parables of Jesus, which examine realistic issues by constructing situations that mix realism with extremely exaggerated and unbelievable factors. Extremes then provide one of the telltale

signs that we are dealing with a literary construction.

Does God heartlessly ignore Job's pleas? Well, it's true that God is unresponsive. But the book and its teaching would flounder badly if Job succeeded in drawing God into litigation. Then God is impervious to such pleas doesn't make him heartless; it shows that that is not the pathway to a solution.

The message of the book intends to convey that message is not achieved by God giving explanations. And therefore, of course, God rejects Job's attempts to draw him into giving explanations. Giving an explanation would destroy the message of the book. The posture of God then has nothing to do with whether he is emotionally responsive to Job. That's not the issue at stake.

Does God intimidate Job into silence? Well, in Yahweh's speeches, he is undeniably portrayed as intimidating because, after all, he's not tame; he's not domesticated. But does the author intend for the reader to be cowed into abject groveling? It stands in sharp contrast to the book of Psalms, in which God is approachable with all sorts of concerns. This posture of Yahweh is necessary as a literary means rather than as a theological end. The point is not that God is unapproachable. The point is that he is irreducible.

Job Parallels with Jesus' Parables [12:17-15:12]

We've used the example of the parables of Jesus. Let's take a look at a couple to make the point here. If you take a look at the parable of the workers and their wages in Matthew 20, God is portrayed as the landowner. We could not infer that God actually works this way. The payment of wages does not have a direct correlation to how people are treated in heaven. The same wage offered to those who worked only the last hour is an intentional exaggeration to highlight the point the parable is making. We can't draw conclusions about how God acts through that parable.

In Luke 16, we have the parable of the shrewd manager. The master's response to his managers, currying favor, should not be used to imply that God wants us to curry

favor with him in the same way. God's character is not being revealed as a shrewd operator. But that's the literary role given to him in the parable.

The unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21 to 35 ends with, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each one of you." Yet, we can't help but notice that the master hands the servant over for torture until he can repay. We can perceive a subtle difference between the message of the parable and the nature of God.

And finally, the parable of the late-night request, Luke 11 verses five through eight. The character that represents God is reluctant to help and needs to be badgered into action by the nagging of the one in need. That would be an extreme portrayal of God in order to make a point. In none of these, do we use that information from the parable to really compile a profile of what God is like? We understand that the point of the parable is somewhere else.

Likewise, God is a character in the Book of Job. Just as he is a character in the parables, it's important to examine what the author does with the character. That's more important than what the character does. The message of the book is not entailed in God's activities but in the information that it offers about God's plans, purposes, and his policies.

Message about God in the Book of Job [15:12-16:21]

God's ways are more complicated than people can imagine. They cannot be reduced to a simple equation. What we learn about God is that he's not in need of vindication by us. He's not accountable to us. In his wisdom, he has created the world as he deemed appropriate, and we trust that wisdom. We should therefore affirm that God's ways are the best ways. These are the things that come out of the book, as it teaches us about God. We have to be careful not to draw information from the wrong areas of the book that would create a distorted picture of God. That's now going to lead us to try to understand the theology of the book of Job, and that'll be our next segment.

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