

The Book of Job

Session 1: Interpretation Problems and False Ideas about the Book

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton introduces the unique challenges of interpreting the Book of Job, highlighting its complex Hebrew syntax and unified literary structure. He dismantles six common misconceptions that readers often bring to the text, such as expecting explanations for personal suffering or assuming the book's primary theme is God's justice. Instead, Walton argues that the Book of Job is centered on God's wisdom and explores what truly motivates righteousness, calling on readers to trust God in their ignorance and confusion.

Outline

I. Introduction

A. Speaker Profile: Dr. John Walton

1. Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College (formerly at Moody Bible Institute)
2. Specialized in ancient Near Eastern and Hebrew text analysis to help understand the Bible

B. Unique Nature of the Book of Job

1. Characterized as extremely unique and difficult
2. Distinguishes itself from both other Old Testament books and ancient world literature
3. Focus is to understand the book both as a whole and in its individual parts

II. Problems in Dealing with the Book of Job

A. Interpretation and Translation Problems

1. Contains the most difficult Hebrew in the Old Testament, characterized by difficult syntax and numerous hapax legomena (words occurring only once)
2. Requires careful translation and structural analysis

B. Literary Packaging and Cohesion

1. Rejects the "patchwork quilt" or contradictory view that sections were added over time
2. Argues for Job as a unified, coherent, and literary whole

C. Philosophical and Theological Issues

1. Job's friends are intentionally positioned to represent incorrect or incomplete theology

2. Readers must distinguish how the theology works inside the text versus how it applies to Christian theology today

III. Six Misconceptions and False Expectations about the Book of Job

A. Point 1: Job Has Trials, But Job is Not on Trial

1. Job's early exoneration in the prologue proves he is not the problem under investigation
2. Job incorrectly perceives himself as a criminal defendant accused of wrongdoing
3. Job attempts to shift his role to a civil plaintiff seeking compensation and vindication
4. In reality, the reader learns that Job is the star witness for the defense, a role Job himself never realizes

B. Point 2: The Book of Job is Not About Job, But About God

1. While Job is a central character, the ultimate focus is revealing the character of God
2. Job is not designed to be an exemplary moral role model for suffering, patience, or interactions
3. Wisdom books are fundamentally about God rather than human emulation

C. Point 3: The Book is Not About God's Justice, But About God's Wisdom

1. In the climax, God never defends or explains His justice, nor does He explain the events in terms of justice
2. Evaluating justice requires complete information, which humans can never possess
3. Defining God as "just" can imply He conforms to an external standard, which violates divine non-contingency; justice flows from God
4. The book is written to defend God's wisdom, which is what humanity must rely on

D. Point 4: The Book is Not About Suffering, But About Thinking About God When We Suffer

1. The text does not provide explanations for why suffering occurs
2. Instead, it teaches how to respond to and think about God during trials—addressing reactions like anger, blame, or running away

E. Point 5: The Book is Not About Getting Answers, But About Trusting God

1. Readers search for answers to explain their pain or global suffering
2. Trust is defined as our response to ignorance and confusion when answers are unavailable

F. Point 6: The Book is Not About How to Suffer, But About What Constitutes Righteousness

1. Poses the foundational question: "Does Job serve God for nothing?"
2. Probes the motivation behind righteousness: if righteousness is only practiced for reward, it dissolves under trial
3. Rejects the view of God as a "vending machine"
4. Suffering is the testing mechanism to reveal whether Job's righteousness is genuine

IV. Conclusion and Review

A. Summary of the Six Distinct Pillars

B. Resolving Misconceptions: Correcting expectations prevents disappointment and guides us on how God truly operates in the world