

The Book of Job

Session 4: Genre and Structure and the Nature of Wisdom

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton explores the genre, structure, and rhetorical strategy of the Book of Job, proposing that it is best understood as a wisdom-oriented thought experiment rather than simple history or fiction. He argues that the book uses extreme scenarios and literary constructs—including the dialogues, the heavenly scenes, and even the speeches of God—to bypass easy answers and focus on a deeper philosophical exploration of wisdom and suffering. Walton outlines the unified structural framework of the text, highlighting the transitional role of the central hymn to wisdom and explaining that the divine authority of the book is found in the human communicator's theological intent.

Outline

I. Introduction to Genre and Structure

- A. Overview of the Session: Dr. John Walton introduces the genre, structure, and nature of wisdom in the Book of Job.
- B. Questioning the Historicity: Is Job history or fiction? Establishing that this is a false dichotomy.

II. The Importance of Genre

- A. Purpose of Genre: It guides the reading strategy and establishes expectations (e.g., reading a biography vs. a mystery or comic strip).
- B. Definition: Genre positions a piece of literature in a community of similar works.
- C. Problem with Job: Job is unique; while it is wisdom literature, there is no community of closely parallel works to define a standard reading strategy.
- D. Mixed Genres inside Job: Contains dialogues, wisdom hymns, and discourses, but as a whole, nothing else in the ancient Near East is quite like it.

III. Job as a Thought Experiment

- A. Definition: A scenario carefully constructed with all features necessary to explore a philosophical issue (similar to Jesus' parables).

- B. Objective: A 'what-if' scenario designed to draw philosophical strength from its realistic yet imaginative setup rather than claiming historical accuracy.
- C. Strategy of Extremes: Everything in Job is pulled to the absolute furthest extreme:
 - 1. If Job were only moderately righteous, his suffering could be explained by his flaws.
 - 2. If his suffering were less comprehensive, it could be dismissed as normal human experience.
 - 3. Drawing things to extremes removes easy answers, leaving the reader to face the core wisdom point.

IV. Job as a Literary Construct

- A. Recognizing Constructed Elements:
 - 1. Speeches of the friends: Characters do not naturally speak in such highly elevated, poetic, and structured extemporaneous language.
 - 2. Absence of technology: Scribes or stenographers did not record these conversations in real-time.
- B. Extent of the Construct: Once parts are acknowledged as literary constructs, the entire framework can be viewed through that lens.
- C. Historical Anchor: Walton believes Job was a real historical person who experienced devastating suffering, but the biblical book is a highly stylized thought experiment built around him.

V. God's Speeches and the Heavenly Scene as Constructs

- A. Divine Speeches: The inspired author puts words into God's mouth to address the theological issues at hand.
- B. Heavenly Scene (The Wager): Also proposed as a literary construct to set up the experiment.
- C. Benefits of this View:
 - 1. Avoids the troubling theological picture of a God who makes casual wagers with the devil over human lives.
 - 2. Prevents modern readers from fearing their personal suffering is the result of a similar divine wager.
- D. Divine Authority: Vested in the wisdom teachings and the theological point affirmed, not in the literal historicity of the narrative events.

VI. Rhetorical Strategy and Structural Layout

- A. The Sandwich Structure of Job:
 - 1. Prose Prologue: Sets up the scene in heaven and Job's earthly experiences.
 - 2. Prose Epilogue: Draws the narrative to a close, depicting God restoring Job.
- B. The Central Pivot (Hymn to Wisdom - Chapter 28):
 - 1. Location: Positioned directly between the dialogue section (ends ch. 27) and the discourse section (starts ch. 29).
 - 2. Voice: Belongs to the narrator, not Job, as Job lacks this perspective before or after.
 - 3. Rhetorical Purpose: Summarizes that the preceding human dialogue accomplished nothing, and shifts the focus from a search for justice to a search for wisdom.

VII. Dialogues and Discourses

- A. Dialogues (Chapters 3-27):
 - 1. Alternating exchanges between Job and his three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar).
 - 2. The friends' arguments eventually run out of steam (Zophar falls silent; Bildad's final speech is extremely short).
- B. Discourses (Chapters 29-37 & Yahweh Speeches):
 - 1. Uninterchanged, standalone monologues.
 - 2. Features Job's final defense (chapters 29-31), Elihu's speeches (chapters 32-37), and Yahweh's speeches.
- C. Organic Unity: Every literary format (narrative, dialogue, discourse, hymn) works together coherently; no piece can be left out.

VIII. Rhetorical Strategy and Authorial Intent

- A. The Author's Strategy: Structure reveals the intent of the human communicator (oral or written).
- B. Location of Authority: God has vested His divine authority in the human communicator. Readers must discern what the human instrument intended to communicate.
- C. Rejection of Freelancing: Readers do not have the freedom to read their own meanings into the text; authority lies strictly in the text's original intent.
- D. Cross-Cultural Understanding: The Bible was written for us, but it was not written to us.