

The Book of Job

Session 5: Job and the Ancient Near East

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton examines how the Book of Job relates to its ancient Near Eastern background, exploring the literary genre of the "pious sufferer" through key Sumerian and Akkadian texts. He contrasts ancient Mesopotamian views of divine inscrutability, caprice, and the "great symbiosis"—where gods and humans exist in a codependent relationship of mutual need—with the uniquely Israelite theological framework of Job. By focusing on a single, transcendent God, rejecting ritual solutions, and introducing the concept of disinterested righteousness, the Book of Job serves as a powerful theological foil that critiques its cultural neighbors. Ultimately, Walton demonstrates that the book shifts the conversation from human suffering and ritual appeasement to a deeper trust in divine wisdom and God's sovereign policies.

Outline

I. Introduction to Job and the Ancient Near East

- A. The Bible is written for us, but not to us; it does not anticipate or speak directly in modern cultural terms.
- B. The Book of Job is fully embedded in the ancient world, unfolding its conversation in that specific historical and cultural context.
- C. Job is not an Israelite (he is from the land of Uz), but the Book of Job is an Israelite book framed by Israelites for Israelites.

II. The "Pious Sufferer" Motif in Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) Literature

- A. The concept of a righteous person suffering fits into a well-known literary category in the ancient world, though Job offers very different answers.
- B. Sumerian: "A Man and His God"
 - 1. The sufferer is ignorant of any offense but suffers from illness and social isolation.
 - 2. In the end, unrecognized sins are identified; the sufferer confesses them and is restored.

3. Core Philosophy: No child is born without sin; the text concludes with a hymn of praise.

C. Akkadian: "A Dialogue Between a Man and His God"

1. The sufferer is ignorant of any offense, experiences illness, and is eventually restored.

2. No philosophy or divine favor is assured in the resolution of the dialogue.

D. Akkadian/Babylonian: "Ludlul bel Nemeqi" ("I will Praise the God of Wisdom")

1. A pious and conscientious sufferer is socially ostracized, suffers demon oppression, and receives unclear communication from the gods.

2. A god appears in a dream; the sufferer makes purification and appeasement offerings, and is restored.

3. Core Philosophy: The gods are inscrutable; results in a hymn of praise to Marduk.

E. Babylonian: "The Babylonian Theodicy"

1. A sufferer claims piety but experiences poverty and the loss of family.

2. No resolution is reached; the participants conclude that the purposes of the gods are remote.

3. Core Philosophy: The gods made humanity prone to suffering and gave them evil inclinations.

III. Core Ideas and Theological Assumptions in the ANE Sources

A. Divine Inscrutability: Suffering is ultimately blamed on the remote and unknowable plans of the gods.

B. Inherent Sinfulness: Because humans are inherently flawed and cannot meet all divine requirements, suffering is always deemed deserved.

C. Lack of Revelation: The gods of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Canaanites, and Hittites have not clearly communicated what pleases or displeases them.

D. Capricious Deities: Gods act inconsistently based on their own self-interested agendas, leaving humans in constant insecurity.

E. Loss of Divine Protection: Anger from a deity causes them to withdraw protection, making the individual vulnerable to demonic forces and natural evils.

IV. Distinctly Israelite Thinking Exhibited by Job

A. Job has Israelite thoughts and perspectives, distinguishing him from ANE characters:

1. No Polytheism: Job has no interest in polytheistic thought, even swearing an oath (Job 31:26) that he has not worshiped the sun or moon.

2. No Curiosity About Other Gods: Job does not seek out which god is angry or appeal to rival gods for relief; he works solely with one God.

3. Deserved vs. Undeserved Punishment: Job thinks deeply about whether his suffering is a direct result of his actions and is highly certain of his personal righteousness.

4. Abstract Righteousness: Job possesses a concept of personal righteousness that is defined in abstract, moral terms rather than purely ritual ones.

V. The Concept of "The Great Symbiosis"

- A. Definition:** The codependent, mutual relationship between gods and humans in the ancient world.
- B. Gods' Needs:** ANE peoples believed gods had physical needs (food, water, clothing, shelter) and grew tired of meeting them.
- C. Human Role:** Humans were created as a slave labor force to cultivate food, build temples, and pamper the gods.
- D. Gods' Role:** In exchange for service, gods provided rain, protection, and social justice to keep human society orderly so humans could continue serving them.
- E. The Challenge to the Symbiosis:** "Does Job serve God for nothing?" (Job 1:9) directly attacks this codependency, introducing the concept of disinterested righteousness.

VI. Job's Conflict with His Friends

- A. The Friends' ANE Perspective:** They believe Job's focus should be on how to appease God to "get his stuff back"—treating God as a transactional vending machine.
- B. Job's Israelite Resistance:** Job refuses to reduce his relationship with God to a transaction for material benefits, preserving the integrity of the book's central question.

VII. The Book's Israelite Focus and Unique Theological Solutions

- A. No Ritual Solutions:** The book completely rejects the possibility of ritual offenses or ritual appeasement as an explanation or cure for suffering.
- B. Prioritizing Justice and Righteousness:** The text centers the entire conflict on God's justice and Job's moral integrity, themes largely absent in ANE counterparts.
- C. Job's Initial Exoneration:** Declaring Job righteous at the very beginning (Job 1:1) is an extreme literary strategy that removes all traditional ANE explanations for suffering.
- D. A Transcendent Deity:** Yahweh is presented as transcendent, running the world based on divine wisdom and sovereign policies rather than human codependency.

VIII. Conclusion: Ancient Near Eastern Literature as a Foil

- A. The Book of Job is not indebted to ancient Near Eastern texts, but uses them as a conversational partner and foil.**
- B. By showcasing the bankruptcy of ANE philosophies, Job reveals a gracious, communicative God whose covenantal character and wisdom transcend the capricious deities of Mesopotamia.**