

The Book of Job

Session 10: Sons of God and Satan

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton examines the unfolding of the first heavenly court scene in Job 1, where God tasks the Challenger with investigating Job's righteousness. He highlights the key theological question of disinterested righteousness—whether Job serves God for nothing—and explains the linguistic wordplay surrounding the Hebrew verb barak (bless/curse). Walton emphasizes that Job's initial response to sudden, total disaster is exemplary, attributing his circumstances directly to God rather than secondary causes. Ultimately, he demonstrates how the concept of 'hidden information' prevents both Job and the reader from reducing God's sovereign policies to a simple retribution equation.

Outline

I. The Challenger's Report in the Heavenly Court (Job 1:6-12)

A. The Court Setting

1. God calls on the Challenger to make his report on his findings.
2. This represents a narrative framework where God gathers information through His designated agent, a common practice of a good king.
3. The dialogue does not imply that God lacks omniscience or does not know what is happening.

B. The Case of Disinterested Righteousness

1. The Challenger raises the core question of the book: "Does Job serve God for nothing?"
2. This challenge questions if true righteousness can exist without self-interest, directly attacking the retribution principle and the "great symbiosis" (the concept of human-divine codependency).
3. The Book of Job serves as a corrective to these flawed transactional paradigms.

II. The Linguistic Wordplay on Blessing and Cursing

A. The Hebrew Verb Barak

1. Throughout Job 1 and 2, when translations mention "cursing" God, the underlying Hebrew verb used in the text is actually barak, which literally means "to bless".
2. Barak is used euphemistically in these contexts (such as Job 1:5, 1:11, 2:5, and 2:9) to avoid placing a curse word directly adjacent to God's name.
3. The translation of barak depends heavily on context, as it is translated literally as "blessed" in other parts of the prologue (Job 1:10 and 1:21).

B. The Irony of Job's Response

1. The Challenger claims Job will barak (curse) God to His face.
2. Job actually does barak (bless) God in Job 1:21 ("May the name of Yahweh be praised").
3. This creates a brilliant wordplay where Job does exactly what the Challenger predicted but in the opposite, literal sense, blessing God without any euphemistic connotation of calling Him to account.

III. The Earthly Tragedy and Job's Exemplary Response

A. The Character of the Disasters

1. Once the Challenger is given a free hand, a series of human, natural, and divine tragedies strike Job in rapid succession.
2. The suddenness and totality of these disasters are extreme literary devices designed to eliminate easy explanations or dismissals.

B. Job's Initial Actions and Words

1. Job engages in traditional acts of mourning, such as tearing his robes and shaving his head.
2. Job prostrates himself, which serves as an acknowledgment and acceptance of God's sovereign actions.
3. Job recognizes God as the direct cause of his circumstances rather than blaming an independent evil agent.

C. Use of the Divine Name Yahweh

1. Job concludes his response by praising the name of "Yahweh" ("Yahweh has given, Yahweh has taken away...").
2. This is highly unique because Job never uses the name "Yahweh" again in any of his subsequent speeches or discourses; he only uses El, Elohim, or El Shaddai until God speaks in chapter 38.

D. The Integrity of Job's Initial Response

1. The narrator confirms that in all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.
2. While Job attributes the actions to God, he does not seek to hold Him accountable.
3. While commendable, this pure response is easier at the beginning and becomes harder to maintain as the suffering becomes an extended trial.

IV. The Rhetorical Strategy of Hidden Information

A. Establishing Job's Innocence

1. The heavenly scene establishes for the reader that Job is indeed innocent of any wrongdoing.
2. This removes the traditional ancient Near Eastern answers of retribution and shows that Job is not on trial; he is the star witness for the defense of God's policies.

B. The Principle of Hidden Information

1. Neither Job nor his friends are ever told about the conversation in heaven; they will never learn what initiated these circumstances.
2. No reasons, answers, or explanations are ever given to them by God.
3. Consequently, the heavenly scene is not there to give the reader a mechanism to evaluate or hold God accountable.
4. Instead, it pulls explanations out of the picture to force a discussion on how humans ought to think about God in the midst of ignorance.

C. The Error of the Retribution Equation

1. Job mistakenly believes that God's actions can be reduced to a simple, predictable mathematical equation of retribution.
2. This reductionist view is a common mistake that the Book of Job is designed to correct.