

The Book of Job

Session 26: God in the Book of Job

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton explores how God is characterized in the Book of Job, noting that His behavior in the prologue and discourses can seem highly problematic in a casual reading. He argues that God must be understood as a rhetorically shaped literary character, much like the characters in the parables of Jesus, whose extreme portrayal serves the narrative's theological message rather than providing a literal profile of His nature. Ultimately, Walton demonstrates that God is approachable yet irreducible, and His complex, wise governance of the cosmos cannot be reduced to a simple human equation of justice.

Outline

I. Introduction: God's Questionable Behavior in Casual Readings

- A. The Apparently Problematic Actions of God in Job
 - 1. God appears to ask the Challenger (Satan) what he is up to, implying a potential lack of immediate awareness.
 - 2. He seemingly wagers with a man's life and coordinates the destruction of Job's family and wealth without direct moral cause.
 - 3. He ignores Job's desperate pleas for a formal legal explanation of his suffering.
 - 4. He responds with a speech that is perceived to intimidate Job ('I'm God, and you are not') rather than explaining His actions.
 - 5. He describes Behemoth and Leviathan as creatures of power and restores Job's prosperity without explanation or defense.
- B. The Hermeneutical Challenge
 - 1. A literal, casual reading of these events can make God's behavior look almost comical or devastating.
 - 2. Readers frequently struggle to reconcile this behavior with their worship of God, prompting the question of what the book actually reveals about Him.

II. God as a Rhetorically Shaped Literary Character

- A. The Nature of Rhetorical Shaping
 - 1. Just like Job, his friends, his wife, Behemoth, and Leviathan, God acts as a character in the Book of Job.
 - 2. The author has rhetorically shaped the character of God to serve specific narrative, theological, and educational purposes.
- B. Viewing the Book as a Structured 'Play'
 - 1. While the book is not a literal play, thinking of the characters as players in a drama helps us avoid confusing their literary activities with God's literal ontology.
 - 2. The actions and dialogues serve the purposes of the broader narrative rather than compiling a literal psychological profile of Yahweh.

III. Deconstructing the Difficult Heavenly Scenes

- A. The Need for Information
 - 1. God does not literally require reports to know what is happening on earth.
 - 2. The dialogue uses conventional ancient Near Eastern thinking regarding how a royal council operates, with Yahweh cast as a king receiving reports.
 - 3. His questions are designed to evoke responses and set the plot in motion, rather than revealing divine ignorance.
- B. The Concept of the 'Wager'
 - 1. The book is not a divine revelation of how God actually interacts with the devil on a day-to-day basis.
 - 2. The literary role of the 'wager' is to establish beyond any doubt that Job's suffering is not the result of sin.
 - 3. It sets up the central investigative question: 'Does Job serve God for nothing?'.
- C. Discovering Motivations
 - 1. God has no uncertainty about Job's motives and does not need an extended trial to discover them.
 - 2. The trial resolves questions for the readers, not for God.
 - 3. The book leads readers in an investigation of how God's justice intersects with human experience.

IV. Extreme Characterization and Its Hermeneutical Function

- A. The Necessity of Total Loss
 - 1. The extreme nature of Job's losses (wealth, children, and health) is a deliberate literary technique.
 - 2. If Job had only lost his wealth, the conversation could always be dismissed on the grounds that he still had his family or health.
 - 3. To address the theological problem of disinterested righteousness fully, the loss had to be absolute.
- B. The Reason for Divine Silence
 - 1. God's unresponsiveness and rejection of Job's litigation are necessary for the message.

- 2. If God had entered into litigation and explained Himself, the book's theological lesson would flounder.
- 3. Divine silence indicates that demanding explanations is not the correct path to resolving suffering.
- C. Intimidation and God as Irreducible
 - 1. Although God's speeches appear intimidating, the goal is not to cow the reader into groveling.
 - 2. This stands in contrast to the Psalms, where God is approachable with every human concern.
 - 3. The literary posture of Yahweh is a means to show that God is irreducible—He cannot be fit into a simple human equation of justice.

V. Parallels with the Parables of Jesus

- A. Exaggerated Realism in the Parables
 - 1. Jesus' parables routinely construct situations that mix everyday realism with exaggerated, unbelievable elements to emphasize a single point.
- B. Key Examples of Exaggerated Parables
 - 1. The Workers and their Wages (Matthew 20): God is the landowner, but His payment structure is an intentional exaggeration to make a point, not a literal description of celestial economics.
 - 2. The Shrewd Manager (Luke 16): The master praises a dishonest manager, but this does not imply that God is a shrewd operator who wants us to curry favor through dishonesty.
 - 3. The Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18): The master hands a servant over for physical torture, exposing a difference between the dramatic parable setting and God's true nature.
 - 4. The Late-Night Request (Luke 11): God is represented by a friend who is reluctant to help and must be badgered, an extreme exaggeration used to illustrate persistence in prayer.
- C. Hermeneutical Application to Job
 - 1. Just as we do not build a theological profile of God's character from the literal actions of characters in Jesus' parables, we must avoid doing so from the setup of Job.
 - 2. The message of Job is found in what the text reveals about God's plans, purposes, and policies, rather than His literal, dramatic actions in the prologue.

VI. The True Message about God in the Book of Job

- A. Complexity and Sovereignty
 - 1. God's ways are infinitely more complex than humans can comprehend, and they cannot be reduced to a simple transactional equation.
 - 2. God is not in need of vindication by humans, nor is He accountable to us.
- B. Trusting Divine Wisdom
 - 1. God created the world as He deemed appropriate through His wisdom.

- 2. Trusting God means believing His ways are the best ways, even when our circumstances appear chaotic or unjust.
- 3. We must avoid drawing theology from the wrong areas of the book (such as taking Job's criticisms of God literally) to prevent creating a distorted picture of Him.