

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 5, 6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

All right, let's dive right into this explainer. You know, if you've ever read the book of Job and just felt like maybe you were missing half of the conversation, well, you are definitely not alone today. We're going to unpack the historical and cultural matrix that actually birthed this text.

And as you'll see, Job wasn't just a story about suffering. It was a radical, absolute rebellion against the entire worldview of the ancient world. We're going to see exactly how this text completely dismantled the assumptions of its era.

Let's get into it. So to really wrap our heads around Job, we have to make a massive paradigm shift. There's this great quote from Dr. John Walton: the Bible is written for us, but it is not written to us.

And that hits the nail right on the head. We have to realize this ancient text is embedded in a culture, completely unlike our own. It doesn't anticipate modern American, European, or even medieval ways of thinking.

It was written in the ancient Near East. So while the lessons are absolutely for us, you know, to help us understand God, the text itself is speaking the cultural language of the ancient world. Job might be from the land of Uz, but this book was framed by Israelites for Israelites, and they were actively participating in an ancient ongoing conversation.

Here's a quick look at where we're headed in this explainer. We'll start with the context of the ancient world, touch on the pious sufferer motif, break down this fascinating concept called the great symbiosis, look at how Job flips the script, and finally we'll wrap up with this totally revolutionary view of God. All right.

Part one, context. Let's begin by stepping back in time to explore the ancient world. Imagine living in an era that was just deeply uncomfortable and, honestly, incredibly anxiety-inducing because in the ancient Near East, it was definitely not a world of theological comfort.

Whether you were Egyptian, Babylonian, Canaanite, Hittite, it didn't matter. The gods of this era had not clearly revealed themselves. There was literally zero clear communication about what they wanted, what would please them, or what would make them angry.

These gods were viewed as completely unpredictable beings with hidden agendas. They were entirely capricious. One day they're happy.

The next day they changed their minds. And the truly terrifying part for everyday people was that if a God just suddenly got mad, they could yank away your protection in a heartbeat. That left you totally vulnerable to demonic powers or hostile forces.

And you had absolutely no way to figure out why it was even happening to you. Think about it like this. Imagine working a job where your boss holds you strictly accountable for your performance, right? But they never actually tell you what you're supposed to do.

You are rewarded or severely punished based entirely on your best guesses. I mean, that is a deeply uncomfortable, stressful way to live. But for ancient people, that wasn't a bad job.

That was just baseline reality. Moving on to part two, let's talk about the pious sufferer motif and how the ancients tried to explain all this. To cope with this overwhelming societal anxiety, the ancient world actually produced a whole specific genre of literature.

It was all about trying to explain why seemingly good, conscientious people suddenly faced terrible disasters. We have these famous Sumerian and Babylonian texts, things like a man and his God, or the Babylonian poem *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi*, and in all these stories, you've got a person who seems to have done everything perfectly right, yet they're hit with illness, poverty, or they become a social outcast. But here's the kicker.

Look at the depressing conclusions they reach. Ultimately, these texts just resolve by saying, well, the sufferer must have secretly sinned without knowing it, or humanity is just inherently crooked, or simply the gods are completely inscrutable. Basically, the underlying philosophy was always just a big shrug.

Who knows what the gods are doing? Which brings us to part three, the great symbiosis, or as I like to call it, ancient codependency. Okay. So the absolute crucial point for understanding all this ancient fear is a concept academics call the great symbiosis.

Get this. The ancients literally believed that the gods had needs, like they actually got hungry, thirsty, and tired of working. According to ancient Near Eastern thought, the gods basically got sick of farming and irrigating fields, so they created humans to be their slave labor.

Humans existed strictly to pamper the gods, to grow their food, make their clothes, and build them these giant, splendid houses, and in return, the gods literally had to send rain and protect the humans from invaders. But, and this is key, it wasn't out of love. It was because if the humans died out, the gods' supply chain would completely collapse.

It was a strict codependency. The gods only maintained justice and order just to keep their human supply chain running smoothly. Now for part four, let's see what happens when Job enters the picture and completely flips the script.

Enter Job. So Job is a man from the land of Uz living right in the middle of this ancient era, but notice the incredibly stark contrast in how he thinks. His friends? They perfectly represent that standard ancient Near Eastern thinking we just talked about.

Their entire argument to Job is basically about ritual appeasement. It's all about how do you get your stuff back? They genuinely believe Job must have offended a god and just needs to perform the right ritual to restore his wealth. But Job? Job represents Israelite thinking.

He isn't interested in just getting his stuff back. He is pursuing absolute righteousness. He is literally calling God into court, demanding an explanation of justice.

And let me tell you, that is something you just did not do with the capricious gods of Babylon or Egypt. No way. In fact, if you look closely, Job systematically dismantles these ancient tropes one by one.

He explicitly refuses to worship the sun and moon, completely rejecting polytheism outright. He shows zero curiosity about which other God might be causing us trouble. He outright rejects the great symbiosis, fully recognizing that God doesn't actually need anything from him.

And the text itself? It pulls all the standard ancient excuses off the table right in chapter one, by having God actively declare Job righteous from the very start. So there's no secret sin to uncover here. There's no magical ritual appeasement that's going to fix it.

Job is demanding that we look at God's justice and his transcendent nature, rather than just relying on human rituals. And wow, that brings us to what is arguably the most dangerous question in the entire book. Does Job serve God for nothing? This specific question strikes at the absolute foundation of ancient thought.

It directly challenges that deeply held great symbiosis. Because in the ancient world, nobody served a God for nothing. You only served a deity to get material protection and prosperity in return.

That was the whole deal. So by asking if Job's righteousness is disinterested, meaning does he love God simply for who God is and not for the stuff he gets out of it, the text is completely shattering the ancient Near Eastern operating system. It's a real game changer.

Finally, part five, let's look at this revolutionary view of God through the lens of divine wisdom. Ultimately, Job's absolute refusal to accept the bankrupt answers of his friends leads us to this profound, totally paradigm-shifting revelation. The book of Job brilliantly uses the surrounding ancient literature as a foil.

It basically invites the ancient reader to look at the Babylonian and Sumerian answers to suffering, and then it exposes how entirely bankrupt those answers really are. It shifts humanity's focus away from the terrifying divine right of capricious, needy gods who just do whatever they want for their own survival. And instead, it points us toward the transcendent, deeply comforting policies of divine wisdom.

God doesn't need us to feed him. He operates the world based on profound transcendent wisdom that is completely unlike anything the rest of the ancient world could even begin to offer. So as we wrap up this explainer, I really want you to ponder this.

How does understanding the shift from absolute paralyzing ancient fear to transcendent divine wisdom completely change how you're going to read the book of Job from now on, because it's clearly not just a story about a guy who had a really bad day, right? It is a radical, liberating manifesto that actually freed humanity from the anxiety of the great symbiosis. Thanks so much for diving into this with me. I really hope this context leaves you wanting to explore the depths of this ancient wisdom even further.