

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 13 – Podcast

BiblicaleLearning.org [BeL]

Welcome to a deep dive into the book of Job. We're really going deep this time. You've shared some fascinating academic work by John Walton.

Yeah. And honestly, it's going to help us unlock some seriously cool nuances, I think, in Job's laments and those early conversations he has with his friends. There's a lot more to unpack in Job than most people realize, especially when you start looking at the original Hebrew.

Okay. Let's start with Job's lament in chapter three. Everyone knows it's a sad part of the book, but it's way more than that, right? Walton points out there are actually three different Hebrew words for curse at play here.

Right. Why is that so important? Well, imagine you're painting a picture, but you only have one shade of blue. You can still paint the sky, the ocean, a bird, but they'll all look pretty similar.

With three different blues though, suddenly you can capture nuance and even emotion in a whole new way. Right. So it's like that with curse.

The first word, Barak, is actually used euphemistically, almost like he's holding back some of his pain, but then you have Qalal, which involves more of an incantation, a word of power. Okay. And finally, Arar, which refers to removing something from God's protection.

So Job is depicting a serious disruption of divine order, a twisting of the way things should be. So he's not just expressing sadness; he's layering these really intense meanings on top of each other. And then there's that whole thing with Leviathan.

It's not just a big, scary sea monster, is it? No, not at all. Remember in the ancient world, Leviathan represented primordial chaos. It was this force of nature that could swallow up the world if it wasn't kept in check by the gods.

So when Job calls on Leviathan, he's not just expressing frustration. He's suggesting that the universe itself has gone haywire. His world is in chaos.

And it feels like maybe the divine order that's supposed to govern everything is broken too. That's a pretty heavy thought. He's basically saying, hey, God, the rules aren't working anymore.

But even with all of this going on, Job never wavers from his integrity. Most people probably think of that as being about outward actions, but Walton seems to suggest there's something much deeper going on. Right.

Most interpretations focus on Job's piety and blamelessness, which are important. But what really sets Job apart is his unwavering commitment to his own righteousness. He doesn't view it as some sort of transaction where good deeds equal blessings.

It's not about the rewards. It's about living a righteous life for its own sake, because that's who he believes he is at his core. And that's something he refuses to compromise, even when everything else is falling apart.

So his integrity is tied to his very identity. It's not something he can just switch on or off depending on the circumstances. Exactly.

The core part is being. And this is what makes his suffering all the more perplexing, both for him and for us as readers. He's facing the ultimate test.

Can he maintain his sense of self, his righteousness, when everything he thought he knew about the world is crumbling around him? That makes his lament even more powerful. It's this raw, honest struggle playing out against a backdrop of cosmic chaos. Yeah.

And then his friends show up. I feel like everyone knows the story, but you're saying Walton gives us a whole new lens to view those conversations through. He really does.

Walton meticulously dissects these verses, looking at them from the perspective of ancient Near Eastern culture and the nuances of the Hebrew language. Even verses that seem pretty straightforward on the surface have these hidden depths that reveal so much more about what's actually going on. OK, give me an example.

Where do we see this in the first cycle of dialogue? Well, take Eliphaz, for instance. One of the things he asks is, can a mortal be more righteous than God? On the surface, that seems like a pretty obvious question with a pretty obvious answer. Of course not.

Right. Like, duh, no one is more righteous than God. Right.

But there's more to it than that. Walton points out that the way it's phrased in the original Hebrew suggests a much deeper question. Can any human be truly righteous in God's eyes? Suddenly, we're not just talking about Job's specific situation anymore.

We're delving into this fundamental question about human nature and our relationship with the divine. That's such a great point. And it completely reframes that entire conversation.

Right. What are some other verses where Walton's approach changes the way we might normally interpret things? Well, there's the line Job quotes from Psalm 8, what is mankind that you make so much of them? In Psalms, this is a beautiful reflection on humanity's place in the grand scheme of creation. But Job, as you might imagine, isn't using it in such a celebratory way.

Yeah. I imagine he's feeling a little less than celebratory at this point. He's actually flipping the entire meaning on its head.

It's like he's saying, God, with all due respect, I'm just one tiny speck in this vast universe. Why are you focusing on me so much? Why all this attention on my suffering? It's a pretty bold question coming from someone who's just lost everything. It challenges the traditional image of Job as this purely pious, unquestioning figure.

Wow. So he's pushing back against God, even while acknowledging his own smallness. And then you have his friends who come in with all this advice.

I've always found it a little frustrating. Yeah. How they just seem to miss the point of everything Job is going through.

Their responses are really fascinating though, because they highlight the limitations of conventional wisdom when confronted with real suffering. Right. They keep coming back to this idea that Job must have done something wrong to deserve his punishment.

Their advice essentially boils down to just admit your sin, get back on God's good side, and you'll get all your stuff back. It's a very transactional view of righteousness. Yeah.

And that's exactly what Job is pushing back against. He's not interested in some kind of cosmic bargain. It's almost like they're speaking completely different languages.

Exactly. They're coming from a place of trying to maintain order and control, to make sense of suffering within their existing framework. But Job's experience has shattered that framework.

Right. He's wrestling with something much deeper and more complex, something they can't even begin to grasp. So he's not just rejecting their advice, he's rejecting their entire worldview.

In a way, yes. And this first round of dialogue really sets the stage for what's to come. He's not looking for a quick fix or a return to his former wealth and status. Right.

He's searching for something far more profound, and he won't be satisfied with simple answers or empty platitudes. He's not going to settle for a spiritual band-aid. He wants to understand the truth of his situation, even if it means challenging everything he thought he knew about God and the universe.

Exactly. And that, as we'll see, is a journey that will lead him to some very unexpected places. It's like he's stepping outside the box everyone else is trapped in and saying, hey, there's a whole other world out here.

But let's get back to his friends for a second. Okay. You mentioned that their responses are fascinating.

What can we learn from how each of them tries to advise Job? Well, they each represent a different facet of conventional wisdom and the limitations of those perspectives when confronted with real suffering. Eliphaz, for instance, seems to be appealing to Job's own past experiences. Right.

I remember Walton pointing that out. It's almost like Eliphaz is saying, dude, you used to give the same advice I'm giving you now. What changed? Exactly.

He reminds Job that he's always been a source of wisdom and comfort for others, urging them to trust in their piety. And now Eliphaz is essentially saying, why aren't you taking your

own advice? Just remember all the things you used to say and apply them to your own situation. You'll feel better.

But what he fails to grasp is that Job's situation is so unique, so profoundly challenging that it's forcing him to question the very foundation of those beliefs. He's in completely uncharted territory. And then there's Bildad, who comes in with this whole wisdom of the ages spiel.

Bildad embodies that very traditional, almost rigid understanding of the retribution principle. It was a common belief in the ancient world that good deeds would be rewarded by the gods and bad deeds would be punished. He's basically saying, look, Job, this is the way the world works.

You must have done something to deserve this. And he even suggests that Job's children must have sinned because they died. Right.

I mean, how do you even respond to something like that? It's a harsh statement, but it reflects a certain way of thinking that often arises when people are trying to make sense of tragedy. There's this need to find a cause and effect, even if it means blaming the victims. In a way, it's easier to believe that people get what they deserve than to accept that sometimes bad things happen to good people for no apparent reason.

I guess it's a way of trying to maintain a sense of order in a world that suddenly feels very chaotic and unpredictable. Exactly. And for Bildad, that order hinges on a very strict understanding of divine justice.

But of course, Job isn't buying it. He's already moving beyond that simplistic worldview. He's starting to question how anyone can truly be righteous in God's eyes.

It's like he's saying, " My experience doesn't fit your neat little boxes anymore. Which brings us to Zophar, who's even more extreme in his pronouncements than Bildad. Zophar represents that unwavering belief in divine punishment for wrongdoing.

There's absolutely no room for nuance or ambiguity in his worldview. He basically tells Job to shut up, repent, and throw himself on God's mercy. He believes suffering is always a direct consequence of sin, and the only way to alleviate it is to confess and seek forgiveness.

It's that whole suffering-must-be-something-you-did mentality. Right. Which, of course, is exactly the kind of thinking Job is railing against.

Right. Job's experience has shown him that suffering isn't always so straightforward. Zophar's response highlights the danger of these simplistic interpretations of suffering.

It can lead to judgment, a lack of empathy, and a failure to truly understand what someone is going through. It also makes you wonder about the role of these friends in the story. Are they really there to help Job? Or are they meant to represent the flawed ways we as humans try to grapple with suffering and make sense of a world that doesn't always make sense? That's a very insightful question, and one that scholars have debated for centuries.

I think their presence definitely serves to highlight the inadequacy of conventional wisdom when confronted with profound suffering. Their words, while well-intentioned, ultimately fall flat because they fail to address the depth of Job's struggle. And in a way, their responses make Job's journey even more profound, right? He's not just dealing with his own pain and loss.

He's having to defend his integrity against these accusations and simplistic explanations. Exactly. It adds another layer of complexity to his experience.

Yeah. He's not just wrestling with God. He's also wrestling with the limitations of human understanding.

He's essentially alone in this struggle, trying to articulate an experience that his friends can't even begin to comprehend. It's like he's saying, you think you know, but you have no idea what I'm going through. And yet there's still this expectation that he should just fall in line with their way of thinking.

And that's where Walton's insights become so valuable. He helps us see how Job is pushing back against those expectations, how he's challenging not only his friends' beliefs, but also the traditional interpretations of righteousness and divine justice that have been passed down through generations. It's a reminder that sometimes the easy answers aren't enough.

There are times when we need to dig deeper to question our assumptions and to be willing to sit with the discomfort of not knowing. Absolutely. And that's precisely what Job is doing.

He's refusing to settle for a worldview that no longer reflects his reality. He's on a quest for truth, and he's not going to let anyone, not even his closest friends, deter him from that path. Walton also points out something really interesting about the advice the friends give.

They seem so focused on getting Job's benefits back, on restoring his worldly possessions. Yeah. Is that just about them trying to fix his material situation, or is there something more going on there? I think it reflects a deeper aspect of their worldview.

They see righteousness as transactional. They believe that if Job repents and gets back in God's good graces, he'll automatically regain his wealth and status. Their advice consistently revolves around this idea that outward blessings are a direct reflection of inner piety.

So for them, it's all about restoring the balance sheet. Good deeds equal good fortune. But Job has clearly moved beyond that kind of thinking.

He's no longer motivated by those external markers of success. He's not looking for a quick fix or a return to his former life. He's searching for something much more profound, a genuine understanding of righteousness and God's justice, regardless of his external circumstances.

He's searching for meaning and purpose in a world that suddenly feels devoid of both. Yeah. And that search, it seems, is leading him away from the conventional wisdom represented by his friends and towards something entirely new.

Exactly. And that's what makes the rest of the book of Job so compelling. He's embarking on a journey of discovery, a quest for truth that will challenge not only his own beliefs, but also ours as readers.

It's like he's venturing into uncharted territory and we're invited to go along for the ride. It's like he's become this explorer of the soul. Right.

And we're getting this front-row seat to his internal struggles. It makes you realize that maybe suffering isn't always about punishment or some cosmic test. Yeah.

Maybe it's about pushing us to confront those deeper questions about who we are and what we believe. That's a powerful insight and one that I think resonates throughout the book of Job. It challenges us to move beyond simplistic interpretations of suffering and to grapple with the complexities of faith and human experience.

So this first cycle of dialogue, it's really just the tip of the iceberg, isn't it? It's setting the stage for this much larger exploration of Job's relationship with God and the meaning of suffering. We've seen Job reject the conventional wisdom of his friends. We've seen him wrestle with the idea of righteousness.

And we've seen him challenge the very foundations of the divine order he thought he understood. He's asking questions that most people would be afraid to even whisper. Yeah.

And he's not backing down. He's not afraid to shake things up. And I think that's what makes this book so relevant even thousands of years later.

We still grapple with these same questions about suffering, justice, and the nature of God. Absolutely. Job's story speaks to something universal in the human experience.

It reminds us that it's okay to question, to doubt, and to wrestle with the big questions, even when there are no easy answers. And maybe, just maybe, it's in those moments of wrestling and questioning that we discover something truly profound about ourselves and our place in the universe. That's a beautiful thought.

And I think it captures the essence of what Job's journey is all about. It's a journey of transformation, of moving beyond the surface and delving into the depths of the human spirit. So after this deep dive into Job's lament, his unwavering integrity, and those really insightful interpretations from John Walton, what stands out to you? What are you going to be thinking about as you move forward in the book? Maybe it's those subtle shifts in meaning Walton brings out, or maybe it's the way Job challenges us to rethink our own assumptions about righteousness and suffering.

Whatever it is, hold on to that thought. Let it simmer as you continue exploring this amazing book. And remember, true righteousness might lead us to something far more profound than just material wealth.