



How to Read Job

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“Walton and Longman, two seasoned commentators on Job, argue that readers should redirect their efforts from seeking in its pages reasons for human suffering to instead recognizing the lesson to trust in a sovereign God within the incongruities of life. The pious may not understand their painful lot, but assurance and rest come in accepting the wisdom of the Almighty. Thoughtful and accessible, this is a welcome addition to the How To Read series.”

— M. Daniel Carroll R.,
Distinguished Professor of Old Testament, Denver Seminary

Who is Job?

It is not uncommon for people to turn to the book of Job when they encounter suffering, but all too often they find the book unsatisfying. They think that the book will explain why they or their loved ones are suffering or why there is so much suffering in the world. They have the impression that the book is about Job and that he is going to provide a model for how they should respond in times of suffering. They expect to learn why God acts the way that he does – why he allows or even causes righteous people to suffer. It is no wonder, then, that they find the book inadequate; their expectations are misguided. We need to begin, then, with some adjustments to our expectations. First of all, Job has trials, but he is not on trial. We will propose that God’s policies are on trial. Second, the book of Job is not primarily about Job; it is primarily about God. Third, if this is so, the book is more about the reasons for righteousness than about the reasons for suffering. Finally, the topic of wisdom plays a central role in the book. Indeed, Job’s suffering leads to a heated debate as to who has the wisdom that will help the characters diagnose and prescribe a remedy for Job’s problems. Here we will see that, though all the human characters claim that they are wise, it is only God who is wise.

Let’s look at these in more detail.

Job Has Trials, but He Is Not on Trial

Job is declared innocent and righteous from the beginning of the book and throughout it, so there is no doubt that he *is* righteous. The question is whether he will retain his integrity. His integrity is defined by whether he will keep his focus on his righteousness or pursue a strategy to recover the benefits of a righteous life. If his focus is his benefits, it will show that the challenge posed against him is a correct assessment: he does not serve God for nothing (Job 1:9).

While Job clearly has trials, he and his friends more importantly believe that he is *on trial*. Job considers himself to be the defendant in a criminal case. In his mind, he has been treated as a wicked person and is now trying to defend himself. His defense follows the strategy of trying to reposition himself as a plaintiff in a civil case. Because he perceives this to be the scenario, he demands a hearing so that he can lodge a complaint against the one who has falsely accused him. In reality, however, his role is to serve as the star witness for the defense, because it is God’s policies that are on trial.

This view of the book is substantiated when we see the issue that is raised for discussion in Job 1:9. The challenge does not suggest that Job is not truly righteous – in fact, his righteousness is accepted as a premise. The challenge concerns Job’s motivations for being righteous: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Such a challenge ultimately questions God’s policy of blessing righteous people. The contention is that if God makes it a policy to bring

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prosperity as a reward for righteousness, true righteousness will be subverted because people will act righteously in order to gain benefits. God, therefore, by his very policy, is creating mercenaries of a sort—people who will do anything to get ahead.

The fundamental issue at question in the book of Job is whether it is good policy for God to bless the righteous by bringing them prosperity (wealth and health). The challenger (identified as *satan*; see chap. 6 for explanation) argues that it is not good policy and suggests that the mettle of Job's righteousness, if tested by the removal of all his benefits, will prove lacking. That would demonstrate that his righteousness was founded only in his own search for gain and was never true righteousness at all. However, this scrutiny of Job's motives is only a means to an end. The main question concerns how God runs the world.

About God, Not About Job

Certainly Job gets more "airtime" than God in the book. In the end, however, it is not important whether we understand Job better. His character does not provide a guide for how we ought to think or act. Much of what Job thinks and says is at least partially wrong. How Job responds is ultimately important so that we can consider how God runs the world and whether there can be such a thing as disinterested righteousness (serving God for nothing).

The focus on God becomes even clearer when we see the second piece of the challenge. The first challenge suggests that God's policy of blessing righteous people is flawed because it seems to buy people's loyalty and righteousness. The second piece of the challenge falls into place when Job begins to suffer. As he makes his speeches and launches his demands to God for a hearing, we learn that Job also has a problem with God's policies: he considers it bad policy that God allows righteous people to suffer. In short, he thinks that God is unjust.

These two challenges set up the focus of the book as it pertains to God's policies in the world: it is not good policy for righteous people to prosper (for that undermines the development of true righteousness by providing an ulterior motive). In tension with that, it is not good policy for righteous people to suffer (they are the good people, the ones who are on God's side). So what is God to do?

Not only do these two challenges shape the book, but they also inevitably lead to deeper questions: Is it really God's policy to bless the righteous and bring suffering only to the wicked? If so, why does experience so often suggest that this is not true? How does God run the world? Can we affirm that his policies are the best policies? Recognizing that these are the questions being addressed, we can now see how it is that this book is primarily about God. Job is the test case for considering how God runs the world and how we should think about God when life goes haywire.



About the Reasons for Righteousness, Not the Reasons for Suffering

This book

- is more about God than about Job
- is more about God's wisdom than his justice
- is more about trusting than it is about getting answers
- is more about what constitutes righteousness than about why we suffer

Once we have adjusted our focus onto God rather than Job and understood the basic nature of the accusations that are being made concerning God's policies, we can begin to see that righteousness is more under consideration than is suffering. The question asked is, "Why is Job righteous?" not, "Why is Job suffering?" No paradigmatic explanation is offered for why suffering takes place, but there is a lot of interest in what constitutes righteousness. We don't have to understand Job's suffering; we do have to understand his righteousness. His suffering does not give us direction about our suffering, but his reasons for righteousness should make us think about our reasons for righteousness. Will Job's righteousness be sustained even when God's policies are incomprehensible and nothing seems to make sense? Will ours? As the book unfolds, we will see that this is the critical issue to be resolved.

Job's pain and anguish lead to a debate as to why he suffers. The human participants all have their opinions about the reason for his suffering and also about how he can get relief. In this debate, they all (Job, the three friends and Elihu) present themselves as wisdom teachers. They claim wisdom and undermine the wisdom of the others.

As we get into the plot of Job, we will see who wins and who loses this debate. Also, how does God enter into the discussion? Indeed, we will see that again this book is not about Job or any of the human participants, whose wisdom is shown to be woefully inadequate, but about God himself, who alone is wise.

— Taken from Chapter 1, "What is the Book of Job About?"