

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

The Joban Poem, Part 1: Setting the Stage

I. In Sum - Job exposes the moral inadequacy of any theology that explains suffering as deserved, redemptive, or divinely justified. The book refuses easy apologetics: Job's pain is not caused by hidden sin, his friends' blame-the-victim theology is condemned, and even the divine speeches leave unresolved the scandal of innocent suffering within a world structured by unequal power. Read this way, Job calls communities not to defend God or systems of power at the expense of sufferers, but to stand with the wounded, reject simplistic moral explanations, and pursue justice, compassion, and repair.

I. The Cast of Characters

- A. God or "the Lord" - who instigates/permits Job's testing.
- B. The Divine Council – gathering of heavenly beings who deliberate over humanity.
- C. Ha-satan - or "adversary, obstacle" is a role, not a name, and functions diversely in the Hebrew Bible: human adversary (**1 Sam. 29:4; 1 Kings 11:14, 23**), angel acting as adversary (**Num. 22:22**), heavenly prosecutor (**Job 1-2, Zech. 3:1**), agent of God (**1 Chron. 21:1, 1 Sam. 24:1**).
- 1. Many biblical scholars distinguish the Hebrew Bible's ha-satan ("the accuser / adversary") from the later developed figure of Satan as a personal cosmic enemy of God found in much of later Jewish and Christian tradition.
- D. Job - A righteous and prosperous man whose faith is tested through immense suffering.
- E. Job's Wife - After Job loses everything, she urges him to abandon his faith and die.
- F. Eliphaz the Temanite – The first friend to speak, arguing that suffering is generally the result of sin.
- G. Bildad the Shuhite – The second friend, who strongly defends traditional beliefs about divine justice.
- H. Zophar the Naamathite – The third friend, who bluntly assumes Job deserves punishment.
- 1. Job's friends, who are chided by God for suggesting Job has sin in his life, have strong reason to believe Job is being punished for sin. The Hebrew Bible (and Deuteronomistic History) continually presents a transactional view of God (e.g., obey = rewarded / disobey = punished).
- I. Elihu son of Barakel – A younger observer who criticizes both Job and the three friends and offers a different perspective on suffering.
- J. Job's Brothers and Sisters – who return near the end of the story to comfort Job after his restoration.

II. When, What, Why

- A. **When?** Somewhere between 7th – 4th c. BCE (likely after the Babylonian exile).
- B. **What?** Job is part of the Wisdom Literature (**add to Glossary**).
- 1. Wisdom Literature – (**core**: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes / **included**: Psalms, Song of Songs / **Catholic**: Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach or Ecclesiasticus).
- 2. Job is **poetry** (rhythmic, artistic imagery) and **prose** (communicating directly), practical wisdom, moral reflection, human suffering, the meaning of life, deep theological questions – rather than centering mainly on law, prophecy, or narrative history.
- a. What makes it poetry? Like much Hebrew poetry, Job uses Parallelism (lines echoing or

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contrasting with one another), Vivid imagery, Metaphor and symbolism, Elevated, and artistic language (e.g., Job's lament in chapter 3 is not written like ordinary narrative but as a highly structured poem expressing anguish and questioning the value of life).

C. Why this matters. Understanding Job as poetry affects interpretation. Poetry often explores profound questions and emotions without intending every statement to be a literal doctrinal assertion (e.g., the speeches by Job's friends reflect **retribution theology**—the belief that suffering is punishment for sin—but the book ultimately critiques their simplistic application of that idea. God rebukes the friends at the end of the book, suggesting that their explanations do not adequately account for Job's suffering.

III. Basic Outline

A. Prologue (ch. 1–2) — prose narrative.

1. Introduces Job, his suffering, the Divine Council scene and the wager.
 - a. Job is introduced as morally exemplary, not secretly guilty. He is “blameless and upright,” one who “feared God and turned away from evil” (**Job 1:1**; repeated by God in **Job 1:8; 2:3**). This matters because the reader is told from the beginning that Job’s suffering is **not punishment for hidden sin**.
 - b. Divine Council - “The sons of God” present themselves before the LORD, and ha-satan also comes among them (**Job 1:6; 2:1**). This frames Job’s suffering inside a divine-council setting before Job himself ever knows what is happening.

B. Poetic dialogues (ch. 3–42:6) — poetry.

1. Job's lament, the debates between Job and his friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar and Elihu’s speeches.
 - a. Friends: Job sinned and is being punished.
 - b. Elihu: no one can understand God.
 - c. God's speeches from the whirlwind.

C. Epilogue (42:7–17) — prose narrative

1. God's verdict and Job's restoration.

IV. The 3 Worlds of the text

A. World BEHIND the Text (ANE Comparanda)

1. **The Sumerian / Akkadian “Man and His God”** – (21st-20th c. BCE) – innocent and confused suffering, lament, plea for restoration, suffering without cause.
2. **Atrahasis Epic** – (Babylonian / Akkadian, c. 18th c BCE) - Human suffering in a divinely governed world; not a direct Job parallel, but important ANE background for divine-human tension.
3. **Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi**, often called the **“Babylonian Job”** or **“Poem of the Righteous Sufferer.”** This early Sumerian material (possibly c. 1700 BCE) features a righteous sufferer, illness, social humiliation, divine silence, eventual vindication.
4. **The Instruction of Amenemope**, ch.6 (Egyptian Wisdom Text, ca. 1300–1075 BCE) advice

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is offered the wise person: be silent in the face of injustice and trust the divine order. Also, it emphasizes knowing one's place and not boasting in one's own knowledge or status.

5. Babylonian Theodicy – (roughly late 2nd to early 1st millennium BCE) – this is a dialogue on justice, suffering, social disorder, why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper.

6. Dialogue of Pessimism – (c. 1000 BCE) - Existential questioning, futility, skepticism about action, wisdom dialogue form.

- If Job was composed or substantially shaped in the exilic/post-exilic period, then the similarities with older Ancient Near Eastern, especially Mesopotamian/Babylonian, texts could plausibly reflect some level of cultural exposure.

B. World OF the text

1. Job challenges the traditional Deuteronomistic understanding of suffering, which generally teaches that obedience brings blessing and disobedience brings punishment. Job is introduced as a righteous and blameless man, yet he experiences devastating loss and suffering, showing that **suffering cannot always be explained as the consequence of personal sin**. His friends represent the conventional Deuteronomistic view by insisting that Job must have done something wrong, but the narrative ultimately rejects their simplistic theology.
2. From a Christian perspective, Job can also be read through the lens of **cruciform theology**, where Like Christ, Job endures undeserved suffering, wrestles honestly with God, and remains in relationship with Him despite his pain.

C. World IN FRONT of the text

1. Job challenges the tendency to assume that suffering is always the direct result of personal sin, moral failure, or lack of faith. Instead, it calls readers to approach those who suffer with humility, compassion, and empathy rather than judgment. On an individual level, this means resisting the urge to blame people for experiences such as poverty, disease, disability, mental illness, unemployment, or abuse. On a corporate and societal level, Job encourages communities to examine the complex social, economic, and systemic factors that contribute to suffering rather than reducing every hardship to personal responsibility. The book reminds us that human understanding is limited and that suffering often cannot be explained by simple formulas of reward and punishment. As a result, readers are challenged to become people who accompany, support, and advocate for those who suffer rather than acting as accusers like Job's friends.
2. As we reflect on Father's Day, the Book of Job raises difficult questions about the image of God as a loving Father. In the narrative, Job's suffering—including the loss of his children, his health, his social standing, and his sense of meaning—occurs within a heavenly wager that many readers find morally troubling. Rather than accepting this portrayal uncritically, the world in front of the text invites us to ask whether a truly loving God would permit such suffering to prove a point or test fidelity. While cruciform theology often interprets suffering as a path to deeper faith and transformation, others may challenge this framework and imagine God differently. Job can be received, not only as a story about faithful endurance, but also as an

