

Job – the Grumbler?

One of the things I find terribly difficult to discover is how familiar people are with the Book of Job. I taught Job as a set text on and off for about 15 years so the text and terminology are very familiar to me. But that may not be the case with everyone here.

Some of you I suspect may have read it in the original Hebrew. On the other hand some may have accidentally wandered in here in the belief that they were on their way to the Refectory, but on discovering a group are too embarrassed to leave

I would hope that the presentation proves interesting enough for all of you to want to stay.

What I am trying to say is that for some people in the room the Old Testament Book of Job may just be a name – or it may be a book with a large number of chapters, 42 in fact.

Others may have gone a little further and explored some of them, only to get bogged down and totally perplexed by the time they reached chapter 8.

The Book of Job is a narrative. It is arranged as a chronological account of a series of events. Formally it is a mixture of prose and poetry and it is a fictional story. It tells of the experience of an exceptionally blameless and pious individual, who was also a very wealthy and prosperous one, and how he was struck down as the result of an argument in heaven between God and a subordinate heavenly being, the Satan, losing his wealth, his family, his health and self-respect and social status. At first Job humbly accepts these afflictions on the ground that God, who both gives and takes back human life, is entitled to do whatever seems good to him and still deserves to be praised and worshipped.

After a period of reflection, however and after three friends have come to visit and comfort him, he begins to complain bitterly about his misfortunes, cursing the day he was born.

The three friends then, in turn make their comments on his situation in a series of speeches, in which there is more accusation than sympathy, and Job replies to each of the speeches in turn, defending his innocence of any sin that would deserve such divine punishment and accusing God of injustice and hostility towards him.

Another person, Elihu then appears and makes his contribution to the discussion. He is angry with Job for his assumption of innocence, but also with the friends for accusing Job without being able to produce any evidence against him. He speaks mainly in defence of God.

Next God manifests himself to Job and addresses him directly. However when he speaks he makes no reference to the predicament of Job at all and makes no reference to human beings and their fate. Rather he speaks of his own power as creator and maintainer of the world and in particular of his care for wild animals that live outside the human sphere. Job however is deeply impressed by God's appearance and his words and submits himself to him. Finally God rebukes the three friends for not speaking rightly of him and praises Job for doing so. He then restores Job's wealth, giving him twice as much as he had before, a new family, a long life and many descendants.

As a scheme for the first part of the morning I would like to suggest that we look at Job in the following way

1. Where does the book fit in the canon – or list of Old Testament books
2. Is it wisdom material
3. The shape of the book
4. Parallels in other cultures
5. What can we tell about the authorship of the book?
6. Splitting it up
 - a) Folk Tale
 - b) Soliloquy
 - c) Dialogues (arguments with Job's 3 friends)
 - d) Chapter 28
 - e) A new voice – Elihu
 - f) God's speeches
 - g) Conclusion
7. Job as an inspiration in art and literature
8. Question of undeserved suffering
9. What significance might the book have for a Christian?

1 Where does the Book of Job fit?

Perhaps the most familiar and successful division of the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures is that adopted by the Jews and known as the Tanak. The three consonants representing

T – Torah (first five books...Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy)

N – Nebi'im (prophets which include Former prophets Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings
And latter prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the scroll of the
12 Minor Prophets)

K – Ke'thubim (Writings – and that is a mixture of what is left – there are Psalms, proverbs, Historical works such as Chronicles and Ezra/Nehemiah, there is erotic love poetry, apocalyptic material and even books which on the surface seem to challenge the nature of God – such as the two we are looking at today Job and Ecclesiastes.

Within this third section of the canon it is possible to discover minor groupings, one of which might be Wisdom Literature.

I am reasonably certain that if I said to any group studying the Old Testament – what comes to your mind when I say “wisdom literature” most people would say “Proverbs” because it is full of wise sayings – well constructed ditties

such as “He who meddles in a quarrel not is own

Is like a man who takes a passing dog by the ears.”

2 Is it wisdom material?

The term “wisdom” - hokma in Hebrew Sophia is Greek (feminine you notice) covers quite a range of meanings. It seems to pertain at a primitive level to some sort of a skill – so Bezalel who constructed the Ark of the Covenant was chosen to do so because he possessed hokma – the skill. At the other end of the spectrum in Proverbs 8:22-31 a personified figure

of wisdom is said to have been at the side of God as a master work-person during the act of creation.

It seems likely that at the royal court in the pre-exilic period there were professional wise men – and their role seems to have been to assist in the making of court or royal decisions. It is worth remembering that Joab calls upon the services of a wise woman of Tekoa to challenge King David in 2 Samuel 14.

I feel that to describe Job merely as a grumbler misses the point.

The words put into the mouth of this character challenge some of the commonly spoken notions of his own day about the purposes of God.

He asks the sort of religious questions that no one else in the Old Testament dares to ask.

He questions current orthodoxy about the so called justice of God.

He even demands that God’s decisions should be subject to scrutiny

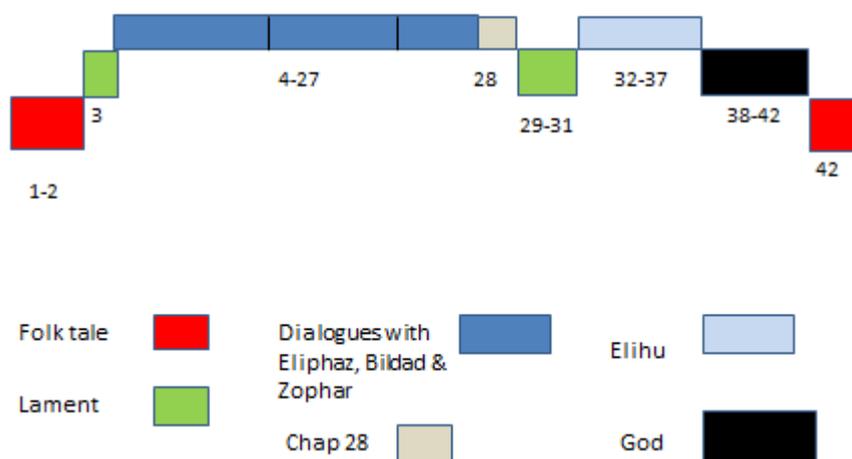
And he complains that God does not listen when reasonable protests are made.

Job maintains that his sufferings are undeserved and unjust and he calls on God to reconsider the matter.

Perhaps the role of a wise-man was just a little more than producing memorable sayings
 Perhaps the role of the wise was to inject a little common sense (based on experience) into the idea of decision making.

3 Shape of the Book

Shape of the Book



Before we get too specific we need to unpack the story of Job and see what there is there

1. There may be evidence of a folk tale at the beginning and the end of the book, which is written in prose – not poetry.
 The first two chapters contain 6 small sections. An introduction, followed by the first heavenly scene, then a scene in Job’s house, the second heavenly scene, Job inflicted with illness

And the arrival of Job's three friends

2. Second there is a soliloquy in poetry, chapter 3, where Job laments the terrible predicament he is in. He appears to move from the mood of submission to one of despair.

I tend to think that chapters 29-31 are a continuation of this lament by Job. It is written in the same vein and simply continues to show how Job is feeling sorry for himself.

3. Here we have in poetry arguments between Job and three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Each friend speaks in turn – attempting to explain why Job is suffering in the way in which he is. After the speech of each friend Job replies – also in poetic form.

This pattern of friend's speech and Job's reply, friend's speech and Job's reply, friend's speech and Job's reply occurs 3 times

So we talk about 3 cycles of speeches between chapters 4 and 27.

It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point that the text of the third cycle of speeches is much damaged. I don't think any scholars would dispute that. These last from chapter 22 to 27. Then this section is rounded off by a separate poem or hymn about where wisdom is to be found – Job chapter 28.

As I said earlier the 3 cycles of speeches are framed by this soliloquy by Job Chapter 3 and chapters 29-31.

4. A totally new character appears in chapter 32 called Elihu. And he speaks for 5 chapters. Elihu is thought to be much younger than the others and has had to wait to speak. But he criticizes not only Job but also the three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar

5. This is followed by two massive speeches from God

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world?" God asks.

These speeches by the Lord are tremendous poems listing God's ability to create and rule his creation. The second speech isolates two enhanced descriptions of two creatures the hippopotamus and the crocodile. And it is pointed out to Job that in no way does he measure up to the demands of managing these two monsters that God does. After each verbal onslaught by God, the author also describes how Job made two rather feeble attempts to apologise to God.

6. In the prose conclusion, chapter 42:7-17 we have God's judgment on the three friends No mention is made of Elihu.

The fortunes of Job are restored – he gains another family, and flourishes in an abundance of livestock. There is no further mention made of either Elihu on the one hand or Satan on the other.

I suspect all of us would agree that is a very unusual shape for a book to take.

Around an ancient folktale is woven this incredibly distinctive story. I can't think of any modern work of literature which could be displayed in this way

It is partly the unfamiliarity of the style that puts us off – however archaeology has rather come to our aid in this matter and given some reassurance that this style of literature found in the Bible was not unique

4 Parallels with other cultures

1 From 21st century BCE there is an Egyptian tale

The tale of *The Eloquent Peasant* comes down to us from ancient Egypt by way of four different and incomplete documents – manuscript as well as ostraca. It is a lovely poem, written in classical Middle Egyptian, composed around 2100 BC

2 Based on one of the major literary texts which survived from the Middle Kingdom, the classical period of Egyptian literature, The Eloquent Peasant is a combination of a morality/folk tale and a poem. The events are set between 2160 and 2025 BC. When the peasant Khun-anup and his donkey stumble upon the lands of the noble Rensi, the peasant's goods are confiscated and he's unjustly accused of theft.

The peasant petitions Rensi who is so taken by the peasant's eloquence that he reports his astonishing discovery to the king. The king realizes the peasant has been wronged but delays judgement [so he] can hear more of his eloquence. The peasant makes a total of nine petitions until finally, his goods are returned

The prologue and the epilogue are written in prose and the peasant's petitions are in poetic form.

3 Also from Egypt there is another interesting text known as "A Dispute over Suicide" (ANET 405 – 407)

All the text books cite this as an interesting parallel with Job. It is slightly later than the first example and if you are very familiar with the Book of Job, I can see how there are parallels, inasmuch as Job laments the day he was born. But the Egyptian document is incomplete and some of the language is very obscure. But it is one to log and then I think walk past.

Much more interesting is a Sumerian poem

4 Man and his god cited by S N Kramer in his book *Wisdom in Israel and the Ancient Near East* 1968.

It looks at the experience of a wise upright man who is afflicted by illness. The victim laments his plight and longs that members of his family might join him in lamenting.

He confesses that he has sinned

The god answers his prayer and restores him to health

5 The closest parallel to the Book of Job though has been found in an Akkadian document Various known as "I will praise the Lord of Wisdom"... "Poem of the Righteous Sufferer" and by one or two hopefuls as "Babylonian Job"

It probably dates from around 1700BCE. The poem is Babylonian in origin but was probably influenced by earlier poems.

A man of high rank was suddenly reduced to dreadful suffering. He knows of no sin and searches for a remedy through the arts of divination for a remedy – all to no avail.

He will not rebuke or condemn his god, Marduk.
All attempts to heal him fail but the sufferer pursues his lament.
At last he has 3 dreams in which Marduk sends messengers to perform rites of exorcism to bring about healing.
The story ends with a long hymn of praise to Marduk.

Let's be quite clear what we are saying about these literary discoveries.

1. They are not earlier versions of the Book of Job.
2. They have no relationship to the Old Testament.
3. They simply show that literature similar in form and/or content to the story of Job was prevalent and had been prevalent in the Middle East for hundreds of years before Job was written.
4. So the Book of Job – no matter how unfamiliar or difficult we may find it, was of a type of literature common in those countries which bordered the Mediterranean and stretched down into the Persian Gulf i.e the Fertile Crescent plus Egypt.

5 Authorship of the Book of Job

For anyone who came to my talk on “Obedience” with reference to Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon, may remember I tried to say to you that these days scholars are much more at peace with divergent opinions over structure, authorship, meaning and influence than they were in the days when I was a student. In my day it also depended on which part of the world you were in. Schools in America were fed John Bright, Bernhard Anderson, John Hayes and Maxwell Miller, whereas on the continent Martin Noth, Gerhard Von Rad, Claus Westermann and Georg Fohrer held sway - and–ne’r the two groups would meet.

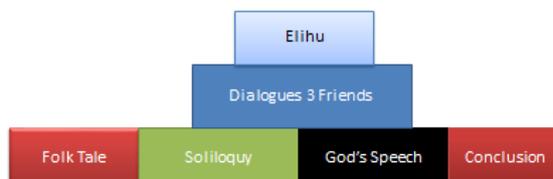
In respect of authorship I will give you a spread of possible approaches you might make in the matter of authorship. Each from a scholarly point of view is very acceptable. I do have a preference but I feel that I need to hand you the tools to create rather than present you with a conclusion.

My first choice is based on the writing of a theologian Norman Snaith a lecturer at Oxford University after the Second World War up to the 1970s

Authorship of the Book of Job

Norman H Snaith 1898-1982

He wrote



He felt that there was an original story of Job based around the folktale in chapters 1 and 2. It also contained Job's soliloquy in chapters 3, 29 to 31. This was followed by God's speeches in chapters 38-41 and Job's restoration in chapter 42.

This original folktale was very old and represented a sort of primitive mentality which ascribed all events good and bad to the will of God

Stage two was when the discussions/disagreements between Job and the three friends were added. In these chapters orthodox thinking about the justice of God and undeserved suffering was being debated. In the post-exilic period when Israel became much more globally aware and conscious of philosophies and ideas of other nations, the need to discuss and thrash out ideas was thought to be important. Society became more aware, more questioning and the fortunes and will of God was no exception.

Elihu might possibly be a third stage in this process. He expressed dissatisfaction with the ideas of the three friends as well as the points being made by Job. Are the Elihu speeches a sign that standards and acceptable explanations move on from one generation to another.

By inserting these philosophical and ethical opinions within the framework of the existing folktale the authors/ editors/ commentators retained a veneer of orthodoxy while allowing and encouraging the development of fresh ideas.

Perhaps the most recent development in the question of authorship is found in the writings of Samuel Balentine he is professor of Old Testament and director of graduate studies at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. His commentary on Job was published in 2006 and in 2015 he brought out in the series Personalities of the Old Testament” Edited by James Crenshaw “Have you considered my servant Job”

Authorship of the Book of Job

Samuel Balentine

Work on Job published 2006 and 2015



Balentine favours the view that the book was composed over a number of years – a vast number of years.

He believes there was an ancient folk-tale – written in prose. It depicts Job’s unquestioning affirmation of the sage’s conventional retribution theology. The righteous prosper and the wicked are punished by God. This tale he says resonates with the optimism of the pre-exilic period of Israel’s history before the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem.

What Balentine calls the “centre of the book” chapter 3 – the soliloquy
Chapters 4-27 the series of dialogues
Chapters 29-31 the second soliloquy
Chapters 38 – 42 the dialogues between God and Job

He dates this section as Exilic – which threw up hard questions about God. While the doubts are Hebraic the theme of the pious sufferer would be known from Babylonian literature

Chapter 28 Balentine notes the similarity between this chapter and Proverbs 8, Sirach 1-24 and Baruch 3-8 and believes this chapter reflects Jewish thinking in the Persian period.

The speeches of Elihu he regards as later still as from the late Persian or early Hellenistic era. The substance of the speeches resonates with the intellectual climate of later wisdom texts and early apocalyptic writings.

What I think Balentine is saying is the book had several authors at different stages of history. They added to a traditional folktale.

This is, as far as I am aware, is the latest thinking on Job. Like David Clines and books from the 90s, it is terribly thorough and examines the text in minute detail. The conclusions he draws are based upon this minute examination

I have a funny feeling at the back of my mind that if you want to know how the Book of Job works and what the author or authors were thinking you really ought to talk to a Jew. They know how their own literature works and they can pick up nuances and ways of expressing something that a Gentile author is unaware of

For my third stab at authorship I would always recommend a very old book by Robert Gordis called “The book of God and Man”. Robert Gordis was a Jewish Rabbi and Professor of the Philosophies of Religion at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York. The book is very readable, well researched but enjoyable. I feel he is 100% accurate on all contentious issues.

Gordis accept that there is a folk tale and he feels the author of the present book utilized it and wrote joining passages to introduce the three friends. He concentrates not so much on the substance of the friends but on the personalities themselves..

Gordis finds patterns of Semitic thinking

While accepting that the Elihu speeches were the last part of the book to have been written Gordis counters in detail arguments which claim they were written by a different authors at a different time.

Substantially he maintains the integrity of the book as a literary unit. It may well have been a work to which the author returned again and again – but nonetheless there is one author and one a pattern to the work as a whole.

6 Various bits of the work

I am not intending to go through the work in detail chapter by chapter but I would like to offer one or two ideas which might encourage you to look at the various bits – which to be honest are fascinating

The Folk Tale

I don't think the story was originally an Israelite story. I think it was a folk-tale which was widely known in the east. And may have been Edomite in origin. The names are sort of Edomite and the places from which they hailed seem to be vaguely related to Esau – the eponymous ancestor of Edom (and of course brother of Jacob).

Obviously we can't retrieve the original but I think both the story and the character of Job were well rooted in Israelite proverbial thinking

The prophet Ezekiel reports a word from God

Or if I send a pestilence into that land, and pour out my wrath upon it with blood, to cut off from it man and beast; ²⁰ even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, says the Lord GOD, they would deliver neither son nor daughter; they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness. Ezekiel 14:14 & 20

A Probably as a result of this tale Job's righteousness was a firmly fixed idea.

There are six scenes in the tale. Two heavenly scenes in which God is surrounded by the court of heaven – not exactly monotheistic is it?

Beware of Satan (shatan) – meaning the adversary. Satan in this context is not the little green man or red man with tail, trident and the keeper of Hell, nor is he the embodiment of evil, but is seen as a sort of counsel for the prosecution... one who tests- whose job it is to search out insincerity, falsehood and disloyalty.

Job – the ultimate good righteous man is a prime candidate to be checked out.

The narrative is well rounded and flows nicely like a good story should. When the misfortunes which happened to Job's family are reported the next messenger has arrived as the previous one is finishing. There are dramatic contrasts there the vindictiveness of Satan and the stoic endurance of Job – even when taunted by his wife.

It is almost pantomime stuff

B The Soliloquy

This is a classic lament found in chapters 3 and 29 – 31

Chapter 3 Job focuses on his suffering and asks why he was born, why he was not allowed to die at birth.

“Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire? Job 3:11

This really concentrates on how the suffering could have been avoided. The bitterness of life – it would have been better to have been still born.

However in chapters 29-31 the concentration is much more on the social disgrace. How friends and family now avoid, despise and disregard him

Men listened to me, and waited,
and kept silence for my counsel.

²² After I spoke they did not speak again,
and my word dropped upon them.

²³ They waited for me as for the rain;
and they opened their mouths as for the spring rain.

²⁴ I smiled on them when they had no confidence;
and the light of my countenance they did not cast down.

²⁵ I chose their way, and sat as chief,
and I dwelt like a king among his troops,
like one who comforts mourners. Job 29:21-25

30 “But now they make sport of me,
men who are younger than I,
whose fathers I would have disdained
to set with the dogs of my flock. Job 30:1

C The Dialogues

Towards the end of the last century studies in the Book of Job were disparaging about what one could learn from the dialogues. The three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar were

literary fictions and merely devices for voicing random observations on Job's condition. It was suggested that there was little progression in the debate and that the level of interaction between the three and Job was minimal.

In fact I couldn't agree less. I think we can tell quite a lot about these three. To begin with they are depicted as much older than Job – one at least claims to have known Job's father

Eliphaz must be the eldest – he speaks first. He is dignified and the most sympathetic to Job's plight.

“If one will venture a word with you, will you be offended?” 4:1

“Surely vexation kills the fool” 5:2

Bildad however is more of a traditionalist he trots out the orthodox position.

“Inquire of bygone generations...” 8:8

“God will not reject a blameless man” 8:20

Zophar by his position in the debating order must be the youngest. He is brash, dogmatic and gets carried away with himself, putting theories before facts

“Should a multitude of words go unanswered?” 11:2

“Should your babble put others to silence? 11:3

“The eyes of the wicked shall fail – all way of escape is lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last! 11:20

Before we leave this section could I mention a few things?

In chapter 14 Job seems to consider the question of life after death, which he rejects sadly. Some people feel that perhaps this may be an indicator of the age in which the author lived – the Persian period.

In chapter 19 Job appears to soar to new hopes of faith as he considers that there might be a mediator, a heavenly arbiter who could intercede for him or independently judge his plight This chapter has greatly commended itself to Christian thinkers and the musical ability of George Frederick Handel and several seem to have wormed that way into the commonly recited sentences at the beginning of the Church of England funeral service

“I know that my Redeemer lives (even printed with a capital R in my Bible in anticipation!) and at (the) last he will stand upon the earth and after my skin has been destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God.” 19:25

Sadly the Hebrew text, which is somewhat damaged and uncertain at this point does not support the interpretation Christians have put on it and the idea of an independent mystical heavenly figure is unhebraic.

3rd While the first and second rounds of speeches may easily be identified there is serious textual disruption in the third cycle.

The speech of Eliphaz seems fine (chapter 22) but then it all starts to go wrong and Job's response seems very long. Bildad Makes his speech, but it only lasts 6 verses. It then looks as if Job's reply stretches over three chapters. Zophar doesn't have the chance to speak. In addition tacked on to the end of this section is a hymn to Wisdom in chapter 28 This includes echoes of ideas found in Proverbs 8 and ben Sirach 1:1-10

D Elihu

As I have already said, I agree with Robert Gordis that these chapters 32-37 are by the same author. Far from being an erratic block, Elihu is an integral part of the overall pattern. Apart from Job he speaks for longer than any of the other protagonists. He is a distinctive character with strong Hebrew rather than Edomite associations

Elihu criticises both the friends and Job, Both are wrong in one respect but right in another. Suffering, he maintains, is an agent of God as a discipline and not as a final outcome

Suffering does not annul the justice of God, it is used by him as a discipline. Martin Buber the very thorough Hebrew scholar drew parallels with the situation described by 2nd Isaiah and the idea of the Suffering Servant. Israel had sinned and Judah, in Exile was being punished, yet this in no way diminished the greatness of God. In Isaiah the suffering of the people allows them to be witnesses to the justice of God. There the suffering affirmed that the suffering was not the consequence of national sin, but, on the contrary, an integral element in the process of moral education of the human race

E Speeches by God

In these magnificent verses God does not refer to the view that Job must be a sinner. Job's agony cannot be justified by platitudes or claimed to be imaginary. The whole problem is raised to another dimension. Can Job comprehend or govern the universe.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding. 38:4

“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
that a flood of waters may cover you?

³⁵ Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go
and say to you, ‘Here we are’? 38:35

In addition two amazing creatures are cited – and imbued with slightly mythological characteristics. – Be'hemoth and Leviathan - possibly modelled on the hippopotamus and the crocodile. These are not chosen at random - they are essentially creatures that cannot be contained by man. The creator and sustainer of such cannot be judged from man's point of view. God invites Job to assume his power and his throne. He admits that there are flaws in the world. Yet the world is not evil simply because there is evil in it.

There are critics of these speeches – some have wondered if there are parts missing. We know that 6 verses from chapter 39 are missing in the LXX the bit about the ostrich. But an argument based on silence is rather difficult to maintain, and the text give no indication that God is about to launch in to a full explanation to Job about undeserved suffering. Given that it is likely that the speeches are as they are how can we reconcile Job's plight and his concerns with what is said?

1. Some commentators have suggested that Job is won over by God's description of his boundless power.

Against that Job has already admitted the same point already

In chapter 9 he says **he who removes mountains, and they know it not,
when he overturns them in his anger;**

⁶ **who shakes the earth out of its place,
and its pillars tremble;**

⁷ **who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
who seals up the stars;**

⁸ **who alone stretched out the heavens,
and trampled the waves of the sea;^[a]**

⁹ **who made the Bear and Orion,
the Plei'ades and the chambers of the south;**

¹⁰ **who does great things beyond understanding. 9:5-10**

2. The message of the speeches is that God remains near to man in suffering
I think we feel that – or perhaps I should say we hope that is the case – nevertheless that is not the message which seems to me to be embodied in the text.
3. The speeches are an indicator of the dual polarity of the nature of God – man’s intimacy with God and God’s transcendence.
Fine but there is nothing in the speeches which indicates God’s immanence. He apparently shows no sympathy for Job.

Possibly a way forward is to realize that just as there is order and harmony in the natural world, although it cannot be controlled or grasped by man, so there is order and meaning in the moral sphere though it cannot be controlled or grasped by mankind.

7 Job as an inspiration for Art and Literature



It is estimated that more than 80 pieces of literature owe their inspiration to this Old Testament book – many of them during the 20th century.

Of course there is Milton’s “Paradise Regained”
 Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot
 Robert Frost’s A Masque of reason
 Muriel Spark’s novel The only problem
 HG Wells The Undying Fire

In art – as we have seen William Blake’s “Illustrations of the Book of Job”

In music George Frideric Handel’s aria in the Messiah “I know that my Redeemer liveth”

D Jenkins An Oratorio “Job” for choir organ and orchestra
 G Parry “Job” – an oratorio for 4 solo voices and orchestra
 R Vaughan Williams “Job”

8 Does the book answer the question of undeserved suffering?

Is this book about suffering?

In life people ask – why is there suffering – or more commonly why is suffering happening to me?

I am not sure that the book is particularly helpful in this matter.

There are some partial answers in the book

Some of Job's friends indicate that suffering is a punishment for sin

Or as a warning against committing sins

Or in Job's case – for no reason at all – but for some divine reason.

But in the end there is no definitive solution given by the author

But what about innocent suffering.

While we could cite examples of that – at the time when the book was written would such an idea as innocent suffering have been understood?

In those days theories of guilt and punishment were tied up with the concept of suffering.

The three Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar all have different ideas about the cause of Job's plight.

Sadly there is still the tendency for people to ask "What have I done to deserve this?"

The Book of Job does not deny the fact that sometimes suffering is justly deserved, nevertheless it speaks out against the view that this is always the case.

Job is an innocent sufferer – his innocence is defended by himself

Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;

I must appeal for mercy to my accuser. 9:15

By the narrator

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was

Blameless and upright. 1:1

And by God

Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God 1:8

In the light of this it would seem that the book does not purport to have an answer to undeserved suffering

Does the book address the question – what am I to do when I am suffering?

It seems to me that the book has two answers here

1. This may be seen in the first two chapters where Job's reaction is simply calm acceptance. He withdraws into himself and refuses to allocate blame. He embodies the oft quote saying "the patience of Job"
2. But he does not remain in that attitude from chapter 3 onwards there is bitterness and anger, hostility towards God

I don't feel these two are irreconcilable. Often one precedes the other as in the Book of Job As such the work forms a synthesis of these two extremes and in that respect an individual may achieve a sense of reconciliation.

9 Christian Perspective on the book

It depends to a large extent on the expectations of the reader.

The reader who begins from the standpoint that the Old Testament conveys the same message as the New Testament, seeing and finding predictive texts about the messiah, may find that the Book of Job prefigures the sufferings of Christ. Medieval exegesis and Orthodox iconography in particular saw Job as both a sufferer and a model of Christian virtue.

In this respect the opening verses of the Book of Job would support such a contention.

Other Christians may feel that the designation, "blameless and upright" from a Christian perspective is inappropriate. Christian theology, and in particular Pauline theology, would hold that even the best of people can never be totally free from sin.

In the gospels Jesus is said to have refused the description "good"

Mark 10:17-18 "Good master who must I do to inherit eternal life"

"Why do you call me good? No one is good – save God alone"

For some Job's refusal to admit the possibility that he has never sinned causes a problem. So both Job's intransigence and the subsequent solution are unrealistic.

Given that a major Christian objective is the quest for personal salvation, the Book of Job takes a course which many Christians might not agree with. It may be argued that if Job cannot see the possibility of his own sinfulness, he has no right to be questioning the way the universe is being run

Nevertheless many Christians find in the speeches by God (chapters 38-42) a helpful, if poetic way of understanding God's command of the created world. It gives a delightful picture of the way in which God interacts with creation but at the same time underlines the point that the relationship between him and the created order remains a mystery to mankind.

The fact that in the Book of Job there is a denial of any link between personal sin and personal suffering is a helpful feature for many Christians. This myth, which sadly still pervades our culture may cause those who are ill to ask the question "What have I done wrong in order to bring about this suffering?"

In this respect the person of Job himself and the words of Elihu, emphatically deny any connection between the two.

It is also possible that a Christian may discover in the Book of Job and in the New Testament an awareness of the unfathomable nature of God.

The message of Job is that God's nature is unfathomable to mortal man.

In the New Testament teaching about the kingdom of God, the same is true.

The parable of the seed growing secretly a man plants the seed and it grows "he knows not how (Mark 4:26-29)

Matthew 20:1-16 in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, The master's (God's) sense of justice whereby those who came late into the work were paid the same as those who had "born the heat and burden of the day"

I don't think there is a decisive answer about the Christian significance of the book.

Given that it is a work of fiction – it is up to the reader to decide.