

I

The Prologue (Job 1:1–2:13)

The first two chapters are usually designated as the Prologue to *Job*. They are almost entirely in prose and that singles them out from a literary point of view. They function as an introduction in two ways. First, the events they describe clearly took place prior to what is recorded in the chapters that follow, and there is no other suitable place for them in the narrative. Secondly, they are also preparatory from a theological point of view, and this is important because this book is about God's dealings with one of his faithful servants.

The opening verse of the Bible declares: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' This indicates that one God created two realms, the supernatural and the terrestrial, and that he rules over both by virtue of being their Creator. It is such a framework for reality that is presented in Job 1:1–2:10.

Two 'locations' are referred to: the land of Uz (the earth) and the heavenly court. Between these there is an immense distinction, but

they are not totally separate from, and closed to, each other. There is a relation between them, and that is made clear by the ways in which they interact with each other. What happens in Uz is noted in the court, and what is enacted there is what transpires on earth. Each has its own significance — the ‘heavenly’ and the earthly — with priority being given to the ‘heavenly’. What is more, the snapshots of both realms that are contained in these chapters are sequentially arranged. This means that the unfolding of human history is related to the process of redemptive history.

This background is of the utmost importance for what is recorded in *Job* and in the biography of every Christian believer.

‘The greatest of all the people of the east’ (Job 1:1–5)

The words of our title (1:3) state the point which the author wants to emphasize. They come at the end of a multifaceted description of Job and apply to everything contained in it. Readers and students of the book often tend to connect them to the details about his numerous family and vast possessions rather than to his piety, but, in reality, these words are a summary of all that precedes them.

It is true that ‘great’ can sometimes carry the meaning of ‘rich’ or ‘powerful’, and Job was both. But his greatness did not exclude his piety. Indeed, it was his piety that was reflected in his progeny and prosperity — the numbers of which are symbolic of completeness — and that constituted the prelude to all that follows. His piety contributed to his prestige no less than did his possessions.

1:1. *There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.*

What the opening verse presents is, first, his place of origin and then his piety. It is anticipatory of the form of address in New Testament epistles, where people are identified in terms of where they happen to live, but also of their relationship to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Clearly, the author thinks it noteworthy that there was a man in Uz who could be described in the way that Job was. We shall use these two categories of place and character to consider the section of text that we have isolated.

Job lived in the land of Uz

Uz was not in the promised land but to the east of it, across the Jordan, whether to the north or south of it. Uz was therefore outside the confines of much of the saving revelation given to Abraham, but not destitute of what had been made known by God prior to that, namely what is recorded in Genesis 1–11.

Working on the basis that place names were derived from the names of people, ‘Uz’ is to be connected either with Aram, a son of Shem (Gen. 10:23), or with Nahor (Gen. 22:21), Abraham’s brother. The covenant line did not include Aram but Arpachshad, his brother (Gen. 10:22,24). Nahor’s son, Uz, had a brother named Buz (Gen. 22:21) and their people settled later in Edom (Gen. 36:1, Jer. 25:20–23; Lam. 4:21).

Given the state of our knowledge of the times referred to, it is hazardous to make firm identifications. Edom is a likely locale given the mention of the Sabeans. The Chaldeans, however, were in the Fertile Crescent to the north and east of that region. Whichever option is taken, we can be sure that Job did not belong to the

covenant line from Shem to Abraham and that he shared in the promised blessing in the same sort of way as did Melchizedek.

Blameless, upright, fearing God and turning from evil

This is a summary statement of Job's piety. It is made up of two couplets. The first describes him from an outward aspect; the other describes his inward motivation.

First, and to an observer, he was 'blameless and upright'. This refers to the outward manifestation of his piety. 'Blameless' is used to describe what is physically perfect — for example, animals that were acceptable for sacrifice (see Num.19:2). But it is also used of human beings (see Josh. 24:14) and then it refers to sincere and consistent compliance with God's will. It is this that is the point of contention in the subsequent narrative at the level of the 'heavenly' debate between Satan and God which is mirrored, or played out, on the earthly plane between Job and the Friends (see 8:20; 9:2-3; 12:4; 36:4; 37:16).

The second adjective is clearly associated with being 'straight', or 'righteous', in accord with law or divine command (1 Kings 14:8). Job lived in the light which he had been given, as an intelligent, moral being who knew something about sin and mercy and justice, as we shall see. It could have been said of him that 'he walked with God', as it was of Enoch and Noah (see Gen. 5:21-24; 6:9). There was a roundedness and a straightness about his character and conduct. There were no glaring sins in his life of either omission or commission.

His inner life is described in the next couplet, which tells us that he 'feared God' and 'turned away from evil'. These complementary aspects sum up the very essence of wisdom (see 28:28). Aware of the power, wisdom and justice of God displayed in creation and providence, but also of his kindness and mercy, Job was conscious of

his own moral dignity and accountability as God's creature. Loving the one true and living God whom he knew, he forsook what he knew to be evil in God's sight. These themes are all present in his speeches.

This summary of his piety is endorsed personally by God (1:8) and repeated later by him (2:3; cf. 2:9). We shall put some flesh on those bones, so to speak, by borrowing statements from chapters 23, 29 and 31–33. It is useful to do this in order to gain an appreciation of Job's significance in God's purpose and kingdom in his own time and place. We shall list these in relation to Job in private, in his family and in society.

1. Job in private

In 23:12 Job indicates how much he valued God's words. For him what came out of God's mouth was more important than what went into his own. The fact that man does 'not live by bread alone' was something he well understood.

In 29:3–5 he describes how he enjoyed God's presence. God communed with him and protected him. Darkness was no terror or perplexity to him. The light and life God gave him resulted in his being at his best. He flourished in every way, as was evidenced by the fact that his flocks and olives produced abundantly.

In 31:33 he indicates that he had not hidden from God like Adam,¹ but confessed every sin he was aware of. He had known what it was to have communion with God broken and also to have it restored. Job knew what divine mercy was all about.

2. Job in his family

In 1:4–5 and 1:20–21 we have descriptions of Job as a father. As is obvious, two very different situations are mentioned in these two passages.

1:4–5. *His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job did continually.*

The first passage refers to the fact that, while Job was no killjoy, he was concerned about the 'killing' effects of sin, and its subtlety. In particular, the focus of his concern is interesting in the light of what follows. He was afraid that his children might have done something similar to what Satan would attempt to get him to do, namely 'curse God'. There was, however, this difference: Job was aware that his children might have done so 'in their hearts' — that is, in their minds; Satan was intent on making Job do it 'to [God's] face' (1:11; 2:5).

But what exactly is in view here? The Hebrew word that is here translated 'cursed' normally means 'to bless', but that meaning is obviously out of place because Satan would not try to get Job to bless God openly and directly. It has therefore been suggested that the verb 'bless', rather than 'curse', was written in the original text because in the sentence it immediately preceded the word for 'God'!²

But there is another way of understanding the use of the verb 'bless'. It also means to 'greet' or, alternatively to 'bid farewell' to someone,³ in much the same way as our 'Goodbye' is a contraction of 'God be with you'. So I would suggest that 'bless' in this verse here in *Job* should be understood as the equivalent of 'to take one's leave of' — that is, 'to renounce'.

Job was therefore concerned that, in the midst of their birthday celebrations, his children might have set God aside in order that

they might enjoy themselves. The very possibility that such thoughtlessness might have occurred was serious enough for him. He watched for their souls like a good father and summoned them to reflection and repentance before God like a good priest, directing them to the need for cleansing and pardon via sacrifice. He did this time and time again. Furthermore, when they died he reacted in a spirit that indicated intense grief but also immense appreciation for God's goodness in ever having granted them to him (1:20–21).

But Job was of course a husband before he was ever a father, and a glimpse into his relationship with his wife is provided in the text (2:9–10). His wife urges him (in effect) to do Satan's bidding. Job's reply to her is often construed as if he were accusing her of being 'a foolish woman' — a serious accusation. In my view, that is not the case. He says that she has spoken 'as' a foolish woman would, implying that her words were not revealing her true self. He follows that statement by stretching out a helping hand to bring her to a better mind and to bind her to him again — note the use of the first person plural ('Shall we receive good from God...?') — and to help her to receive calamity at God's hand, just as they had together received of his bounty. He is here holding fast to her (Gen. 2:24) and maintaining his marriage covenant (see 31:1).

3. Job in society

Chapters 29 and 31 are relevant in this connection, and they depict Job as involved in public affairs but not in sinful practices.

In 29:7–25 his status as a judge is referred to and the respect which was accorded to him by all classes of society. This was as a result of the way in which he ascertained the true facts of a case brought before him, was no respecter of persons, defended the vulnerable and opposed the unscrupulous. Righteousness was his habit because it was his heart.

In 31:1–12 he describes how intent he was on banishing impurity even from his thoughts and deceit and covetousness from his ways. (It is as if he had not only read the Decalogue aright, but also the Sermon on the Mount!)

In 31:13–23, 29–32 he describes how he has dealt with his servants, with the poor, with his enemies and with strangers. Here is one who ‘loved his neighbour as himself’. In addition, he indicates that it was his awareness that they all had one Creator and one Judge that animated his words and deeds. He is aware of the teaching of Genesis 1:26–28 and confirms in advance what Paul says about Gentiles and the law in Romans 2:14–16.

In 31:24–27 he reacts against the idolatry of his day, refusing to trust in ‘uncertain riches’ (see 1 Tim. 6:6–10), or attribute their provision or continuance to false gods.

This is the picture presented to us of that ‘man in the land of Uz whose name was Job’. His piety is rounded and straight — in the eyes of God, and not just of his contemporaries. This means that those afflictions which are described in the first two chapters of the book are not occasioned by sin and are not disciplinary or chastening in character and purpose. What is said about them later in the book is another matter.

But what does his name mean? The name ‘Job’ can be connected with the word that means ‘an enemy’. There is a play on this meaning (see 13:24; 33:10) and in those passages the idea is that God treats Job as his enemy. (For God read Satan!) But whose enemy was Job, or whose could he have been? To judge from his character and conduct, he was neither the enemy of God nor of man! But he was the enemy of the one who was the enemy of both, and so the enemy of God and man cannot dismiss him.

Job was included in the ‘seed of the woman’ which would be opposed by ‘the seed of the serpent’, and in his case not only

the serpent's seed but 'the Satan' himself. Here in Job the saving purpose and promise of God are being wonderfully manifested relatively soon after the promise had been announced, and this manifestation is taking place in the land of Uz!

Behind the scenes (Job 1:6–12)

So far we have seen an example of a man who had served God faithfully in a fallen world and who was richly blessed by him. His piety provoked two very different reactions in the higher realm of God's creation, and that is what these verses make clear. Two matters must be noted before we consider the interaction between Satan and the LORD: the setting and the Sovereign.

The setting

1:6. Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.

The action in these verses is not to be thought of as taking place 'in heaven', and so there is no need to wonder how Satan could appear there. What is depicted is a royal court, a feature of other ancient Near-Eastern cultures and religions.⁴ Shorn of all its polytheistic associations, it is here used to depict a supernatural reality, namely God's sovereign administration and the execution of his purposes (see 1 Kings 22:19; Ps. 89:5–7). The 'sons of God' (1:6; 2:1; 38:7) who appear there are angelic beings. Elsewhere they