

The Unique Literary Form of the Book of Job

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The Book of Job has a unique literary form since it includes poetry and prose with different features of drama, epic and law suit. It forms a genre by itself. It is one of the most ancient books of the entire Bible. It is considered as one of the classics of Judeo-Christian heritage. The entire book revolves around the relationship between God and man.

A Narrative of Job's Suffering and the Lessons

Job is a wise, wealthy and a righteous man in the land of Uz. Suddenly one day he loses all his wealth, his cattle, servants and his ten children. Finally on the same day, he falls sick and sits in ashes with the painful skin disease. Job did not know the reason why all these happened to him, that too in a single day. He was unaware of what went on with God and His adversary Satan. In other words, Job was caught in a mysterious context, totally ignorant as to the reason for all this tragedy. Thus begins this absorbing story of Job.

Job's three friends come to visit with him in his death bed, and try to explain that his sufferings are due to his sins and that God is punishing him. They also do not know what went on between God and His adversary Satan. In other words, all these humans had to depend on what was reality on hand and to rationalize why these things had happened. Job's friends went with the traditional notion of God's sovereign power to do or undo every aspect of human kind. Perhaps they used the belief widely prevalent that if a human suffers he or she is responsible for it through their sinful work and disobedience. Job tries to defend himself, but it is all in vain. He is discouraged by the accusation of his friends and becomes frustrated. Yet he still believes in God and never utters a word against the Almighty.

The book, ending with the speeches of God answering Job in a whirl-wind, reveals his omnipotence to Job and reminds him that humans can never fully grasp the meaning of God's

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work. God expresses His anger against Job's friends for misinterpreting Him. Job confesses his unworthiness, lack of understanding and weakness and says, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5, 6)

Unflinching Trust

Job realizes that man must put his full trust in God irrespective of whatever happens in his life. Finally, God restores Job's health and his fortunes by giving him twice the material possessions he had enjoyed before and blesses him with a new set of children. The book ends describing Job's happy, peace-filled old age.

A Combination of Prose and Poetry

The book of Job is a combination of poetry and prose. The first and the final part of the book are in prose while the middle part is in poetry. The Prologue and Epilogue are in prose and the main part is made up of three cycles of dialogue in poetry. The book as a whole is set in a prose narrative framework within a poetic core in the middle. The prose framework narrates the background and the life of Job including the tragic part.

Poetic Delicacy

According to Tennyson the book of Job is the greatest poem of the ancient and modern times. "It has a worthy place beside the great tragedies of history from Greek to modern times" (Guthrie, 421).

The theological heart of the book is in the poetic form that includes the three cycles of dialogues of Job and his friends and the appearance of Yahweh (God) himself. G von Rad argues that the form of a long didactic poem features four times in Job in the speeches of Job's three friends. (Google.books)

It is amazing that the writer of the Book of Job chose to present the dialogues or conversations in poetic form. Perhaps in those days, conversational pieces were presented in singing format just as we have in musicals. And for this poetic form might have been chosen.

As an Epic

As an epic, one of the significant features of the book of Job is the use of speeches. It has many affinities to an Epic. It is a long narrative poem of Job's trial and his sufferings. Like the hero in the epic, the hero of the book of Job is one of the noblest figures in the Bible. He represents the sufferings of an innocent man in whom one can find no blame. Even God testifies to his integrity. And the Lord said to Satan, "Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?"(1:3).

Cosmic Context and Background

The theme of the book of Job deals with the cosmic, for the incidents take place between earth and heaven. God and Satan, who are supernatural powers, get involved in this situation - which is like a challenge from Satan. Satan's ultimate aim is to make Job curse God during the time of his suffering.

The book is set in the format of a drama. Here is the initial piece of the drama:

And the LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?" So Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it."

Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that *there* is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?"

So Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for nothing?"

"Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.

"But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!"

So the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not lay a hand on his person.” Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (Job 1:7-12)

A Distinct Style

The book has a peculiar style. The book takes on the style of argumentation in most of the chapters. The speech is, not a conversation but a debate. Towards the end of the book, God himself appears before Job for his reconciliation.

Like an Epic and Drama

Keeping step with an important aspect of epic, the book of Job begins with a Prologue (chapters 1&2), followed by the debate between Job and his friends (chapters 4-27). The reader becomes interested after the fourth chapter when Job is put on trial. E.S. Bates commenting on this literary book remarks,

The Book of Job is the nearest approach to a form of drama in The Bible. It exhibits the genius of the Hebrew people in a style nowhere else to be found in the Scriptures. From the hand of one of the world’s greatest poets we have a series of impassioned dialogues culminating in the speech of the Lord out of the whirlwind. As Satan is the hero of Paradise Lost, so Jehovah is the hero of The Book of Job (Tilak, 40)

The book of Job resembles drama with the Prologue as the introduction stating Job’s wealthy, prosperous and righteous life and the Epilogue which is the climax that ends with the speeches of Yahweh. On further analysis, the structure of the book of Job seems like a dramatized lament.

A Law Suit Model

Hartley states,

Legal language is incorporated into the lament in order to develop Job’s complaints and his accusations against God. The friends’ speeches are designed as words of consolation, but disputation intrudes into their speeches as they feel

compelled to persuade Job of the orthodox position. The Yahweh speeches are also a disputation. .. The book is both an epic and a wisdom disputation. In order to probe deeply into the issue of the suffering, righteousness and its attendant issue of theodicy, the author has drawn on numerous genres in the composition of the speeches... At this point an overview of the component parts of the speeches is given to show their interrelatedness and to show how they contribute to the nuance of the message. (P.37)

And again

Richter identifies it as a lawsuit. The various sections of the book correspond to different stages of a lawsuit. The first section is the procedure to reach a settlement through a pre-trial hearing. (chapters 4-14) Since this attempt fails, a formal trial follows. (chapters 15-31) The friends' silence after Job's oath of innocence means that they have conceded their case and Job has won. Deeply disturbed by this state of affairs, Elihu enters and appeals the decision. (ch. 32-37) Finally, God appears as litigant (chapters 38-40). Under his questioning, the defendant Job withdraws his complaint so that reconciliation between God and himself is achieved". (Ch. 42:1-6), (P. 37, 38)

Thus he draws on the language of a lawsuit to confront God. Thinking of litigation against God, he affirms his own innocence. Also, out of faith he states his trust in God as the one who will prove his innocence. It is most befitting to conclude with the views of Carlyle:

one of the grandest things ever written with pen; grand in its sincerity, in its simplicity, in its epic melody and repose of reconciliation; one perceives in it 'the seeing eye, the mildly understanding heart, true eyesight and vision for all things; sublime sorrow and sublime reconciliation; oldest choral melody as of the heart of mankind; so soft and great as the summer midnight, as the world with its seas and stars'; the whole giving evidence "of a literary merit unsurpassed by anything written in the Bible or out of it; not a Jew's book merely, but all men's book". (Chakravarthi, 7)

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