



Job

The story of Job famously asks the question of why bad things happen to good people and, possibly even more important than that, how a good person then copes with what has happened to them. The opening chapters suggest that Job's suffering took place as an experiment between God and Satan to see what would happen when everything Job had was taken away. The long intervening chapters take the form of a conversation between Job and three friends about what has happened and how Job responds. The exchange ends with God appearing to Job in a whirlwind. The story then completes with an account of Job's good fortune being restored to him.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 1 ¾ hours
Short of time? Just read 1–2; 3.1–4.14; 38–42



Genre

Wisdom literature



Anything tricky?

Job raises for us the trickiest question of all... why do good people suffer?



Inspiring quotes

²¹ He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."
(Job 1.21)

²⁵ For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; ²⁶ and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.
(Job 19.25-26)

¹ Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ² "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me."
(Job 38.1-3)

⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; ⁶ therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.
(Job 42.5-6)



About the Author

Jewish rabbis ascribed the book of Job to Moses. Few people today would associate the book of Job with Moses, but there is no other suggested author of the book.

Many scholars would suggest that there are a range of authors and that the story of Job told at the beginning (1–2) and end (42) is an ancient story that has been added to over time.



What kind of Book is it?

Most people would say that Job is part of the Wisdom tradition. The wisdom tradition, which contains books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, provides wise teachings and sayings by which you can live your life. Job has these, but they are woven into a bigger more complex whole. Indeed, it appears to be responding to a very particular question. By and large the wisdom tradition assumed that 'good people' would receive a just reward. Job seems to be countering this assumption with reflections of its own.



Look out for...

There are numerous responses offered to Job's suffering throughout the book, offered by Job himself, by his three friends, by Elihu at the end and by God. Look out for these responses and reflect on which, if any, makes the most sense to you.

Job's friends are often regarded as a walking, talking example of how not to comfort someone in suffering. See if you think they say anything helpful at all.

Although the book is all about Job, it can feel as though it is hard to catch a glimpse of the 'real Job'. See if you can get a sense of who you think he was as you read.



About the times

If the book was added to over time then the early story could be quite early, maybe around the eighth century bc, with the additions (e.g. the conversation with the friends, or God's speech) coming after that from, perhaps, the sixth bc century or later.

What were people feeling?

The audience of this book (whenever it was written) were feeling what countless people have felt throughout history – bemused at why bad things seem to happen to good people.



How is it structured?

- 1–2 The opening story
- 3 Job's lament
- 4–14 The first cycle of conversation with a speech from each of Job's friends. Job responded to each of these speeches
- 15–21 The second cycle of conversation set up like the first
- 22–27 The third cycle of conversation set up like the first
- 28 A wisdom poem
- 29–31 Job's closing speech
- 32–37 A new, younger friend now speaks
- 38–41 God appears in a whirlwind and speaks with Job
- 42 Job's good fortunes are returned.



What could this mean for me?

We all encounter suffering in our lives (whether our own suffering or that of others). Use your reading of Job as an opportunity to reflect on what you might have said if you were Job and what you might have said if you were one of Job's friends. What words would you use to respond to suffering?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- What things should you say and what things should you not say to people who are suffering?
- Do you think Job offers any adequate answers to the problem of suffering?
- What do you think about the ending of Job where Job gets new children in place of the old?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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