

Handbook  
on the  
Psalms and  
Wisdom Literature

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*Job*  
*Iob*  
*Iyob*

*And Satan came also . . .*

– Job 1:6

*There's a chapter on God that I don't understand.*

– Gordon Sumner (a.k.a. “Sting”),  
“The Book of My Life”

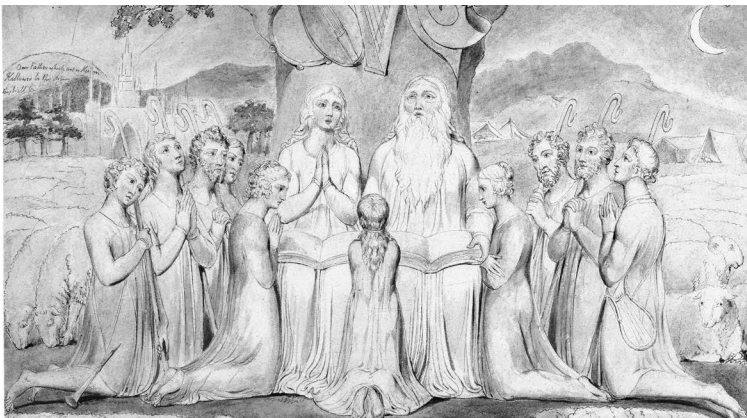


Figure 2. *Job and His Family*, William Blake

## THE AUTHOR

Whoever wrote the Book of Job preferred to remain anonymous, but this has not stopped later readers from guessing at his identity. King Solomon, Job himself, Elihu (the fourth friend of Job), an Arabic storyteller, Jeremiah, and Moses have all been suggested as authors. There are a few points in Job that commend the idea that the book was authored by Moses. First, certain themes in Job correspond to the theme of Psalm 90, a psalm traditionally attributed to Moses. Second, the subject of creation pervades Job and at times strongly suggests that the author is in direct dialogue with the Genesis account of Creation, which has traditionally been ascribed to Moses. Third, the story of Job appears to be set in a period that predates the law of Moses. There is in Job no discussion of the traditional marks of Mosaic ritual purity, no reference to a priesthood, feasts, sabbaths, holy shrines, or circumcision; the story of Exodus, Israel's defining narrative, appears to play no role in Job's consciousness. Thus, some say, Job most likely lived before the time of Moses, and Moses probably told the story to the children of Israel.

Jeremiah is also sometimes posited as the author of Job. Both Job and Jeremiah regret that their mothers bore them (Job 3:3–10; Jeremiah 15:10–21; 20:14); both have similar depictions of the heavenly court (Job 1:1–2:7; Jeremiah 23:9–32); Job, Jeremiah, and Lamentations are the only books in the Bible to mention the land of Uz (though Genesis mentions three men by that name); and both Job and Jeremiah undergo similar ordeals as a result of divine election.

These intersections between Job and Moses and Job and Jeremiah, however, are somewhat circumstantial, and those who argue dogmatically for such a position risk running beyond the author's intentions and allowing modern preoccupations to interfere with the reading. The book's text is quite agnostic about questions of authorship, as it is concerning other text-critical questions, such as the date of its composition and its provenance. It may well be that the

book's silence on these questions is strategic. As frustrating as this may be to modern sensibilities, the text's ambiguity does encourage stronger readings of the text.

Job is not identified as a Hebrew, but, when he refers to God, Job often uses the name that was God's unique self-disclosure to Israel: I AM. We are told that he lived in a land called Uz, but after more than two millennia of discussion on the subject, there has never been a consensus on where Uz was located. There are no time markers, no hint of a contemporary monarch or governor that would indicate when Job lived. There is a time-less, place-less quality to the story. The paucity of specifics actually has a universalizing effect. If Job had been described as a man living under the obligations of the Mosaic covenant, the story would read very differently; Job's cry of appeal would have been to the Law, and questions of the Law's sufficiency in accounting for and redressing the mystery of human suffering would dominate the text (much as they do in books like I & II Samuel, I & II Kings, Isaiah, Amos, in which the presence of suffering is explained as a consequence of the broken Law). Instead, as it now stands, free of the accouterments of any religious apparatus, the Book of Job is simply the story of a man who suffered and lost, not in spite of the good he did, but because of the good he did.

Nonetheless, this story is rooted in history. Some situation, contemporary with the author, compelled him to tell the story of this man and not the story of another man. Because the book, with its implications that a good man suffered in order for God to win a dare with the devil, seemingly creates more theological difficulties than it solves, some argue that Job was not a historical personage but an allegorical cipher invented by the author in order to explore the mystery of bodily suffering and loss. However rational such a position may seem at first, it is hard to see how an allegorical interpretation solves the problems the book raises. Even at the level of allegory, we are still left having to explain why a man, no

matter whom he represents, suffers intensely as the result of a conversation between the man's Creator and his accuser.

This study will proceed under the assumption that Job is *both* a historical figure *and* a representative of a later historical event in the life of the nation of Israel. The names of Job's friends are thought by some to be of Edomite origin, and the story could have come from the East. Stories similar to Job's were told in ancient Mesopotamia (see *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 601–4; 434–37; 589–91), and reports of such a singular man could have circulated among the Israelites. The basic elements may have been passed down orally until its composition at a later time under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. But why was the story written in the form in which we now have it? To what current issue was the Israelite writer speaking? The answer to these questions call for an “intertextual reading” of Job, that is, the use of one passage of Scripture to guide and inform the reading of another passage.

### **PURPOSE: THE BOOK OF JOB AND THE STORY OF ISRAEL—AN INTERTEXTUAL READING**

There were stories of Israel's backslidden condition; there were stories of Israel's idolatry; stories of the rich oppressing the poor; stories of rulers ignoring or persecuting prophets; of strong men growing weak; of priests becoming yes-men for wicked kings. For their sins, the ancient historians and prophets said, Israel went into captivity. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Jeremiah tell this story memorably. But this story does not cover the full range of Israel's experience; there were other stories too. There were also righteous Israelites, faithful to the bitter end, who also suffered just like the backsliders and went into Exile. For these Israelites, the Book of Job may well be their story.

It is probably not a coincidence that outside of Job the first and only mention (in the Old Testament) of the figure of Job comes in the prophecies of Ezekiel, the prophet

who was taken captive to Mesopotamia and became Israel's quintessential voice in the Exile. The story of Israel's exile is in many ways the story of Job writ large. What happened to this one man may have been used to shed light on what had happened to those whom Isaiah sometimes referred to as "the remnant of Israel" (Isaiah 1:9; 10:20–23), those who had remained faithful to Yahweh in spite of a culture-wide decline. For the righteous remnant, the story of Job would have been deeply personal. Their purity had not prevented them from being taken captive by the Babylonians. They had been dragged from Jerusalem in chains, children ripped from their mothers' clutches, sons and daughters tortured and murdered before their fathers' eyes, desperate goodbyes and a life's worth of I-love-yous having to be shoved into the sudden space between a soldier's backswing and the deathblow, men caught on their knees in prayer, entombed by falling beams and stone walls and rubble, old men stealing a glance over their shoulders for one last look at Jerusalem and their collapsing Temple. Like Job, they had lost their children, their wealth, their health, and their dignity in a single night. And they were no doubt desperate to know why. Job asked God, "Wilt thou break a leaf driven to and fro? and wilt thou pursue the dry stubble?" (Job 13:25). Job's question might also have been righteous Israel's. Their theology told them that they were God's chosen people, but whatever the particular reasons for their suffering, whether it was due to Israel's sins or because of Babylon's, they had to wrestle with the reality that their special status with God came at a heavy price. Job's complaint that "Men groan from out of the city, and the soul of the wounded crieth out: yet God layeth not folly to them" (Job 24:12) described exactly captive Israel's vexation over what had happened to their land (Lamentations 2). Like Job's wife, there were voices in the Exile resigned to God's apparent abandonment; they told the righteous remnant that the only thing left to do was "curse God and die." But righteous

Israel obstinately responded, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Like Job’s friends, there were voices among them assuring them that they were getting their just deserts. But the remnant insisted that they were pure; but the more they protested, the louder and more acidic the accusations became. What Isaiah said of the Suffering Servant could well describe Job: “He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: And we hid as it were our faces from him” (Isaiah 53:3). Isaiah’s prophecies were often sympathetic to the plight of the righteous sufferer; he voiced many of the same concerns as Job. This suggests that both Isaiah’s Servant visions and the Book of Job came from the same historical crucible. Their point was that the narrative of retributive justice did not adequately account for the suffering of the righteous. Other explanations had to be found. And they were found indeed, but not in a new formulation: they were found in the old original: “fear of the Lord.”

In due time, God answered their questions, but not in a way they could have expected. Out of the whirlwind, the Holy Spirit spoke. He did not engage in personal apologetics; He did not give a point-by-point justification for their sorrows he had allowed them to endure; neither did He try to tell them, as parents sometimes tell the child they have disciplined, that what had been done had been for their own good. Instead, he gave them a holier, higher, deeper vision of Himself; He took them by the hand and led them to the moment of the earth’s creation and let them watch Him build the mountains, marry the moon to the seas’ tides, craft the ostrich, forge leviathan—all to the soundtrack of singing stars and the shout of angels. After God’s speech, Israel fell into a stunned silence; it had nothing left to say. And as the light of a candle is lost in the light of the sun, the answers Israel had demanded from God were lost in the wonder of an answer to a question they had not asked. At the end of sorrow, Israel’s wealth was restored; the nation’s sons and daughters once



again populated the land. But above all, when Israel went into Captivity, they, like Job before his trial, had only wished for quiet domesticity, respect, and wealth; but upon leaving Captivity, they, like Job after his trial, had the gift of awe.

In essence, Job is Janus-faced. Job's story looks backward and forward. It begins with Job wealthy and having plenty of children; it ends with Job wealthy and having plenty of children. But in between, Job's story resembles the story of Abraham, the father of the exiled Jews. As Abraham was once childless, so Job also became childless. But like Abraham, Job, in his old age, was miraculously enriched and given children. And this is the story of Judah, which saw its wealth, from Solomon to Zerubbabel, decline until at last it was gone. In Babylon, Judah hung its harps upon the willows and refused to sing. But then God spoke, and Abraham's descendants returned home, richer in revelation than before. Perhaps Job's story was written because he, better than anyone, embodied faithful Israel's whole historical arc.

### **JOB 1:1–5: EARTH**

The narrator begins and ends the Book of Job in prose; everything in between is music, set in poetic meter. The narrator's voice is confident in his judgments, even when discussing something as enigmatic as the state of a human soul. Before the narrator discusses things like Job's children or his wealth, the first order of business in the book is to settle for all that follows the most important issue: Job feared God and was blameless (which the KJV translates "perfect") and upright. To head off any notion that the children sinned and merely got what they deserved, the narrator even gives us a glimpse into the measure that Job took to ensure that his children were right in the eyes of God. There was a surplus in Job's devotion. He sought to expiate not just actual sins but also potential sins. After their birthday celebrations (the meaning of "every one his day" in verse four), in case of any youthful

indiscretion, he summoned them and, as high priest of his home, performed a ritual sacrifice with them at dawn. He would not allow the light of the sun to shine upon the sins of his sons and daughters. As a father, as a man, and as a steward of his land and livestock, he was blameless.

Sensing that Job's anxiety over his children's potential sins and his own acts of reverence somehow smell of "works-righteousness," some have concluded that Job's character was suspect. But such a conclusion ironically sides with Job's friends against Job and reads post-Reformation pre-occupations into this ancient story. It is important that we take at face value the narrator's (and God's; see 1:9) boast concerning Job. We are not meant to read this description of Job's character as an autopsy—a postmortem on the too-good-to-be-true Job. There are no chinks in Job's armor thus far. At this point in the narrative, he has followed to the letter everything that wisdom prescribed. He feared the Lord and, we are assured, he did so "continually" (Job 1:5). Unless we take the narrator's evaluation of Job the man at face value, nothing wonderful can come of this story.

### **JOB 1:6–12: HEAVEN**

*By the pricking of my thumbs,  
Something wicked this way comes.*  
– Shakespeare, Macbeth

In Job 1:5, after Job's sons' birthdays, the narrator states that Job called them together to meet with him for a time of reckoning and a sacrificial rite. But when the scene shifts to Heaven, we see God calling His sons together for what seems to be a day of reckoning. Thus the narrator's lens moves from earth to Heaven, where the horizons are broad enough to consider big existential questions and test them in the lab of history. The Book of Job stages an interrogation of mankind's

motives for “fearing” God and of God’s motives for creating the world. God welcomed the interrogation.

A heavenly council was called, and God surveyed the *bené ha-Elohim* (i.e., the sons of God), who traditionally sat in divine council, weighing in on earthly matters (Psalm 89:5–7; I Kings 22:19–23; Jeremiah 23:18–22). Spotting a shadow lurking amid these luminaries, He initiated a fateful conversation with that shadow. The conversation began innocently, as most conversations do, with a bit of small talk, a neutral question: “From where have you lately come?” Other members of the council may have sat in the heavens, rendering their judgments from afar, but not the Satan. The prosecutor’s answer implies that he preferred a more “hands-on” approach to his role in the divine court. He himself had been spending a great deal of time rubbing shoulders with the little worldlings, probing them, prodding them, bolstering his case against them.

In discussing his wide journeys “to and fro,” “up and down,” the Adversary betrayed just a bit of anxiety though (Job 1:7). He was assuring the council that he had done his due diligence and that all of his findings would be based on broad data. He had thoroughly surveyed the earth, leaving no rock unturned. Satisfied with the scope of his investigation, God asked him what he thought then of Job, the man who best represented the human race. This was Heaven’s best hand; a man of unimpeachable integrity. Perhaps the Satan would accept that his case against humankind (and thus by proxy against the God who favored them) was not so strong after all. But the sullen accuser answered the question with a question of his own: “Does Job reverence God for free?” (Job 1:9, paraphrase). “Why does Job fear God? Do you, God,” the Enemy’s question asked, “really think Job has anything but self-interest at heart when he reverences you? Have you never asked what would happen to his ‘reverence’ if you ceased to pay him according to the work of his hands?”

In an age that typically worshiped its deities only in hopes of procuring protection and wealth, the potential that this way of relating to the divine was somehow inadequate dawned upon the mind. And the Satan's question represents this sudden realization. The story of Job marks a progression in the way that humankind relates to God. The question was unsettling, for out of the quietude of a simple system of retributive justice, something new in the annals of religion appeared. The old-time religion used only whole numbers that resolve into neat, solvable sums, to solve its equations; add, subtract, multiply, and divide; a man's obedience to a divine being = something from him in return, whether it be children, wealth, safety, or power. But now the old faith found itself staring unwittingly at a fraction, an irrational number, a new equation: a man's obedience to God = . . . but why is he obedient in the first place? It was now no longer sufficient to infer a man's motives from his actions; one had to look into regions of the soul that often lie in the abyss beneath the threshold of his conscious mind for signs of pure religion.

The seeds of this evolution are surely to be found at the earliest stages of the Abrahamic and Mosaic faith; after all, the first commandment enjoins upon humanity the duty of loving God with one's whole heart (Deuteronomy 6:5). Now the simple algebra of Moses—mankind's obedience to God in the form of  $x, y, z = \text{God's pronouncement of favor, blessing, and life}$ —seemed suddenly quaint. This question was too searching to be answered in tranquility; it had to be answered on the battlefield of earth. The answer to the Satan's question is found in the sacred geometry that is the Book of Job.

### **JOB 1:13–32: EARTH**

There is a breathlessness to the pace of Job's calamities; one report overlaps the other. As a line formed behind the first messenger, Job had no time to collect himself, count his losses, and appeal to Heaven. Disaster came in four waves,

**HOMILY****“AND SATAN CAME ALSO”**

*Look over that last clause from Job 1:6: “And Satan came also.” Read it again and again. A great deal of human history is tucked away in this one clause. The Garden of Eden existed in innocence; pleasure without sin, wealth without guilt, nourishment without death, age without pain, wisdom without regret. It was God’s own idea of paradise, and one gets the sense in reading about it that God cherished it even more than its human inhabitants. But to that paradise, Satan came also.*

*And this is the story of the world. Every Eden has its Satan, every Camelot its Mordred; among the twelve disciples, a Judas; in a revival of giving, an Ananias and Sapphira. Heaven itself had its Lucifer, the bright and shining archangel, once the pride of Heaven, grew dark and malicious—not in the gulag, not in the slums, not in the trenches, but in the bliss of Heaven.*

*Such is the history of the universe, and we ourselves share in that pattern of history. Our best efforts, our highest dreams will, at some point, be infiltrated and tested by the enemy of our efforts and dreams. We build a family, but Satan comes also; we build a career, but Satan comes also; we build a church, but, lest we forget the lesson of Job 1:6, Satan comes also.*

*The story of Job is a testament, however, to the fact that the enemy’s intrusion is not the end of our story. We may even say that “and Satan came also” is a necessary event in any great story; without this event, there is none of the awe in the Book of Job. Notice how the Book of Job begins and ends. Job’s story only begins with Satan’s testing; but the last pages are reserved for the awesome voice of God alone. Should we refuse to “curse God and die” when Satan comes also, so also may our stories end with awe.*

the common components of each suggested divine decree. The first and the last tragedies occurred while the victims were eating; the first and third were the result of raiding bands; the second and the fourth are occurrences that clearly have the marks of the hand of God (and God confirms this in Job 2:3). In each disaster, the devastation is surgical; deadly but, to maximize the effect, controlled just enough to ensure that the memory of what happened would live on.

The quick repetition of messages also has the effect of putting the reader next to Job's side when the content of the last message finally comes. The patriarch of Uz, who had been sitting stunned at a meal, rose to his knees and then slowly to his feet; and the reader, having already overheard what had been decided in Heaven, feels the weight of Job's sorrow. Within the space it took to eat one meal, Job went from a man in the mild autumn of his life, enjoying the constant favor of God to a bitter, childless winter, a wraith of his former self. Upon the customarily humming, whistling house of Job, a noxious silence settled. The reader watches in awe as Job prepared himself to stand stubbornly grateful before his God. Ripping off his robe and shearing his own hair in mourning, he prostrated himself on the ground and, remembering that he could only have lost what had been graciously given him in the first place, acknowledged his own creatureliness. The instincts for worship that Job honed in the good times of life came to the fore and he revered God.



Figure 3. *The Messengers Tell Job of His Misfortunes*, William Blake