

When I looked through the Morning Prayer lectionary to see what was for this Sunday, I was delighted to find Job as the OT lesson. It is, in itself a wonderful story, wonderfully told—well, boring at times with all the speeches of the 3 comforters. (Actually, if you skip ch. 15-28, you can take out a lot of redundancy!) It's a folk tale at the beginning and the end, with the middle being several theodicies, theological thoughts about the problem of evil. It's funny, it's wildly anthropomorphic—with the Satan and God walking around and talking, and placing a bet on their reading of Job's behavior.

Before I get into the story line, though, I want to talk about why Job was put into the growing Bible anthology in the 400's BCE. The material in the Bible was compiled over a maybe 750 or 800 year period—much of the Torah first, maybe 900 or 800 BCE, and then the prophets as they wrote, say from 700 down through 400 BCE. These, through a process we don't know, became official, or canonized; everybody was aware of the books and revered them; they were the Law and the Prophets. Then after this, from the 400's to the 100's came much of the other literature, Job among them.

It's a universal, philosophical occupation to try to explain why a good God would build a world with evil in it. If he's all-powerful, couldn't he avoid that? And if he's all-good, wouldn't he want to? Some theologians had developed for the Hebrews a standard theology as a solution for this, which had really taken hold. It was a theory of reward and punishment, put out by the Deuteronomist (whoever he was or they were, but he/they were responsible for the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic History, composed of Joshua, Judges, I & II Samuel, and I & II Kings. The Deuteronomist assumed that if a person does good in life, he/she will be rewarded, and the same goes for nation states. And if a person does evil or bad, he/she/or the state will be punished. This, because of the ever-presence of God and His justice. God wouldn't let it happen otherwise.

It didn't take only the wise men of Israel and Judah to notice that it didn't always happen like this. It became obvious that bad men and nations prosper, and good men and nations are sometimes victimized or otherwise cut down. So when in the 400's the nation was being rebuilt after the disaster of the Babylonian Captivity, and much effort was given to redacting and editing the already extant material and adding new writings to the anthology that was to become the Bible, certain authors attacked the old reward and punishment theories that had been going for a couple of hundred years—and the author of the book of Job wrote it specifically to counter the Deuteronomic theory. So let's look at the book of Job as a whole and see what conclusion it comes to.

But first, just a side note. What's especially interesting, I think, is that the Biblical editors left in both versions of reward and punishment—the Deut's and Job's. And this happened a lot. Remember the 2 stories of creation—the one detailing the 6 days of creation, which is probably 300 years later than the other, which gives the stories of Adam and Eve. There are 2 versions of the 10 Commandments—one in Ex. and one in Deut. There are 2 histories of David—one pretty realistic, and one cleaned up a little as befits the leader of the Golden Age of Israel. There are two styles of religion—priestly and prophetic. One says sacrifices are necessary to please God, and one has God saying, "I hate your sacrifices." And in the NT there are 4 accounts of Jesus' life and doings. The editors don't side with 1 view and leave out

the “wrong” one. They include both. What do we make of this? I think we make of it that the Biblical editors did not want to make the religion doctrinaire, with only one right viewpoint, but they wanted their readers to decide for themselves what to believe. That a pretty trusting attitude toward us, isn't it? Though I can't imagine that they could imagine that 2000 years later it would be read by people who would have a very different world view from theirs.

Well, let's move on to Job, itself. Those of you who have read it will remember the story. God is meeting with his Council (should it be called Cabinet?) in heaven. One of the members has the role of adversary or the satan—it's his job to challenge Yahweh's relationship to humankind; he is an official gadfly. The Adversary comes into the Council from going to and fro on the earth and walking up and down in it. God says, “Well, if you've been everywhere, have you seen my servant Job, a really good and upright man?” The Adversary answers that of course Job is really good—you never let anything bad happen to him. If you did, he'd curse you to your face. God bets he won't, and says to the Adversary—do what you want to him, just don't touch his person. He won't curse me. God trusts the upright Job.

Now, under the premise of the Deut. if you're bad, bad consequences will come to you. In the current Hebrew thought, the highest values that could come to a person would be progeny, wealth, and health and long life. Job had these in abundance—he had children, wealth, and health. So the adversary removed each of these from Job. His children were killed, and his cattle and asses (his wealth) were stolen from him. God and the Adversary meet again, and God says, “See—he didn't curse me!” The Adversary says, “Of course not. You wouldn't let me touch him.” So God says, “OK, but just don't kill him.” So the satan afflicted Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. His wife now says, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.” But Job wouldn't. “In all this Job did not sin with his lips,” says the narrative.

Here is where the ch. 4 reading comes in. Three friends, or “comforters”—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—come to him and try to get him to admit that he has done wrong—for, for what other reason would all the dire happenings be? It could only be that he has sinned. They, too, don't know of any obvious sin, so they say it must be some secret sin that Job should confess. There has to be something he's done. They reason with the Deut.: if it's T that if you behave badly, you'll get bad consequences, then it would also be T that if you have bad consequences, you've behaved badly. (Never mind that they overlooked that this is an invalid argument.) Now this is where it goes on a bit too long. They each get 3 turns at him, and he gets a response to each of them—so there are 18 speeches in all in the 3 cycles. Then a younger man, Elihu, who had waited to see if the speeches of the older men bore fruit, went after Job in anger that Job had defended himself.

God is nowhere to be seen all this time. Job even rants at Him to come out from behind a cloud and at least answer him. He taunts God for being a coward, with no answer for him. Job says, even if he has erred, the punishment is far in excess of the error. It makes no rational sense. You can't make this a cause and effect thing. It's out of that category. If he could only be able to talk to God, get an answer.

Job never lets go of the idea that there is someone, something in the universe that will hear him; a redeemer or vindicator will rise up to listen to him, as God is not doing now. He believes that even if God doesn't listen, he's made a universe that listens. And it will happen—maybe after he's dead.

After Elihu stops, God shows that he's been there all the time, listening to everything. He says: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. (Remember, it was Job who was questioning God, demanding an answer from God.) Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

(Read similar questions from God from ch 38 & 39)

At ch 40 Job says he cannot answer. So God does another number on him in ch 41. It is as if he would ask 21st century people – Do you know how DNA works? Or what time as a 4th dimension means? Or where stars go when they are swallowed up by black holes? Or how genetics determines traits of a person? Or how the bee finds nectar? Or how swallows and butterflies migrate?

God is saying: The world is complex—all the interrelationships are; it's a vast web that I can't explain to you, Job, but I can say one thing—Your buddies are absolutely wrong. They told you you are cut down because you have been evil. That's not true. I didn't make that as a moral cause and effect in the world. "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now, therefore, take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." And they did sacrifice, and Job did pray, and God did forgive.

In what's considered a late ending to the story, the Lord gave Job 2x as much as he had had before; all his family came to him, sympathized with him, and ate bread with him, and each gave him a piece of money or a ring of gold. He got 14,000 sheep, 6000 camels, 1000 yoke of oxen, and 1000 she-asses. And also he had 7 new sons and 3 new daughters—Jemimah, Keziah, and Kerenhappuch, who inherited from him along with their brothers. (By the way, this is certainly counter-culture for their time!! The daughters and not the sons are named, and they inherit along with their brothers!)

I saw in the paper recently the words a mother spoke about the senseless killing of her teen-aged son. She said, "He didn't deserve that." We will all agree with her: No he didn't. Not at all. Absolutely. And I feel God would grieve with them, but Job's God would say, "Don't talk about 'deserve'. Moral issues don't proceed along lines of desert. Deserving is not the operative word. The teen died because of desire for power over someone, envy, rage, ill will—and it is there we have to address ourselves. We need to make the world a better place so that desire for power, envy, rage, and ill will are not so familiar to the human heart. God says that it's too easy to blame God for what goes on, or to have a neat formula to follow when we judge, or to ask God to shape up the world so that it better represents proportionality in reward and punishment. Job's God says: that's not my job. I gave the world to you.

