

JOB'S FRIENDS AND THEIR CONTRBUTION TO THE MESSAGE OF JOB

A Paper

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Introduction

The book of Job is most perplexing in that it seems to contradict the wisdom theology found in other inspired books like Proverbs, Psalms and James, in that God's Word seems to show that righteousness is rewarded with blessings, while a life of folly is addressed by death. Then enters this confusing book of Job that seems to contradict God's previous messages of wisdom theology and shows the righteous being punished while the evil doers prospering. This paper will seek to show, through the dialogue between Job and his friends, that there are exceptions to the rules established in wisdom theology and that through the dialogue between Job and his friends we find the explanation to these exceptions: God's Sovereign Freedom.

This paper will specifically identify, address and evaluate each friend's communications with Job and his replies in an effort to reveal a progression to their dialogue that seems to start with compassion and quickly degenerates to callousness that is ultimately rebuked by God Himself. Through these examinations this paper will attempt to reveal the purpose of this book and how the friends discourse have a contribution to the overall message of Job: there are exceptions to wisdom theology.

The Man: Job

The book of Job starts out by introducing the reader to "a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job" (Job 1:1a). And, while we see the end of the life of Job recorded in the last book and verse, where we find that "Job died" (Job 42:17a), there is much to be found in the chapters and verses between the start of his life and the end. Additionally, let me state, from the outset, that I am one that believes this book is to be taken literally in contrast to the thoughts of others, like Luther, that attributes this work to

one of an imaginative, “ingenious, learned, and pious person”¹. It is also prudent at this early point to bring to light that Job was a man that was “perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil” (Job 1:1b). And, in light of wisdom theology, whose message is essentially that God will provide, protect and bless the righteous, Job was very well off enjoying good health, a large family and much in the way of materialistic possessions, which for the time and culture, was a measuring stick to determine the blessings of God. Job’s vast wealth was also highlighted by God to not only demonstrate that his righteous life was blessed but also as a set up to demonstrate the contrast of the greatness of his loss and the greatness of his patience to the greatness of his holdings. And, lastly, we are told that Job hailed from the land of Uz, which has been identified as a land of profaneness and wickedness, which identifies the stark contrast between the life of Job and his environment and gives yet another reason this “upright” man was selected by the devil to cast doubt upon his motives to God.

The Problem: Death and Destruction

As a result of the dialogue between God and Satan that culminated in God allowing Satan to launch an attack on his materialistic possessions, his family and his health, Job was thrust into an apparent conflict with the practical rules of life. These rules, defined and defended by wisdom theology, equated to: righteous living is rewarded by blessings and a life of folly follows judgment from God.

Whereas Job had enjoyed tremendous blessings by God in the form of a

¹ Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator*, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI), 1.

healthy and happy family (Job 2:2), Satan had been allowed by God to kill his family, servants and livestock by invasion, fire, sword and wind (Job 1:15-18). Through this first round of attacks Job experienced the proverbial riches to rags tragedy as he was left without finances and family. And yet through all of these reports of death and destruction Job maintained that God is good and his ultimate response in the midst of this devastation was to fall down and worship God as the Giver and Taker of all, even maintaining his testimony as he “sinned not, nor charged God foolishly” (Job 1:22).

Seeing Job maintaining his faith, trust and confidence in his God, Satan resumes his dialogue with God and further challenges Him to allow an attack on Job’s health, a challenge God allows. So, with permission from God, Satan strikes Job with “boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown” (Job 2:7), which prompts the breaking of silence from his wife to admonish Job to “curse God, and die” (Job 2:9a). And yet in spite of the pain and suffering experienced by this upright man of God, Job still refuses to bend and have his faith wane and still he did not “sin with his lips” (Job 2:10b).

So it would appear that had Job been left to work through his circumstance with just his wife as the sole force of challenge, he would have remained in a state of acceptance and trust subscribing to the theology that the “Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). In fact, Job, even after losing his livelihood and family, was to be found not complaining or regretting but “worshipping” (Job 1:20)! And yet we find that Job was not left alone to worship or even limited to the pessimism of his wife, but had to contend with a lengthy visit from three of his friends: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, all of which offered a progressive argument that transitioned from compassion to callousness. It is through these arguments presented by the friends

of Job that we are exposed to the concept that in light of wisdom theology there are exceptions to the rules.

The Friends: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar

While many might feel the statement “with friends like that, who needs enemies” may be justifiably applied to the likes of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, we must acknowledge their motivation and understand their theology if we are to analyze their arguments with integrity. These three friends had “heard” (Job 2:11) of the troubles experienced by Job and were not summoned by Job. This is important in that in a time before the modern technological advances relating to communications we find unity displayed by all three friends making plans together to come to the side of their friend Job. And, they were not motivated by gossip or a desire to see for themselves the evil that had “come upon him” (Job 2:11), as their goal was to “mourn with” and “comfort him” (Job 2:11). And, as the matter of some is, they were not even attempting to show compassion for Job’s sake as from a distance, outside the reach and scope of Job, they saw his condition and “wept and rent every one his mantle and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven” (Job 2:12). In these actions we find these friends of Job: felt complete sorrow and empathy for Job and acknowledged God and His sovereignty as displayed by the tears and lifting of heads “toward heaven” (Job 2:12).

Once Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar had finished weeping and acknowledging God, they made their way to the side of their friend and stayed with Job for seven days and seven nights in complete silence. One can only surmise that this silence was indicative of friends that were allowing opportunity for Job to share his heart as they were ready to simply listen. This seven days of presence and silence from the friends can

certainly be interpreted as an act of compassion as they were making themselves available, sacrificing their own time, responsibilities and schedules, and restraining their own opinions and judgments for seven days and seven nights opening the door for Job to pour out his heart and share to attentive and open ears for they “saw that his grief was very great” (Job 2:13).

Round One: Courteous

After seven days and seven nights without a word spoken from Job, his wife or his three friends, the silence is broken when Job opened his mouth and said “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, there is a man child conceived.” (Job 3:3). One can only surmise the inner turmoil experienced by Job after seven days and seven nights of introspection, and soul searching surrounded by three of his friends and rejected by his wife. It is no wonder, nor comes as a shock and surprise, that Job would just as soon never been born than to endure the horrors of his present state. With the silence broken and door to dialogue opened Eliphaz steps through and lays the foundations for his doctrinal beliefs while leveling his judgments against Job. While this first round of communications is very civil and not entirely presumptuous and attacking, there is still a fundamental element of theology that assumes Job has sinned and is thereby deserving of the wrath of God (Job 4:8-10).

After Eliphaz speaks Job speaks, yet does not attack the position held by Eliphaz nor offer much in the way of a defense for his position, he primarily articulates his grief and anguish as indicated in such statements as “For the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit the terrors of God do set themselves in array against me.” (Job 6:4).

Once Job has replied to Eliphaz, although I will address this issue later, Bildad enters the dialogue which continues with the theme laid out by Eliphaz in that Bildad reminds Job that God is just and that if Job were “pure and upright; surely now he (God) would awake for thee (Job) and make the habitation of thy righteousness, prosperous.” (Job 8:6). And, while not as direct as Satan who forecasted that Job would curse God (Job 2:5) or Job’s wife who admonished Job to curse God and die (Job 2:9), Bildad offers twelve verses (Job 8:11-22) that advise Job to forget God and perish. After Bildad finishes offering his advice, Job replies in a two-fold declaration addressing the: power of God (Job 9:1-12) and the superiority of God (Job 9:32-35). Then Job, as he did with Eliphaz, reveals his weariness through his struggle and identifies his current path, as did the psalmist, as “a land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness.” (Job 10:22).

Finally, after Job finishes talking, Zophar, the last of the three friends speaks. While Eliphaz and Bildad, for the most part, spoke of general doctrine and theology, Zophar addresses this issue specifically, boldly and personally desiring to hear from God Himself in regard to the current conditions faced by Job (Job 11:5). Zophar not only desires to hear from God, but wants God to show Job “the secrets of wisdom” (Job 11:6), that the sins of Job might be revealed and that Job would repent to receive forgiveness (Job 11:13-20). When Zophar finishes, Job, unlike his replies to Eliphaz and Bildad, addresses the issues presented by Zophar head on. Job addresses the apparent attitude of superiority in wisdom held by his friends by stating “ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you. But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you: yea, who knoweth not such things as these?” (Job 12:3). And, once a level playing field is

established Job resumes propagating his beliefs that God is full of strength and is the only One with superior wisdom. Then Job, becoming more transparent and obviously growing more weary, reveals that he actually agrees with the wisdom theology presented by his friends as he asks God to make known his “transgression and sin” (Job 13:23) yet acknowledges, much like the author of Ecclesiastes, that he is not alone in his struggles and bad things do happen to good people as he cries out that “Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble.” (Job 14:1).

Summary Round One

It is very evident that while all three friends had much of the same message in round one of their speeches, they were also very diverse in their presentation. While Eliphaz was the most compassionate, Bildad and Zophar, while not entirely aggressive at first, were more blunt and forthcoming initially in their address. According to LaSor, Eliphaz came over as a “*gentle, confident mystic, Bildad as a firm traditionalist, Zophar as a rash dogmatist.*”²

Round Two: Cold

Again, Job’s friend Eliphaz is the one that launches round two of discourse to Job and this time seems to transition from a conversation that is civil and courteous to one that cold and callous. And, while Eliphaz has certainly changed his tone he does not offer any new advice, wisdom nor offer evidence to further his cause, he is in fact simply repeating the same argument only changing is his apparent lack of compassion. The

² William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), 476.

second discourse offered by Eliphaz can be summed up when he says to Job, speaking of Job, “He shall not depart out of darkness; the flame shall dry up his branches, and by the breath of his mouth shall he go away.” (Job 15:30). This statement is a great example to highlight the lack of compassion that Eliphaz is displaying and shows the contrast between his original motive of loving and comforting him (Job 2:11b). Being directly attacked by his friend Eliphaz and feeling quite beaten down, Job responds again with a view of his grief and recognition of the transition his friends have made in Job’s eyes from friend to foe as he laments “Are there not mockers with me? And doth not mine eye continue in their provocation?” (Job 17:2).

With Eliphaz and Job completing their talks, Bildad resumes the conversation with a brief attack against Job and his apparent lack of an acknowledgment of his sin and a failure to be quiet (Job 18:2). In fact the entire premise of Bildad’s speech is to fight for the right to speak against the sins of Job that God would bring judgment. Bildad addresses this issue with Job when he says to Job “How long will it be ere ye make an end of words? Mark, and afterwards we will speak.” (Job 18:2). And, as Job’s friends went from a conversation that was civil and courteous, Job went from a conversation that was general to one that was defensive. Job addresses Bildad’s lack of compassion and judgment and reveals his frustration with his friends by stating “How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words?” (Job 19:2). And yet even when starting to show signs of discouragement, especially with his friends, Job maintains his faith and draws a contrast between his cold and callous friends to God by stating, in the midst of this turmoil and trouble “I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my

flesh shall I see God” (Job 19:25-26).

One would think that with Job sharing his heart in that he was feeling attacked, vexed, judged and broken by his friends barrage of verbal abuse, that they would respond in repentance and seek forgiveness, yet Zophar does no such thing but steps up his game in describing how God’s wrath destroys the wicked! Zophar ends his discourse by summing up that the wicked will receive the curse and judgment of God and that Job’s portion, as a “wicked man” (Job 20:29) will be to justly receive said wrath. This is the argument that finally causes Job to address the flaws found in their wisdom theology by questioning how the wicked prevail if God’s wrath always falls upon the wicked (Job 21:7-9). Job then addresses God’s sovereignty, wisdom and knowledge and asks “Shall any teach God knowledge?” (Job 21:22), conveying, for the first time, that there must be exceptions to the rules of wisdom theology, Job himself being a prime example.

Summary Round Two

In this second round of speeches we find the transition from, more or less, a compassionate based communication to one of coldness. It appears the friends have become more dogmatic in their pleas for Job to confess and repent as they are grown increasingly impatient with their perception of a man that refuses to admit he is in sin. So, in this round of speeches Job’s friends focus “their rhetoric on the terrible fate that befalls the wicked person, for they wish to convince Job that he will undergo greater hardship if he does not repent.”³

³ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988), 242.

Round Three: Cruel

With this last barrage of attacks even Eliphaz gets personal and blunt in his assertion that Job stands a sinner in the hands of an angry God, a thought personified in the statement “Is not thy wickedness great? And thine iniquities infinite?” (Job 22:5). Yet in spite of Eliphaz’s accusations, he ends with a message of hope, although perhaps tainted with a hint of sarcasm, in that he assures Job that God “shall deliver the island of the innocent: and it is delivered by the pureness of thine hands.” (Job 22:30). With Eliphaz opening the door for Job in that God will deliver the innocent, Job takes the opportunity to argue his cause and request an audience with God to present his case of innocence that Eliphaz’s hope might be fulfilled (Job 23:3-5). And, Job seems to show his agreement with Eliphaz on the principles of wisdom theology by spending some time on the sins of the wicked and those of darkness how “They are exalted for a little while, but are gone and brought low; they are taken out of the way as all other, and cut off as the tops of the ears of corn.” (Job 24:24).

When Job finishes his conversation with Eliphaz, Bildad takes over and starts his, albeit brief, speech on how holy God is and how God has resources and provisions to take care of the wicked addressed by Job. But Job responds by agreeing that God is great, so great in fact that nobody, including he and his friends can “understand Him” (Job 26:14). With God’s ways beyond understanding, Job seeks to gain wisdom to understand why bad things happen to good people, recognizing God as the source of wisdom and understanding and acknowledges it is the “fear of the Lord that is wisdom” (Job 28:28). Job then looks back at his former life of blessings, service and status and reveals a heart that is broken and an object of contempt and ends with a cry to God and

an argument for his innocence and integrity as he enters into a series of “if” and “then” statements that Job uses to give God permission to curse him if he has in fact sinned against Him.

Summary Round Three

This third round of speeches has many distinctives when compared to the first two rounds. The most apparent is the content found in Eliphaz and Bildad’s speeches and the fact that Zophar remains silent and contributes not to this last attack against Job. While it may be contended that Zophar was silent because he gave up his position and sided with Job, it is more likely that Zophar was silent because, following the lead of Eliphaz, he lacked direct evidence to level against Job. Even Bildad’s argument was simply a repetition of a platitude and noticeably shortened from his previous speeches. One can surmise that the “whole prosecution broke down when Eliphaz in his last speech left the safety of generalities and came down to specifications and proofs of Job’s guilt.”⁴

Rebuked by God: Job’s Repentance and the Friends Final Exchange

After Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar have spoken to Job and Job responded, God goes through a long, four chapters (38-41), discourse with his servant Job whose essential message is in the shape of a question “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding.” (Job 38:4), which leaves Job silent. While Job is not directly accused of any specific sin, Job is rebuked, for a lack of understanding, for his desire to bring his case before God that God would recant his apparent wrath and

⁴ B.H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible*, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1986), 72.

confess He made a mistake. Ultimately, Job is found submitting to God and repenting of his proposed course of action to take his case to God (Job 42:3), or as observed by Henry “The words of Job justifying himself were ended.”⁵ Then after spending much time with Job, God then directs His attention on Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar with the charge to take “seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering” (Job 42:8). Then, after Job “prayed for his friends” (Job 42:10a), the Lord restored Job and blessed him “twice as much as he had before.” (Job 42:10b).

Conclusion: The Impact of Job’s Friends on the Message of the Book of Job

There are several items worthy of note in regard to the dialogue between Job and his friends that seem to shape the message of Job into what we have.

1. **Wisdom Theology:** Very evident through the speeches by Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, and the replies of Job, that the message conveyed is one of reward from God for a life of righteousness and the wrath of God to the wicked. While the tone certainly changes as the friend’s dialogue transitions from civility to cruelty, the essence and core of the message remains unchanged. Even Job does not seek to argue the theology presented by his friends, yet seeks to understand why their theology, and one he apparently held to as well, was lacking. And, while not embraced by all theologians, there are some, including this author, that believe that the primary purpose of the book of Job is to teach the concepts of repentance and reconciliation. Through the

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA, 2000), 185.

interactions with his friends and laments to God, we find Job to be a man that felt “that before God he was all right. In fact, he wanted to come into the presence of God to defend himself. When Job did that, he found that he needed to repent!”⁶

2. **Peer Pressure:** While Job remains unchanged in his trust in God and search for truth, Job does digress as the attacks upon him are leveled and increased in magnitude.
3. **Compassion:** The message of compassion can in fact be found in the friends of Job. They were initially motivated by, and moved with compassion and in the seven days of silence, their weeping and outward expressions of grief did they convey that they loved Job. Even in the very dialogue do we find a respect and compassion for Job in that every friend speaks less than his previous friend and all of the friends speak less than Job, allowing Job to talk much longer while they demonstrated self-restraint. That being said, it must be noted that this compassion did disintegrate as every speech communicated to Job was a one-way argument and never did the friends discuss any of Job’s points nor address his concerns. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar simply were concerned about getting their point across and not interested in “hearing” their friend Job.
4. **Exceptions to the Rules of Wisdom Theology:** One of the great truths

⁶ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1982), 581.

uncovered by the dialogue between Job and his friends is the evidence that while his friends were correct that wisdom theology is generally correct as applied to practical living, there are exceptions to the rule.

The interaction between Job and his friends reveal that while his friends were successful in debating wisdom theology, they were quite lacking in providing the evidence to support that theology in this particular case, thereby revealing Job was in fact an exception.

5. **God's Sovereign Freedom:** Over and over again, Job, in response to his friends accusations and attacks, highlights God's freedom to not be confined, limited and bound by mans understanding and interpretations of wisdom theology.

Through this historical account, the reader is left with answers to the age old questions of why good things happen to bad people and why bad things happen to good people. We find revealed in this dialogue between Job and his friends the wonderful and unfathomable truth that God has the freedom and right to do whatever He chooses and is not to be second guessed nor put in a theological box and explained away by the limited understanding, knowledge and wisdom held by man. This sovereign Freedom of God, contrasted to the wisdom theology presented by the friends of Job, is central and key to the message of the book of Job and would not have been revealed and explained had not his friends made the journey to be at the side of Job and to engage Job in a discussion that would be used by God through the ages to convey these timeless truths. And while it seems the central purpose of the book of Job has been identified above, we must also

understand that this is a prophetic book in that it presents “wisdom of the deepest kind”.⁷

⁷ Alice C. Linsley, *Righteous Job and His Kin*, (*Just Genesis*, 2010), <http://jandyongenesis.blogspot.com/2010/09/righteous-job-and-his-kin.html>

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