

Job

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Job: Introduction, Part 1



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- When we think of the books of the Old Testament from Genesis to the Prophets, we need to rethink how the ancients put things together. The New Testament writers were much more “modern” in that you primarily had a single writer with perhaps some later editing, just like books today. But the earlier books of the Old Testament did not begin with a single writer but had been handed down verbally generation after generation for centuries. Imagine a large extended family, traveling with their sheep from pasture to pasture, living in tents, and gathering at night around a fire as the elders retold all the old stories. And the quality of the story telling was rated on the fidelity to the story. Everyone knew the stories, especially the other elders and any variation was not to be tolerated. This is still the way illiterate nomadic herders remain connected to their ancient roots. The tradition has always been that during the 40 years in the desert, Moses took the oral stories of God and His people the Hebrews and wrote them down. Thus the first five books of the Bible are called The Book of Moses.
- Mesopotamia and what we know as the Middle East has been called the Cradle of Civilization. The Patriarch of Israel, Abraham, came from Ur in what is now Iraq. Each tribe or city or culture had their own stories and some of those stories overlapped. For instance, in our Bible we have the story of Noah and the Great Flood, but there are also flood stories from elsewhere around Mesopotamia, including the Sumerian Eridu Genesis and the Akkadian Atrahasis epic. These stories were written before the time of Moses’ writing his story of Noah and the flood and they tell of a god who warns a chosen individual about an impending flood. Another flood story, which is very close to the story of Noah, is the Epic of Gilgamesh. This is a Babylonian epic which includes a flood story where the hero, Utnapishtim, is instructed by the god Ea, to build a boat and save his family and animals from a flood sent by the gods. Even the ancient Greeks had their flood story called the myth of Deucalion. Deucalion was the son of Prometheus, and the story tells of a flood sent by Zeus to punish humanity. Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha survive by building an ark and are later instructed to repopulate the earth by throwing stones over their shoulders. The Hindu, Chinese, and other cultures have similar stories as well. Clearly there was day once when even having an umbrella wasn’t enough!
- The same is true to some extent of the story of Job. It is a story that is likewise older than Moses. There is a sad Job-like story from Egypt of a man who was suffering terribly and he was having a debate with his own soul about the value of human life. Another Egyptian story is called “The Eloquent Peasant”. This man too was suffering and he declared to the gods that he was a victim of

a great injustice and eventually won his case. The Babylonians and the Akkadians and the Greeks all had stories similar to Job where the stories are trying to answer why a good man is unjustly suffering.

- So we come to Job and the central themes of the book. People commonly think that there is only one real theme and that is the question of why good people suffer. But curiously the book never actually resolves the question, so we must look deeper and wrestle with the tough questions the book raises. Can pain and suffering ever be fully explained and understood by human wisdom? What is the purpose of our existence? What is the relationship between humanity and God's righteousness? And then what about the profit motive and real worship? Is there any connection between my faith and my comfort?
- To answer such questions requires a review of what we really believe about God and our need for a divine Mediator and Advocate to stand on our behalf.
- Finally, there is the question as to whether Job was a real person or is the story simply a parable? Well, you can add that to the list of questions you'll have answered when you get to Heaven. But in the end, it really doesn't matter. Does the idea that the Good Samaritan may not have been a real person make the point of story any less real? Of course not. Whether Job was a real person or not is really unimportant because he is every person. Any one who have suffered great loss and endured great pain can put themselves in Job's sandals. Who has not asked his questions and wondered where God is in the midst of the pain and suffering? Job is very, very real.