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Job 1



In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. ²He had seven sons and three daughters, ³and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

⁴His sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.

⁶One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. ⁷The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"

Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it."

⁸Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

⁹"Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. ¹⁰"Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. ¹¹But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

¹²The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

¹³One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, ¹⁴a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, ¹⁵and the Sabians attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

¹⁶While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

¹⁷While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

¹⁸While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, ¹⁹when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

²⁰At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship ²¹and said:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.
The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised."

²²In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.



Job's Profile (1:1–5)

Uz. JOB'S HOMELAND HAS yet to be positively identified. Weiss points out that Uz is a region, not a city, and that "the East" is associated with the Syrian Desert stretching from Mesopotamia to Arabia.¹ In biblical genealogies, Uz is sometimes connected with Aram (Gen. 10:23; 22:21; 1 Chron. 1:17)² and at other times with Edom (Gen. 36:21, 28; 1 Chron. 1:42; Lam. 4:21; probably Jer. 25:20). Edom has been preferred over Aram,

1. Weiss, *Job's Beginning*, 23.

2. For the case for the area of Bashan and Hauran, see J. C. de Moor, "Ugarit and the Origin of Job," in *Ugarit and the Bible*, ed. G. J. Brooke, A. H. W. Curtis and J. F. Healey (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1994), 242–45. He also offers his evidence for an association between Job and Ayyabu of Ashtartu known from the Amarna texts.

based on Edom's reputation for wisdom and Eliphaz the Temanite's origin from the area of Edom. In an appendix to the book of Job, the LXX locates Edom between Idumea and Arabia; thus, the earliest analysis situates it in the south.³

Regardless of its location, this detail is significant because it indicates that Job is not an Israelite. His non-Israelite status explains the absence of many key theological elements in the book, including law, covenant, temple, and references to Yahweh.⁴ Intriguingly, however, the book frequently evidences an Israelite perspective,⁵ which suggests that the story of the non-Israelite Job has actually been given its literary shape by an Israelite author for an Israelite audience. This secondary context gives the book a voice in the context of Israelite ideas about God and his expectations.⁶

Job's qualities. Weiss suggests that "blameless" (*tam*) refers to Job's character and "upright" (*yašar*) to his actions.⁷ When we look at the use of the terminology elsewhere in the book of Job, we find that the opposites of *tam* are "proclaimed guilty" (‘*qš*, 9:20) and "wicked" (*raša'*, 9:22). This verbal stem of ‘*qš* occurs only four other times (Prov. 10:9; 28:18, both in contrast to *tam*; Isa. 59:8; Mic. 3:9, both in contrast to "justice," *mišpat*) and specifically refers to something twisted or perverse. The noun *raša'* is, in contrast, common (26x in Job), and refers generally to the wicked. The word *tam* denotes integrity and the resulting absence of blame or guilt. *Tam* is an appropriate description for people characterized by integrity when measured by general human standards. Note, for example, Abimelech, who asserts that he took Sarah in integrity of heart (NIV: "with a clear conscience" Gen. 20:5), and that God confirmed this assessment (20:6).

Second, Job is identified as "upright" (*yašar*), a term commonly used to describe people who behave according to God's expectations—specifically, kings faithful to Yahweh (e.g., Joash, 2 Chron. 24:2). An upright person gains God's favor (Deut. 6:18). God himself is upright (Deut. 32:4), and he made humankind upright (Eccl. 7:29), but people have gone in search of schemes. The Israelites each did what was (up)right in their own eyes (Judg. 17:6; 21:25) because they had no king and they were departing from faithfulness to God.

3. See É. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984), xxiii.

4. "Yahweh" is used consistently in the prologue (last occurrence in 2:7) and in the speeches of Yahweh at the end of the book (38:1; 40:1, 3, 6, 42:1, 7, 9–12). Other than these occurrences it is used only once (12:9), and on that verse some manuscripts have 'eloah in its place. See there for further discussion.

5. See listing in the Introduction, 38.

6. See Introduction, 33–38.

7. Weiss, *Job's Beginning*, 25

Tam and *yašar* are desirable accolades, but they are achievable for humans who seek steadfastly to order their ways according to customary conceptions of godliness. But these terms do not describe people who live lives of sinless perfection; rather, they describe those who have found favor in the eyes of God and other humans (cf. Prov. 3:4).

Job is also described as one who “fears God” (*’elohim*). As we would expect in Job, the author does not identify him as one who “fears Yahweh” specifically. We can again turn to the description of the non-Israelite Abimelech and his people and the premature assessment made of them by Abraham (Gen 20:11).⁸ In common Old Testament usage, to fear the Lord/God is to take God seriously. That can mean different things depending on what one knows of God. For the sailors in Jonah, fearing the Lord entailed a different response than the Israelites, who “feared the LORD” in response to the covenant. In a non-Israelite context, fearing God could refer to being ritually or ethically conscientious, and the context of Job requires nothing more than this definition. In sum, Job is a paragon of devotion and integrity.

Job’s possessions and status. In verses 2 and 3 Job’s prosperity is described in terms of his family and his possessions. The numbers all give indication of representing idealizations or stereotypes, but this is no evidence that they are contrived. Truth is stranger than fiction. Nevertheless, as suggested in the introduction, the book as wisdom literature would be expected to be the result of literary shaping. Everything about Job is ideal, which has the purpose of portraying him as the ultimate example of a person who is beyond reproach and who has achieved success by the highest standards.

Job’s piety. A number of questions emerge from the short vignette in verses 4–6. One might first question why these feasts are the setting for the potential offense of cursing God. Note that these are not cultic feasts because the word used here usually denotes special celebratory occasions; other terminology designates a cultic feast. From a literary standpoint these feasts have significance because they provide the setting in which Job’s sons and daughters eventually meet their demise (1:18–19).

This group setting might seem unnecessary at first glance since Job expresses his concern that they may have cursed God “in their hearts.” Although this phrase often refers to the private thoughts of an individual, when a group of people are part of the scene, it can refer to corporate thinking shared confidentially (cf. Deut. 8:17; 18:21; Ps. 78:18). Tangentially, since just such a feast was taking place when Job’s family was destroyed, one might ask whether their behavior at the feast may have

8. For another comparable use, see Gen. 42:18, where Joseph is pretending to be non-Israelite.

somehow brought this judgment on them (note that Bildad suggests exactly that in 8:4). In such a case, the death of his family could be interpreted by observers not as action against Job, but as action against his children. But the information here about Job's scrupulous purifying rituals argue against that suggestion.

Second, why does Job even imagine that his family might curse God in their private conversations at these feasts? Again, a first glance can be misleading. It would appear that this is an extreme offense that would be unlikely of this pious family, where we might expect an illustration that shows more subtlety. But that initial impression evaporates under scrutiny.

Strange as it may seem, the word translated "cursed" is the normal Hebrew word for "bless" (*barak*). The general consensus among interpreters is that the use of the opposite word is euphemistic so that the uncomfortable concept of cursing God is circumnavigated.⁹ This unusual interplay between cursing and blessing becomes significant in the early sections of this book. In 1:11 (also 2:5) the Challenger suggests that Job will "bless" (= "curse") God to his face (in contrast to the fears Job had that his children might bless/curse God in their hearts). Instead, Job truly does "bless" God (1:21, same verb). Job's wife urges him to "bless" (= "curse") God blatantly and die (2:9). Job does not respond with blessing God after the second round, but neither does he curse God. Instead, he curses the day of his birth.¹⁰

Beyond this specific use of the terms in establishing a literary motif, we must also consider the underlying narrative framework. In the narrative God has blessed Job with children and possessions (1:10). But on the larger scale one could also say that God has orally blessed Job by praising him to the Challenger (sometimes blessing is accomplished by praise). As it turns out, the very nature of that oral blessing becomes a curse as it is made the basis for the challenge that leads to the loss of the material blessing. Eventually God restores and multiplies the material blessing (42:12). So the curse/bless antithesis stands as a significant motif in the book. Yet as important as this motif is, it fails to answer the question that we are pursuing.

The next level of investigation concerns what sort of statement would constitute "cursing God." In the Old Testament the matter of cursing (*qll*)

9. For euphemistic use outside of Job, see 1 Kings 21:10, 13; Ps. 10:3. The case against this euphemistic understanding is made by T. Linafelt, "The Undecidability of *barak* in the Prologue to Job and Beyond," *BibInt* 4 (1996): 154–72. See also Cheney, *Dust, Wind and Agony*, 58–77.

10. Here no euphemism need be used. A common verb for cursing, *qll*, is used. This verb usually has people as the grammatical subject and refers to the invocation of words of power against someone or something (cf. Ex. 22:28). When God is the object of the verb, it is often translated as "blaspheme" (cf. Lev. 24:11).

God is discussed explicitly in Leviticus 24:10–16 (see also the passing reference in Ex. 22:28 [27] and Isa. 8:21).¹¹ The offense is extreme (it carries the death penalty) and could be committed in a wide variety of ways. Cursing God could involve using God's name in a frivolous oath,¹² using God's name along with illicit words of power (e.g., hex),¹³ using words of power against God, or speaking in a denigrating, contemptuous, or slanderous way about God—basically insulting God.¹⁴ The last is the most likely in this context as most befitting the situation. We can identify some examples of this offense by moving beyond the actual occurrence of the term "curse" to exploring some of the offensive words people speak against God "in their hearts" in other passages:

- taking credit for what God has done (cf. Deut. 8:17)
- misjudging God's motives (Deut. 9:4)
- thinking that God will not act (Deut. 29:19 [18]; Isa. 47:8; Zeph. 1:12)
- expressing one's ambitions against God (Isa. 14:13)
- expressing one's arrogance (Isa. 47:10)
- stating that there is no God (Pss. 14:1; 53:1)

These examples all hold God in contempt by stating implicitly or explicitly that he is powerless to act, that God is corrupt in his actions or motives, that God has needs, or that God can be manipulated. These sorts of claims would constitute cursing God as they make God to be less than God. We thus discover that "cursing God" may not be as blatant and obvious an offense as first thought.

The way Job might curse God in response to his suffering would be to show contempt for God by suggesting that God is corrupt, irrational, or capricious. But it is unlikely that this is how his sons and daughters might curse God. They might be more inclined in their revelry to think that their

11. See lengthy discussion in J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2107–9.

12. This is indirect since it involves cursing by God's name rather than directing a curse specifically at God. It would be included in ways that the Lord's name could be taken in vain. It can be included in the general practice of cursing God in that it fails to treat God with sufficient respect.

13. In the Old Testament enemies can be cursed in the name of Yahweh (see Josh. 6:26; 2 Kings 2:24).

14. "Curse" is therefore seen as failing to give honor (*kbd*), as when Shimei curses/insults David as he flees from Jerusalem (2 Sam. 16:5–13); see S. Tishchenko, "To Curse God? Some Remarks on Jacob Milgrom's Interpretation of Lev. 24:10–16, 23," in *Babel und Bibel* 3 (2006): 543–50, following suggestions put forth by H. C. Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible* (SBLMS 16; Missoula, Mont.: Scholar's, 1963).