

The Book of Job, Redux

We have discussed Job already a couple of times in past Sunday School lessons, but this Scripture is so deep and so compelling that it deserves yet another look. This time, though, let's focus mostly on how the book ends and its relevance to us today. Admittedly, this is a difficult task. The Book's Hebrew text throughout is difficult to bring into English, and its poetry and metaphors are difficult to interpret. And indeed a great variety of interpretations are on offer in the commentaries. Nevertheless, a fresh look will be worthwhile.* All the narratives in Scripture, especially this one, have deep theological meaning that we need to identify and meditate on.

The Book of Job is widely believed to be all about suffering. And there's plenty of that in the story. Job suffered grievous personal losses as well as painful sores. He was in ghastly misery. And so Bible teachers commonly use Job to discuss how to deal with suffering and loss. Poor Job was made even more miserable by the callow sophistries of his 3 friends. But I don't think that suffering is the theme of the book. It's a theodicy. It's all about evil and God's relationship to it. How can we harmonize the presence of all the evil in the world with a good God? Where's God's wisdom? How is God just? This is why we need to discuss Job again.

Most scholars believe that Job was authored during the era of the Patriarchs. Indeed, it is probably the very first Scripture written. And if it is, it makes sense that it should deal with God's great, cosmic purposes in history. An evidence of its profundity is the conflict between God and Satan in the first two chapters. Conflict! It's not a mere contest or even a power play using poor Job as if he were a chess piece. It's a conflict that actually depends on Job for its outcome. It's a conflict that smacks the reader over the head, because Satan is causing Job to experience horrible suffering just so he can get the best of God (as if that's possible!). And God allows it! We are dealing here with great evil. We mustn't miss it.

God is good. Yet there's massive, insuperable evil in His Creation. How do we explain this? I think we need to fully understand what God is doing in His creation because He's called us to participate in His great cosmic project, which is to defeat and ultimately to abolish evil so that at the end only God's goodness exists .

The structure of the book is important. Its opening chapters allow us, its readers, to know what the issue is, Will Job remain faithful to God in the face of unspeakable evil? The other option open to Job is voiced by his foolish wife advising him to abandon faith in God. Her comment is cryptic, but it seems to be, "Your fear of God and shunning evil got you nothing from God. Forget Him." (She clearly had no fear of God.) What follows is a surfeit of chapters of dialogue between Job and 3 friends that has one lesson, which is that justice -- as everyone, whether educated or not, knows -- requires that good be rewarded and bad be punished; so if Job is being punished (how else to understand his miserable circumstances), he must be a terrible sinner. Some friends! Their understanding of this moral world we inhabit is similar to that of Satan, who argues that Job only serves God so that God necessarily will bless him (1:9ff). It's how we also today understand blessing. What kind of wisdom is this?

In the very middle of the book (occupying the place of greatest importance), Chapter 28, is a poem that extols God's wisdom. In contrast to human wisdom, what everyone in every society knows to be true, God has transcendent wisdom that no human can know. Not until God reveals it. Thus, "Where then does wisdom come from?" (28:20), and "God alone knows where it dwells" (v.23). Chapter 28 is key to understanding the Book of Job. Human wisdom isn't adequate to explain evil. Only God can explain it and only He can deal with it. And He will do that. But in the meanwhile, our humanly role is to "fear God and shun evil" (v. 28), which is what Job did (1:1, 1:8b, and 2:3b, three times!).

* For this lesson, I draw upon the ideas and insights presented by Duane A. Garrett at the 2022 Annual ETS meeting. Garrett teaches at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and is currently writing a commentary on the Book of Job. His understanding of themes in Job needs to be shared.

Then the book ends with a monologue in which God challenges Job to reflect on His goodness and greatness. God brings as evidence of His wisdom and His total control of all creation: (a) the physical world; (b) various animals and the behaviors God gave them; followed by references (c) to Behemoth; and (d) to Leviathan. An epilogue in which Job repents and is vindicated closes the book. Job needed to offer sacrifices to atone for the foolishness of his 3 friends. And so Job was blessed at the end, not by having everything restored to him, as we foolishly understand the ending, but by the perfecting of his faith (James 5:10ff).

"Behemoth" is not an animal, as most commentators believe. It's only symbolically an animal, a beast. Behemoth is what God built into His creation to maintain order in society. It's a system of enstructured ideas and rules that include levels of authority (eg, parents, teachers, and especially government) and systems of thought that regulate justice, morality, finance, and lots else -- all that would allow His beloved humans to live together in community and flourish. But as with everything involving humans, our sin nature corrupted what God had created and gifted to us. So the wisdom God devised turned into a beast, a monster that tyrannizes and exploits and preys upon people. Behemoth is the statue in Daniel chapter 2, a series of Gentile empire-building nations opposed to God and His Israel. Behemoth is the spirit of Babylon pervading all history, societies and cultures. The word in Job for Behemoth that's used in the Septuagint is "beasts" (plural), and that may be why there are two future "beasts" in Revelation chapter 13, one from the land and one from the sea. Behemoth is the powers that govern all people, but brutally, oppressively, cruelly. Behemoth exists to preserve order and limit wrong-doing, but he also aggressively lusts for power over others.

The understanding that Job's wife had of his suffering, and all the counsel of the 3 friends filling all those chapters in the book, was human wisdom; it was wisdom that they'd acquired from Behemoth. It was the concept of retribution. It was their understanding that justice necessarily rewards good and punishes evil. It was the notion that God blesses and protects those who are good, but those who do evil fall into ruin and suffer. And that is OK as far as it goes. (See the Book of Proverbs; Behemoth is Lady Wisdom perverted by sin and turned into a beast.) But none of that was God's wisdom for Job. The 3 friends mouthed nothing but sophistries and human wisdom. They were really part of the evil that constituted Job's world. Human wisdom does not and cannot explain evil and injustice.

"Leviathan" is not an animal either. Leviathan is Satan. Satan was created by God to serve Him. He was given surpassing beauty and power. He also, however, was cunning. In pride, he became corrupt, wicked, and sought to replace God as ruler of God's people. His minions, including the "gods" that God also created and that constituted His divine council, should be included in the category of Leviathan. Leviathan's playground is the "sea," a symbol in Scripture for the Gentile nations. They are incessantly turbulent, frothing and tumultuous, provoked continually by Satan to do evil. Satan is the dragon of Revelation 12. It was Satan who initiated the evils that targeted Job. Satan also knows only retribution. He doesn't and cannot know God's secret wisdom. Satan knows only to exercise power, thereby to gratify himself at the expense of everyone else, including God.

Behemoth and Satan are both creations of a good God that turned into evil. Similarly, our bodies are God's good creation, yet because of our sin nature, our bodies are the source of insatiable lusts. We were designed to be embodied, but embodiment also has been corrupted and practices evil continually. God's entire creation, every aspect of it, although "very good" when made, has turned into evil. God must deal with this.

The book's ending chapters are compelling. God alone controls the dangerous forces of our physical world (38:4-38) and the animal world (38:39-39:30); He alone is able to deal with the behemoth (40:15-24) and with the leviathan (41:1-34). These cause massive suffering in our world: hurricanes, volcanoes, and tornados, for example; and lions, tigers, vipers, and hornets; and the oppressive cruelties of society's systems, as well as the wickedness that Satan engenders. What a good God had created and was initially good has turned into evil, but God is in control and will deal with them in His way and in His

time. So the book ends with God humbling Job (and us, the readers of Job, as well) by making it clear that He, and He alone, is able to deal with both behemoth and leviathan, indeed, with all evil. God's wisdom and His justice eventually will prevail.

Now let's review. The Book of Job deals with evil (and the suffering that results from it) and with wisdom (both human wisdom and God's yet unrevealed wisdom). Although not explicit, it raises the further issue, is God just? The book certainly teaches that human wisdom, which is limited to the concept of retribution, is inadequate to explain evil. So the book ends with the implicit promise that in His higher level of wisdom, in the future God will deal with evil. And His justice and goodness then will prevail. But until then, we're to be faithful, fearing God and shunning the practice of evil.

God's wisdom is transcendent. He knows how to deal with evil, and He has the power and the will to do that. Because revelation is progressive, we now know what God in His ineffable wisdom did. In God's wisdom, He sent the Son to earth in human form to fulfill all righteousness and to reveal God's goodness and justice. The Son willingly suffered humiliation, rejection, the pain of being flogged nearly to death, and then an agonizing, torturous, atoning death on a cross, only then to be raised to life and ascend gloriously to the Father in heaven, where He awaits His return to earth. God's secret wisdom that is fully revealed in the New Testament (although it's there in the Old, e.g., Genesis 15:6 and Isaiah 53) is imputed righteousness. God imputes our sins to the Son and the Son's righteousness to us. That satisfies justice, as Paul explains in Romans.

That work of God in history was necessary to defeat Satan. Had God annihilated Satan when he rebelled, that would not be wise. That would have been retributational and an exercise of raw power, Satan's own strategies. The wisdom that is God's required more. It required a demonstration of transcending love, a love that necessitated suffering personal loss in order to benefit others. It required a demonstration of goodness that alone can show evil to be what it is and thus be condemned. Goodness is serving others, even sacrificially, even those who don't deserve it, something totally alien to Satan. It required a demonstration of weakness and dependence on God, also alien to power-mad Satan. It required a demonstration of selflessness, of concern for others, of intent to bless others, also alien to self-loving Satan. So Leviathan is defeated. Satan doesn't have the right to rule. Only the Son does. And when the exalted Son returns to earth, He will rule in wisdom, love and goodness. Behemoth then will be defeated as well. And then, after a demonstration of God's goodness in ruling earth, God will do something even more stupendous. He will annihilate everything in creation that's corrupt and replace it with a new heavens and earth in which there will be no evil, not even the possibility of evil, only God's goodness. The love, peace and joy of the Godhead will prevail in all the new Creation.

What does all this have to do with us today? 1. We need to understand what Job learned at the end, which is that this present world is controlled by the behemoth and the leviathan. So we need to submit to the evil that surrounds us, encroaches on our lives, creates extensive confusion, and may cause us much suffering and loss, yet as Job did, persevere with trust in God and faithfulness to His will. And be confident in the hope of a future vindication and restoration. To Job's 3 friends, God was an intellectual concept; Job in contrast was committed to God in a fearing, trusting, loving relationship. Job was only able to persevere because of that commitment. God's love embraced Job because of his faith. If we don't have such commitment, we'll be blown away when the evils in our world target us. 2. We need to be discerning so that we can shun evil. This requires that we know God's revelation and think carefully how it impacts on the world we currently live in. Pride, ambition, self-indulgence, greed, lust for power, covetousness, vindictiveness, contemptuousness, a striving for pleasure and comforts, idol worship, all these and lots more come to us from the behemoth if not from the leviathan. Some of Behemoth's values and ideals are so subtle we need to reflect deeply on God's will for us and how our culture conditions us. 3. Equally important, in this new era of the Son, if we're in Christ, we're to participate in that great cosmic work of God, the defeat of evil. And we do that by demonstrating good, which is living out, in this present existence, God's revealed holy, just and wise will. We're not here to pursue happiness. Behemoth generated that notion. We've been given life to love God and to pursue His will with fierce commitment and purposefulness, mindful of the great things God intends to do in the future.

There's a lot here to reflect on. We build our understanding of life on all Scripture, which includes what's here in Job. Imputed righteousness is God's unique wisdom. God's transcendent love and ineffable goodness is His wisdom. God's grace, the forgiveness of sins and making resurrection to new life in Christ, is His wisdom. His offer of Himself, that is, access to God's presence, is His wisdom. God is good! And He expects us to imitate Him by demonstrating good. So we also show grace to others. We forgive them, we generously meet their needs, we share the Gospel with them; and we do it as God Himself did, in weakness with love and humility, suffering whatever personal loss is needed. Out of love for God, we also eschew all that's opposed to Him, whether it comes from government, the media, or from our culture, whether from inside us, from social pressure, or from the traditions we've received, and whether it is beliefs, values, ideals, or priorities. In God's goodness and wisdom, He sent Christ to suffer humiliation and exaltation in order to loose us from the iron-tight grip of Behemoth and Leviathan. But we need to make that real in our lives, because it's not automatically effective as if we're a machine or a computer. God's wisdom includes the free will He allows us to choose to obey Him, to demonstrate God's goodness by how we live, although He does empower us to do His will if we're so inclined.

The great issue in all history is our response to what God has revealed. Will we honor Him and take the side of good, or will we take the default side, the side of evil? There's no neutral response. Yes, the side of good includes being in a trusting/loving relationship with the Son, but there's more. The side of good is humble submission to God's will and confidence in Him to do right (that is, to be just, to do only good) and a refusal to participate in evil in all its current expressions and manifestations. We can't be ignorant of His will, for He has clearly revealed it to us; even to refuse to know His will is to participate in evil. God is wise and good, but He also is dangerous. He has endowed us, if we're in Christ, with the gift of understanding His will and with the enablement to do it -- if we want to. He has bestowed on us great privileges. And with those privileges necessarily comes accountability. Job represents faithful humanity. May we, like Job, also be faithful.

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Relevant Scripture:

"The Lord brought me [wisdom] forth as the first of his works, before the deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began" (Proverbs 8:22-23; all of Proverbs 8 should be studied).

"Look at the behemoth, which I made along with you . . . He [the behemoth] ranks first among the works of God. . . " (Job 40:15a,19a).

"The wisdom of the wise will perish" (Isaiah 29:14b).

"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? . . . To those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God . . . Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God" (1 Corinthians 1:20b,24, 30).

"We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began" (1 Corinthians 2:6-7).