



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 4 Commentary Job 1 (1-19:29)

Lesson 5 Questions Job 2 (20-42)

GOD AND JOB

Job 1 (1-19:29)

INTRODUCTION

In the Book of Job, God wants to say some truths about Himself. In reading thoughts about God we read about a mystery, in the sense of religious truth that man can know by revelation alone and cannot fully understand. We do this with an attitude of respect, remembering that He is so infinitely above us that we can hope in who He is, more than we can understand who He is. But God loves all to an infinite degree; He sets the book of Job outside Israel and in an earlier time, as if God speaks to all on His earth to whom He wants to teach some truths about Himself.

Job is one of the most heart-searching and beautiful books in the Bible. It is about human life, about innocence, and about suffering. Why do the innocent suffer it asks? The Bible not only speaks to us, but it reveals us and is about us. In this book we will search into our lives as believers in God, remembering that:

“God’s word is loving and effective, sharper than any two edged sword. It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow: it

judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart. Nothing is concealed from him; all lies bare and exposed to eyes of Him to whom we must render an account” (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Job moves from a blameless, successful and happy man to an innocent, anguished and suffering man. In it, God inspires the writer to a lofty understanding of why God allows trials for good people.

This book is regarded as one of the great pre-figures of Christ in the Hebrew scriptures. As literature, its richness of diction, its poetry, “is continually astonishing in its power and inventiveness” (*Literary Guide to the Bible*, Alter and Kermode). “Job is the greatest poem of ancient and modern times” (Tennyson). “There is nothing written of equal merit” (Carlyle). [The writer was “the Shakespeare of the Old Testament.” Like Shakespeare, he used an antique story of such a man and imitated its antique style, though it is thought he wrote it around 600-300 B.C.]

I. JOB’S CHARACTER, PROSPERITY AND TRIALS (Job 1 - 2:10)

A. His Wealth and Piety (Job 1:1-5). A non-Hebrew, Job is said to have lived in the region of Edom or Arabia. “He was greater than any men of the East,” being of a sterling character who feared God and avoided evil. With his large number of livestock, and ten children who had numerous “feasts,” he still expressed his reverence for God by the sacrifices he offered to God to make up for any irreverence by his children.

B. Job’s Trials (Job 1:6 - 2:10). Such an ideal man, irreproachable in his character, aroused the “satan” among the “sons of God” (those whom we call “angels”) to ask God to allow Job to lose all that he had and then he would not be such a good friend of God. God allowed this and Job triumphed, while Satan was confounded, for Job said, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!” (Job 1:21, Ecclesiastes 5:14, 1 Timothy 6:7).

Again Satan (an “adversary”) challenged God to “touch his bone and his flesh and he will ‘blaspheme you to your face!’” (Job 2:5). This done, Job sits at the town dump heap, and his exasperated wife, as his friends will do according to the belief of the time, accused him of falsely declaring his innocence. Calling her senseless like other women (!) he makes an amazing statement, causing us to wonder if we could say that in a similar situation: “We accept good things from God and should we not accept evil?” (Job 2:10). Job does not know of the “Satan’s” role, but attributes it solely to God’s decision, making his submission more remarkable.

We of today, knowing of countless influences and causes for such misfortunes, still struggle to accept God’s failure to prevent such catastrophes, even though He would have to force others’ free will that He gave to all of us.

With this situation, the author has set up his characters and plot in order to teach “wisdom” to generations of God’s friends till the end of time,

for his creation found its way into the “Word of God.”

II. FIRST CYCLE OF SPEECHES (Job 3 - 4)

A. Job and Three Friends and Their Dialogues (Job 2:11 - 14:22). Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, from three different places, but probably all from Edom known for its wisdom, arrive to help their friend Job.

So far, the story has been in prose style; now it continues in outstanding poetry, causing scholars to suspect different authors; probably the poet used the original well-known folk tale to be a vehicle for his writing.

True to the theology (knowledge of God) of their times, each one, after listening to a Job different from the first two prose chapters, being one who laments and wishes he had not been born, the friends begin to encourage Job to admit some sin, some fault, for, says

1. Eliphaz: “...Mischief comes not out of the earth, nor does trouble spring out of the ground; But man himself begets mischief As sparks fly upward” (Job 5:6-7).

He remarks that God “with his angels can find fault, how much more with those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust!” (Job 4:18b-19a). How apt a description of all of us! Then Eliphaz reminds Job that

“Happy is the man whom God reproves!
The Almighty’s chastening do not reject,
For he wounds, but he binds up;
He smites, but his hands give healing”
(Job 5:17-18).

In his reply, Job again declares, “I have not transgressed the commands of the holy One... prove to me where I have erred!” (Job 6:10-24). To God he cries, “Why should I be a target for you?” (Job 7:12). “Why do you not pardon my offense?” (Job 7:21).

2. Bildad suggests that Job “have recourse to God,” that he pray “instead of uttering such things!” (Job 8:5, 2) We often heed Bildad’s advice and unlike Job turn to prayer in misfortunes. In Job’s reply (Chapters 9-10) we also see ourselves in our crosses and pains:

“If I say, I will forget my complaining,
I will lay aside my sadness and be of good cheer,
Then I am in dread of all my pains... ”
(Job 9:27-28)

He adds,
“Would that there were an arbiter between us!”
(Job 9:33)

The author of Job has stated exactly what God has given to us: an arbiter (one with power to decide between disputes)—and none other than God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who is a revelation of God’s love which the early Hebrews never knew!

Neither Bildad nor Job’s theology is anywhere near the revelation that God later gives, especially in the New Testament. To Bildad, the good will be rewarded on earth. In the Gospels, Jesus went completely contrary to Bildad and Job’s thinking. Jesus chose degradation and suffering for a most important reason in the mind of God: “I am the good Shepherd; the good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). “The Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all!”

Job’s problem is “How am I to speak of God in the context of my unmerited suffering?” He voices another belief of his time:

“Let me alone that I may recover a little.
Before I go from where I shall not return,
To the land of darkness and of gloom,
The black, disordered land
Where darkness is the only light.”
(Job 10:20-22)

In the Old Testament Sheol, an after-death destination, was a place of existence only, at least not of suffering!

3. Zophar (Job 11:1-20). Repeating the judgment of the first two friends, Zophar urges:

“If you set your heart aright
And stretch out your hands toward Him...
Surely then you may lift up your
face in innocence...”
(Job 11:13-15)

B. Job Replies (Job 12-19). Job testily replies: So “...you are the intelligent folk! I have intelligence as well as you!” (Job 12:2-3)... “the just, the perfect man’ is a laughingstock...” (Job 12:4, Matthew 27:43-44). Job’s reply to Zophar beginning with Job 12:10 through verse 25 is a praise of God’s power and judgment, well worth re-reading. In Job 12:10: “In his hand is the soul of every living thing, and the life breath of all mankind.” St. Paul echoes this in his discourse at Athens (Acts 17:26-28).

Is God responsible, we wonder, for Job’s suffering? Does this fill us with anger, even resentment, against God? We are reminded today that this is part of a grieving process which if suppressed can damage our relationship to God. When and if we cry out to God about His will or permissive will at least, we find that He embraces our darkness—in such a trial, we feel His embrace after we tell Him how we really feel! Job is every man—questioning God... Zophar’s words in Job 11:13-15 are a wonderful description of a preparation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation!

Job is weary of the speeches from these three accusers and he declares that he is preparing a case before God and invites anyone to try “to make a case against me.” If they can, “I shall be silent and die” (Job 13:18-19). Later on, we shall hear his case and God’s reply that does silence Job, and he begins to live in a new way.

Here, though, he begins to question God. “What are my faults and my sins? My misdeeds and my sins make known to me! Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?” (Job 13:21-24). A few lines further, we find the apt, poetic description of our being and of our end:

“Man born of woman
Is short-lived and full of trouble.
Like a flower that springs up and fades.
Swift as a shadow that does not abide.
Upon such a one will you cast your eyes,
So as to bring him into judgment before
you...”
(Job 14:1-3)

Nevertheless true as this is, and pessimistic, in Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:30, we hear a glorious difference; “If God can clothe in such splendor the grass of the field which blooms today and is thrown on the fire tomorrow, will he not provide much more for you, O you of little faith!”

Four lines later, without knowing it, Job exclaims a truth we believe: “For a tree there is hope that if it is cut down, it will spring up again.” Here is a symbol for us of the resurrection promised by Jesus.

Eliphaz and Zophar continue in two replies to say the same conclusions about Job. “Should a wise man answer with airy opinions... ?” (Job 15:1). ...he knows that his destruction is imminent says Eliphaz, and goes on to describe a “wicked man”: “By day the darkness fills him with dread; distress and anguish overpower him” (Job 15:23b-24). Such darkness in a soul, well describes a guilty conscience which Job does not have—yet. St. John of the Cross cites Job 16:13-20 as a description of Purgatory as well as the dark night of the soul. Job calls Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar “wearisome comforters are you all!” (Job 16:2b) and he cries out a very significant insight:

“O earth, cover not my blood,
Nor let my outcry come to rest!

Even now, behold, my witness is in heavens,
and my spokesman is on high.
My friends it is who wrong me;
before God my eyes drop tears.”
(Job 19:25-27)

The Hebrew word for “witness” above is go’el, their word for defender, vindicator, redeemer, who will plead a case. This is usually done by the nearest of kin. The RSV translation renders the line,

“I know that my redeemer lives
And at last he will stand upon the earth!”

Handel’s MESSIAH sets this beautiful line to music.

The high point of the whole book of Job are the next words:

“Whom I myself shall see:
My own eyes, not another’s shall behold Him
And from my flesh I shall see my God;
My inmost being is consumed with longing.”
(Job 19:27-26, New American Bible)

Even though Job believes he will go to the “nether world,” he seems here to have a “leap of faith” that God in the future will vindicate his innocence and give him a vision of himself. The translation above is St. Jerome’s; the state of the received text is not that clear. We remember, however, that the belief of Israel was in a “living God.” Jesus in Matthew 22:29-32, states, “He is the God of the living, not of the dead.” Jesus taught clearly in Matthew 22 the resurrection of the body.

However we translate this, the text of St. Jerome has been read in Christian liturgies for centuries as God’s Word.

“The writer of Job portrays his friends in such a way that they are to be pitied more than Job. They are too smug in their orthodoxy... too con-

fidant that God was bound by their logic.” In the end, their security in their own wisdom is their sin; Job is vindicated. He has, in his trial, doubted, rebelled, and hurled defiance at God. He goes through a Dark Night; he learns that God is sovereign; and that we are held by the power of sin. Yet he hopes in God.

“I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last... I shall see God!”
(Job 19:25-26)

Many see the theme of Job as “Why do the innocent suffer?” Bernhard Anderson in the last edition of his book, UNDERSTANDING THE OLD

TESTAMENT, NEW EDITION 1986, says that the basic issue is a relationship with God, an I-Thou relationship, coming from a decision of faith. Within the relationship of faith, suffering may be faced in the confidence that we are in God’s hand and as St. Paul says,

“In everything God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

We shall begin the next lesson with Chapter 22. Some of Job’s book, which is quite long, will be skipped.

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- b. Skim over Job 38:4-41. What does God seem to be saying?

- c. Read a stanza or so in Job 39. Is this more of the same strategy? Explain.

Day 5 Re-read Job 38:21, 40:2, 41:2.

- a. In what spirit does God say these words to Job?

- b. Read Job 40:2-5. What change has come upon Job after God's descriptions?

- c. Read Job 40:6-14, 25-30, 41:1-9, and 42:1-6. Describe the attitude of Job now and the lesson he has learned.

Day 6 Read the Epilogue.

- a. How do you feel about Job 42:7-9?

- b. What do you learn of God's judgment of the doctrines of Job's friends?

- c. Can the absence or presence of material and earthly goods and joys indicate God's judgment of anyone? Why or why not?

- d. Give an effect of the Book of Job on you.