

Institute for Christian Teaching
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A THEMATIC APPROACH TO THE BOOK OF JOB:
PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Prepared for the
International Faith and Learning Seminar
held at
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies
July 1993

149-93 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA

I. Introduction

"Christianity has been called the most literary religion ever, the most compelling evidence being the Bible."¹ Christians acknowledge that the Bible is "an authority source in their lives. They use its themes to formulate worldviews, its recommendations to order daily existence."² Christian literary scholars have taken interest in the Bible's literary qualities and in interpreting God's message using the literary approach. Indeed, the Bible demands literary study for it contains the most sublime themes, varied literary genres, and literary artistry and beauty in both content and form. Though an analysis is no substitute to the reading of the literary piece itself, it "does heighten the reader's comprehension, increasing awareness of thematic issues."³

This essay uses the thematic approach to the study of the book of Job. It endeavors 1) to analyze its themes 2) to draw implications for the Christian teacher and for effective Christian teaching and 3) to suggest some activities that will make English teaching meaningful and Bible-based in the secondary level by using the book of Job or parts of it as springboard or as main material.

A. Background of the Book of Job

The book of "Job is a . . . historical poem."⁴ Before it was transcribed into its present permanent form, the story of Job was part of oral literature. Comm writes, "Moses' sojourn in Midian would have enabled him to become acquainted with this local story."⁵ Dickinson agrees with Comm: "Moses, the author, took a well-known incident and under the illumination of inspiration elaborated it into this rare gem of literature."⁶ The fact that Job did actually exist at a certain period in history cannot be doubted. Ezekiel 14:14, 20 are proof "that he was a living human being."⁷

Who wrote the book of Job? Although the answer is given above, it has to be admitted that this question has created differing opinions. Ellen White, however, affirms that it was Moses who recorded the words of God to Job.⁸

The date of the story is rather difficult to establish. Comm takes Job's longevity--one hundred forty years after his trial (42:16)--as a clue to his times. She concludes that he was a contemporary of Abraham and Isaac.⁹

Like Comm, the Jewish Publication Society of America sets Job in patriarchal times. Those were the times when wealth was based on one's possession of livestock and slaves (1:3). Job's offering private sacrifices without the mention of priests nor of central shrine affirms it. In addition, he died in the manner of Abraham's and Isaac's death--old and contented.¹⁰

That Moses fleshed this local story into written literature justifies the claim that Job lived during the pre-Mosaic period or within the patriarchal times.

Based on Lamentations 4:21--"Rejoice and be glad, O Daughter of Edom, you who live in the land of Uz"--Morris associates Uz with the land of Edom which is at present a desert.¹¹

B. Job as Literature

Dorothy Comm considers the book of Job as the "tallest tree in the literary forest."¹² She supports her claim with six points:

1. It contains colorful vocabulary with rich metaphor, vividness, and impressive silences.
2. It has the universal element of an encounter with the God of mankind.
3. Embraces depth of thought, sublimity, and the omnipotence of God.
4. It deals with the deepest emotions and problems of life.
5. It maintains a deep interest in character, backgrounds, and movement.¹³

Andersen points out the supremacy of the book of Job "in the vast range of its ideas, in its broad coverage of human experience, in the intensity of its passions, in the immensity of its concept of God, and not the least in its superb literary craftsmanship."¹⁴

The book of Job cannot qualify to be called drama though the presentation is strongly dramatic. The prologue and the epilogue are narrated and the dialogue is merely an exchange of discourses. It lacks action, which is an imitation of actual human life. Such action should be tied in a series of scenes, a succession of events, which characterizes a story. Such is the requirement

of a drama of which the book of Job misses. And though it deals with "the tragic details in the life of Job. . . . the work as a whole is not a tragedy."¹⁵ A tragic work must end with the nemesis of both the antagonist and the protagonist. It is not a tragedy because its "sequence of events makes up a comic plot", a "U-shaped plot in which events begin in prosperity, descend into tragedy, and rise suddenly to a happy conclusion."¹⁶

To illustrate:



Fig. 1. The U-shaped plot of the book of Job

Taken as a whole, the book consists two distinct parts. These are prose and poetry. The prologue (chs. 1-2) and the epilogue (42:7-17) are in narrative form. The dialogue (chs. 3-42:1-6) is in poetry. The book's structure is better pictured as a sandwich with the prologue and the epilogue encasing the nutty and knotty part--the dialogue. "The ensuing dialogue . . . gives the book a unique and challenging flavor, producing also what is probably one of the most significant debates in all recorded history."¹⁷

As great literature, the book of Job deserves to be studied in English classes.

C. The Profile of the Characters

This portion introduces the characters. A brief description of each important character will shed light to the development of each theme as it is traced in this work.

1. The Profile of the Main Character

Job is the main character of the story. He is seen in three contrasting scenes of his life: in the prologue, in the dialogue, and in the epilogue.

In the Prologue

Job lives in Uz. He is "a man of distinction, honor, wealth and great integrity."¹⁸ Two word pairs describe him: blameless and upright, fearing God and shunning evil (1:8). His distinction and honor are well-established. He sits in the assembly of men. His wealth is remarkable. He is the richest of all the sheikhs of the East."¹⁹ His integrity is widely acknowledged. He has "nothing in him that his fellowman could bring as a charge against him."²⁰ As a blameless person, he walks with God (Gen. 17:1), takes Him as a close friend, and obeys His law in love (Ps. 119:1). As an upright person, he adheres faithfully to God's statutes, relates compassionately with others, and shows mercy to the orphan, the widow, and the needy.²¹ He assumes spiritual leadership in his home. He shows concern "for inner holiness as well as outward righteousness, and the fact that he practices his religion? Continually? (1:5) Further attests his good character."²²

In the Dialogue

The dialogue presents us a man in search of the answers to the why's of his sufferings. The dialogue portion portrays a near-defiant Job who engages himself in a daring challenge with God. The intense physical and emotional turmoil that he is undergoing through prompts him to reexamine the tenets--that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer--which he once upheld. He strives to rebuttal the more painful implication--that he is a sinner. He becomes "disoriented . . . in the anguish of life's bitter experience."²³

In the Epilogue

Here we see "a picture of an ideal patriarch, a pious man who has been rewarded for his piety by worldly prosperity."²⁴ He has survived the test--and admirably! To him, his former estate is restored. Though God has some words of correction for Job, He has words of praise for him. In 42:7 God calls him "my servant."

Here, once again, the man is presented before us--blameless and upright, fearing God and shunning evil.

2. The Profile of the Secondary Characters

The participation of Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad, Elihu, and Job's wife enriches the themes of the book. Each of their profile is necessary to gain a fuller understanding of the themes.

Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, who come from neighboring lands, are rich and respected men. Job 2:11-13 presents them as thoughtful friends, who by agreement with each other, have decided to leave their homes for a time to go and comfort their grieving friend, Job. But as the three of them try to reason with Job as to the cause of his suffering, their words, which are meant to comfort, turn to thorns that wound Job's heart very sorely. They deliver three cycles of speeches allowing Job to answer each speech. In the first cycle (chs. 4-14) they try to convince Job to repent. In the second cycle (chs. 15-21) they sound severe and threatening. In the third cycle (chs. 22-25) they dare hurl accusations upon Job. In the epilogue, we see another picture--three-humbled men who obey God's command to offer an offering and to go to Job that Job may pray for them.

Elihu is a mysterious figure. We only know that he has been there listening to Job and his three friends. He is younger than the four others. But he is bold and his speech has a fiery flavor. He tries to defend God. He asserts that man is too insignificant for God to bother about.

Not much is told about Job's wife. Apparently, she has enjoyed, with Job, the blessings of God. Unlike Job, she takes the other way--when everything seems wrong; the last option is to curse God.

II. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A theme is-a central idea of a literary piece. It is usually extracted from a literary piece by tracing how the author develops it. The author implants clues here and there until the theme blooms to the fullest and is noticed by the reader. A theme is the thread that runs through the beads of events, thus uniting them and giving the piece direction.

Three themes of the book of Job will be traced in this paper.

A. The Problem and Mystery of Human Suffering

The polytheist, the dualist, the atheist, the naturalist, the fatalist, the materialist, the agnostic, and the believing Christian alike have deeply engaged their minds and occupied their hearts with the perplexity of human suffering. All of them grapple with the question, why does man suffer? Or

more perplexing yet is the question, why does the righteous man suffer? The suffering of the righteous seems to be inexplicable. All of them cannot arrive at absolute answers. But the believing Christian, unlike the others, catches a glimpse of hope in the God he faithfully serves. Though confused at the present, he knows that a time will come when everything will be disclosed and made plain to him. For the mean time, he can only pray and wait knowing his God, was, is, and will be the same.

The wisdom theory--the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer--was so prevalent in Job's time. That means, if I am good, God will bless me; if I am bad, God will punish me. In Job's case, however, it does not seem to make sense. Even the Lord declares him "blameless and upright, fearing God and shunning evil" (1:13). In sudden succession of disasters, Job loses his livestock and his children (1:13-18) and finally, Job is "afflicted with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head" (2:7). On the yardstick of the wisdom theory, Job's spiritual status and his experience do not reconcile. If Job is righteous, why does he suffer? Taken collectively, the question is Why do the righteous suffer? This question has echoed and reechoed through the corridors of time. From the book of Job, we glean answers:

1. On the framework of the prologue, Ryken extracts the first answer: "Job suffers because God is testing his faith."²⁵ Moulton also supports the idea: "Suffering is . . . Heaven's test of goodness."²⁶ But why should heaven test Job's goodness when it knows Job is blameless? According to Bullock, "It is a test, not to refine an imperfect man, but to bring out the sterling character that God knows Job already possesses."²⁷ Although Job has no idea of the metaphysical transaction, he grasps the reason of his suffering:

But He knows the way I take;
When He has tested me, I will come
forth as gold.
23:10

2. Based on the prologue again, Ryken adds a second answer: "Job suffers because God permits Satan to bring suffering into his life."²⁸ Job 2:6 records God saying, "Very well, then, he is in your hands, . . ." The permissive theory of evil spells that God allows suffering to come into a man's life whether he is righteous or evil, but He is never the cause of it.

3. The third solution is proposed by Job's friends, Eliphaz specifically, in the first cycle of speeches:

Consider now: who, being innocent,
has ever perished?
Where were the upright ever
destroyed?
As I have observed, those who plow evil
and those who sow trouble reap it.
At the breath of God are they
destroyed;
At the blast of his anger they perish.
4:7-9

Elihu reinforces the idea. He asserts that suffering is punitive--a form of divine discipline.

He punishes them for their wickedness
where everyone can see them. 34:26

Job's friends are partly right in claiming that suffering is the result of sin. But they are partly wrong because this is not a universal rule. It is not so in Job's case. The cause and effect moral order may be broken. The righteous may suffer; the wicked may prosper. Job himself makes an insightful observation:

The tents of marauders are undisturbed,
and those who provoke God are secure--
12:6

4. As presented by Elihu, the fourth solution is: "Suffering is one of the voices by which God warns and restores men."²⁹ This he expresses in

. . .
to turn a man from wrongdoing
. . .
a man may be chastened on a bed of pain
. . .
He prays to God . . .
. . .
he is restored by God to his righteous state.
33:15-26

Eliphaz also believes that suffering comes to the good "to educate them, correct them, make them stronger for the futurel."³⁰

Blessed is the man whom God corrects;
so do not despise the discipline
of the Almighty.

5:17

Dickinson thinks on the same line: "Men are being prepared for eternal life under circumstances involving severe trial and conflict."³¹

This is an imperfect world. There is a constant clash between good and evil. There is a fruitful struggle against forces, for the "Christian life is a warfare"³²; the world a great battlefield.

5. Moulton, from the speeches of God, deduces the fifth solution: "The whole universe is an unfathomable mystery."³³ God Himself is a mystery--"For your thoughts are not my thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8). Man cannot fathom

the full mystery of the moral universe . . . We
must affirm both the mystery and God Himself. It is
built into the moral and physical orders and into
the very nature of God as He has permitted us humans
to perceive Him. The universal principle . . . of
cause-effect . . . is a reflection of the mysterious
self-revealing God. It is subsumed under Him,³⁴
however . . . He cannot be subsumed under it.

According to Pedersen, when the righteousness of man and the justice of God, as in the case of Job, clash "it is not that God's justice goes against that of man and suspends it, but that it transcends it and goes deeper than man is able to penetrate."³⁵

Hearing the voice and the questions of God, Job realizes his finiteness, his creatureliness. He concludes that he cannot answer God, which his knowledge is so limited to reason with an infinite God. But Job finds the way to wisdom and understanding:

The fear of the Lord--that is wisdom,
and to shun evil is understanding.

28:28

He also realizes that only God possesses ultimate wisdom. And he knows that he is not God. He, then, confesses:

Surely I spoke of things
I did not understand,
things too wonderful
for me to know.
42:3

True, "God's ways are incomprehensible, and no one but He can understand them, "but Job's personal encounter with God assures him that God is very close to him and he to God."³⁶

The very appearance of God, the very sound of His voice speaking to Job is the proof Job has been seeking. That God's power is immense emphasizes the wonder, the uniqueness, of God's coming to Job, to one man. If there is such a gap between man and God, what a wonder it is that God should speak to man at all. Job has the answer to his personal problem. God is his friend.³⁷

Job submits himself to God. He is now sure God is always his friend no matter what happens to him.

This is one of the many themes of the book of Job, which is lesson-filled for man of any age and place. Sooner or later in our lives, we may find ourselves wearing somewhat the same shoes that Job had once worn. We wonder, *Is God alive?* From the story of Job, however, we learn it pays to be a willing and vigilant participant of the great cosmic conflict. That great war that started in heaven is raging, even becoming fiercer and fiercer, until the end of time when God's government shall finally triumph over Satan's. At one point or another, we may be hit by the enemy's buffets. The book of Job tells us that it is not our battle alone; it is, as well, God's. He has proven that He is never far away. He granted Job's standing request--to hear from Him personally.

B. The Growth of Faith

"Job launched upon a journey of faith."³⁸ What is faith? "Faith is not faith without the element of personal confidence, self-commitment, trust."³⁹ Pease explains that without the anchoring commitment, without his basic loyalty to God, Job could not find his way back to light. How could one with unexpected and unexplained tragedies? But Job's loyalty remains unshaken. He exclaims in the midst of heart-rending grief:

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
 may the name of the Lord be praised.
 1:21

His wife tempts him but he responds:

Shall we accept good from God,
 and not trouble? 2:10

His conception of God is wrong. We can only sympathize with him because he does not know the role Satan plays. He laments for his miseries outweigh the sands of the seas. But there is another load, aside from the calamities and the accusations of his friends. This is the hardest to bear:

The arrows of the Almighty are in me,
 my spirit drinks of their poison. 6:4

Yesterday God was his friend; today God seems to be his enemy. The thought alone tortures him day and night. He cannot tolerate God's silence, so he searches for the seemingly broken relationship. He knows, though, that he is only man and that he is not worthy of such a friendship.

But how can a mortal be righteous before God? 29:2

Therefore, he prays:

I could only plead with my Judge for mercy. 19:15

In the better days, he sought God; he enjoyed a deep and personal communion with Him. In his bitter days, he seeks God that they may talk again; for he has so many questions--so many--which he cannot find answers. He pleads,

O God . . .
 summon me and I will answer,
 or let me speak, and you reply. 13:20,22

But God does not answer him. He looks up to the heavens but it is as still as the heart of summer. In the stillness, Job takes a leap of faith.

In 13:15 he makes a declaration, which completely disproves Satan. Satan has certified that, "a man will give all he has for his life" (2:4). But here is Job declaring

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him. 13:15

Surely, he values his faith in God more than his own life.

He even verbalizes his belief in the resurrection and Christ's Second Coming. He is saying that even if he will not get the explanation of his present situation, there is a time when he will understand; he will meet his God face to face.

I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. 19:25

In the end, Job declares:

My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you. 42:5

This is the growth of the faith of Job. It surely has its ups and downs. Like any grieving man, Job undergoes the various emotional stages: anger, anguish, self-pity, hope. But in spite of his shifting moods, God does not condemn him. Instead God commends him for having spoken right (42:9). Indeed, the God in whom he has put his faith listens to the questions of a sincere man. An always-pious man that he is, his faith in God has sustained him until he hears the voice of God. Surprisingly, God does not address the cause of his suffering. Rather, God focuses on his response--his faith.

Faith has five ingredients as Dr. Rasi⁴⁰ enumerated in his paper. These are choice, confession, trust, obedience, and hope. How do these apply to the faith of Job?

Choice Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble? 2:10

Obedience Till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me. 27:5,6

Confession But now my eyes have seen you. 42:5

Trust Though he slay me yet will I trust in him. 13:5 KJV

Hope I know that my Redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. 19:25

Faith grows when nurtured. There are times when faith falters, as Job's faith sometimes did. But the remarkable thing in Job was his faith ascended to greater heights. He was able to do so because he clung to God who alone is able to give man faith. Any man, therefore, gripping the hand of God, can move one step higher then higher, though sometimes slipping, up the mountain of faith.

C. Goodness without Reward

"Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9) This is Satan's question which implies that no man can serve God without reward, that man's loyalty is bought by God's special favors, and that man cannot adore God on the basis of His character alone. Satan claims that Job fears God because of the great wealth God has freely bestowed upon him. Satan, therefore, challenges God to destroy everything that is dear to Job, even hurt him physically. He, then, predicts, "He will surely curse you to your face" (1:11). He excitedly waits. A positive result of his accusation means his triumph. It is the argument he plans to spread throughout the earth or even to the universe: "No one can live up to the claim God has made about the high moral standard of Job"⁴¹ and that no man can serve God for His character alone.

Job's reaction astounds Satan; it irritates Job's wife who, out of a grating heart, exclaims, "Curse God and die!" (2:9) Job's exceptional response is an index of a worship inspired purely by love.

His full surrender tells the spectators and readers of this great book that his service and loyalty to God are motivated purely by love, not by the wealth and prestige God had given him. In his review of his past life (29:2-5), he never makes reference to his material possessions. He recalls God's intimate friendship and the companionship of his children. He argues that he has done good not because of pay or reward "but because it was his nature, his integrity to be blameless and upright, fear God, and avoid evil."⁴²

Satan is proved wrong. Job serves God with no ulterior motive and even if there is only one person, it proves that it is possible--man can love God for His character.

III. IMPLICATIONS

Job's life can serve as a model for modern man. It can revolutionize his life, for the same problems and questions that baffled Job also baffle him today. The modern man struggles with his own faith because, as an innate religious being, he searches for the object of his faith; he desires to confess Him, to trust in Him, to hope in Him, to obey Him. The modern man is confronted with the unwritten principle of the universe--that is, service. The snow that caps the mountains melts and feeds the rivers; the rivers, in turn, flows to supply the sea. Why does nature serve each other? Why should the modern man serve God and his fellowman? For what motive? A thematic analysis of the book of Job can help him order his own life.

A. For the Christian Teacher

1. The Christian teacher can only know in parts. She realizes that she has no comprehensive knowledge of all truths and that some truths are better made plain in the light of faith.
2. In the face of suffering or stress, the Christian teacher needs social support that can come from fellow Christian teachers, students, her own family members, and significant others.
3. The Christian teacher can choose to teach from a purely love-motivated purpose.
4. The Christian teacher's faith, though it may reach its lowest ebb, can grow to spiritual heights. She can choose to continually advance by earnestly seeking the presence of God.
5. In spite of the awesomeness of God, He takes the Christian teacher as a personal friend.
6. The Christian teacher can choose to live an examined life-blameless and upright, fearing God and shunning evil.
7. The Christian teacher can choose to view suffering in a universal context, against the backdrop of the great controversy and address suffering in a more caring and loving attitude and action.
8. The Christian teacher, faced with injustice, indifference, and suffering can choose to anchor her faith upon God who will ultimately bring justice and mercy.

B. For Effective Christian Teaching

1. A thematic approach can be used to dig the great mines of the Bible, which offer viable insights into a richer, fuller, and more meaningful life.
2. Effective Christian teaching calls for a caring classroom atmosphere. The teacher tries to know students individually, calls each student by name, takes time to talk with each of them, displays a sense of pride in every student's achievement, and gives each a fair evaluation. This was exemplified by God as he dealt with Job from the beginning to the end of the book.
3. Effective Christian teaching provides the students abundant opportunities to question, argue, defend positions, and to discover truth. The teacher knows when to keep silent and when to talk.

IV. SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES to bring the book of Job alive to English classes

Many factors come into play in creating lively and meaty class interactions. One of these is the activity, which the teacher introduces to the class. The following are suggestions, which the teacher may modify to suit her own teaching conditions.

1. For the students: You are employed as a feature editor of a leading magazine in your country. Your editor-in-chief has heard about a phenomenal figure--a man with an unusual experience and an unusual behavior named Job. You are assigned to interview him. Outline your questions.⁴³
2. Based on # 1, choose a classmate who will act as Job. Interview him in a make-believe TV studio. Be sure you and your partner study the speeches of Job beforehand.
3. For the teacher: Divide the class into groups. If you come up with four groups, assign two groups to dramatize the prologue and two groups to dramatize the epilogue. Instruct the groups to write the script befitting their own culture. Some considerations are costumes, use of language (addressing the elders, forms of greeting, etc.), props, and stage design. This will develop creativity, open-mindedness to others' ideas, dramatic skills, cooperative effort, and empathy. Or choose one of the two groups to study the culture of the Near East people in the ancient times. Let the groups chosen present the play in a way they think it happened.

4. If your class can recommend a man who has undergone a "Jobic" experience and who can testify the greatness of God's love, invite him to the class and have the students interview him.
5. Arrange a choral reading piece from the dialogue with Job and his friends alternating. The teacher may do this herself or the class groups. Keep the piece within reasonable time limit by picking out only the highlights of the speeches. Ask students to memorize their assigned parts. Present a speech choir. A variation can be the reader's theater.
6. Have students pick out two or three figures of speech they like best. Let them explain to the class why they are meaningful to them.
7. Divide the class into groups of three or four students each. Assign half of the groups (counselee) to write a letter. The teacher or the group may suggest and both agree on the seed problem (based on Job's story). Let the group expand the idea and address the letter to a group belonging to the other half (counselor). The counselor group sends a reply proposing some possible solutions. The counselee letters and the counselor letters will be read before the class.
8. Encourage the class to ask questions, which echo Job's questions. Organize discussion groups (panel, symposium, round table conference, etc.) to address the questions.
9. The teacher may look for another piece of literature whose character's experiences are almost similar with that of Job's. Let the class compare the two characters marking their similarities and differences in profile, experiences, reaction, and motives.
10. Ask the students to retell the story of Job in the first person point of view, e.g., in the point of view of Job, of the wife, of the eldest son or of any of the children, of the servant, of any of the friends, or of any of those he had helped.

V. CONCLUSION

Everyone grapples with difficult questions in this life. There are many things, which are not plain. Man searches for answers. God, in His great love for lost humanity, discloses Himself in His Word. May the Christian teacher take His revelation as the foundation of her faith and the source of valuable lessons, which will guide her to a meaningful Christian life and an effective Christian teaching experience.

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Bible texts are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise cited.