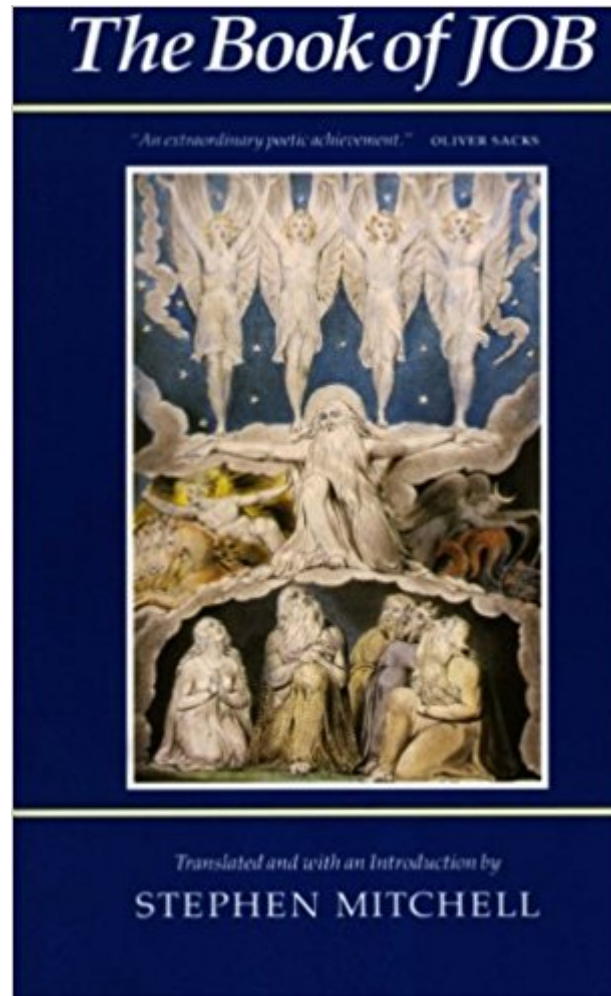




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The BOOK OF JOB



Synopsis

The theme of The Book of Job is nothing less than human suffering and the transcendence of it: it pulses with moral energy, outrage, and spiritual insight. Now, The Book of Job has been rendered into English by the eminent translator and scholar Stephen Mitchell, whose versions of Rilke, Israeli poetry, and the Tao Te Ching have been widely praised. This is the first time ever that the Hebrew verse of Job has been translated into verse in any language, ancient or modern, and the result is a triumph.

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Customer Reviews

"Entralling."--George Steiner, "The New Yorker" "Where the text is intrinsically moral, criticism becomes a moral act. Stephen Mitchell's superb translation of "The Book of Job" is moral in just this way--it puts us on the closest terms with the Old Testament book that many commentators regard as the crucial post-Holocaust parable."--David Lehman, "Newsweek" "If Mr. Mitchell gives an eloquent account of the effects of Job's poetry in his introduction, in the translation itself he does even better: he makes those effects come alive. Writing with three insistent beats to the line, and hammering home a succession of boldly defined images, he achieves a rare degree of vehemence and concentration."--John Cross, "New York Times" "The thoughtful reading of this astonishing translation has been for me a rare experience combining poetry and enlightenment."--Erik H. Erikson

The theme of "The Book of Job" is nothing less than human suffering and the transcendence of it: it

pulses with moral energy, outrage, and spiritual insight. Now, "The Book of Job" has been rendered into English by the eminent translator and scholar Stephen Mitchell, whose versions of Rilke, Israeli poetry, and the "Tao Te Ching" have been widely praised. This is the first time ever that the Hebrew verse of Job has been translated into verse in any language, ancient or modern, and the result is a triumph.

What will happen when bad things happen to a God-fearing Man? The verbal fireworks of the dialogue between Job and his friends and beauty of the poetry on wisdom of the divine speeches are found in the Book of Job. Having lost everything, confused and angry, Job refuses to reject his faith. In order to understand the nature of God, he questions if God make good people suffer and what has he lined up at the end of this. Is he going to bring happiness? Is he testing the individual or it is a fact of life? At the end of this book, we learn that God indeed is benevolent and forgiving. The God Almighty blesses Prophet Job and bestows everlasting happiness in his life. In the process of teaching Job, God reveals that He is Omnipotent. In Job 4:17, we find that "Shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall a man be more pure than his maker? The implication is that God alone can discern morality and goodness in the universe. This idea is reinforced by God's own voice which asks Job "Can thou draw out leviathan with a hook (Job 41) a rhetorical question which serves to demonstrate the almost abject lowliness of a human being when contrasted with the wisdom of God. The author briefly discusses the Hindu holy book of Bhagavadgita and the Book of Job on the Problem of the Self as a matter of academic expediency, since God talk to Arjuna, like he does with Job. In Bhagavadgita, Lord Krishna teaches and mentors Arjuna of his spiritual journey and quest for enlightenment. Krishna first comforts Arjuna by instructing him on the externality of the human soul and helping to stave off Arjuna's own fear of personal mortality and fighting a war with his own kith and kin. In this story, God stands as a protector of Arjuna and all mortals (1, 2). The author has translated the book from Hebrew to English with an emphasis on the accuracy and the meaning of the original version of the scripture. The life of Prophet Job dates back to about fifth century B.C., but the earliest Hebrew manuscript that survived was written some 1500 hundred years later. Through many centuries of oral and scribal transmission, corruptions have occurred in the Book of Job. To prove this point, the author discusses selected verses such as 5:6-7; 23:13; 39:21, etc. References: 1. The Bhagavad Gītā and the Book of Job on the Problem of the Self, James Norton, East-West Studies on the Problem of the Self, 1968, pp 177-1922. Dilemma and Resolution in Bhagavad-Gita and Job, Hazel S. Alberson, College English Vol. 18, No. 8 (May, 1957), pp. 406-413

Stephen Mitchell offers readers an almost musical, poetic, easy to read, vigorous translation of the biblical book Job with an extensive introduction. He states that the original Hebrew of the book is difficult to read in some places due to scribal errors and the insertion of small and large segments of material that were not in the original composition. Therefore, he corrects the text by changing some of the words and translates freely on occasions to capture the book's intent rather than being literal. He deletes Elihu's entire speech because many scholars insist that it is a later addition to the book, probably inserted by some scribe who thought he was improving the tale by having Elihu add a new, more pious idea why people suffer. However, this scribe neglected to notice that when God criticizes the people who spoke to Job, he does not mention Elihu. Mitchell includes a detailed section of notes where he comments upon the text and has a section where he identifies the verses he deleted.

Who is Job? The book Job is composed of three parts: a prologue, an epilogue, and the main body of the tale. Many scholars are convinced that the prologue and epilogue are later additions to the original, the body of the tale; it is different in tone and portrays God in a radically distinctive manner. These additions were probably made hoping to portray God in a more favorable light to the average reader. Scholars are unable to agree on when the book was composed, who wrote it, and its intended audience; however, it was probably composed sometime between the 7th and 5th century BCE. The book's prologue states that Job was afflicted with a debilitating skin disease by God's command to show that Job, a very pious non-Israelite who did not live in Canaan, would not curse God even though he suffered constant pain. God also commands that Job's children be killed and he lose his wealth. This prologue theme of a test to see if Job will curse God is different than the theme in the body of the book which explores why bad things happen to good people. It is significant that Job is a simple common man, despite his enormous wealth, and not very intelligent, an individual who the average reader will identify with. He lacks spiritual maturity; his pious acts toward God are unsophisticated and consist mostly of sacrifices, equivalent to today's prayers. His thoughts and concerns are not deep, certainly not philosophical. As God predicted in the prologue, he doesn't curse him explicitly when he is inflicted and loses his children and wealth, but he comes very close. He curses his own life and human life generally, indeed all that God created. It is as if one man says to another "I certainly like you, but I dislike everything you do." Job is disappointed, confused, and questioning. He doesn't curse God directly because he is afraid of him and his punishment, not because of respect and righteousness. Thus, although the book doesn't say so, it appears that God's test actually fails; Job's failure to curse God is not piety, but fear.

Who is God? The portrait of God in the book's prologue is, as previously stated, different than

his portrayal when he speaks to Job at the end of the body of the book during a whirlwind, a violent scene of nature in turmoil, a symbol of his message to Job. In the prologue, God is shown as a monarch sitting before attendants, presumably angels, and mentions to an accuser that Job is one of the nicest human beings. The accuser disagrees and argues that Job is only good because he is prosperous, but if he lost all and was afflicted with a painful disease, he would turn and curse God. Strangely, God tells the accuser to inflict Job to prove that he is right. God's decision to murder of Job's ten children, cause Job pain, and prove to an underling that he is correct, are totally uncharacteristic of what people think about God, a being who is just and all-knowing, who should be respected by all, especially by angels who shouldn't doubt his views. The psychologist Carl Jung wrote that the prologue portrays God as being morally inferior to Job.

Explanations of Job's three friends Job is visited by three friends who sit by his side for seven days without speaking because they are considerate to Job's suffering. But the consideration doesn't outlast the seven days. (It is interesting to note that the magical numbers seven and three, which reappear often in Scripture and fairy tales, is mentioned frequently in the story.) The friends soon ignore Job's suffering and begin to criticize him for failing to understand the cause of his situation. Each of the three, in their own ways, with increasing pious emphasis, reminds Job that God is just, and they chastise him for not realizing that he is suffering because he is being punished for past misdeeds. When Job repeatedly reminds his friends that he never did anything wrong, they insist that he is obviously morally blind. Readers hearing the friends suppose that evil occurs in this world because the good and just God is punishing a wrong-doer may wonder what they would think if they knew what the prologue reveals is the real reason why God caused Job to suffer. God's explanation delivered in a whirlwind Job hears God's voice which tells him that he and his three friends don't understand the purpose of the world or how it operates. Their premise that the world functions on a moral basis of good and bad, that God oversees human behavior and punishes bad acts and reward good deeds, and that humans are the center and purpose of creation, are wrong. The whirlwind is the true symbol of how the world functions. The earth is full of violence. The lion pounces upon the deer, tears it apart, and consumes it. Violent of creatures are, metaphorically speaking, God's toys. Humans, with their wrong notion of morality, want to see a different world, but the world functions as God wants it. Job's suffering (contrary to the prologue) is part of nature, the way things are. People need to understand this and accept the world for what it is, not what humans naively want it to be.

Summary The message of this biblical book is not comforting, but it is realistic. The world functions according to the laws of nature, not morality. The philosopher Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) understood this. In book one chapter 2 of his Guide of the Perplexed, he points out that we should not make decisions based on morality,

but on reason, on understanding how the universe functions, for the world works by the laws of nature. Later, he explains that evil is the result of natural law, one of three things: people harm themselves, others harm them, or they suffer from natural events, such as hurricanes, which are good for the world as a whole, but may not be good for a particular person. The Lord's revelation to Job would distress most readers who hope that God cares for them and protects them as a merciful moralistic father. Accordingly, an additional ending was added, either by the original poet or some later writer, which is similar in tone to the poem's prologue. In it a compassionate God, altogether unlike the God of nature who spoke from the whirlwind, awards Job for his conduct during his suffering by giving him seven sons and three daughters again, doubling all of his previous possessions, and by prolonging his life.

A wonderful rewrite of this grand story! As a Bible teacher for over 35 years, I should act shocked by the changes, omissions, and emendations but Mr. Mitchell has produced a flowing text that puts you right in story. I am sad that he left out the chapter on the help the Lord gives when someone doesn't hear the message of His sacrifice for yours and my sake. I will listen to this story several times I'm sure.

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