

West Branch Friends Meeting
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“Lessons Gleaned from the Book of Job”

I never know what questions and/or comments I will sometimes get when visiting with some of you, and the most recent one, ‘do Quakers believe in the devil,’ got me thinking about the subject and although my answer was a simple, ‘depends on which Quaker you ask,’ it did get me thinking a little about the Old Testament book of Job where the term Satan is first introduced. But before we tackle the purpose of that book, let me add this bit of background as a reminder about the language of the Bible.

I have friends on Facebook in both Africa and South America who will often have comments that are not in English. Conveniently, I can click on ‘translate’ and get the general meaning of the message. But the translation is computer generated, and never sounds quite like we would say it in English if a native English-speaking American were doing the translating.

Think about that for a moment, and then consider scripture. Nearly all the Old Testament books were written in Hebrew (with a few verses in Aramaic) while the New Testament was written in Greek, although the language spoken by Jesus and his disciples was Aramaic. Eventually all the books – well, the ones the church leaders decided were good enough to be a part of the Bible, at least - they were all eventually translated into Latin (after being copied by scribes who often made mistakes or added their own ideas). THEN, as the centuries passed, the Latin was finally translated into a variety of other languages, English being one of the earliest in the King James Version in 1611.

So back to Job. So keep in mind, the word ‘Satan’ was first translated from Hebrew, then from Latin, and then finally into English when we read it in Job. Many who read this book today have an understanding that it is a true story, and not a very fun one, at that. But I want to turn to my go to Biblical Scholar, John Shelby Spong, for a different understanding of the story of Job.

IF the story of Job were created for a specific purpose, then we have to figure out what that purpose might have been for the Israelites. In this story, Job raises the deepest human questions, and deals with the most ancient of human fears: why there is evil and suffering, and the seemingly absence of fairness and justice.

A quick review of the book starts with a supposed conversation with this character the author calls Satan (who is not an evil figure, or even a fallen angel) and this other major story character called God. Job is this very faithful servant of God, and Satan is playing 'devil's advocate' if you will, and questions God as to whether this man would be so faithful if he didn't have all his possessions, his flocks, his health, and his large family. God defends Job's faithfulness, but agrees to see which one of them is correct. Satan is allowed to test Job 'for a season' during which time his flocks are decimated, his wealth destroyed, all his family and servants are killed, and Job, himself, loses his health.

I'm sure in this story the Satan character is rubbing his hands in glee, thinking this will turn Job against God and prove Satan's point that it's easy to be faithful when things are going your way; not so much when you lose everything in life.

Then we have 30 chapters of the book devoted to three 'friends' of Job's who are absolutely convinced that the reason Job is suffering all these terrible circumstances is because, according to Hebrew scriptures, God is a just deity who punishes evil and rewards righteousness. In II Samuel 24, David was punished for his affair with Bathsheba; Moses, in Numbers 20, is punished with death for putting God to the test, and just the opposite, in Exodus 14, the Israelites are given a path to cross the Red Sea for their faithful endurance of the suffering they've experienced at the hands of the Egyptians. So, according to these friends of Job, it's obvious that he must have done something bad to lose everything of value in his life.

The idea that if one obeyed the law and worshiped God properly then one could count on blessings from heaven, was a central tenet in popular Jewish religion, and what the 'friends' were relying on for their 'wisdom'. It gave meaning to their lives; otherwise, went their thinking, what was the point of life, anyway.

But good news – Job doesn't buy his friends' arguments – arguments based on Hebrew Scriptures. Job knew he had been upright and honest, but he had no answer for his losses. In the end of the story Job is sitting on top of a pile of garbage, scratching the infected sores of his body with a piece of broken pottery, alone with nothing but his integrity. The meaning of life itself was at stake in this debate.

Here's Job's quandary: if there was no God, then apparently life was chaotic, ruled by chance, fate or good luck, and had no meaning. But if there was a God, did that mean God was not just? Job's friends – his tormentors – were fervent with their belief that Job was being punished for something bad he had done; something that had displeased God.

Then the author of this story, a story I believe was written to prove a point, has God ask Job dozens of questions in chapter 38. Here are just a few from verses 4-7:

“Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me, if you understand.

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?”

As question after question is posed to Job, he comes to understand a new version of God - one totally different from the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. His new understanding helps him realize the inadequacy of every human attempt to state how God works. Job gets it: that the human mind cannot embrace the reality of God by thinking like a human.

I think we sometimes read the stories of the Old Testament with a literal interpretation rather than learning from them, and applying them to our lives today. I'm afraid our Christian religion at its basic core, has an arrogance of believing that we humans can discern the ways of God. Our human idea of fairness should never be read into our understanding of God.

The reward and punishment – heaven or hell – is little more than the assertion that the mind of God operates in the same ways our human minds operate. God’s conversation with Job in this story tells us we are not God, nor can we begin to think that we think like God!

I think of all the sermons I’ve sat through in my life, often being told I was a sinner going to eternal damnation, but that God would reward me if I just said a prayer to Jesus and then all would be well. It’s a religious system born of human fear that life has to have meaning, and it includes our human idea of fairness that is dualistic – good vs. evil, love vs. hate, heaven vs. hell, God vs. Satan. I believe it’s a human religious system that needs to die.

Job resisted the theological conclusions of his day; he refused to let what had happened to him be interpreted by past Hebrew scriptures, written by men who were also trying to make sense of life. Can we look at this story of Job and see how WE can have a paradigm shift in our beliefs about God? That a God of love isn’t like us and how we think, but yet is a part of each of us? Job, then, becomes an eternal symbol of that endless human struggle to find meaning in life.

Is there a real evil deity called Satan? I choose to believe such a character exists in past stories to teach lessons, and should not be taken literally in readings of scripture. Consider Job a story for us today; a story that reminds me that when I hear someone say they believe certain things about God because it’s in the Bible, or when I hear someone say they know God’s will, I will simply try to remember the lesson in Job, that we are not God, and we can’t understand the meaning of life by making God in our own human image.

My challenge is still to live that life of love that I find in the God I don’t know in human terms, but can experience in so many areas of my life. The God I see in so many aspects of the natural world around me – the beauty of the soon changing leaves, the glorious sunsets, the animals that bring meaning to our lives. It’s the God I see in the eyes of love when one of my grandchildren runs to meet me with a huge hug. The God I feel in my heart when I am doing something that makes life better for someone else.

The purpose of the book of Job? I believe it is to teach us we need not try and understand all about God, but to simply feel and experience the love that *is* God, and then? Live accordingly.