

## P.S. 'Contradictions' in the book of Job

**D**OES THE BOOK OF JOB contradict itself? The answer to that question is, unsurprisingly, no. However, the book may contradict what some people might *think* it says. I'll try to explain what I mean.

First, consider what the book has to say about the claim:

**If you're righteous you will be blessed by God here and now.**

From the first forty-one chapters one would think that a key message of the book was that this is not necessarily (or at all) true. Job was a righteous man (the prologue says so), God had not taken issue with Job's protestations of innocence in His speeches, and yet Job had suffered at an excruciating level. So the book breaks the link between being righteous and being blessed now, doesn't it?

Yet if this were the correct conclusion, the book then appears completely to undercut it in chapter 42 by giving Job a here-and-now blessing twice what he had before (and he was already the greatest of the children of the East!). God did this (we might presume) because Job had spoken that which was right concerning God (and, perhaps, because he was a righteous man)! Job's right words and actions at the end of the book result in blessing.

Let's spin things around and consider the flipside of the righteousness-breeds-blessing equation. We can express this as:

**If you have sinned, you can expect suffering from the hand of God here and now.**

Again, most of the book seems directed towards disproving this assertion. Job is righteous (the prologue says so), and yet he has suffered like none before him. But, just as we are beginning to nod our heads in agreement, Job *repents* (in chapter 42), which must imply that, paradoxically, he *has* sinned. It *may* even be taken to imply that his suffering was in some way linked to this. Once he has repented, God blesses him with double the riches he once had. Like the first, this tension is not straightforward to resolve. In the last chapter, the book appears to take itself apart, undercutting the conclusion it had looked as though it was making.

We can resolve this by recognising that we must have been wrong in our assumptions

about the book's message. We conclude instead that the book of Job is not *primarily* a message about whether or not righteous people are blessed here and now, and neither is it *primarily* a message about whether people suffer because they have sinned. They may do, but they needn't. Neither the book nor God makes a definitive pronouncement on this issue. The book *seemed* to be suggesting that to link suffering and sin was categorically false (as was any linkage between present blessing and righteousness), but chapter 42 of the book seems to imply that on some occasions they *may* be linked after all. The point is *that this is entirely up to God, and not something which is open to man's scrutiny or rationalisation*. It is not a question of behaviour and reward which is at stake in the book, but a question of what God has a right to do and man a right to know.

The clever way in which the book pulls the rug from under the feet of what we might have thought was its conclusion renders its real message all the more powerful. This message is that suffering and blessing are up to God, that He is right in however He disposes them, and that He is not accountable to us to justify or explain His decisions. The way the book deliberately undermines any pat conclusions about whether suffering and blessing are or are not 'deserved' enhances the point that one never knows as a human being (nor should one expect to know), but that there is a God Who does and Who must be trusted. Job contains a message about God more than a message about suffering.

The book certainly establishes that sin does not *necessarily* lead to suffering (it is the suffering that brings out the 'sin' of which Job repents at the end of the book, not the other way round), but it goes little further with respect to that question. By the events of chapter 42 it refuses to be tied down about what one may or may not expect in this life. This chimes perfectly with the point that God is making in His speech. He says *nothing* about the link between sin and suffering, righteousness and blessing. This is not the book's message; the message is one about the inscrutability of God, and the fact that He always is and always will be right, and that we must trust Him to be so. Mark Vincent