

Dating the Life of Job

Job, Last of the Patriarchs

I have read discussions in multiple biblical references which reasonably date Job as generally contemporary with Abraham. Some reasons given for this include the fact that Job lived to be very old (lived 140 years after fathering 14 adult children) and that his wealth was measured in cattle.

While I generally accept this timeframe, I must push the date forward slightly, following Abraham by 3 or 4 generations, but still preceding Moses. I do not believe that this chronological shift conflicts with the general evidence mentioned above, but that it simply stretches an ancient desert lifestyle for a few more years, and adds significance to God's blessing of Job's long life (note the undiminished vitality of Moses at age 120).

Lack of Hard Dating in this Article

There is no actual hard dating (i.e. 1800-1500 BC) used in this article due to the specific focus on generational and sequential chronology, and a desire to limit discussion to this format.

Considerations for a Later Earliest Possible Date

The identified nationalities of Job and his friends are the reason dating must be pushed to a later date. While neither Zophar nor Elihu are particularly helpful in this regard, both Eliphaz and Bildad become very important. Also, the land of Uz is itself offers an interesting possibility.

Job lived in the land of Uz. The name "Uz" is identified with two people in Scripture, a grandson of Shem (Genesis 10:23) and a nephew of Abraham (Genesis 22:20-24). If this land of Uz refers to Abraham's nephew, this would point to multi-generational distance between Abraham and the establishment of a later land of Uz. Unfortunately, because Shem's grandson was also named Uz, there is no way to ascertain which Uz the land is associated with, and therefore no conclusion can be made in this regard.

Eliphaz the Temanite, introduced in Job 2, is our best indicator of earliest possible dating for the events of the Book of Job. A Temanite would be a descendant of Tema, one of the 12 princes who were sons of Ismael named in Genesis 25. Since the term "son of Tema" is not used, Eliphaz would not likely be a son, but would be a grandson, nephew, or further descendent. Note also that Job is an adult with 14 adult children and his advising friends are elders – quite possibly grandfathers themselves, indicating an additional generational step away from Abraham.

Likewise, Bildad the Shuhite, also introduced in Job 2, can be identified as a descendent of Shuah, a son of Abraham by his later wife, Keturah, named in Genesis 25. While not as chronologically indicative as Eliphaz, we would, by this reference alone, still push the life of Job to at least 3 generations after Abraham.

So:

Abraham > Ismael (1) > Tema (2) > Tema's sons and daughters (3) > Temanites (4th gen.+)

Abraham > Shuah (1) > Shuah's sons and daughters (2) > Shuhites (3rd gen.+)

Compare:

Abraham > Isaac (1) > Jacob (2) > 12 Sons of Jacob (3) > 12 Tribes (4th gen.+)

Although years are not clearly represented by simple generational accounts, since Eliphaz and Bildad place Job at least 4th and 3rd (respectively) generations after Abraham, then Job could not have lived any earlier than slightly after the time of Joseph, that is, sometime after Israel's establishment in Egypt.

Considerations for Latest Possible Date

Rabbinical tradition names Moses as the author of Job. This in itself gives a latest possible date of Job as occurring before the time of Moses. This tradition would indicate Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, as his most likely source for Job, because Jethro was a priest and also lived in generally the same geographic region (Midean) which Job had lived (Uz).

As Job lived 140 years after the main events of the Book of Job, then unless he was alive at the time of Exodus, these events would necessarily have transpired no later than 140 years before Moses. There is, however, no distinct indication from Scripture that this is the case. One can make a mild argument from silence, expecting that if Job was alive during, or nearly up to, the time of Moses it would be expressed, either in Job or elsewhere in the Pentateuch. At any rate, the patriarchal nature of Job would indicate an earlier date, not a later date, during Israel's time in Egypt.

The Pre-Law sacrificial practice and Job's later appointment as mediator for his friends make a strong theological argument that Job lived before the institution of the Law at Mount Sinai. While non-Israelites would continue to worship God after their traditional fashion regardless of God's covenant with Israel, it does not seem likely that God would appoint Job as a mediating priest ministering beyond his own family after having set up the Aaronic priesthood.

In Conclusion:

If we accept the following evidences:

- A late patriarchal period based on Job's age and other indicators
- The identities of the nationalities of Job's friends
- Accepting that Moses was the editor/author of Job
- Accepting that Job would probably not have been appointed by God to be a mediating priest for his friends after the institution of the Aaronic Priesthood

Then, based on the above, the events of the Book of Job would necessarily occur during the period of Israel's 400 year sojourn in Egypt, in all probability (by generational account) at least 50-100 years after Joseph, with the expectation of the events occurring not much later, probably 150-250 years before Moses.