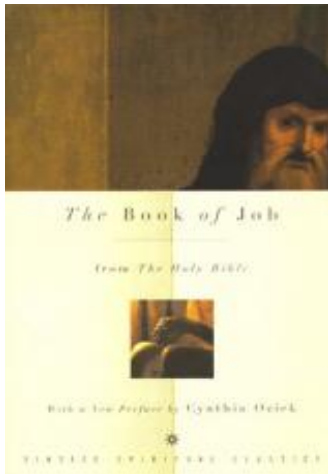


The Book of Job

by John F. Thornton



About the Book

The Vintage Spiritual Classics present the testimony of writers across the centuries who have pondered the mysterious ways, unfathomable mercies, and deep consolations afforded by God to those who call upon Him from out of the depths of their lives. These writers are our companions, even our champions, in a common effort to discern the meaning of God in personal experience.

"God is our home but many of us have strayed from our native land. The venerable authors of these Spiritual Classics are expert guides--may we follow their directions home."

--**Archbishop Desmond Tutu**

The questions, discussion topics, and background information that follow are designed to enhance your group's reading of the six works that make up the first series in Vintage Spiritual Classics. We hope they will provide you with a variety of ways of thinking and talking about these ancient and important texts. We offer this word about the act of reading these spiritual classics. From the very earliest accounts of monastic practice--dating back to the fourth century--it is evident that a form of reading called *lectio divina* ("divine" or "spiritual" reading) was essential to any deliberate spiritual life. This kind of reading is quite different from that of scanning a text for useful facts and bits of information, or advancing along an exciting plot line to a climax in the action. It is, rather, a meditative approach, by which the reader seeks to taste and savor the beauty and truth of every phrase and passage. There are four steps in *lectio divina*: first, to read, next to meditate, then to rest in the sense of God's nearness, and, ultimately, to resolve to govern one's actions in the light of new understanding. This kind of reading is itself an act of prayer. And, indeed, it is in prayer that God manifests His Presence to us.

The Book of Job, a dramatic poem composed sometime between the seventh and fifth centuries b.c.e., is concerned with the suffering of the innocent. It speaks today to the torment of anguish and solitude when the burdens of our humanity exceed the reach of cure, of palliatives, and of all manner of sympathetic human intervention. Then, in unexpected and

even terrible ways, God's grace is amazingly given. Job teaches us to recognize and be open to these divine visitations.

As Cynthia Ozick observes in her Preface, we approach The Book of Job without the weight of scholarly knowledge, and "there is something to be said for novice readers who come to Job's demands and complaints unaccoutered: we will perceive God's world exactly as Job himself perceives it—Job's bewilderment will be ours—For us to be as (philosophically) naked as Job will mean to be naked of bias, dogma, tradition. It will mean to imagine Job solely as he is set forth by his own words in his own story."

Discussion Guide

1. What current or recurring examples of disaster, cruelty, or loss in history, or in the contemporary news media come to mind most powerfully when you read The Book of Job? What examples of disaster or loss in your own life do you think of? Does your reading of Job's drama shift, change, or deepen your perspective on your life's most awful experiences? On those of history? If so, how?
2. The author of Job makes an effort to frame this highly sophisticated debate with the naive style of a folk tale. How do the opening and closing of Job's story shape your response to its central questions and arguments? Why do you suppose the author chose to make this juxtaposition? Is it because, as Cynthia Ozick suggests, the author intends it to be a timeless or primordial tale?
3. The "patience of Job" was already proverbial by the first century c.e., when it was referred to in the Epistle of James. But is Job a patient man? Doesn't he lose patience with God? How do you understand the personality and character of Job? Is his story meant to teach us patience, or is this an oversimplified reading?
4. How does The Book of Job change your assumptions about the nature of God? We tend to think of God as not only omnipotent but good, just, fatherly. Why does God agree with Satan's urging that Job needs to be tested? Does God laugh at, or ignore, Job's suffering? How should Job react to God's observation that Job is just a minute and insignificant piece of the Creation? Does God's replacement of goods, cattle, and children to Job at the end of the tale justify his having taken them away?
5. Cynthia Ozick, in her Preface to the Vintage edition, states that The Book of Job is "shocking to conventional religion." Why is it so?

Author Bio

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Publication Date: December 29, 1998

Paperback: 144 pages

Publisher: Vintage

ISBN-10: 0375700226

ISBN-13: 9780375700224