

Wisdom in the Old Testament—3 Job: Wisdom in Pain

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes we encounter suffering that moves beyond the merely sad, or even tragic, to the truly catastrophic and cataclysmic. So it is when we encounter the story of Job, whose sufferings seem so overwhelming and whose trial seems so demanding, that we despair of words to describe it. Deep within the recesses of our hearts and minds, Job's suffering also stirs troubling questions for us. They encompass the simply selfish and move to the deeply theological. How would we cope if we were faced with suffering on this scale? Do we hide from the possibility and whistle in the dark by somehow thinking that we will be immune from such pain? Do we base the hope of any immunity on the fact that we have (surely!) not done anything to deserve being made such an object lesson? Do we now, in these heady New Testament days, have a God who is other than the one we meet in the opening and closing chapters of Job? Or do we perhaps hope that Job's experience is, after all, allegorical and that God should not expect such grief to be borne by anyone in actual life? And how do we cope with the picture of God in the prologue, who is clearly portrayed as the one in whose will Job's affliction ultimately lies? And, the epilogue, where it sometimes seems that Job's complaints and questions are not even addressed by God? And, in all this, where can we find a true theodicy?

MAIN THEME

The dating of Job is extremely difficult, with estimates varying from the Mosaic period, through to Solomon's time, and beyond into the exile. It is arguable that Job is the oldest book in the Bible, or at least that it embodies an ancient story which dates back to patriarchal times. In either case, it tells us that the issue of suffering has been the object of a long history of reflection. Other wisdom books and Psalms deal with the matter of suffering as well, as do many of the prophets, but none is so directly focused for such an extended period on the nature and effects of one man's sufferings. This attention cannot be without purpose. What is this purpose?

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C. L. Feinberg has suggested that the book of Job deals with one central theme (suffering, and particularly God's role in it) which gives rise to five main questions:

- 1) Can man serve God disinterestedly from pure love of him or is all his worship of God tainted with ulterior and selfish motives?
- 2) Is there anyone but God to whom the control of the circumstances of human life can be attributed?
- 3) Are man's outward circumstances a criterion and standard of his moral character and life before God?
- 4) Can men, by their wisdom, rightly and completely comprehend the workings of the providence of God?
- 5) Since the righteous do endure such great afflictions in this life, is a life of righteousness worth it in the last analysis? ¹

Helpful though these questions are (and they are all addressed in Job), we would be wise to heed Westermann's comment that the book of Job cannot be understood outside of the Old Testament category of 'lament', and this must affect our interpretation of it. This means that Job is not formulated to address the problem of suffering as though it were a philosophical conundrum to be solved. 'A lament is something fundamentally different from a treatment of the problem of suffering. A lament does not arise out of mournful reflection on suffering . . . On the contrary, a lament is an existential process which has its own structure.'² Thus, in the disputations with Job's friends, we see their doctrinal formulations do not touch the depths of Job's anguish, which can only be addressed by God himself.

This, then, focuses the question of purpose even further. Biblically, we cannot give attention to the problem of suffering *qua* suffering. We can only give attention to the matter of suffering *in the face of the revealed nature and character of God*. The problems and perplexities raised in the book of Job only take their shape from the underlying creation and covenant theology of the Bible. In the realm of biblical revelation suffering becomes an issue because of words like holiness, righteousness, justice, mercy, love, faithfulness, goodness, truth, and grace—words which attach to God's self-revelation.³ The perplexity raised by Job is not that Job suffers, nor even that he suffers by God's will, but the God whose will brings the terrible sufferings into Job's life has revealed himself to be of a certain moral character. He is not just the sovereign, transcendent Creator, but the one who enters into covenant relationship with his people by his own gracious initiative. Rightly, we confess that 'We believe in God the Father, Almighty'. This is the nub of the problem in Job. How do 'Father' and 'Almighty' square with one another, particularly where the Almighty seems to

¹ C. L. Feinberg, 'Job and the Nation of Israel', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 96:384, Oct. 1939, p. 405.

² C. Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1981, pp. 2–3.

³ We should not allow ourselves to believe that the onus lies on us (Christians) to provide a rationale for suffering. Every *Weltanschauung* (worldview) must finally deal with the matter, and the explanations (or exclamations!) of these are not in the last analysis anywhere near as substantial as that which comes to us in the Scriptures. The West does not realise how much its inherent frameworks of thinking and how many of its assumptions are essentially biblical. Indeed, it is the nature and depth of such assumptions that allows Western atheism to take the forms it does! In other places and at other times in history, the perplexities and problems that we associate with suffering do not even surface.

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wager on Job in a test designed to upstage his adversary? But even if this theological formulation is a step too far for the Joban era, Job would have had no doubt in asserting, that ‘We believe in God Most High, covenant Father of his people, and righteous Judge of all the earth’. Either way the suffering is a problem *because of God*, not merely because of the suffering.

In the Psalms of Lament it is only God who can address the person suffering, and it is therefore to God that the complaints, petitions and prayers are poured out. In like manner, the book of Job must take us beyond mere human formulations—and even beyond the formulations of traditional covenant wisdom when these are callously expressed or wrongly applied—to bring us to an encounter with Yahweh himself. Though in his speeches Job may only echo the fragments of the language of prayer—even parodying prayer in some of his responses⁴—still in his deepest distress Job knows it is God with whom he has to do, and Job will not let God ‘off the hook’. He demands that God answer his complaint. But even these demands are an implicit expression of faith. Job’s wife urges him, ‘Curse God and die’ (Job 2:9), to which Job responds with a remarkable statement of faith (Job 2:10), in which he voices the fact that to curse God is to speak as a fool (cf. Job 1:22). True, Job later speaks unwisely, but he never becomes the quintessential fool (understood as a moral description in the Old Testament, expounded, for example, in Psalm 14). He persists in faith, albeit angry and restive faith, but faith that will and must engage with God himself. Even his protest against his own existence is a protest against the God who gives and takes away, and who has not taken away Job’s life (Job 3:3, 11, 20, etc.). He looks and longs for God to show himself, so that he might deal with God face to face and present his case before him. It is in an encounter with him that the matter must be settled.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF JOB

Job may be conveniently divided into five sections:

- 1) *The Prologue* (chapters 1–2) presents us with an introduction to the character of Job himself and shows us (the reader) the scene in heaven and the dialogue between Yahweh and the satan.⁵ It then describes the tragedies of loss and physical affliction that Job is given to endure and the arrival of three friends. The Prologue ends with the friends sitting in silence with Job for a week.
- 2) *The Disputation* (chapters 3–31) begins with Job breaking his silence with a bitter outpouring in which he curses the day of his birth and longs for death. This is followed by three speech cycles from Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar in

⁴ For some details of this and the construction of what she calls Job’s ‘anti-psalms’ see Carol Newsom, ‘The Book of Job’, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 4 (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996), pp. 393–8. An example of the ‘anti-psalm’ idea appears in Job 7:17–18, a clear parody of Ps. 8.

⁵ The definite article indicates the role here being described as that of an adversary. ‘Elsewhere in the OT the word *satan* is used to describe both human (1 Sam. 29:4; 1 Kings 5:4; Ps. 109:6) and heavenly beings (Num. 22:22; Zech. 3:1), who act as adversaries or accusers. The context may be personal, legal or political, but in each case the noun simply defines a function’ (Newsom, ‘The Book of Job’, p. 347). Though we are technically correct to speak of this figure in this way as ‘the satan’, given the whole canonical picture we can also identify him as Satan (Lucifer) himself.

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dialogue with Job. The third cycle of speeches is incomplete, with Bildad's last utterance comprising the shortest chapter in the book and Zophar making no reply at all.

- 3) *The Elihu Speeches* (chapters 32–37) follow next. Elihu's presence had not been recorded up to this point, so he is presented as a listener to the conversations thus far. He is a young man, who is distressed by both Job's protestations of self-righteousness and the insufficient answers of the other three friends. He proposes his own answers in four speeches. Commentators are divided as to whether he provides any new material, or simply rehashes the other friends' views, albeit with the strident brazenness of youth. Those who take the view that he does provide some new material—or a least that he casts the issues in a different form—see his presence as preparing for the Yahweh speeches.
- 4) *The Yahweh Speeches* (chapters 38–42:6) occur in the context of a theophanic storm. They are replete with questions (approximately 70 of them!) related to the hidden ways of the creation and the Lord's dealings with it, and demand answers that Job (or anyone) is unable to give. This encounter ends with Job's recanting from his pride and ignorant complaining, and with the acknowledgment that he has spoken unwisely.
- 5) *The Conclusion* (chapter 42:7–17) begins with Yahweh's rebuke of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar (Elihu is not mentioned). The friends are commanded to offer sacrifices and seek Job's prayer for them. In this way Job acts as an intercessor-priest to his friends, and God refrains from dealing with them according to their foolishness. Job's fortunes are then restored and he is presented as living a long life of contentment and blessing with his new family and descendants, to the fourth generation.

The accompanying diagram gives a clear picture of the movement and structure of the whole book.⁶

Interpretive Issues

The book of Job presents us with a number of interpretive problems. Matters to which commentators have given consideration, and with which they have vested more or less importance for its interpretation, include:

- the identity of Job (a real figure or a construct, a sort of Old Testament 'Everyman');⁷
- the use of the Divine names (Yahweh and Elohim in the Prologue and Conclusion, a variety of other names in the intervening chapters);

⁶ From Elmer Smick, 'Job' in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 4 (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1988), p. 848.

⁷ It would be tempting to identify Job as a figure representing Israel as a whole—a wisdom literature equivalent of the suffering servant, so to speak—but it is significant that neither Job nor his friends are pictured as Israelites. Job is portrayed as coming from Uz (in Edomite territory?) and his three friends all come from areas outside of Israel. Job is beyond doubt a servant of Yahweh, but perhaps the point being made is that none suffers without it being under the tutelage of Yahweh, who, throughout the OT is the Lord of all the nations.

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- the literary integrity of the book;
- the place of Job vis-a-vis the wider wisdom literature of the Old Testament on the one hand and the prevailing wisdom of Israel on the other;⁸
- the mythic elements alluded to throughout the book and the relation of these to the theological message of the book (as well as the issue of suffering and God's role in it; is there, for example, a polemic against or contrast with Canaanite/Ugaritic religious systems in particular and ancient near eastern wisdom in general?);
- the style of the writing (prose in the Prologue and Conclusion, poetry in the rest of the chapters);
- the provenance, meaning and purpose of the poem on wisdom found in chapter 28 (interpolation or central to the interpretation of the book?);
- the place that is accorded to Elihu (empty bag of wind or theological good guy?);
- the language of the book (Hebrew, or a dialect of Hebrew, or a Hebrew translation of another language, but containing a very large number of rare or unique words, unusual expressions, difficult phrases and unusual syntax);⁹ and
- the forensic language and setting of the book (e.g. the place of the satan in heaven compared with the longing for an advocate with God on Job's part, and the 'trial' language of some of Job's utterances and God's responses).

In the light of the difficulty and diversity that such theories present, perhaps we are being told that there is *no one key* that will unlock the meaning of the book. We must let it speak to us in all its complexity, without trying to subject it to our own desire to reduce the turmoil and perplexity of suffering to neat systems of interpretation. Indeed, to do so would be to reproduce the error of Job's friends!

The Theme of the Friends' Arguments

Motyer's comment is apposite: 'Job's friends (2:11–13) came to sympathize, and (unfortunately) stay to explain (4:1–25:6)'.¹⁰ It is the 'explaining' part that dominates the disputations in Job. In the end, all of the disputations hinge on one point: *is Job's suffering retributive?*

In Job 1:1 we have a significant pointer to the answer. We are told, 'There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright,

⁸ John E. Hartley provides a very thorough summary of the affinities of Job with other OT books, indicating (in four full pages) parallel phrases, metaphors and texts in Proverbs, Psalms, Lamentations and a variety of other books. In particular, however, he shows a disproportionate number of parallels with Isaiah and with the servant songs especially (J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, pp. 11–15). Parallelism does not prove dependence, however, and it may well be that Isaiah is dependent on Job rather than *vice versa*.

⁹ In this respect, the book of Job indicates the careful treatment accorded to the written documents in the centuries of their transmission by many generations of copyists. Andersen comments that 'the [textual] difficulties we encounter are themselves a tribute to the fidelity of the Jewish scribes, who reverently preferred to copy an obscure text exactly rather than attempt to clarify it by an emendation. In this way they were more modest and more scientific, than many modern critics.' Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP, Leicester, 1976), p. 16.

¹⁰ Alec Motyer, *The Story of the Old Testament* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2001), p. 157.

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one who feared God and turned away from evil'. This description of Job delineates him in brief compass as the archetypal sage (see, for example Ps. 111:10; cf. Ps. 1), and who thus represents the pattern of life under the covenant for the man who fears God. This picture of Divine approval is further underscored by Job 42:8, where the three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are told:

Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.

The narrator's unreserved positive attestation to Job's character; Yahweh's confirmation of this in his own statements to the satan; and the role of the satan himself in the afflictions, are all alike occluded from the view of the friends.¹¹ We (the readers) are thus given a double perspective: what is really happening in heaven vs. the interpretation placed on events by Job and his friends. Job's friends have only one view, that suffering is retributive. As Calvin has said, the friends 'have no more songs but one, and no regard at all to whom they sing it'.¹²

In various ways Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar all argue from the seen to the unseen. Job's suffering has been extreme and, ipso facto, Job must be very wicked. The friends push and pressure Job to get him to acknowledge that this is the case, to force him to repentance and acknowledge that what he has received is nothing more than just and fair retribution for his (albeit, hidden) wickedness. Suffering of such magnitude must indicate that he has been a sinner of equal or greater magnitude.

The events portrayed to the reader in the prologue, the affirmations of Job as a wise man (both at the outset and conclusion of the book) and the condemnation of the friend's so-called counsel, all indicate that Job's suffering lies outside the realm of retributive justice. However, in their various speeches the friends indicate that they lack the true wisdom needed to take into account things that are not seen. For example, in Eliphaz's first speech he turns to Job with cruelty, assessing him (by implication) to be a fool (Job. 5:2–4). By contrast he aligns himself with the actions and attitudes of the wise (Job. 5:8). The basic pose adopted by Eliphaz is reiterated by Bildad (e.g. Job 8:4, 11–13, 20) and also by Zophar (e.g. Job 11:11–16). The speeches in Job occur in three cycles, each punctuated by a response from Job. The last of the cycles is incomplete, with Bildad giving only the briefest comments (Job 25:1–6) and Zophar not making any contribution at the end of this third cycle. This structure indicates that the friends' arguments have run out of steam, and that Job remains unanswered from their stores of conventional wisdom.

¹¹ It is not just Job who has to live through his sufferings on earth without having been given a glimpse into the drama being played out in heaven, but the friends also are on the blind side of the action. The difference is that Job does not let this hinder his longing for direct engagement with God on the matter! The friends, so to speak, live in an entirely horizontal world. Yes, it is a world in which God's rules are operative, but direct engagement with God does not figure in their arguments. By contrast to their flat worldview, Job wants to do business with God himself!

¹² From 'Calvin's Sermons on Job', Sermon 62 (Job 16:1–9) quoted in Derek Thomas, *Mining for Wisdom: 28 Daily Readings from Job* (Evangelical Press, Auburn, 2002), p. 58. Derek Thomas's PhD thesis on Calvin's Joban sermons has now been published under the title *Calvin's Teaching on Job: Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God* (Christian Focus Publications, Fearn, 2004), and is highly recommended.

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However, as we read the friends' contributions, many of the speeches have what we might call a 'Yes, but . . .' quality about them. Lots of the theological statements in the speeches are true, but they are either wrongly applied, or are used as the basis for what are ultimately shown to be wrong conclusions. Sometimes we find ourselves standing with the friends, being persuaded by their theological statements and siding with them against Job—only to be confronted with the fact that the friends are declared to have spoken foolishness! And then, on the other side, Job is vindicated, but not without him recanting and repenting in dust and ashes, so we cannot simply take his side in the matter either!

The issue, then, is the callous simplicity in which the friends reduce all complexities to one point. This stance needs no faith, and thus it finally falls to the ground as unbiblical. Alec Motyer comments that the friends:

. . . have a true conception that God's world must be governed by God's justice, which they see as working in an observable nexus between sin and adversity, virtue and reward . . . The friends' error lies in their view that there is an observable nexus between sin and adversity, justice and reward, in their reduction of God to the compass of human understanding. Instead of an attitude of faith, waiting until the holy and just God works his moral purposes out, theirs is an attitude of logic. They are sure that they can trace out the pathways of divine and moral providence in rewarding and punishing.¹³

At the end of chapter 31 we have reached an impasse. The friends have no further arguments. Job has not budged an inch. God has not spoken. There seems no way forward. Enter Elihu.

As indicated earlier, Elihu's contribution has been variously evaluated, ranging 'anywhere from interpreting him as a theological bigot to a theological hero'.¹⁴ At the one end, commentators suggest that he brings nothing new, and what he does bring comes with all the unthinking, hot-headed presumption of youthful self-importance. In this view:

The ultimate *coup de grace* for a foolish theology is to have it presented by an unsympathetic spokesman, who is so muddle-headed and ridiculous that no character or even the narrator will deign to acknowledge his presence, either before or after his appearance. Elihu is the *reductio ad absurdum* of traditional theology. Once he has spoken, traditional dogma can no longer be defended.¹⁵

At the other end, Elihu is seen as a helpful precursor for the Yahweh speeches, a voice of true wisdom and a theological 'hero' of sorts who brings a new and helpful perspective in contrast to the traditional wisdom of the other three friends.¹⁶

¹³ Motyer, *The Story of the Old Testament*, p. 158.

¹⁴ R. V. McCabe, 'Elihu's Contribution to the Thought of the Book of Job' in *The Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, vol. 2 (Fall, 1997), p. 47.

¹⁵ McCabe, p. 48.

¹⁶ McCabe, pp. 48–9, gives a very helpful and thorough overview of the prevailing conclusions of Elihu scholars (!). The various arguments take their force not simply from the content of the Elihu speeches, but also from other factors—not least that Elihu is not rebuked by Yahweh, nor asked to offer sacrifices as are the other friends. Is this because he is a bag of wind, whose opinions need not be dignified with an answer or even an acknowledgement? Or is it because he has indeed been given a positive role within the structure of the book which has implicitly earned Yahweh's approval? In addition to the various commentaries and other resources, the series

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Whatever the commentators make of his contribution, Elihu certainly seems to think that he does have some new information to bring to the discussion, and he is insistent that he be heard (his are the only uninterrupted speeches in the book). Since he is dissatisfied both with the friends' arguments and with Job's replies (Job 32:1–5), he, though young, now is emboldened to speak up. If there is anything new in Elihu it is in his recasting of retributive justice to chastening discipline (33:19–33) and, in that he insists Job is wrong in complaining so against God (e.g. 34:5–9), in some ways he prepares for the Yahweh speeches, after which Job is left covering his mouth in silence.

Job's Responses

It is self evident that the *quid pro quo* understanding of Job's suffering portrayed by the friends is not shared by Job! Job makes responses to the speeches of the friends (with the exception of Elihu) and also to the theophanic words of Yahweh. However, these responses reveal that Job himself is not quite as free from the assumptions that his friends bring to the ash heap as we might at first think.

On the one hand we can suggest that it is Job's deep understanding of God's character—and his certainty of his own integrity before him—that enables him to withstand the battering of his three friends for so long. In their speeches the friends move from a relatively gentle opening in the first few paragraphs of Eliphaz's first speech, through the progressive cycles, to become deeply hardened, and even brutal, towards Job to the point of fabricating dire accusations of wrongdoing to justify their position (e.g. Job 22:5–10). They become exasperated that Job will not simply acknowledge what must be plain for all to see: he has sinned greatly and his calamities are the direct result of his guilt. But Job, despite all that he is going through and all his complaints against God, utters some remarkable statements of trust in the God who has afflicted him (e.g. Job 1:21; 2:10; 16:15–21; 19:25–27).¹⁷ Essentially, he appeals to God against God! This is the stuff of gutsy faith, and parallels the intercession of Moses, for example, in pleading the Name of God against God's own words of judgement on Israel (e.g. Exod. 32:11–14; Deut. 9:14–29; cf. Ps. 106:23).

But on the other hand, Job's protestations against his friends' accusations and his stubborn refusal to compromise his position are all directed by the same moral compass as that of Eliphaz and his companions. *They* argue that the suffering makes moral sense. *Job* argues that it does not make moral sense, because he has done nothing to deserve it. *Both* assume that it *should* make moral sense, in a retributive universe. Both Job and the friends share the assumption, therefore, of retributive justice as the foundation of God's dealings with men.

of sermons by John Piper on Job (<http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ScriptureIndex/18/>) provides a helpful analysis of the main features of the book and thoughtful pastoral application. Piper is one who takes a more positive view of Elihu's contribution.

¹⁷ Who is the one to whom Job looks for intervention? Who is this 'redeemer' (*go'el*)? Paradoxically it is probably God himself (cf. Exod. 6:6; Isa. 41:14; 43:1–7; 49:7–9; Ps. 74:2). 'This redeemer must prove Job is on God's side, must live until the end of the earth, and must make certain that a potentially deceased Job sees God (19:25–27) . . . Besides the sovereign God who has let him suffer so terribly, Job has no other redeemer, no other advocate, no one else worth believing in though they kill him.' Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (IVP, Downers Grove, 1998), pp. 433–4.

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This is further seen in the way in which Job presses his case with God. Job longs for a legal confrontation with the Lord (e.g. Job 13:13–19; 31:35–37); in effect, to put God on trial for the trial he had placed on Job. The friends assert God’s sovereignty, as does Job, but they suggest that his suffering is indeed just. They see a direct and causal relationship being worked out. Job repeatedly asks for an explanation from God (e.g. 7:20; 10:2; 13:23; 23:5), and by way of counter evidence he repeatedly protests his innocence from the charges brought against him by his friends (e.g. 9:21, 29; 10:7, 14; 23:10; 31:6). Job also points out what he takes to be the failures of God’s moral government (e.g. 12:14–25; 21:30–33; 24:1–12; 27:2)—the good suffer, the wicked prosper, and God seems not to intervene. Job longs for a mediator to represent him before God so that he can get a fair trial in God’s courthouse (e.g. Job 16:19).

Taken together, these sentiments indicate that Job presupposes the same point as the friends. The difference is that if Job were given the chance to take it up with God, Job would be able to show that in God’s balance Job’s failures do not deserve the punishment he is receiving. Both Job and his friends:

... take as unquestionable the assumption that justice, specifically retributive justice, should be the central principle of reality. They disagree only as to whether such justice is operative in the world, or whether God should be called to account for failing to enforce such justice. The speeches of God from the whirlwind, however, challenge the paradigm that both Job and the friends have taken for granted. When God speaks of the ‘design’ of the cosmos, which Job has obscured (38:2), the categories that underlie God’s descriptions are not categories of justice/injustice but order/chaos.¹⁸

Job’s Responses: A Step Too Far

As the book unfolds it emerges that Job’s cavilling against God moves from mere lament to pride. When Job 38:2 is compared to Job 42:3 it indicates that the one who has darkened the Lord’s counsel without knowledge is Job himself! Job was indeed righteous in his own eyes (Job 32:1) and there is no doubt at all about the blamelessness of his conduct—the description of Job’s character in the Prologue will not let us adopt any other view than the fact that he was a man who really did walk uprightly. Pride, the most deadly of all sins, lies within us all. In some (such as Nebuchadnezzar) it is revealed in a time of prosperity and blessing. In others it is revealed in a time of suffering—and particularly that suffering which is, or is perceived to be, unjust suffering. Job falls into the latter category.

Commenting on Job 40:8, Hartley says:

To bring about the full import of Job’s stance, God laid before him the option of either ascending the throne of the universe and ruling better than he did or of abandoning his complaint. God was disclosing to Job that if he persisted in his claim of innocence, he was in essence exalting himself above God. Such stubbornness would lead him into committing the quintessential sin of hubris.¹⁹

¹⁸ Newsom, ‘The Book of Job’, p. 336.

¹⁹ John E. Hartley, ‘Job: Theology of’, in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4 (Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1996), p. 788.

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In Job 42:5–6 we hear of Job’s own testimony: that he had heard of God with his ears, but now met him face to face, and that this encounter led him to abase himself before God and publicly declare the insufficiency of his utterances. There is repentance involved here, which leads Job to finally place his hand upon his mouth and utter no more words. The repentance, however, is not along the lines of the friends’ theology. In Job 42:6 the word translated as ‘repent’ is *nacham*. That this word is used, rather than the more usual word ‘repentance’ (*shuwb*) may be significant:

If he [Job] had repented [in the manner of *shuwb*] he would have taken the direction vigorously advocated by his comforters and anticipated by the Satan. Rather, Job used the term [*nacham*] which means to discard an intended course of action and pursue another course on the conviction that is the right path. With these words Job withdrew his oath of innocence, which had placed a demand on God. Job’s response offers the insight that a human being must not let the pursuit of a right position be the barrier that separates one from God.²⁰

In his undoubted moral integrity, Job had unwittingly become one in whom the sin of pride had taken deep root. This lay unrecognised, dormant so to speak, until the testing time came. Because Job’s theological framework (let alone that of the friends!) did not provide wide enough horizons to account for Job’s particular suffering, this gave the opportunity (out of the dissonance between what Job thought ought to be and what was) for the latent sediment to be stirred up. Thus, in his protestations against God:

Job’s problem had extended further than simply asking silly questions. Job had been angry with God. In being angry, he had entered into judgement of God and his ways. God had been placed ‘in the dock’. Job had in effect, set himself *above* God. He had committed man’s most prevalent sin: making himself a god . . . Job must now face a deeper reality than his ignorance. He must face up to the *sinfulness* of his response. If Job had been morally ‘blameless’ before the trial, he had not been *during* it.²¹

Through it all, Job is brought to confess his ignorance and to repent of his pride (Job 42:2–5). But this does not occur in a way that matches what the friends were looking for. The unwise utterances that Job made during the trial were not the cause of the trial. Job’s suffering was not because he had sinned a particular sin which had brought the calamity upon his own head. The ‘flat earth’, retributive justice theology of shallow contemporary wisdom is shown to have failed comprehensively. In the deep statements of trust that Job had uttered in the midst of his trial—backing God against God, so to speak—the satan’s position has also shown to be false. Job is vindicated by God, and, in some senses, God has also been vindicated by Job. The adversary has been put down. But Job himself has not come through unchanged and untouched. He starts out sitting in silence for seven days, he ends up covering his mouth and withholding his words (Job 40:3–5), and when he does speak in response to Yahweh, all the hurt pride, anger, and complaint has been removed (Job 42:1–6). No longer is there a brooding silence, but a calmed and restful stillness. No longer does he want to put God on trial, but is quiet under his hand. If we can speak in the

²⁰ Hartley, ‘Job: Theology of’, p. 788.

²¹ Thomas, *Mining for Wisdom*, p. 167.

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poetic manner of the book, the Lord has drawn out the hidden Leviathan in Job's depths, and he has, indeed, 'come forth as gold'.²²

Yahweh's Speeches

In all that we have said, we have assumed the content of the Yahweh speeches without expounding them. We cannot here discuss them in detail, but make four observations.

Firstly, it is to be noted that the speeches are written in a particular style, replete with questions, and these in a rapid sequence that builds layer upon layer. In this way Yahweh is revealing himself to be the supreme wisdom teacher.²³ In Job 28:20 the question is raised, 'From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding?' In the Yahweh speeches the question is answered. God alone is the teacher of wisdom. Job and his friends need to sit humbly at his feet.

Secondly, their content is expansive (from the unimaginable dimensions of heaven to midwife-like care for his smallest creatures). Here we see no deistic doctrine of first causes, but the 'hands on' action of the faithful Creator. He not only brings all things into existence, but providentially orders all that he has made in accord with His own knowledge and faithfulness. He is not just the Almighty Creator (in the sense of initiator), but the Almighty *faithful* Creator because of his sustaining wisdom. He attends to all the elements of his universe, all the time. Only he is able to do this, and only he can be trusted to do it. The implication is that Job should again trust him.

Thirdly, they emphasise the *Godness* of God and the creatureliness of *everything* else. There is nothing, nowhere, in any place that is comparable to God. He is the one and only God, and anything that diminishes this Creator-creature distinction has the smell of Hades about it. Job and his friends have to do with *God*, not with a theology of God (and certainly not with a philosophy of suffering!). In wanting to put *God* on trial, Job has overstepped the mark (cf. Rom. 9:20!). In assuming that they can understand the ways of *God* in simple concepts, the friends have spoken foolishly.

Fourthly, comment has often been made about the amount of space given to the figures of Behemoth and Leviathan in the Yahweh speeches. The identification of these beasts raises interesting questions for interpreters and translators (hippopotamus, rhinoceros, elephant, whale, unidentified dinosaurian species?) but, as Derek Thomas says, 'there is another interpretation that calls for our attention':²⁴

The book of Job has already used the word 'Leviathan' in chapter 3. There, it seems to function as a synonym for death (3:8). Jewish interpreters have been almost unanimous in their interpretation of both Leviathan and Behemoth of symbolic of all that is evil. An entire mythology of evil grew using these two creatures to depict it . . . Perhaps the point of the passage is to further elucidate the point made in chapters 38 and 39. God and his ways are unknowable . . . It may be that this passage

²² Job's statement in 23:10, 'But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold', has often been taken pietistically: Job sees this test as a purifying trial, through which he will be more fully sanctified. This is to misread the intention of Job's speech. In its context it is in fact a statement of Job's view of his own integrity and innocence, and that, in the court of God's justice, he will be acquitted of the charges Eliphaz (at that point) has brought against him.

²³ Hartley, 'Job, Theology of', p. 789.

²⁴ Thomas, *Mining for Wisdom*, p. 172.

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is reinforcing the idea that much of God's providence is *incomprehensible to us. To us—not to God!* . . . But perhaps there is more than that . . . Here, in chapters 40 and 41 God is saying something more. Leviathan and Behemoth are representatives of evil, of Satan. Job, remember, knew virtually nothing about Satan. He was certainly ignorant of the first two chapters where we are told of Satan's wager . . . Now he is being told in the language of pictures that another *being* is at work in the universe. This creature is powerful and threatening. And fearsome! 'He is king over all the sons of pride' (41:34) . . . Satan may well be uncontrollable as far as we are concerned:

Will you play with him as with a bird,
or will you put him on a leash for your girls (41:5)?

But he is not uncontrollable as far as God is concerned . . . No matter how evil things may appear, or how afraid he [Job] may be, God is in control of everything and nothing is a threat to him.²⁵

This interpretation is supported by a comparison with Psalm 74:14 and Isaiah 27:1 where Leviathan connotes evil that is judged by the Lord, and also by the place that such images have in the surrounding cultures of the day. In a discussion of the mythological language in Job, Smick identifies many features associated with the belief systems of other Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) peoples and with the Canaanites in particular.²⁶ Time and again the mythic creatures, gods and cosmic entities alluded to in the various speeches in Job are shown to be entirely subject to the Lord's will. Leviathan²⁷—who in Ugaritic mythology is a destructive entity which must be overcome—is no exception to the sovereign rule and victory of the Lord. None is able to rival him for control of the cosmos, because none is holy, as he is:

By telling of his dominion over Behemoth and Leviathan . . . Yahweh is celebrating his triumph in the moral sphere. The Satan, the Accuser, has been proved wrong though Job does not know it. The author and the reader see the entire picture which Job and his friends never knew.²⁸

SOME CONCLUSIONS FOR WISE LIVING AND WISE COUNSEL

Given all that we have said, in brief compass are there any points on which we may reflect for our mutual profit? I suggest a few:

²⁵ Thomas, *Mining for Wisdom*, pp. 172–4.

²⁶ Elmer Smick, 'Another Look at the Mythological Elements in the Book of Job', in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 40:2, Spring 1978, pp. 213–228. In part Smick's argument is that we cannot understand Old Testament literature or the covenant culture of God's Old Testament people that gave rise to it as analogous to other ancient societies. By virtue of shared historical and geographic space there cannot but be parallels, but the Old Testament generally—and the wisdom literature represented in Job in particular—does not allow us to read this as congruence. As more ancient documents come to light, the more the non-congruence of Israel's thought and practice is confirmed.

²⁷ While acknowledging that 'both terms are used in other O.T. contexts without symbolic significance (Pss. 8:8, 50:10, 78:22, 104:26; Joel 1:20; 2:22; Hab 2:17)' (Smick, *W.T.J.*, p. 226), there are other considerations that point to the symbolic interpretation as the preferred option. This seems to be demanded by: (a) the immediate context (in juxtaposition to the role of the Lord in his moral governance of the cosmos, as in Job 40:10–14; 41:34); (b) the actual descriptions (in which it is not only impossible to tell where one begins and ends, and in which these beasts are described in warlike and moral terms); and (c) the intensification of the form of Behemoth (to mean, in effect, 'the Beast of Beasts; the Great Beast itself' according to Motyer, *The Story of the Old Testament*, p. 158), and the wider polemic against the surrounding mythologies all suggest we should take the reference to the satan in his power.

²⁸ Smick, *W.T.J.*, p. 227.

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- It should be self-evident that it is wrong to condemn anyone simply because they are suffering. However, the underlying theory of direct retributive justice that surfaces in Job is, in my view, an outcrop of the Flesh (to use a Pauline category). As such we are not surprised to see it formalised and codified in various philosophico-religious systems on the one hand, or emerging in ourselves from time to time on the other. The rigid retributive justice of the three friends and the belief in *karma* are not a million miles apart, and neither is biblical. Wherever it occurs it is Folly. But we should not be surprised to see it!
- In suffering, we have to deal with God, not with our theories about suffering. The severity of any one person's suffering is not God's public comment on their personal character, nor is the obverse the case. However, when suffering (or prosperity, for that matter) comes to us we must receive it from God, and let him shepherd us through it. There is no 'scatter gun' approach to providence. The trials of each are unique to each, but the matters with which we have to wrestle, and the God we meet in the midst, are the same.
- While there may be a secondary cause of our sufferings, ultimately we must receive all things from God's hand. Any trust that is not grounded in him will fail. Even our friends may become our enemies, and we can never put our trust in human flesh, not even our own. The only wise God is the only one we can trust to deal wisely with us.
- Job is commended for his patient endurance and his righteousness (e.g. James 5:11; Ezek. 14:14, 20). Suffering does not always pass quickly, and there is the need for *patient* endurance in it (so Heb. 6:12). In this we await the revelation of God. Hereby hangs a tale, for it gives a pattern for understanding New Testament eschatology.
- Job longed for his advocate to appear. In Christ we now see face to face the one for whom Job longed. In the man Jesus, we have the direct assurance that God is for us, not against us. In him we have an eternal advocate with the Father against all his enemies.
- The mystery and the complexity of the creation and God's rule over it is a cause for humble reverence before him. He has set order and boundaries in and over all the creation, and attends to it all with diligence and care. However, a creation spirituality of itself is insufficient. The Creator is also the Redeemer, and indeed the creation can only be truly understood from within redemption. The book of Job belongs to a redeemed people, and comes from their covenant relationship with him. This accounts for the vast difference between not only Job's story, but also all the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and their surrounding cultures. Job's God is the Redeemer for whom he longs. From the point of view of New Testament revelation, we stand in and under the cross as our theological 'north'. Only from here may we properly view the twin horizons of creation and new creation. The cross is the final theodicy.
- The universe is not a closed system; the Lord is free, and he is also both good and just. 'The book of Job demonstrates that although practical wisdom is reliable to a certain extent, it must not be taken as the sum total of divine wisdom. The

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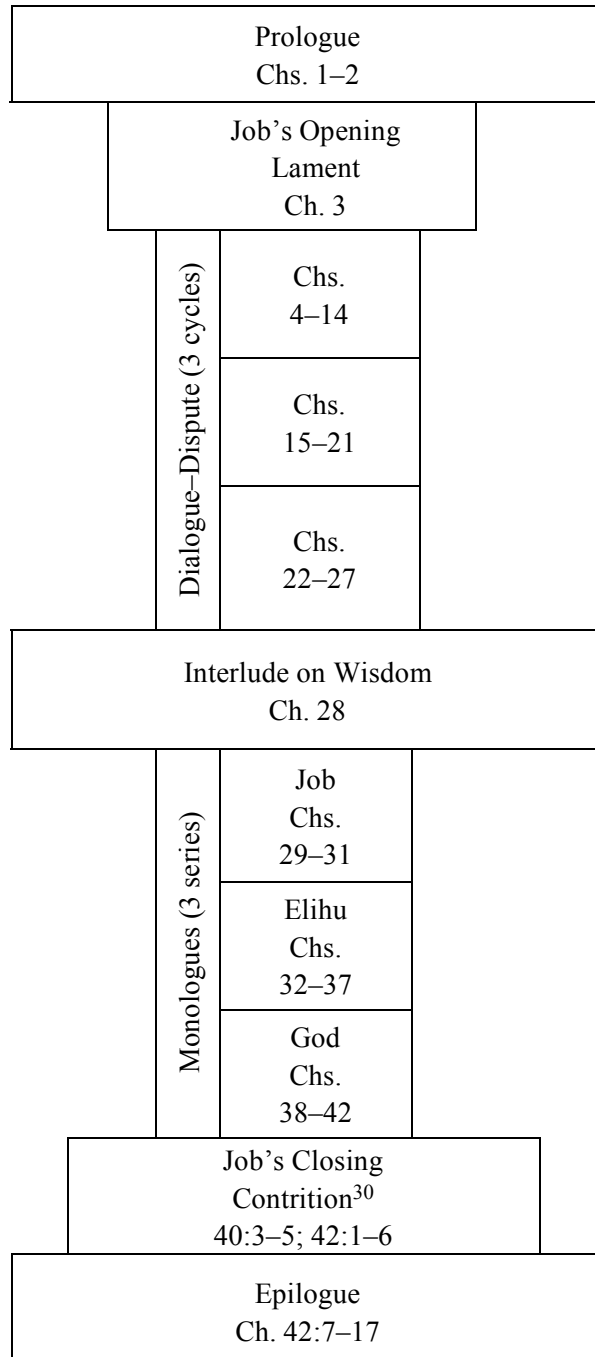
wisdom of Yahweh also includes aspects that are mysterious to finite humans. Consequently, humans must not confine Yahweh to their tidy theological formulas or logical constructs.²⁹

- There is a scene behind the scenes. True wisdom does not go merely by what is seen with the eyes and heard with the ears (cf. Isa. 11:1–4). God alone is the true Judge, and he has given all judgement to the Son, who is the embodiment of wisdom. Let us not seek to usurp his place.
- Job’s sufferings on earth are the arena for God’s name to be vindicated in heaven. In like manner, Israel of old, Messiah and New Testament Church share in this vocation. God has purposed to display his glory in heaven, through that which his people endure here on the earth (Eph. 1:18–23; 3:10; cf. Rom. 8:18–25; 2 Cor. 4:16–18).
- Job became an intercessory priest for his friends. The one who has suffered more than Job could ever imagine, is the intercessor and friend of sinners. In times of suffering we are called not to condemn those who condemn us, but to likewise seek their blessing and good (Matt. 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–36; cf. Acts 7:60; Rom. 12:14–21; 1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Pet. 2:21–25; 4:12–19).

²⁹ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2005), p. 25.

Addendum

Architectonics of the
Book of Job



³⁰ Job's words of contrition are divided to provide a response to each divine speech. The first is preparatory to the second.