

## **The Voice from the Whirlwind – Job 38-41**

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The book of Job stands as one of the most poetic, intriguing and debated books in the Hebrew Scriptures. It tells the story of a man named Job, clearly reputed as being “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1 NRSV). As a result of a *conversation* between God and an Accuser in the celestial court, Job, who had a well-established family and wealthy estate, loses everything, including his physical health, for the sake of *testing* the motives of his fidelity to God. What ensues is a dramatic and beautifully crafted soul-searching, answer-seeking poetic exchange between Job and three of his friends. Throughout this lengthy, albeit inconclusive debate, and in spite of Job’s repeated requests for a manifestation from God, the Deity remains silent. Finally, in the very last chapters of the book, God answers Job “out of a whirlwind” (Job 38:1 NRSV). The primary goal of this essay is to offer an interpretive analysis of God’s answer. In the first section we comment on the historical and religious contexts of the book. In section II, we provide some references to the strikingly varying scholarly opinions about the book. Then, in section III, we analyze God’s speeches. And finally, we present some concluding remarks in section IV.

### **I. Historical and religious context**

The author of this book is unknown. The date and the place where it was written are objects of debate. Most probably the book was written between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Some commentators assume an exilic date, after 586 BCE (Janzen 528). It is considered to be a piece of Wisdom literature, neither historical nor biographical.

The exile in Babylon was a painful period in the history of the Israelite people. It posed a serious challenge to the people's covenantal relationship with YHWH, and particularly to their understanding and experience of evil. Accepting suffering and evil as the disciplinary consequences of disobedience and infidelity to YHWH was common practice. But what was the explanation for suffering and evil when there was no apparent offense to YHWH (as, for instance, in the case of the story of Job)? A related, and yet distinct, question was whether the people should be righteous and faithful to YHWH *in order that* they could enjoy blessings and joy. These issues originate directly from the Deuteronomic view of the covenant between YHWH and Israel (see Deut 30:15-20).

## **II. Some strikingly diverse views of the book**

The broad range and the degree of passion with which theologians and Bible scholars have discussed this book are quite surprising. Without presuming to be exhaustive, we would like nonetheless to give an idea of the diversity of opinions.

In a quite stirring article, Fretheim states upfront that the “portrayal of God [in the book of Job] is troublesome for many Bible readers” (85). He personally agrees with Norman Habel in that “the God of the prologue is too arbitrary and selfish, intervening at will in human lives... the God of the friends is too mechanical, reacting according to a rigid code of reward and retribution... the God of Job in his anguish is too violent, harassing humans and creating anarchy... the God of the poet’s commentary in Job 28 is too remote and inaccessible” (86). But Fretheim himself believes that the God of the speeches is most commendable, revealing “the most basic (if not the only) perspective regarding [Himself] (and suffering)” (86). Fretheim arguments are quite compelling and we will endorse many of his ideas when commenting about God’s speeches in the next section.

Balentine considers that “the report that God has set about to destroy Job for no reason, like a nefarious sinner who ambushes the innocent, is in [his] judgment perhaps the single most disturbing admission in the Old Testament, if not in all scripture” (360). He further agrees with William Scott Green that the book of Job undermines the three distinguishing aspects of Judaism vis-à-vis other religions of antiquity – monotheism, covenant and cult<sup>1</sup>. So much so that Balentine even argues about the place of the book in the Jewish canon. In spite of these strongly negative remarks though, Balentine earnestly attempts to extract some positive lessons from Job’s steadfast pursuit of justice and especially from the creational contents of God’s speeches (another rich interpretive vein that we will pursue in section III).

Karl Barth, as studied and quoted by Sherman, affirms that the central theme of the book of Job is freedom in the relationship between God and Job: the freedom of “God to be truly God” and the freedom of “Job to be truly human” (178).

Crenshaw, while wary about “any theological claim to have discovered the ‘*last truth*’ [about God]”, states that “theological complexity is an important legacy of this book, for it stands as an abiding warning against established belief wherever it exists” (598).

Clines, certainly the most acid critic (and the last one) in my sample, expresses his serious reservations about the ethical integrity of the book of Job, by mercilessly attacking any attempt to “side with the ‘message’ [or the ‘truth’] of the book (whatever that may be).” His solidarity resides solely “with the man Job, who is still being put in the wrong” (250). Clines suggests that the character of God as depicted in the book of Job is seriously flawed.

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<sup>1</sup> The *peer* conversation between God and the Accuser in the Prologue of the book challenges monotheism. The seemingly *arbitrariness* of God’s actions toward Job appears incompatible with a covenantal relationship. And the fact that there is nothing that Job *can do to remedy* his situation in front of God is at odds with the cultic practice of offering sacrifices to God to atone for one’s sins. (Balentine 361-363).

### III. The voice from the whirlwind

If, on the one hand, the beauty of the poetry in the divine speeches is universally recognized,<sup>2</sup> on the other hand, as Seow points out, “their meaning and their significance are among the most debated issues in the book” (727). According to Crenshaw ([2] 351), the reaction of readers varies enormously. Some see “sublime irrelevance,” others see a lesson to Job to turn his eyes from himself onto the universe around him, and still others see the decreeing of the death of ethics and morality in this world.

MacKenzie and Murphy emphasize that God does not make a single reference to Job’s personal problem. God does not utter a single “word about his guilt or innocence, his suffering or its meaning” (486). Instead, God puts a series of unanswerable questions to Job, inquiring “where [*was he*] when [*God*] laid the foundation of the earth?” or “who determined its measurements,” or “who shut in the sea with doors,” or yet “[*has Job*] commanded the morning since [*his*] days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?” As God questions Job, He slaps down with irony: “surely you know!” (Job 38 NRSV). One of the possible implications is that if Job cannot answer these questions, he should not expect to be able either to hold his own in a debate with God nor to understand any explanation of the mysterious dealings of God with those who are “blameless and upright” in His sight. God’s speeches induce Job (and the book readers) to step back and look at the bigger picture of God’s Omnipotence, the human role and the relationship between them.

Another rather appealing way of looking at the divine speeches is under the lens of the creation accounts. According to Fretheim, God’s response to Job is “a verbal recreation of an amazingly diverse universe.” We are “taken up into a literary spacecraft, as it were, and

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<sup>2</sup> The resemblance with the exquisite poetry of Isaiah 40:12-31 and Psalm 104 is noteworthy (Crenshaw[2] 351).

shown a splendid creation” (88). If Job’s expectations, and ours, were for either a direct explanation of the reason for his suffering or at least a compassionate vigil of solidarity, God actually comes up with a third alternative: a verbal journey through creation, a reminder of our beginnings and a veiled recommissioning of mankind to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28 NRSV) or to “till ... and keep” God’s garden (Gen 2:15 NRSV).

Along similar lines, Balentine refers to God’s speeches as a further elaboration on the *grammars of creation*. This term, used as a title in a book by George Steiner cited by Balentine, refers to the myths and stories that mankind has come up with since primordial times to try and explain the creation of the world. In a broader sense, it refers to the description of any new beginnings that may renew hope, life and faith. The several creation stories found in the Jewish Scriptures and listed in the next paragraph, are examples of Israel’s grammars of creation (Balentine 352-356).

In Genesis 1 the world is described as being very good. In Genesis 2-3, God and man are involved in a partnership, but man crosses over some boundaries and the word *sin* enters the lexicon of creation. In Isaiah 40-55, out of the disenchantment and the pain of the Babylonian exile the prophet announces a new beginning, a new creation, rooted in justice and righteousness (Isa 45:8). But, along with the promise, come also the (startling) revelations that “I [the Lord] make weal and create woe” (Isa 45:7 NRSV) and that the realization of the promise will come through the suffering servant: the humble, unimpressive, despised, wounded, crushed, oppressed, afflicted, silent and righteous one (Isa 53:1-12). Quoting J. Janzen, Balentine argues that “Job’s enduring faith identifies him as a fellow traveler with Isaiah’s suffering servant” (357).

Finally, in Job 38-41, God's words from the whirlwind add on yet another chapter to Israel's grammars of creation. They assert the majesty, beauty, complexity and wonder of the created world. As Fretheim notes, in God's description of the foundations of the earth, the firmament, the seas and the weather elements, there are images of "boundary, law and rule; ... a basically coherent world" (89). In the allusion to the five pairs of free-ranging animals, there are images of parental loving care and nurture. But there are also the unsettling references to Behemoth (the hippopotamus-like creature) and Leviathan (the reptile-turned-into-dragon figure), which suggest the presence of chaos, randomness, unpredictability, incoherence, fierceness, domination and power in the life on earth. God reveals Himself to be the God of both aspects of creation. He cherishes and controls both of them. This assertion of God's *lordship over good and evil* is consistent with the revelation in Isaiah 45:7.

An intriguing idea suggested by Janzen and corroborated by Fretheim stems from the parental images in God's speeches. Job, when lamenting his predicament, had expressed regret of having ever being born (Job 3:3-12). This regret may suggest that even more serious than the issue of injustice being faced by Job is the issue of parental abandonment and forgetfulness. Within this context, the image of loving, nurturing parents from the animal kingdom used in the divine speeches seem to suggest that God meets "the innocent sufferer at the level of the primal fear of abandonment and forgetfulness" (Janzen 530).

Perhaps the most compelling lesson of the book of Job has to do with the vocational call embedded in the rhetorical and creational tone of the divine speeches. Several commentators refer to this call (Balentine, Janzen etc), but Fretheim does it in the most pungent and passionate way. The relentless questioning on Job's understanding of the cosmological and existential mysteries, rather than being meant to silence and suppress his

voice, seems intent on encouraging him to move one step further. He is invited to actually either keep or raise the tone of his voice in an active search for broadening and deepening his understanding of the created world and of the human role in it. When Job is twice urged to “gird up [his] loins like a man” (Job 38:3, 40:7 NRSV), he is being called to pursue the vocation delineated in the first two chapters of Genesis.

When God told man to subdue the earth (Gen 1), to cultivate and take care of His garden, to name every living creature and to obey God’s commands (Gen 2), He was calling mankind to stewardship and the pursuit of knowledge of the created world, as well as the pursuit of knowledge from above. The progress on the acquisition of both types of knowledge and their intertwined usage for the benefit of mankind can be seen as answers to this vocational calling. Whether we are uncovering the mechanisms of illnesses, or learning how to love those who dislike us; whether we are peeking farther and farther into the Universe, or visiting the lonely and sick; whether we are striving to preserve animals and plants from extinction, or crying with the friend who lost a dearly one; whether we are understanding the movement of the earth’s crust, or lovingly bearing our troubled family member; whether we are building structures that can withstand earthquakes and hurricanes, or helping to improve sanitary conditions in the housing project nearby; whether we are penetrating the human psyche to help the mentally ill, or fighting to eradicate poverty and hunger; whether we are deepening our understanding of political sciences and history, or using them to foster peace among peoples; whether we are using art, music and literature to enliven the spirit and excite the emotions, or to cry out for justice; whether we are looking for traces in our past in order to better prepare for the future, or trying to understand what God has revealed to us; these are all forms through which we are advancing our knowledge

and thus responding to God's calling. And if we manage to do this regardless of whether we are experiencing joy or sorrow, laughter or pain, safety or fear, fellowship or loneliness, then, perhaps, we might have learned something from the story of the book of Job.

#### **IV. Concluding remarks**

While acknowledging the wealth of insights and the disparaging range of opinions about the book of Job in general, this paper tried to draw attention on the message of hope and life embedded in the creational tone of God's words to Job.

Human beings in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should feel at the same time justified in their past pursuits to learn and expand knowledge (from below and from above) and newly empowered to proceed with those pursuits. Nowadays we have answers and insights, even if partially, to many of the questions and issues that puzzled Job. And many of these answers do at least offer comfort and mitigate, if not fully explain, some of the suffering and evil that afflicted Job then and still afflict us today. As Fretheim states, we, "Job's descendents, will be working on some of God's questions forever, but [we] have come a long way in [our] understanding of [God's] creation" (90) and revelation.

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