



Wisdom Literature

Job: The Dialogues

Job's anger at Eliphaz has two reasons. First he complains about the lack of sympathy: "those who withhold kindness from a friend forsake the fear of the Almighty (6:14). The friends are like a brook that has dried up when one needs it most. Second, Eliphaz has assumed Job's guilt without evidence; he has simply assumed that Job must be guilty because of a dogmatic presupposition. Job asks for evidence: "Teach me and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone wrong. How forceful are honest words! But your reproof, what does it reprove?" (6:24-5). Job appeals for honesty, and he is nothing less than candid himself: "Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul" (5:11)

Job now addresses God directly and complains that God is oppressing him as if he were the Sea or the Dragon, the cosmic enemies of ancient mythology. God should not be affected by human sin, and should be able to overlook it. Instead, he is the "watcher of humanity" who targets a human being who will all too soon be dead. "What is man that you make so much of him?" asks Job. The question inverts the well-known psalm: "What is man that you are mindful of him? A human being that you attend to him?" (Psalm 8:4). For Job, the attention of God is not a desirable thing, but an affliction.

Bildad responds to the challenge in chapter 8: "How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind?" (8:1). For Bildad the question is simple: "Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right?" (8:3). The answer is axiomatic, and negative. It is reinforced by the wisdom of the ages "inquire now of bygone generations and consider what their ancestors have found; for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing" (8:8-9). Bildad affirms the chain of act and consequence that was basic to proverbial wisdom: "Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh?" (8:11). Job must be guilty, and God must be proven right.

Job's reply to Bildad in chapter 9 is a pivotal passage, as it anticipates much of what will happen at the end of the book. Job admits that a human being cannot hope to defend himself before God. The problem is that God is both accuser and judge, and so it is impossible to win one's case before him. God prevailed over the Sea and over the mythical monster Rahab. How can a human being hope to withstand him? Where Bildad affirmed the justice of God, Job acknowledges only the raw power of the Creator. At issue is the very nature of justice. Is justice

simply the will of the all-powerful Creator? Or can it be measured by standards that humanity can recognize?

Job does not waver in protesting his innocence, but he shows little hope of winning satisfaction: “Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless; he would prove me perverse” (9:20). This prediction must be borne in mind when we come to the eventual encounter between God and Job at the end of the book. For the present, despair leads to candor: “It is all one; therefore I say, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges—if it is not he, who then is it?” (9:24).

The last friend to speak, Zophar, is quite brief. As between God and Job, there can be no contest. “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?” (11:7). Like Eliphaz, Zophar counsels submission. His argument rests on the unfathomable superiority of the Deity.

Job draws a sharp contrast between himself and his friends. The friends, he claims, are trying “to whitewash with lies” (13:4). They “speak falsely for God and speak deceitfully for him” (13:7). Job recognizes that they are trying to speak “for God,” to defend God’s good name, as religious people typically do. If evidence is thought to be damaging to God’s good name, it must be explained away, and pious dogma must be maintained. Not only does Job reject that approach, but he claims that God does too: “Will it be well with you when he searches you out? Or can you deceive him, as one person deceives another? He will surely rebuke you if in secret you show partiality” (13:9-10). This claim too will be tested when God finally appears on stage at the end of the book.

In the conclusion of this speech, Job dwells again on the wretched state of humanity and on how God should not need to afflict such creatures. Job insists especially on the finality of death. There is hope for a tree that is cut down (14:7), but when mortals expire they are laid low. This denial of resurrection, or of meaningful afterlife, is crucial to the problem of Job. The Hellenistic *Testament of Job* has Job rewarded in heaven for his sufferings on earth. No such easy solution is available to the author of the Hebrew book.

The second and third cycles of dialogue add rhetorical weight to the dispute between Job and his friends, but they add little by way of new argument. Here it will suffice to highlight two passages: 19:23-26, and 26:7-14.

Job 19:25 was made famous by its rendition in Handel’s *Messiah*: “I know that my redeemer liveth.” For traditional Christianity, the redeemer is Christ, but messianic prophecy has no place in the worldview of Job. The Hebrew text of this passage is very difficult, and probably corrupt at some points; but the general idea is clear enough. Job is not referring to a specific savior figure. Rather, he expresses his conviction that sooner or later his innocence will be vindicated. The truth will out, so to speak. The focus is not on the person of the redeemer, but on the hope of redemption.

Job 27:7-14 is attributed to Job as the text stands but is likely to have been part of a speech of Zophar. In any case, it provides a fine example of the kind of mythological view of creation that

was widely held in ancient Israel. In this account, creation involved stilling the Sea, and striking down the sea monster Rahab. The passage in Job goes farther than most of the allusions in the Psalms. God hangs the earth on nothing and draws a circle on the waters at the separation of light and darkness. Heaven is supported by pillars. This passage ranks with Psalm 104 as one of the major witness to an account of creation that is different from what we find in Genesis.

despite their ability to mine silver and gold from the bowels of the earth. “It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from birds of the air” (8:21). Abaddon and Death have only heard a rumor of it. Only God understands the way to it, and he does not want to disclose it to humanity. Rather, “he said to humankind, ‘Truly, the fear of the Lord that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding.’” This poem lends support to the view that wisdom is independent of God. He does not create it, but he knows where to find it. Human beings do not. For them, it must suffice to fear the Lord.

Job’s Self-Justification (Chapters 29–31)

The final speech of Job in chapters 29–31 differs from his earlier outbursts. Here he paints a picture of his prime, “when the Almighty was still with me, when my children were around me” (29:5). By his own account, he was a champion of righteousness: “eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame . . . a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger” (29:15-16). In return, he enjoyed respect: “young men saw me and withdrew, and the aged rose up and stood” (29:8). Moreover, he thought he had a deal with God: “Then I thought, ‘I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix my roots spread out to the waters, with the dew all night on my branches’” (29:19-20). In chapter 30, however, he expresses his profound disillusionment: “But now they make sport of me, those who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock” (30:1). He continues, in chapter 31, to set out what might have been fair punishment for various crimes. There is considerable irony in all of this. Job is in no position to bargain with God. Moreover, he comes across as not only righteous but self-righteous. His contempt for the people he would not put with the dogs of his flock is damning. We need not doubt that Job is genuinely righteous in his behavior. He plays by the rules in life. But he also expects life to keep the rules as he understands them.

The dialogues are brought to a conclusion by the speeches of Elihu. Elihu speaks out of frustration at the failure of his elders to silence Job. But his own speeches add nothing to the arguments that have already been presented. Presumably, his speeches were added by someone who shared his frustration, but still shared the perspective of the friends and arguably missed the point of the Book of Job.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org