



Wisdom Literature

The Speeches from the Whirlwind

The Book of Job reaches its climax in chapters 38–41, with the speeches from the whirlwind. As both Job and his friends had predicted, YHWH is overpowering. The experience of the theophany, however, surpasses any idea of it that mortals might have entertained, and overwhelms Job in a way that no speeches could.

At no point does YHWH respond to the question raised by Job, about his guilt or innocence. How could he? In the phrase of Robert Frost, he had just been showing off to Satan. Instead he hurls at Job a series of impossible questions: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” The speeches of God present a catalogue of concerns that are far beyond the reach of humanity, but are vital to the running of the universe, from the birth times of mountain goats to the control of the mythical monsters, Behemoth and Leviathan. The implication is clear. God has too many things on his mind to regard Job’s fate as of great importance. Job is given a lesson in perspective. Neither he nor humanity in general is as important as he had thought. Job gets the point when he answers meekly: “See, I am of small account” (40:4).

God’s speech from the whirlwind is arguably the strongest affirmation in the biblical corpus of the intrinsic value of nature. The mountain goats, let alone Behemoth and Leviathan, do not exist to serve the needs of humanity. Nature has its worth in the eyes of God. It also has its own morality, if it may be so called. God asks Job: “can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food” (38:39-40). This is a world where creatures eat each other in order to survive, and this is how it is ordained and sustained by God. In such a world, there is lots of collateral damage. Take the case of the ostrich:

The ostrich’s wings flap wildly, though its pinions lack plumage,
For it leaves its eggs to the earth and lets them be warmed on the ground,
Forgetting that a foot may crush them, and that a wild animal may trample them
It deals cruelly with its young, as if they were not its own . . .
Because God has made it forget wisdom
And given it no share in understanding.
When it spreads its plumes aloft, it laughs at the horse and its rider. (39:13-18)

Nonetheless, despite the cruelty in nature, it is good. When God created the earth, the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy (38:7). In such a world the misfortunes of Job are not of all-consuming importance.

The Epilogue

If the book of Job ended at 42:6, it would be rather depressing. Job had predicted, in chapter 9, that God would make him condemn himself, even though he was innocent. While he does not exactly abandon his plea of innocence, Job repents, at least of speaking of things he did not understand. But essentially Job has been crushed, as if by a thunderbolt. He has been shown that he does not understand the universe, but he has not been given any reassurance that it pays any attention to a moral law, as he had originally assumed.

The book does not end at 42:6, however. Instead, we have a brief, but surprising, prose epilogue. After Job's submission, we might have expected that God would thank the friends for their efforts on his behalf. Instead he tells Eliphaz: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has" (42:7). The friends, we must recall, had insisted that God does not pervert justice. Job, in contrast, had asserted that "he destroys both the blameless and the wicked" (9:22). God agrees with Job. Job had warned the friends that God would not be pleased that they were speaking falsely on his behalf, and in this he was right. We should not necessarily conclude that, in the view of the author, God does pervert justice. Rather, the point is that God does not comply with human conceptions of justice and is under no obligation to do so. In his play, *A Masque of Reason*, Robert Frost has God return years later to thank Job for helping him

Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.

He continues:

You realize by now the part you played
To stultify the Deuteronomist
And change the tenor of religious thought.
My thanks are to you for releasing me
From moral bondage to the human race.

The Deuteronomist was the editor of the historical books, from Joshua through Kings. He sought to demonstrate that those who kept the covenant prospered and that those who did not were punished, in accordance with Deuteronomy. His thought is broadly typical of much of the Old Testament, including the wisdom tradition as exemplified in Proverbs. Yet the certainties of this theology are upended in the Book of Job.

The friends are not treated harshly, although they have to rely on the intercession of Job. The epilogue provides a happy ending all around, in the manner of comedy rather than tragedy. Job's fortunes are restored. Now all his relatives, who were conspicuous by their absence up to

this point, come out of the woodwork to show him sympathy. Each gives him a piece of money and a gold ring. Job's wealth is doubled, and he is given a new family to replace the old one, with the nice touch that the daughters are now given an inheritance with their brothers. (Even the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27 were allowed to inherit only because they had no brothers.)

We might think, initially, that Job was restored to his original state, with some enhancement. But he ought to have learned something from the experience. No great confidence could be placed in people who professed their friendship when he was restored, when they had been absent in his time of need. And he should know from experience that all the new-found wealth and family that he is given at the end could be lost again in one bad day. Never again should Job be so confident that he would grow old in his own nest, or that other people were not worthy to be put with the dogs of his flock.

The book of Job has more than one lesson. As between Job and his friends, Job is vindicated. He was not being punished for any sins, as the reader knew from the

beginning. Moreover, his near-blasphemous candor is preferred to the piety of those who would lie for God. His honesty, however, is not tantamount to wisdom. He has to live with the fact that the universe does not revolve around humanity, let alone around Job. The justice of God, if that be the proper term, cannot be measured by human standards.

Job, then, stands as a great meta-commentary on much of the biblical tradition. It is a warning to beware of dogmatic certainty, and to respect the freedom of God.

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

www.yalebiblestudy.org