

THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB

The Voice of God (38:1—40:5)

The Voice of God and the Responses of Job (38:1—42:4)

At long last, we are ready to hear the voice of God, something for which Job has been desperately longing for what seems an interminable length of time (cf. 9:35; 13:22; 23:3-7; 31:35-37)! **Here, the reader must decide what tone is to be heard in the divine voice.** There is no doubt that God poses a series of very pointed questions to Job. The issue, then, is whether these questions are to be heard as coming from a friend or an enemy. Those interpreters who read Job as cynical or as antagonistic against God during his long ordeal tend to read the divine questions as thrusts aimed at crushing Job in humiliation. This assumption is unnecessary and is against the flow of the whole book, since in the end God will say of Job that he had spoken what was right (cf. 42:7b). Better to hear these questions as coming from a friend to a friend.

The content of the divine speeches is surprising. Job had asked for a written list of specific charges (cf. 31:35), or at the very least, a verdict of exoneration (cf. 13:18; 23:3-7, 10-12). Neither of these are forthcoming. Rather, God voices a series of questions that invite Job to observe the world, and in doing so, he will implicitly discover God within the world. Further, there is at least one feature that is conspicuous by its absence, the fact that in these speeches God does not offer a list of Job's offenses that "caused" his downfall nor any explanation as to why it all happened. His friends were not hesitant to level direct accusations (cf. 22:6-9), but God says nothing at all along these lines. While the reader knows from the outset that Job's great trial came about due to the aspersions of Satan and God's willingness to put Job to the test, Job knows nothing of this, and in the divine speeches, God does not explain. Of course, this is the central point of the book



God Answers Job from a Whirlwind
Watercolor by William Blake

that the reader must firmly grasp—that Job can find resolution to his suffering without ever completely knowing the back story. Job "does not see it all"; instead, "he sees God," and this makes all the difference! Job had felt that he had been abandoned by God, but the divine speech showed that God was not aloof, and more to the point, that Job could experience the presence of God even in the midst of suffering.

God's First Speech (38-39)

The opening question, "Who is this darkening counsel in speech without knowledge?" is a wry reference to Elihu's castigation of Job (38:1-2; cf. 35:16). Job is now invited to face God,

the very thing he has repeatedly desired (38:3; cf. 13:22; 31:35).¹

The questions God asks Job fall into two large blocks, the first concerning the mysteries of the created world (38:4-38) and the second concerning the mysteries of the animal kingdom (38:39—39:30). These questions, of course, are rhetorical and educational, intended to reinforce to him that there were huge areas of knowledge that were simply beyond any human's capacity to understand. By implication, Job's crucible of suffering should be seen in that same light as well—something he experiences but may not fully understand. Because God now speaks to Job directly, he confers upon him an elevated status! He is a creature with the highest dignity. Job had invited God to call, and he said that he would answer (cf. 13:22)—and now, the very thing he desperately desired was actually happening!

The Mysteries of the Created World (38:1-38)

The initial sequence of unanswerable questions concerns the origins of the universe, the “who” and “what” and “where” issues. The imagery of foundations (38:4), measurements and the surveyor's cord (38:5), footings and a cornerstone (38:6) all depict the universe as God's great architectural project. Still, if humans were not there to see it happen, the angels



*When the morning stars sang
together and the sons of God
shouted for joy...*

Watercolor by William Blake

THE ORIGIN OF ANGELS

The origin of angels is not described in the Hebrew Bible, though their existence is everywhere assumed. Later, St. Paul will specifically say that all entities in heaven and earth were created by God through his Son, “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (Col. 1:16). The reader should note the synonymous parallelism between “the morning stars” and the “sons of God,” indicating that both phrases refer to the same thing.

were, and they watched with admiration, amazement, and spontaneous song (38:7)! The “sons of God,” of course, are referenced earlier in the book as the spiritual beings who belong to God's heavenly council (see pages 14-15). The origins of the ocean are

described with the metaphor of child-birth, the gushing forth of the natal fluids from the “double-doors” of the womb (38:8). The clouds continue the birthing metaphor, here depicting the bands of cloth used to wrap an infant (cf. Eze. 16:4). The sea is personified, and God set boundaries to curtail its threat (38:10-11).

The questioning continues, now concerning the demarcation of night and day. The darkness of night is depicted as a metaphorical robe covering the earth, and the breaking of morning as “shaking out” the robe's folds (38:12-13). Seal impressions² transform lumps of clay into

¹ The Hebrew idiom “gird now your loins like a man” indicates readiness (cf. Ex. 12:11; 1 Kg. 18:46; 2 Kg. 4:29; 9; 1; Lk. 12:35; Ep. 6:14; 1 Pe. 1:13), more or less equivalent to the English expression “brace yourself.”

² If Job's context is sufficiently ancient, the seal likely refers to a cylinder seal rather than a signet ring.

recognizable images, and in the same way, the bright rays of the sun bring into sharp relief the profile of the land with each sunrise (38:14). With the coming of the morning light, the wicked are deprived of their preferred element, darkness, and can no longer raise their arm in violence, since all will be revealed by the light of day (38:15)!

From explorations of night and day, God turns to the sea once again, this time not its origin but rather its subterranean depths from which the waters emerge (38:16). The waters of the sea are often a symbol of death in Hebrew poetry (e.g. 28:14; Ps. 69:2, 14; Jon. 2:3),³ and here they are linked to the “gates of death,” the entry to the place of the dead (38:17). Just as Job has never explored these unreachable places, so he has never explored the expanse of even the visible land (38:18).

Now, the tour of the world turns to the horizon, where light and darkness are personified as entities traveling to their homes (38:19-20). The reader should bear in mind, of course, that Job’s knowledge of the celestial world is largely phenomenological, not scientific, so these verses are not a means by which modern interpreters should attempt to define cosmology. God asks Job if he knows the origins of snow or hail (38:22), divine weapons that he sometimes uses for war (38:23; cf. Ex. 9:22; Jos. 10:11; 1 Sa. 7:10; Isa. 30:30; Eze. 13:13). Did Job know the source of light (or lightning?) or the east wind (38:24)?

Transitioning to rain, God questions whether Job is aware that rain falls on uninhabited lands, not just the places with which Job is familiar (38:25-27). Humans might try to irrigate parched areas for farming, but God designs channels for the irrigation of places where no humans even live! Further, the origins of rain, dew, ice, and frost were mysteries well beyond Job’s ken (38:28-30)! Moving to the heavens, God cites the stellar world (38:31-33). The constellations of Pleiades and Orion are well-known. The movements of cloud, lightning, rain, and flood were totally outside Job’s ability to control (38:34-35). Who imbued them with their wisdom, or what human could possibly influence them (38:36-38)?⁴

The Mysteries of the Animal World (38:39—39:30)

God now invites Job to explore the animal world in a series of vignettes. Could Job possibly conduct a hunt in order to provide meat for a pride of lions (38:39-40)? Hardly! This, the most ferocious of wild animals in the ancient Near East, was always a hostile predator and fearful for humans. No more could Job provide for the young chicks of the desert raven (38:41). Could he possibly know anything at all about the birthing patterns of the ibex, their gestation time, calving and rapid progress toward maturity (39:1-4)? And what about wild asses, which freely roamed the arid steppes of the Middle East (39:5-8)? Who set them free if not God? The same for the

³ The word **תְּהוֹם** (= the deep, the abyss), used in 38:16, derives from the same Semitic root as Tiamat, the goddess of chaos in the Babylonian creation stories, often associated with the sea. In the Hebrew Bible, however, “the deep” generally is not personified, but refers to the primal waters of the sea (Ge. 1:2; Ps. 33:7). By the time of the New Testament, “the deep” becomes a synonym for *hades*, the underworld (cf. Lk. 8:31; Rv. 9:1-2).

⁴ The meaning of the words **תְּחִלָּה** and **לֵב** have long been scholarly bones of contention. The RV and KJV rendered them as “inward parts” and “mind/heart” (so, also, NASB, NRSV, ESV, NET, JPS, NLT). The RSV rendered them as “clouds” and “mists.” Several versions translate them as birds, the ibis and the rooster (so TEV, NAB, NIV, NIB, NJB), which seems odd in the context of weather descriptions. All translations at this point are scholarly guesses, and the actual meanings have been lost in antiquity.

wild ox, creatures of great strength and ferocity but virtually impossible to tame (39:9-12; cf. Is. 34:7). Could Job ever expect to harness one to work his fields?

Next, the divine speech transitions from questions into a direct descriptions, and God calls Job's attention to the ostrich. Ostriches, at best, are comical creatures, their plumage useless for flying and their eggs exposed (39:13-15). They have a reputation for cruelty to their young (39:16; cf.



The Palestinian Ibex

La. 4:3), and altogether, they seem rather dull if humorous creatures (39:17). Though they cannot fly, they can run faster than a horse (39:18)!

God now asked Job about horses.⁵ Had Job given the horse its strength and agility or its courage in battle (39:19-25)? While horses are the only domesticated animal in the series, they still exude a wildness that is comparable to other untamable animals. The language of the quivering mane, the powerful stride, the snorting and pawing of the ground, the willingness to charge into bristling weaponry and the unrestrained eagerness at the sounding of the battle trumpet—all these things mark the horse as unique in the animal kingdom. The final query concerns the flight of birds, the hawk and vulture (39:26-30). They soar

heavenward in their southward migrations, building their nests in the highest crags, seeking out prey with incredible keen-sightedness, and scavenging on the corpses of those fallen in battle.

The Divine Challenge and Job's Response (40:1-5)

At the beginning of his speech, Yahweh had challenged Job to face him (38:2-3), and now, after a lengthy series of unanswerable rhetorical questions, he challenges Job to respond (40:1-2). Once more the reader encounters the word for lawsuit, which most English Versions translate as "contend." In his final appeal, Job had bluntly said that if God would only give him an audience, he would approach him "like a prince" (cf. 31:35-37). Now, Yahweh has answered and returned to Job his challenge. Job must answer! At this point, however, Job is suitably chastened, and his answer is less like a prince and more like a humble subject. Job concedes that compared to God, he is very small indeed, and there is nothing he can say. Previously, Job had spoken boldly, but he will do so no more.

Yet, there is more to come. God is not yet finished speaking with Job, and there is still work to be done for the reconstruction of Job's understanding of God's ways. This brings us to Yahweh's second speech.

⁵ Horses were not domestic animals in the ancient Near East as they would become in later eras. The horse was used primarily for one purpose, war, and in the earlier period, primarily for chariotry (cavalry would come later).