

## THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB

### The Second Cycle of Dialogues (15-21)

Now begins a second set of dialogues between Job and his three friends. As before, each friend will speak in turn, and also as before, Job will offer responses. Since Job's friends have been altogether unsuccessful in diverting him from his protestation of innocence, the friends change tactics somewhat. Previously, they sought to defend God. Now, they attempt to defend religion, accusing Job of doing away with reverence for God (cf. 15:4).

#### ***Eliphaz Speaks (15)***

The same order of speakers is preserved, so Eliphaz is first. He bluntly accuses Job of windy emptiness (15:1-3) and brands him as a threat to religious reverence (15:4).<sup>1</sup> He charges that Job's claims of innocence are nothing but a huge cover-up, and by fingering specifically Job's words (mouth/tongue/mouth/lips), he flatly contradicts what the narrator said earlier—that Job did not sin with his lips (15:5-6; cf. 2:10b). In a flurry of blistering and highly sarcastic rhetorical questions, Eliphaz derides Job's capacity for wisdom (15:7-16).

Eliphaz then embarks on a lengthy and pompous exposition of divine retribution, which he says is derived from the accumulated wisdom of the ancients, a wisdom unadulterated from passing strangers (15:17-19). Still, he offers essentially the same cause-and-effect theology he expounded earlier (cf. 4:7-8). It is as though by saying it again, more loudly this time, its veracity will be confirmed (15:20-35).

#### ***Job Responds (16-17)***

Nothing new has been added by Eliphaz' insinuations. Job's ironic rejoinder—that Eliphaz is at least as windy as Job—seems appropriate (16:1-3). By this time, Job is truly at his wit's end. It hasn't helped to vent his feelings, but silence doesn't help either (16:6). He is emaciated and gaunt, torn and persecuted, the object of God's anger (16:7-9). His friends have mustered a devastating attack upon him, punching him with vicious words (16:10-11). Andersen's literal translation of 16:12-14, where Job describes the attack of God, is vivid but accurate:

*I was at ease and he shattered me;  
He grabbed my gullet, and smashed me.  
He set me up as his target,  
His archers encircled me.  
He chopped my kidneys unsparingly,  
And split my guts on the ground.  
He wounds me with wound upon wound;  
He rushed against me like a champion.*

Still, in spite of a torrent of tears and no relief, even by wearing loose clothing, Job still refused to retaliate against God (16:15-17). His description of God's attack is just that—a description—

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<sup>1</sup> In saying that Job is undermining "fear," several versions insert the words "of God." The qualifier "of God" is not in the Hebrew text, but they seem implied by the context (so RSV, NRSV, ESV, NLT).

but he never resorts to incriminating God.

So, Job is now reduced to disputing with both God and his friends. God has not spoken, and his friends, who have spoken, have only mocked and betrayed him. Job lifts his tear-stained face upward, pleading for someone, but especially God, to come to his defense (16:20-21). He feels there is not much time left (16:22)! Indeed, he feels that the grave awaits him (17:1). In this extremity and in view of his friends' accusations, Job now enters into a solemn oath in which he calls upon God to defend him against his accusing friends (17:2-3). Doubtless he realizes the risk of such a bold initiative, but he feels justified, since he is convinced that God already has negated their wisdom, which is evident by their closed minds (17:4a). They must not be allowed to succeed in their malicious prosecution (17:4b)!

Once more taking up God's attack upon him, Job moans that he has become an object of public contempt, one in whose face people spit (17:6). His eyesight is failing and his body has only a shadow of its former health (17:7). Decent people<sup>2</sup> are appalled at his condition, and they recoil at the cruel mockery of his friends (17:8). Still, in spite of these crushing circumstances, Job's spirit rises to the occasion, if only briefly (17:9).

Continuing the description of his debilitation, Job anticipates death. All his former aspirations have been dashed, and darkness is closing in (17:11-12). Still, if he resigns himself to death, embracing *Sheol*, the pit, and the maggot, what prospect is there (17:13-15)? His hope for justification will sink into the prison of the dead along with him, never to be resolved (17:16)!

### ***Bildad Speaks (18)***

Bildad, the consummate traditionalist, holds true to form in his response to Job. He obviously has taken umbrage at Job's response, for he asks, "How long will you set a snare for words?" (18:1-2a). His quip, "Be intelligent, and then we will speak!" merely adds insult to injury (18:2b). Bildad then embarks on a rambling discourse about the misfortunes that beset the wicked, and by implication, he continues to indict Job as someone suffering his just deserts. Again, this is the cause-and-effect theology propounded by all the friends, except that this version is blunter and less nuanced. Bildad's parting shot that such things are bound to happen to the man who does not know God is presumptuous, arrogant, and tendentious (18:21).

### ***Job Responds (19)***

If the preceding speech by Bildad is especially dark, the climax of Job's response is brimming with faith, even confidence. First, however, Job must say something about the stinging barbs of his friends. They have been unrelenting in their castigation, crushing him with accusations they cannot prove, drawing their conclusions from inferences based on Job's tragedy, not from any actual knowledge of his life (19:1-3). This is why Job urges it is God's place to judge, not theirs (19:5-6)!

What has happened has happened, but Job still has not heard from God himself. His friends

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that by "the upright" Job is making a sarcastic jibe against his friends, but without a larger context, it is better to take the word as referring to ordinary decent people.

attempt to speak for God, but Job knows instinctively that their words are presumptuous and empty. Job wants to hear from God himself, but there has been only divine silence (19:7). Job does not accuse God of injustice, but thus far he has heard no divine word to exonerate him. God, in his sovereignty, has allowed Job's downfall without explanation, here described by the metaphors of being walled in, stripped of glory, demolished, uprooted, and put to siege (19:8-12). To be sure, these metaphors are mixed, which is a bit frustrating for English readers who have been reared on the maxim not to mix metaphors, but it is their cumulative effect that is most important.

Job is utterly lonely, estranged from his friends, rejected by his kinfolk, and disrespected by his servants (19:13-16). Little children jeer and whisper about him (19:18), and his most intimate friends repudiate him (19:19). He is surviving, but just barely (19:20).<sup>3</sup> He pleads with his friends for mercy rather than recrimination, but they seem like ravenous predators, pretending to speak for God, but eager for his flesh (19:21-22)!

In desperation, Job turns from his faithless friends to his faith in God. He is certain that God will vindicate him, and when it happens, he will know it himself. Indeed, he even wishes that his protestation of innocence could be inscribed on a scroll, embossed on a lead sheet or engraved in stone—an enduring witness to his innocent suffering (19:23-24). Then follows an exclamation of incredible confidence that shines all the more brightly against the larger background of bleak negativism (19:25-27).

וְאֲנִי יָדַעְתִּי גֹאֲלִי חַי וְאַחֲרָיוֹן עַל-עֶפְרָ יְקוֹם:

*And I know my Redeemer lives, and afterward he will stand upon the dust!*

וְאַחֲרַי עוֹרִי נִקְפּוּ-זֹאת וּמִבְשָׁרִי אֶחְזֶה אֱלֹהִים:

*And after my skin has been stripped off, so from my flesh I will see God!*

אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי אֶחְזֶח-לִי וְעֵינַי רְאוּ וְלֹא-זָר

*Whom I will see for myself, and my eyes will behold, and not a stranger!*

כָּלֹ כָלִי־יִי בְחֻקִּי:

*How my "heart" is spent in my bosom! (my translation)*

Job depicts his Redeemer as standing upon the dust of death, a metaphor for Job's own grave. Nonetheless, it is after the event of death that Job is certain he will see God! In this post-death vision of God, he will not see him in some ghostly shade of existence, but as a full man ("from my flesh"), a full view of God that he will see for himself! Does Job anticipate resurrection? Many interpreters are doubtful, but it seems to me that this is precisely what Job has in view—a form of life after death! To be sure, Job is a long way on the other side of the Christian gospel of Jesus' resurrection, but nevertheless, even if imperfectly formed, his confident hope is that after death he will encounter God, and he will do so as a full and complete person!

### **Zophar Speaks (20)**

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the idiom made famous in the rendering of the KJV, "I am escaped with the skin of my teeth," is not immediately clear. No doubt it was understood in Job's day, but it is irrecoverable for us.

Zophar especially took umbrage at Job's closing words about the sword of judgment cutting both ways, which he took to be a personal insult. He claims to have had an inner dialogue with himself, which he evidently perceives to be a mark of wisdom and insight (20:1-3).

There is very little new ground in Zophar's rebuttal. He remains consistent in contending that everything is explainable by cause and effect. His generalisms, while perhaps true, have little to do with Job's specific circumstance. The conclusions he has offered may be true generally, but they are not true regarding Job.

### ***Job Responds (21)***

Job commences his rebuttal by calling for his friends to actually listen to him (21:2). This, he says, would in itself be an act of true comfort. His friends have argued from the beginning that sin leads to calamity. For them, the moral framework of the universe is cause and effect, pure and simple. Job now attacks this thesis by pointing out from observable human experience that very often the wicked live long, healthy lives (21:7)! Zophar had confidently asserted that the wicked die prematurely (cf. 20:11), but Job says this is not necessarily so! Further, Bildad had urged that the wicked die childless (cf. 18:19), but Job says not necessarily so—he has seen plenty of wicked people with happy families (21:8)! Eliphaz had urged that if Job would just confess his sin, his “tent” would be at peace (cf. 5:24), but Job says not necessarily so—lots of wicked people have comfortable and safe houses, and God doesn't seem to do anything about it (21:9)! The livestock breeding programs of the wicked are hugely successful (21:10), and their families produce a veritable flock of happy children, all dancing about (21:11) and singing (21:12). More to the point, they live out their days in prosperity and finally go to the grave in peace at a ripe old age (21:13)! Job's observations, then, are exactly the opposite of Zophar's!

Hence, he poses his own set of rhetorical questions. Alluding to Bildad's words, he asks, “How often do the wicked really experience calamity, divine reprisal, or premature death” (21:17-18)? Not that often, it seems! Job's friends have argued that God stores up punishment, even to the next generation, paying it out to the children so that even if the parents don't experience it fully, their children will do so (cf. 5:4; 18:19; 20:10).

In the end, who gets to tell God how to run the world (21:22)? This is Job's pointed question. The sovereign God is beyond moral advice from his creatures, and indeed, since he is supreme, he even passes judgment on the higher beings. Still, the moral framework of God's judgment is not immediately apparent, since the fates of any two individuals, one healthy, relaxed and prosperous and the other bereft and poor, are the same (21:23-26). Death is the great equalizer, and it admits no favoritism, since every human dies! No moral differences explain their fates. It is, of course, precisely this reality that is the problem for Job. If he believes in a sovereign God (and he surely does), how are these moral inequities to be explained? The world seems more characterized by randomness than anything else.

It is only too apparent that the wicked person frequently escapes confrontation and gets away without paying for his crimes (21:31). In the end, the consolations of his friends were so much vapor (21:34). They had no substance; they were wrong!