

THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB

Zophar Speaks (11)

Zophar, the final speaker, is at least brief. He offers no new insights, and indeed, he is even more severe than his compatriots. Whereas Eliphaz insinuated that Job must have sinned, and Bildad carried that insinuation even farther, Zophar actually suggests that Job is so guilt-ridden he has gotten off easy. Zophar is the sort of comforter that sufferers could do without! He is the sort of pretentious advisor who says, “You want to know about God? Just ask me! (God and I go way back!)”

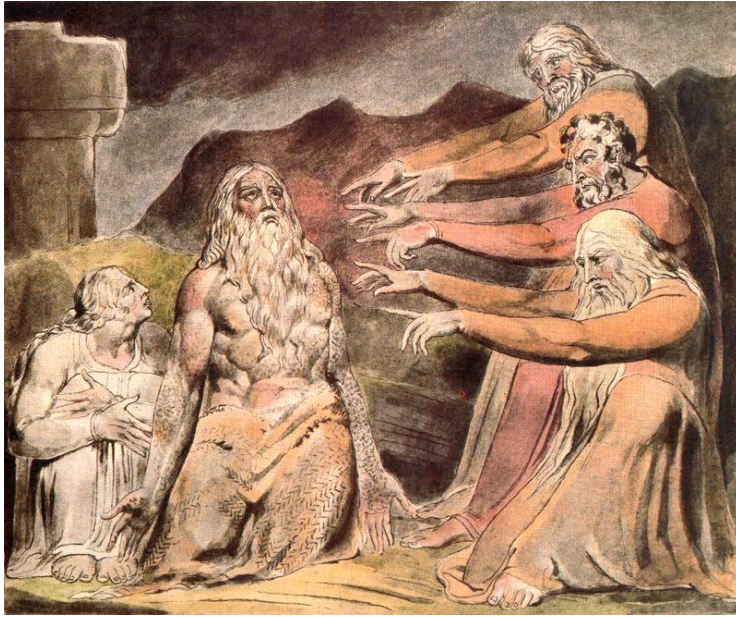
He begins by addressing Job’s “multitude of words,” dismissing them as empty talk¹ and arrogant mockery, deserving censure (11:1-3). He flatly contradicts Job’s claim of innocence and asserts that if only God would speak, he would reveal that Job has received even less than he deserved (11:4-6). If Job has pled with God to answer his agonizing question, “Why?” Zophar is confident that he already knows why! If God would speak, he would say the same thing as Zophar is saying.

He challenges Job’s search for God as an exercise in futility, since God’s wisdom is higher, deeper, and wider than any human can comprehend, encompassing the heavens, the underworld, and the ends of earth and sea (11:7-9). God’s judgments, here expressed in a courtroom metaphor, are irrevocable (11:10). He knows that humans are worthless and stupid, and he implies that Job should see himself in this same light (11:11-12). Of course, Zophar is partially correct in his truisms about God’s vast wisdom, but as with the other friends, though he can make true statements, he comes to wrong conclusions. Further, to insinuate that Job is a stupid ass is particularly heartless.

Zophar’s conclusion is that repentance is the only way forward. Job needs to turn from his evil ways and seek God’s pardon (11:13-14). Only then can he expect to be restored, and once he has done so, his former misery will vanish like water disappearing into a desert wadi (11:15-16). Life will be bright, he will be protected, and fear will be gone (11:17-19). The alternative, on the other hand, is disastrous and will end in miserable death (11:20).

So, Job’s friends have concluded their first round. Job continues as he was, an upright man experiencing dire calamity, but he knows not why. His friends claim to speak for God, and if Job will only take their advice and repent of his sins, God will be pleased (which really means that *they* will be pleased). It is almost axiomatic that when some self-designated religious expert urges that another must do such and such to please God, it often means he must do such and such to please them! Job, for his part, is certain that he is innocent. His friends are certain that he has hidden guilt. Job believes he can know the truth about himself. His friends contend that only God can know such hidden mysteries. Job struggles with his conception of God, whom he regards as good, but now, in light of God’s goodness, finds his own reduced state inexplicable. His friends confidently assert that “everything happens for a reason.” Not everything his friends have said is wrong, of course, but in the midst of their well-intentioned truisms, they fail to do justice to Job, and more to the point, they fail to do justice to God, as will be made clear later (cf. 42:7).

¹ Lit. “a man of lips”



To the man, the accusations of Job's friends is that everything is his own fault.

Watercolor by William Blake

Job Responds (12-14)

Job now begins his final speech of the first cycle, and it will be his longest thus far. In it he will address both his friends and God.

The address to his friends, particularly Zophar, is couched in finely-crafted sarcasm (12:1-2). Zophar has urged that God's wisdom is so high and wide and deep that it is entirely beyond Job's ability to perceive it (cf. 11:7-9), and worse, that Job is nothing more than a stupid donkey-brain (cf. 11:12). Job counters Zophar's harshness by pointing out that he has as much a right to access God's wisdom as they do (12:3). No doubt he feels his sarcasm is appropriate in light of their cheap

mockery, even though he is a man who has previously been known to seek and hear from God (12:4). In particular, Job's friends have failed entirely to explain why he, a just and blameless man, has experienced misfortune, while bandits, blasphemers, and idolaters see peace and security (12:5-6).²

Job now begins to address one friend in particular, presumably Zophar.³ He points out that all God's activities, including even his activities in the animal world, are essentially the same, which is to say, the tragedies of animal life in both land and sea seem indiscriminate and without any moral attachments (12:7-9).⁴ Every living thing is in the hand of the sovereign God (12:10), and Job is as qualified as any of his friends to test and "taste" the validity of arguments, even the so-called wisdom of the ancients (12:11-12). In God's activities in the world, which display his wisdom and sovereignty, there is no clear moral pattern to justify the notion that all outcomes of good and bad are simply cause and effect, rewards and judgments. God's will cannot be

² The Hebrew in 12:5-6 is quite difficult, though the gist seems reasonably clear. Readers will see some variation in the English Versions. H. H. Rowley's summary is helpful when he says, "Job is observing that the theology of his friends is the theology of the prosperous, who can afford to look down on the unfortunate and excuse themselves from giving sympathy by the assumption that they have brought it upon themselves." The line הָבִיא אֱלֹהֶם בְּיָדוֹ (= "they bring their god in their hand") probably refers to idolatry.

³ This change from plural to singular is not obvious in an English translation, since the pronoun "you," in English at least, does double duty for both singular and plural. In Hebrew, however, the "you" in 12:2, 3 is plural, while the "you" in 12:7ff. is singular.

⁴ Job 12:9 is the only poetic passage in the book using the name Yahweh, which following the prose prologue has given way to a form of *Elohim*. Some scholars suggest that this must be a gloss and not the original text. On the other hand, if this is original, then it forms an emphatic declaration of Yahweh's sovereignty over all created life and forms a link with his divine right to both give and take away (cf. 1:21).

resisted, of course, and all humans, not to mention nature itself, testifies to the reality of God's sovereignty (12:13-25). Nonetheless, this historical parade of builders, droughts, floods, counselors, judges, kings, priests, elders, princes, nations, and chiefs all point to one overpowering conclusion: disasters happen to them all under the sovereignty of God, but there

Job, at least, recognizes what his friends do not: God cannot be easily explained by shallow reasoning as though he were a problem to be solved. Job's God was much bigger than that!

is no clear sense of how or why such things happen. Zophar had sarcastically asked of Job, "Can you find out the deep things of God?" (cf. 11:7), and Job's much more serious answer was, "No!"

Job now longs to voice his appeal directly to God. He knows only too well the threadbare truisms

of his friends (13:1-2), but what he really wants is to have a conversation with God in order to sort out his poverty of understanding (13:3)! God, only, can provide an adequate answer! As for his friends and their superficial counsel and paltry explanations, it would be wisdom on their part if they would just shut-up (13:4-5)! He urges them to hear him, for in their presumptuous attempts to defend God, they have put themselves in grave danger, since their arguments are unjust and treacherous (13:6-8).⁵ If God, for instance, deigned to examine the three friends, it would hardly turn out well for them (13:9-10)! They would be terrified to discover that their advice had been nothing but ashes and clay (13:11-12).

So, Job boldly intends to maintain his claim his innocence before God, come what may (13:13), and indeed, he is confident that he does so as a godly man, taking his life in his hands to face Almighty God. He is absolutely undaunted in his firm belief that he will be vindicated (13:14-16). There is a difference between arrogance and confidence, and Job's boldness stems from confidence. Death itself could not undercut his confident expectation!⁶ His friends must continue to listen as he prepares to present his case to God, and Job knows he is in the right—he will be vindicated. He is confident that God will exonerate him, but even if he does not, Job would willingly accept the verdict of death (13:17-19). He prays for two things only, that God would give him relief and that God would directly specify his transgression and sin (13:20-23). If God would

⁵ Most English Versions offer some sort of dynamic equivalency for the opening phrase of 13:8, which literally reads, וְהִפָּאֵן עַל-פָּנָיו (= "Will you lift up his face?"), an idiom for bribing judges, cf. Dt. 10:17; Pro. 18:5. The Almighty is not about to start condoning partiality, even if in defense of himself!

⁶ The wording in 13:15a can be taken in two ways. The *Qere* reading is וְיָקֻטְלֵנִי לֹא אֶחְיֶה (= "Even if he slays me, I will wait for him."). The *Kethiv* reading is וְיָקֻטְלֵנִי לֹא אֶחְיֶה (= "Behold, he will slay me; I have no hope."). A *Qere* reading in the margin of the Masoretic Text (MT) is an oral substitute for the actual written word in the text itself. In other words, scribes would never change a text, but they would offer an alternative reading, a euphemism, if the text as it stood was considered unsuitable for public hearing. The *Kethiv* reading is what is written in the MT itself; the *Qere* is what would be read aloud in the synagogue service. Here, whether one should follow the *Qere* reading or the *Kethiv* reading depends upon how one understands Job's mood and tone. If he is expressing unbounded and optimistic trust in God (and I think that he is), then the *Qere* reading is the most appropriate (so KJV, RV, JPS, NAB, NASB, NET, NIB, NIV, ESV). On the other hand, if he is defiantly resigned to pessimism (a viewpoint that some scholars adopt), then the *Kethiv* reading is to be preferred (so NJB, NLT, RSV, NRSV).

only break the silence, Job would heartily respond, or if God would allow him to speak, he would accept whatever reply God might give. It is noteworthy that Job uses three distinct words for sin, עֲוֹן (iniquity/error), חַטָּאת (sin/missing the mark), and פְּשָׁע (transgression/rebellion). Job does not claim perfection or sinlessness, and he frankly concedes waywardness during his younger years (13:26b), but if he has done something now to earn God's displeasure, he wants to know what it is. What frustrates him beyond measure is the fact that he simply does not know and that God has not spoken (13:24-25). He feels as vulnerable as a leaf in the breeze or a piece of dry straw—totally helpless before his tragic circumstances. It is as though God has delivered a sentence against him, but he doesn't know the charge. God has sentenced him to the stocks and kept him under surveillance, restricting his freedom, but Job still doesn't know why (13:26-27). Hence, as before (cf. 3:11, 20; 7:20; 10:18), the word לָמָּה? ("Why?") looms large (13:24a)! As it is, his life is rotting away with no answer (13:28).

Hence, Job returns to his lament about the condition of his waning life, and indeed, all human life, a lament that has graced many a funeral service for its elegant depiction of life's brevity (14:1-2). Given life's fragility and insignificance, Job is amazed that God even pays attention to him or cares to bring judgment on him, since no one can reverse impurity anyway (14:3-4). Since the lifespan of a human is so short, why does God not just leave him alone, so he can enjoy his brief respite at the end of the day like a hired man who has completed his work (14:5-6)? A felled tree might be regenerated out of the old root system, but is that even possible for a human (14:7-10)? Humans are more like a dried-up lake or river with no hope of recovery (14:11-12).

So, Job muses on the possibility of resurrection. After death, he expects to descend to *Sheol*, the place of departed spirits, and he wishes that he could simply linger there until God's anger against him had waned and he could be recalled (14:13). *Sheol*, of course, raises the question of whether death is the end of everything, and Job contemplates that there may actually be life beyond *Sheol*. If so, he would patiently await this brighter future (14:14)! He envisions God desiring his fellowship and recalling him from death, expunging the record of his sins by sealing them away forever (14:15-17)! Here lies the most vibrant of hopes, and while the Hebrew Bible does not have many references to resurrection or life after death,⁷ Job surely looks to the future with this blessed hope in mind!

Finally, Job's mood swings again to despair, which should not be too surprising, given his miserable condition. People in dire circumstances find that their emotions vacillate back and forth, and Job is no exception. The imagery of crumbling mountains and eroded landscapes seems to parallel crumbling hopes (14:18-19). In the end, death comes to all. Even though a man might be mourned by his family, in death he is unaware of such honor (14:20-22). Both hope and fear shadow each other during tragedy, and they do so here. In view of the silence of God, Job gropes toward the future, mingling his hopes and fears. The reader should not expect of Job some sort of sterile consistency, but neither should Job's expressions of despair be allowed to obliterate his profound expressions of hope.

⁷ The idea of resurrection and life after death is to be found in the Old Testament, though not often (e.g., Ps. 16:8-11; Is. 26:19; Da. 12:2-3).