

The Wisdom of Job's Conclusion

(Job 42:1-6)

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In his response (40:3-5) to the first divine speech of Job 38–39, brief though it was, Job said that he stood by what he had previously argued in his speeches, but he will not reiterate his case: 'I have spoken once, but I shall not speak again, twice, but I shall say no more'. Now his response to the second divine speech of Job 40:6–41:34 goes one step further, in saying—not only that he has nothing to add, but—that he is abandoning his suit against Yahweh (which is how I will argue that we must read 42:6a). Just as in 40:3-5, he does not withdraw a word he has said, he does not admit that God is in the right or that he is in the wrong, he does not confess to any sins or apologize for what he has said.

In my translation, this second response of Job to Yahweh reads:

- 1 Then Job answered Yahweh, saying:
- 2 (A) I know that you can do anything,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
- 3 (B) 'Who is this who obscures the Design¹ without knowledge?', [you ask].²
To be sure, I made my depositions—without understanding—
[concerning] things too wonderful for me—[things] I did not know.
- 4 (C) 'Listen, and I will speak', [you said]³;
'I will question you, and you shall let me know [your answers]'.

5 I have heard you with my ears,
and my eye has now seen you.
6 So I submit—and I accept consolation [offered to me]
for my dust and ashes.

It is an unprepossessing response, without a trace of the passion and rhetorical verve of his other speeches. But it is a crafty conclusion in that, while

¹ The Hebrew, without the article, could mean 'counsel' in general, as RSV, NJPS. But it seems likely that the reference here is to the divine counsel or plan, which I understand to be Yahweh's design for the universe. Other translations that take the term in this sense include: NAB 'divine plans', NJB 'my intentions', NIV 'my counsel', and NEB, JB 'my design(s)'; similarly Robert Gordis has 'my plan' (*The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Notes*, New York 197), 491). I give the term a capital letter because it is a grand design, of universal scope.

² I add the phrase 'you ask' to make clear that Job is quoting Yahweh's previous words; a similar addition is made by NIV, TEV and REB.

³ 'You said' is not in the Hebrew, but added also by NIV, TEV and REB to indicate that what precedes is a quotation of Yahweh's words.

his speech appears quietly reasonable and even submissive, it amounts in reality to a cool dismissal of all that Yahweh has been saying. I don't think the commentators have really appreciated that, and this is the reason why I make a paper out of it.⁴

There are three elements in Job's speech. In the first, Job acknowledges the omnipotence of Yahweh (v. 2); in the second, he accepts that he has intruded into an area in which he has no competence (v. 3); and, in the third, having heard Yahweh's speeches, he abandons his case against God and determines to resume his normal life (vv. 4-6). Put like that, Job's intentions seem rather straightforward. But there is a subtlety in each of these responses.

1. *You can do anything*

First, when Job acknowledges Yahweh's omnipotence, there is nothing new in that, for he has always done so, and there is none of his companions who would deny it. But this avowal of Yahweh's omnipotence stands here as a response to Yahweh's speeches, which have by no means had that as their central theme. If this is Job's response, it means that he has failed (perhaps, deliberately failed) to understand much of the divine speeches, whose purpose was rather to lay out the principles behind Yahweh's creation and maintenance of the world. Though Yahweh never mentioned justice, Job has not failed to notice its absence. Job declines to accept any worldview that does not prioritize justice, and so he effectively says, *It is as I always said, Might is right with you!*

There no doubt a concessive note here: he accepts that he is a mere mortal, unfitted by capacity or knowledge for the management of the universe; as he has said already, in comparison with Yahweh, he is of little account (40:4). And yet, if demands for justice and a questioning of God's manner of governing the universe are only ever to be answered by an invocation of the divine almightiness, it is a sorry state of affairs, and every bit as bad as Job had been complaining all along (cf. 23:13-14). In short, Job's words are both a capitulation and, in a way, a reiteration of his complaint.

There is yet more to this response by Job. However we state the purpose of the divine speeches, there are few who would argue that they intend only to reassert the divine power. At the very least, they seem equally concerned to convey the divine wisdom, and they go far beyond that in sketching Yahweh's program for the whole universe. His created order is not a rule-bound mechanism, sustained by principles of balance and equity and retribution and equivalence. Yahweh's universe is a vast array of differences held together by the divine intimacy with its manifoldness and the divine delight in the quiddity and the contrariness of its parts that are exemplified by Behemoth and Leviathan.

This formal response by Job to the divine speeches ignores all that, and—as when Joseph says to his brothers after all their protestations of innocence, 'It is as I said to you, You are spies' (Gen. 42:14)—retorts in effect to Yahweh's

⁴ Much of what follows is to be found in one place or another in my commentary, *Job 38-42* (Word Biblical Commentary, 18B), Nashville 2011, esp. 1204-24. I thought it would be useful nevertheless to bring together my interpretation of these verses in a more manageable compass.

subtle and engaging exposition of his vision for the cosmos, 'I know, it is as I said, you are only interested in power'. That ידעתי 'I know' is very revealing: whether it means 'I now know what I only guessed before, that you really are addicted to power' or 'You don't need to tell me, I've known all along that you only ever follow your own desires, which are never thwarted'. Job can hear nothing that is not addressed to his single issue of concern: the question of justice. From Yahweh's point of view, Job is being recalcitrant, but Job's position is that, though he will have to submit and withdraw his case (v. 6), he is not going to accept that he has received the shadow of an answer.

2. Things too wonderful

Job's second remark consists of a quotation (with one minor change) of Yahweh's words in 38:2 as he began his first speech—'Who is this who obscures the Design by words without knowledge?' — followed by his own response to them.

Job's response is intriguing. He says that he spoke 'marvels' (נפל אֹתָהּ), things 'too wonderful for me' (נפל אֹתָהּ מִמֶּנִּי), which he did not 'understand' (בִּי) and did not 'know' (ידע). What, we may ask, in the Book of Job count as 'wonders'? They have always been the inscrutable deeds of God in creation, which Eliphaz speaks of in 5:9, Job himself in 9:10, and Elihu in 37:5, 14—except for 10:16, where Job speaks ironically of the heroic deeds of God in battle against puny Job. Outside the book of Job, God's 'wonders' tend to be acts of deliverance in history. So what 'wonders' has Job been speaking of, which have been 'too wonderful' for him, which he did not 'understand' (בִּי) or 'know' (ידע)? All Job has ever been speaking of are the principles on which the world is, or should be, governed; he thought they were pretty straightforward matters of justice and fairness, but the way Yahweh tells it, everything in the world is a marvel, and Job had better accept that justice and fairness too, like the structure of the physical universe, and the ways of Yahweh in rain and wind, are 'marvels' beyond his comprehension or understanding. Redefining cosmic justice as a 'marvel' puts it outside any realm that humans can access or have rights in. Job has to confess that he knows nothing, understands nothing, now that it is clear that justice is one of those 'marvels' or divine mysteries.

Now this is a capitulation indeed. If cosmic justice is God's business, then it is whatever he decides it is. It is not a principle to which he himself is subject, to which he gives his allegiance. It is not a rule, the knowledge of which is shared by Yahweh and humans. It is, rather, yet another sphere of divine might, another instance of the truth that Yahweh can 'do anything', as Job said in v. 2. And Job has come to know that such is in fact the truth about the universe through the divine speeches, which have—in his understanding—made Yahweh's power and Yahweh's knowledge the only issue, and have steadfastly suppressed Job's questions about justice. Calling Yahweh's manner of administering the universe a 'marvel' is not to praise it,⁵ but Job's ultimate act of despair.

Job has no choice now but to accept that this is the way things are, but he cannot be at all happy about it—because he has now had his worst fears

⁵ As Dale Patrick thought ('The Translation of Job xlii 6', *VT* 26 [1976], 369-71).

confirmed.⁶ All along he had suspected that, for God, might meant right, and he had wanted that suspicion to be corrected. Too late; Yahweh has assured him that the creator of the universe is indeed subject to no law or principle. Such is the Design, and Job's demands for justice have been adjudicated out of order as an obscuring of it.

Job is not going to press the matter further. He has been defeated in his case against God, but he has won a victory of sorts, as Gordis puts it: 'God's admission that justice is not all-pervasive in the universe is a clear, if oblique, recognition of the truth of Job's position'.⁷ As we saw on v. 2 above, Job's words of capitulation are not the end of the matter for the observant reader.

We should note the term Job uses of his speaking without understanding. נגד hiph is not the ordinary word for 'speak' or 'utter', but refers rather to informing or declaring; it is especially used of announcing things not previously known before (as in 1:15; 12:7; 36:9) or things kept secret (as in 11:6; 38:18),⁸ and is thus almost like 'reveal'. One particular context is important for the present passage: 31:37, where in the very last verse of Job's final speech (as we should probably emend the text⁹) Job says that if only he could encounter God face to face in a legal setting he would 'give him an account [נגד hiph] of [his] steps', i.e., he would set out in detail the evidence of his life that would prove him an innocent man. In using the same term here, he makes clear that the legal suit is still the framework of his thinking; what is different now is that he has come to a realization that the whole of that legal realm, with his self-defences and his accusations against Yahweh, were outside his scope. At the time, the lawsuit had seemed a reasonable step for a person to take who suffered an injustice; now it transpires that justice is not a value in its own right, but, if anything, a minor element in a huge divine plan consisting of 'wonders' (נפלאות). Though he did not understand it at the time, his 'depositions' (הגדותי) concerned matters that belonged to the realm, not of the prosecution of justice, but of the 'wondrous', a realm to which he recognizes himself an outsider, who knows nothing (ולא ידעתי 'and I did not know').

3. I hear you

In v. 4, Job again quotes Yahweh. But unlike v. 3a, he does not quote a charge against himself that he must deal with here. It was a sentence of Yahweh's that dealt only with procedure and process, the matter of who will speak first, who will reply. It seems too trifling a matter to mention now, at the very climax of the interchanges between Job and Yahweh, does it not? And, more than that, it is all water under the bridge by now, is it not, now that the confrontation with Yahweh is drawing to a close? No, by no means; the function of Job's quotation of Yahweh's words is to declare, in the coolest manner possible, that the process of

⁶ John Briggs Curtis, 'On Job's Response to Yahweh', *JBL* 98 (1979), 497-511 (509), sees this point very clearly.

⁷ Gordis, *The Book of Job*, 491.

⁸ Cf. BDB, 616b §2.

⁹ For support for this view, see my *Job 21-37* (Word Biblical Commentary, 18A), Nashville 2006, 973.

the dispute has now come to a close. What it means is that Yahweh has spoken, Job is giving his reply, and that will be that. The debate, the lawsuit, has nowhere else to go. I hear you, says Job to Yahweh, as people say, I hear you, when they mean, I understand you perfectly, but I don't agree.

But what does Job's reply amount to? He does not for a moment negate the words he has spoken, but he withdraws or abandons his case.¹⁰ Why so? Habel thinks that 'Yahweh's appearance in person was sufficient vindication of Yahweh's integrity and clear evidence of his goodwill',¹¹ but the Job we have come to know in the course of the dialogues cannot have drawn such a conclusion from the divine speeches. It would seem rather that Job has come to the realization that his case is hopeless: Yahweh is determined not to answer questions about justice. Job will withdraw his suit not because he has lost his case but because, given the attitude of his opponent, he finally despairs totally of ever winning it—and even of having it heard.

In these sentences lies the dénouement of the whole Book of Job. It is a climax that has rarely (in my opinion) been properly understood. It is not an upbeat, 'comic', resolution, but it is not a tragedy either. Some may find it a deeply sad and cheerless outcome, but others may feel it rather a blessed release to recognize that there is no underlying principle of justice in the universe. However we may feel about the outcome of the book, in order to grasp the nature of that outcome there is much exegetical ground to cover.

A word about v. 5. It is usual to find a contrast between the two halves of this verse, between 'hearing' and 'seeing', between 'hearing about' and 'seeing (directly)', between 'then' and 'now', between (inferior) 'hearing' and (superior) 'seeing'. But all this is more than doubtful. First, Job has not actually seen Yahweh (there is no language of visual perception), but only heard him speak, so 'my eyes have seen you' can only be an idiom for a close or authentic encounter (and the view that seeing is a higher form of knowledge than hearing¹² is without foundation, and probably a Western intellectualization of the privileging of that particular sense). Secondly, Job does not say that he had previously heard 'about' Yahweh, as distinct from now seeing him directly; the Hebrew has 'I heard you with the hearing of the ears' (לשמע־אזן שמעתי). It would be strange if he were describing his imbibing of traditions about God or his listening to the friends' theological statements as 'hearing Yahweh'. All the sententious remarks of commentators about a contrast between mere hearsay in the past and immediate perception at the present moment are an irrelevance. Thirdly, though Job says that 'now' (עתה) his eyes have seen Yahweh, it is now also, just now, that he has heard Yahweh—for the first time; so in effect the 'now' refers both to the hearing and the seeing.¹³ Fourthly, seeing and hearing in the Hebrew Bible are usually parallel forms of perception and not contrasted with one another (cf.,

¹⁰ So too Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (OTL), London 1985, 582: '[Job] withdraws his case against Shaddai'; Norman Whybray, *Job* (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary), Sheffield 1998, 170: 'Job has capitulated'.

¹¹ Habel, *The Book of Job*, 582.

¹² So, for example, A. de Wilde, *Das Buch Hiob eingeleitet, übersetzt und erläutert* (OTS, 22), Leiden 1981, 398; cf. also G. Gerald Harrop, "'But now my eye seeth thee'", *CJT* 12 (1966), 80-84.

¹³ So too Edwin M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job, with a Translation*, Stanford, CA 1990, 374.

e.g., 13:1; 29:11; Gen. 24:30; Exod. 3:7; 2 Kgs 19:16; Prov. 20:12; Song 2:14; and Ps. 48:8 [9] 'as we have heard, so have we seen', where the hearing and the seeing are consonant).¹⁴

Finally, v. 6. This crucial verse forms the climax of the whole dispute between Job and Yahweh. But sadly it contains three major linguistic uncertainties: (1) the meaning of **סָנַנְנָה** (is it 'I reject, despise' with perhaps 'myself' or 'my words' as the implied object, or 'I melt, submit?'), (2) the meaning of **נִחַמְתִּי** (is it 'I repent' or 'I am consoled, I accept consolation?'), and (3) the meaning of 'dust and ashes' (is it a reference to the place and the situation of Job on the ash-heap, or a reference to Job's status as a mourner, or to his human mortality?).

I cannot now argue my interpretation in detail.¹⁵ In a nutshell, what I propose is that (1) in a legal sense, Job 'submits', i.e., he withdraws his lawsuit against Yahweh, (2) since he has done no wrong, he cannot 'repent', but having been in mourning, he now brings the period of mourning to an end by 'accepting consolation', for his lost children as well as for the loss of his honor, a consolation that is being offered to him both from the friends and (in his own way) from Yahweh, and (3) the consolation he accepts is 'for' the 'dust and ashes' that have been the visible expression of his state of mourning.

This sentence of Job's, as thus construed, contains one of the biggest surprises of the book. We have not been prepared by the course the book has taken to witness Job abandoning his case against God. His arguments have been so cogent, his passion so sincere, that it is almost unthinkable that at end of the day he should merely withdraw from the lawsuit. But he does; and we need to understand why he does. He has not been convinced by the divine speeches either that he is in the wrong—or that Yahweh's cosmic concerns truly outweigh his own call for justice. On the contrary, he has made it plain that he has heard the divine speeches as nothing more than a reaffirmation of divine power (v. 2)—which means inevitably a marginalization of the issues of justice he cares about so passionately. And he has not admitted to any fault—apart from not recognizing that in the divine counsels justice is subsumed into supernatural 'wonders', which means that the discussion of cosmic justice is ultimately off limits to humans. Job will accept that he is not permitted to question the divine decisions—he has no choice—but his complaints are still not answered, and he knows it. Now he knows what he had always feared, that he would never get justice; now he can no longer hope that his champion will in the end rise to speak on his behalf (19:25), for the judge before whom his champion would prosecute Job's claim has now dismissed the claim out of hand.¹⁶ And now the desire to

¹⁴ 1 Kgs 10:7, where what the Queen of Sheba sees with her own eyes surpasses the reports she has heard of Solomon's wisdom and wealth, is only an apparent exception, for the contrast is not between hearing and seeing but between hearing a report and 'seeing' for oneself (a seeing that must include hearing, since she is more likely to be hearing than seeing Solomon's wisdom).

¹⁵ See my *Job 38–42*, 1207–11, 1218–23.

¹⁶ I understand Job's champion (**גִּבּוֹר**) to be, not God, with whom he is in dispute and who therefore cannot be his advocate, but his own legal appeal, which he also refers to as his witness (**עֵד**, 16:19), his advocate (**שֹׁדֵד**, 16:19) and his 'spokesperson' (**מַלְאָכִי**, 16:20); see my *Job 1–20* (Word Biblical Commentary, 17), Dallas, TX 1989, 459–60.

'behold Eloah while still in my flesh' (19:26), a desire so intense that it has been consuming his inmost being (19:27), has proved the ultimate disappointment of his existence: it was no beatific vision of the deity that Job wished for, but a face to face confrontation that would lead to his exculpation. What has happened now is the worst of outcomes, worse even than being judged guilty—it is Eloah's definitive decision that Job's case amounts to nothing, given the cosmic scope of the grand Design.

With one word, Job announces his withdrawal from his lawsuit: אָנֹכִי 'I submit'. And then, in words that have nothing to do with the processes of law or his grievance against the deity, and as if he had never raised the issue of justice, he declares that he will bring to an end his period of mourning and return to his usual life—as if it could ever be normal again: 'I accept consolation for my dust and ashes'. We readers may have somewhat lost sight of his dead children in the course of the great drama of his struggle with God, but that word אָנֹכִי 'I accept consolation' is reminder enough that, in all his rage against heaven, he has also been a man in mourning. Now, in that word 'I submit', he has bidden farewell to theology, and, like *Candide*, will retire to cultivate his garden. He will not again say a single word (by the evidence of the Epilogue), he will conduct no more theological disputations with his friends or summon God again to defend himself; he will devote himself to his family and his farm.

But what he leaves unsaid is as important as what he says. What he does not say is that he is accepting consolation for his loss of standing and dignity, and for the traducing of his character, for he has had no consolation on that score. He is not 'content',¹⁷ he is not convinced, he is not now possessed of a totally new outlook on the world. He has submitted to the famous omnipotence of Yahweh (as in v. 2), that is all. His eyes have been opened by his encounter with God, to be sure, but what he has seen has not been his vindication but his ultimate humiliation.

Job's response, so modestly expressed, is a standing rejection of the principles by which God acts and governs the universe. Not a lot of people realize that, and therein lies the wisdom of Job's conclusion.

¹⁷ As Whybray, *Job*, 170.