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The Meaning of the Book of Job

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▶ **W**hen we turn to the Book of Job we find a totally different picture from the Book of Proverbs. However, are they contradicting one another? I don't think so. We shall comment on diversity and similarity among the books of the wisdom tradition by the end of our session.

The problem of the Book of Job is probably not the suffering of the righteous, nor the retribution, nor—as it is frequently said—the connection between deed, good or bad, and corresponding consequences. The scholars who speak of retribution mean that God is at work in rewarding or punishing people for their deeds. Others speak of an automatic connection between deed and consequence—a connection inherent in the very nature of each deed without a direct intervention by God.

This distinction is probably an invention of modern interpreters. It is true that several times biblical wisdom does not explicitly mention God but makes the order of things go its way, in the sense that virtue itself rewards and vice itself punishes its doer. The reader should know, however, that according to wisdom mentality God is the author of the order of creation; because of that, order is not anonymous and is in no way comparable to destiny. Indeed, God himself hides behind world order.

Now, suffering of the righteous and retribution are indeed problems debated in the Book of Job. My point is, however, that they are not the basic problem. The real, basic problem is mentioned several times in Job's dialogues with his three friends. After Job voiced his lament in ch. 3, Eliphaz, the first speaker, clearly enunciates the basic problem and its implications with the following words:

*Can mortal man be righteous before God?
Can a man be pure before his Maker?
Even in his servants he puts no trust,
and his angels he charges with error;
how much more those who dwell in houses of clay,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed before the moth. (4:17-19)
Call now; is there any one who will answer you?
To which of the holy ones will you turn? (5:1)*

Eliphaz hits the mark: How possibly can man be righteous before his creator; how can he assert his rights, dictate his conditions or call him to give reasons for all he does? Even if man cries out and raves, as Job does, God will not answer him; nor can man expect any celestial being to intercede in his behalf. Bildad, the second speaker, echoes Eliphaz much in the same tone in 5:14-16 and 25:4-6.

Job, on his part, objects that he does know that he will never be "righteous before God" since God is so powerful and wise.

*Truly I know that it is so:
And how can a man be just before God?
If one wished to contend with him,
one could not answer him once in a thousand times.
He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength
—who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?— (9:2-4)*

This is, I think, the basic problem of the Book of Job—the relationship between man and God, between the creature and his Creator, the limited and the unlimited.

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Suffering is the case that makes the problem emerge in all its force, but is not the problem itself. In order to make the problem emerge in all its contour, the case is depicted with full details in the prose prologue. Job “was blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil” (1:1). He is rich and powerful, and therefore he is blessed by God in the eyes of everybody. Still God lets him to be struck in his possessions, in his beloved ones and finally in his person. The ultimate goal of God’s wager with Satan is to prove that Job’s piety is totally unselfish. In fact, Job stands this test in an exemplary way (1:22; 2:10).

Three friends come to console him. They raise their lamentations and remain seated on the ground for a full week without saying a word. At this point, after having accepted everything from God’s hands, Job opens his mouth to curse the day of his birth. (Read Job 3:3)

All this is the setting of the drama. Job’s suffering is the suffering of a righteous man—a man who accepted everything without rebelling. Why, then? Job’s lament is a blatant challenge of the Creator and his way of governing the world. It is a desire of a return to a pre-creational chaos, before the time when God separated light from darkness (read Job 3:4-6). This is why the three friends rightly understand that the problem at stake is the relationship of man to God. This is, I think, the problem of the Book of Job.

Everybody understands that, both the friends and Job, but their perspective is different. For the friends Job’s accusation is totally unjustified; Job has to convince himself to be a sinner because it is the sinner that receives evil in his life while the righteous receives his good. In different forms this idea is repeated again and again by Job’s friends. In other words, since God cannot be wrong, Job must be a sinner. No other possibility is envisaged.

Job, on his part, being conscious of his righteousness, calls God to account for his behaviour and, at the end, openly accuses him of an unjustified punishment.

Thus different solutions are given to the problem by the friends and by Job. The friends wish to defend God at all costs and are not afraid of doing Job wrong by trampling on his dignity. At the end, they do God himself wrong. In fact, God is not properly taken into account; he remains outside the horizon of the solution proposed by the friends. Indeed, the friends do not even consider the possibility that God, in his sovereign freedom, might change the law of retribution. This is exactly the reproach raised to them by Job in 13:7-16. Paradoxically Job—and not his friends—shows the deepest sense of God’s greatness.

Despite all the differences, both Job and his friends resolve the basic problem (“Can man be righteous before God?”) from a human perspective. As a consequence, they are both wrong. The friends are wrong because, on the one hand, they trample on a human being and, on the other hand, they enclose God inside a law of retribution that, so rigidly interpreted, is less an article of faith than the fruit of human arrogance.

Job, too, is wrong because, based on the conscience of his righteousness, insists in calling God to account for his conduct. Still, he has the advantage of leaving the door open to divine freedom even when he asserts his dignity and rights. God himself, at the end, vindicates him against his friends (42:7).

An intermediary between us

Job is attracted and, at the same time, disgusted of his God. His faith assures him that there is no other being to whom he might appeal. He is his creator; he is his accuser and he is his judge. How could it be possible for Job to hold a fair judgement with God?

In his anguishing ups and downs of attraction and disgust, Job reaches an unbelievable height of hope. He dares to imagine and invoke a kind of intermediary, a mediator in his struggle with God.

In ch. 9 we gain an idea of what crosses his mind. He begins by fully recognising the greatness of God (9:2-3). There follows a hymn to God wise and strong in creation. Although he firmly believes in God’s greatness, nonetheless Job dares to accuse

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him of injustice in the government of humankind (9:14-15). Then Job resumes his lament. At this point we find the first text on the intermediary.

For he (God) is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we could come to trial together.

*If there was an umpire between us,
who might lay his hand upon us both.
If he (God) would take his rod away from me,
and let not his dread terrify me,
Then I would speak without fear of him,
for I am not so in myself. (9:32-35)*

Unfortunately this text is rather difficult and scholars give different translations and interpretations. We find a major difference between the Hebrew original (MT) and the Greek version (the LXX) concerning 9:33. In the Hebrew we have in fact a negation: “*There is no umpire between us*”, while in the LXX the same word is read differently as a conjunction: “*If there was an umpire between us.*” In the light of similar passages such as 16:19-21 and 17:3-4, I think that the second possibility is preferable. Almost contrary to fact, Job hopes some day to be able to meet God and discuss his case standing on the same level with him. But how can man fill the abyss separating him from God? Would it there be an umpire, an intermediary, capable of placing himself above the two parties and to ensure a fair case.

This intermediary envisaged by Job seems to be a celestial being, maybe an angel. A figure of this kind is actually found in the first speech of Elihu. This young speaker takes over when the three friends are left silent, defeated by Job.

As the three friends, Elihu resumes the basic problem of the book with the intention of demonstrating that what Job claimed was altogether misplaced. The prose introduction of this new character—Elihu—in the drama is highly significant:

So these three friends ceased to answer Job (who pretended) to be righteous in his own eyes. Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became angry. It was at Job that he was angry because he declared himself righteous before God; it was also at Job's three friends that he was angry because they had found no answer and still they had declared Job to be wicked. (32:1-3)

In order to prove the impossibility of Job's claim of disputing with God, Elihu envisages the case of a man struck, first, by terror, and then by illness (ch. 33). His situation is despairing and without return. That man is going to die. The reversal of this situation is due to an intervention of someone from outside—an angelic mediator, one out of the thousands standing at God's service to govern the world. As a true mediator, the angel plays a double function—toward man and toward God. Moved by compassion, the angel, on the one hand, explains to the dying man God's justice even in the present despairing situation. On the other hand, he prays God to save man from death saying: “I have found a ransom.”

There are many solutions as to what this ransom is. According to many interpreters this ransom is the man's conversion, or an offering or a price to be paid to the temple in order to “redeem one's own life”, as we read in some texts (Ex 21:30; 30:11-12). The fact is, however, that the text does not mention any positive reaction from the side of man; on the contrary, he is totally passive and speechless along all the process of his restoration. He is almost unconscious of what is going on.

Here we perceive the unusual character of Job 33. God restores a man without any previous positive response from his part. God physically restores him and enables him to publicly proclaim the salvation received by pure grace. As we read:

(The healed man) recounts to men his salvation, and he sings before men, and says: I sinned, and perverted what was right, and God did not requite me accordingly.

He has redeemed my soul from going down into the Pit; and he freed my life that it might enjoy the light. (33:26-28)

Now, precisely this confession of God's salvation may be the ransom found by the mediating angel. In other words, the angel assures God that the man will sing his grace, and this eventually happens, as we read: “I have sinned and perverted what was right, but God did not requite me accordingly. He freed my life, that it might enjoy light.” The sick man did not cry to God but was saved by pure grace. His

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confession of praise is the consequence, not the cause, of salvation.

Elihu, then, disproves Job’s assumption to be righteous before god by underlining the sovereign power of the Creator. God, in fact, totally controls his creatures; he can enter their inner world; he strikes them down. The figure of the mediator has the function of underlining human inability to interpret God’s action in one’s own life.

We see, then, that the mystery of the transcendent God and of his relationship with his creatures—that is the basic problem of the Book of Job—receives different solutions from the different characters in the drama:

- For the three friends, Job must surrender because he is certainly a sinner.
- For Job, God is unjust and cruel because Job is convinced to be righteous.
- For Elihu, man cannot be righteous before God because man does not receive

but grace from God.

If so, which should, then, man’s attitude be toward God according to Elihu? The answer is already indicated in the passage we have just read (33:27). Man should sing, publicly proclaim God’s wonderful deeds. Still in another passage the same verb to sing is used by Elihu (this verb is frequently found in the Psalms, as we know).

Remember to extol his works—
the works that men have to sing;
the works that everyone contemplates,
that every mortal sees from afar. (36:24-25)

In the last passage God’s works that humans have to praise are the works of creation. According to biblical wisdom, every human being is able to contemplate the wonderful order of creation because the order itself comes to meet him personified in the figure of Lady Wisdom. Lady wisdom speaks to man and reveals to him the order and meaning of the world. However, man can only see all this “from afar”, in the sense that he can only see a small part of it. Indeed the whole plan and meaning of creation is only known to God the Creator.

A small point worth noticing is that the same verb to sing, solemnly proclaim, is used by Elihu for God’s work in man (33:27) and for God’s work in creation 36:24). Both are works of the one and same God—great and good; both the governing of humankind and the government of creation are to be sung by man in the same way.

| |
|-----------------------------------|
| To sing |
| •God’s work toward man 33:27 |
| •God’s work toward creation 36:24 |

This parallelism between the divine action toward men and the divine action toward creation is basic to understand the plan and the meaning of the speeches of Elihu (chs. 32-37). The final message of Elihu is to fear God. Only through God’s fear can man interpret the divine message in creation and in his own life. Only in this way can he understand the events and himself in the framework of the cosmic order, that is in God’s plan. This does not mean that man should renegade his dignity. On the contrary, in this way only can man find his place as the king of creation and live in harmony with it while unceasingly praising his Creator.

Let us now consider in a very sketchy way the dynamics of the Book of Job. From the literary point of view we can call it a drama with a prose prologue (Job tested: 1:1-2:13) and epilogue (Job restored: 42:7-17). The body of the drama is poetry. It comprises twice a monologue of Job. The first is a lament (ch. 3), the second a challenge to God (chs. 29-31). The body also comprises two sets of dialogues. In the first (chs. 4-28) the partners are the three friends; in the second set (chs. 32:1-42:6) the partners are Elihu and Yahweh.

After the dialogue with the three friends only increased the problem of Job and embittered his soul, Job launches an open challenge to God to come to judgement with him:

Here is my signature
Let the Almighty answer me!
Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;

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I would bind it on me as a crown;
I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him. (31:35-37)

God's reply does not immediately follow Job's challenge. If so, the reply could not possibly be one of grace. The biblical poet is well aware of this fact. Indeed the drama has its own logic to be accounted for. For this reason a new character is introduced between the three friends and God. Elihu, the young charismatic, steps in and starts dialogue with Job. Since Elihu is not mentioned either before or after his appearance in the drama, the interpreters normally think that he is a later addition to the Book of Job. We cannot discuss this issue here, we can show that Elihu's speeches do have a role—and an important role—in the dynamics of the drama.

Elihu's theology is half-way between the dogmatic wisdom of the three friends and God's revelation in the theophany. In some way, Elihu paves the way to Yahweh by proclaiming his great works in creation. He insists that man does not understand them completely and must therefore fear God.

Moreover, Elihu prepares Job to meet God by showing that his personal case—his suffering, that is not a punishment for his bad deeds—cannot be treated from a human perspective. Even if Job is righteous, he is not the center of the universe, nor the criterion of justice, because he is not the creator. Elihu's function in the drama is, precisely, to *de-center* Job. As Job's position is *self-centered*, Elihu makes it *God-centered*. Job's personal case must be treated from God's perspective because God is the Creator and everything has a meaning in his plan. Thus, Elihu prepares Job to meet God face to face.

Finally, God does answer Job, as he has asked so many times. But how is everything different from what Job had expected. God does not appear to discuss Job's personal case, nor does God answer in his terms. In fact, job's personal case is not even mentioned—not by God, nor by Job himself.

The meeting becomes a confrontation between God and Job on the subject of the works of creation. God asks a full set of questions to Job—Do you know who founded the earth? Where is the seat of thee light? Did you order the days? Show me whether you are able to control superb beings like Behemoth (the hippopotamus) and Levyatan (the crocodile), or the animals of the field, like the hinds, the wild ass and the buffalo.

Of course, Job's answer should be negative on every subject—Job does not know; he is not able to control the creatures. A clear conclusion left to the reader to draw is as follows: Therefore, Job's claim "to be righteous before God" has no basis. It would amount to "obscure God's plan with words of no-wisdom" (38:2). As we read:

And the Lord said to Job:

Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?
He who argues with God, let him answer it.

Then Job answered the Lord:
Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee?
I lay my hand on my mouth.

I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice,
but I will proceed no further. (40:1-5)

And again in 40:8-10:

Will you even put me in the wrong?
Will you condemn me that you may be justified?
Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?
Deck yourself with majesty and dignity;
clothe yourself with glory and splendor. (40:8-10)

To obscure God's plan of creation amounts to claim the place of the Creator, to put on his vestments and to pretend to govern the world in one's own way. This is *the* sin of man—not a particular sin but *the* sin. This kind of sin lurks in every man—even in the righteous. Indeed, as a Hasidic saying puts it, "A sinner who knows to be a sinner is better than a saint who knows to be a saint."

The final goal of the theophany is to avoid this kind of sin; in other words, to teach man to live in the fear of God. Only if man lives in this attitude, he will be able to accept everything that happens to him in life. Here we see how the Book of Job joins

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the Book of Proverbs: the fear of the Lord is basic to both of them. They are different, yet converging.

From his personal encounter with God Job does not learn anything new but finds again the attitude of prayer and praise. His illness had embittered him and the dialogue with the three friends had only made things worst. Elihu begins Job's conversion and the theophany gives the final solution to the problem. At the end, Job becomes able to live together with his own suffering and with the suffering of the others.

The epilogue tells us that Job is eventually restored to his former state—even doubly restored. However, this fact has no more a decisive importance for Job. By now, he has become one who fears God without looking for reward (1:9). In the contemplation of the Creator's wisdom and power, Job has learned to consider the events of his life, the world and everything within the plan of God. In this way everything becomes a sign and a message—something that invites man to praise his God.

The fact that Job is doubly restored does not mean that all the drama is voided of its meaning or abrogated. On the contrary, the prose epilogue is a necessary complement and specification of the poetry body. It means that the do-called law of retribution is true, after all. It does not become bad for the reason that the three friends affirm it without any possible exceptions and thus make it a rigid dogma that contradicts the divine freedom. The law of retribution *is not* false by itself; on the contrary, it is basically true. In fact, God, being ethically righteous, cannot but reward and punish soon or later. Yet, time, form and exceptions are to be left to God's freedom to decide.

We all know the great importance of sons, riches and honor in society in the theological horizon of biblical wisdom. This kind of worldly, material reward is not at all base for the biblical mentality, because it is a symbol of God's spiritual friendship. Of course, no one can think that friendship with God only exists with worldly reward, or that worldly reward is an unequivocal sign of divine friendship. The situation is rather complex and a profound faith is necessary to decipher it. We should remember, however, that biblical mentality ignores a rigid distinction of worldly and spiritual. Indeed, our almost dualistic mentality, influenced by Greek-Platonic philosophy, can do harm to our understanding of the Bible.

The Lord of the universe indeed rewards and punishes according to each one's deeds but also puts one under suffering and to test for his wise purpose, that he alone knows. In doing that he does not intend, above all, to punish—not even to purify. He intends to reveal the weakness of his creatures and particularly his own greatness, with the final goal that every man and woman may accept their own status in the world and learn to praise their Creator.