

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JOB – PART TWO

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The Book of Job is unique in the Hebrew Bible with its sustained series of long poetic dialogues conducted between Job and his friends. This form is similar to the script of a theatrical play, so it would be fascinating to invite professional actors to inhabit the roles of Job, his three friends, Elihu and God. Actors could bring out personal characteristics of each of the speakers which would provide added dimensions beyond just the intellectual content that the words alone bring.

For example, in the first speech of Eliphaz, the author has written him to be somewhat pompous and overly proud of his rhetorical skills. In 4:10-11 he tosses in a dramatic metaphor:

The lion roars and the fierce lion howls
Yet the teeth of the young lion are broken.
The old lion perishes for lack of prey,
And the whelps of the lioness are scattered.

All the commentators write at great length about the author's rich Hebrew vocabulary that can provide five different words for 'lion' which have no direct counterpart in translation. But, apart from suggesting that these verses might be a familiar proverb, no two commentators explain their relevance to Eliphaz's speech in the same way, if they manage to do so at all!

With great drama Eliphaz goes on to introduce a vision that comes upon him in the middle of the night: his hair stands on end; a mysterious form appears. He proclaims *d'mamah v'kol eshma* 'silence and a voice I heard' (Job 4:16). But with this phrase he appears to be borrowing the context and significance of the famous words *kol d'mamah daka*, 'a still small voice' (1 Kings 19:12). Is the author suggesting that Eliphaz is convinced that he's Elijah?

In his book *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, William Whedbee devotes a chapter to 'The Comedy of Job'. He writes:

From the outset both Job and the reader, albeit on different levels of knowledge, are keenly aware of the utter incongruity between the friends' speeches and Job's situation. The friends become cruelly and grotesquely comic as they strive with increasing dogmatism to apply their faulty solutions to the wrong problem – and the wrong person.¹

What might actors reveal in their roles as Job's three friends as they gradually run out of arguments. How would Zophar be performed when his expected third speech is simply missing from the text. Its absence leads commentators to construct his missing text from other passages. But if stage directions had been included it might be made clear that he simply has nothing more to say.

¹ J. William Whedbee, 'The comedy of Job: creation, chaos, and carnival', in: *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998), pp. 221-262, 234.

If we take this theatrical idea further, we might resolve some of the apparent dislocations in the sequence of speeches that so concern modern commentators. For example, we could envisage that the opening two chapters and the closing one might be performed in front of a symbolic curtain, a narrator telling the story while the heavenly and earthly domains are depicted. After this start, the curtain would 'open' to reveal Job on his dunghill and his three friends observing him. But the last of the friends' arguments, and Job's final response to them conclude in chapter 27. That could provide an effective end to Act One, and the curtain would 'close'. After all, following such an intense and wordy back and forth, surely it is time for an interval, both for the sake of the performers and the long-suffering audience.

This would also explain why the Book continues, unexpectedly and seemingly out of sequence, with chapter 28, the monologue about the quest for wisdom. However, this speech would make perfectly good sense as a 'prologue' before the curtain to prepare the audience for Act Two. In his commentary on Job, Raymond Scheindlin writes:

the passage is so appreciative of man as doer and thinker that it might well have come from Greek Drama. (It specifically recalls the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone*, lines 332-72; let us remember, that the classic Greek tragedies could well be contemporaneous with Job!)²

As a possible 'prologue' it concludes with summarising the ultimate teaching of wisdom:

Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding. (28:28)

That effectively sums up the premise of the friends but leaves open Job's unresolved question: how does one acquire the 'fear of the Lord' if not through a true encounter with 'the Lord'?

After the 'prologue', the playwright needs to re-establish continuity with what has gone before, so Job speaks once again (chapters 29-32). He summarises the vicissitudes of his life but swears to the integrity with which he has conducted it.

If only I had someone to hear me!
Here is my desire! That Shaddai answer me,
that my opponent write the indictment.
I swear I would wear it on my shoulder,
bind it on me like a crown.
I would tell my steps to Him by number,
come before Him as a prince! (*Job 31:35-37*)

But, just as we think we have reached a climax, Elihu appears. In purely theatrical terms, we need an injection of energy into Act 2 to renew the inner tension of the drama. So this 'angry young man', with his bombastic language, challenging the wisdom of his elders, is another comic foil the author has introduced. Elihu rehearses the arguments used by the friends so that they are fresh before the audience as we await some kind of resolution to Job's plight. Nevertheless, however provocative Elihu's words may be to Job, on three occasions his words are met by silence. This is signalled by the author's 'stage-directions' using fresh introductions to three of Elihu's speeches: 'Elihu began to speak' (34:1 and 35:1), 'Again Elihu spoke' (36:1). Like the earlier silence of Zophar, such silences, amidst so many words, carry dramatic weight and significance. In the end, Elihu too has nothing more to say, worn down by Job's patience. And, similarly, Job has finally forced God to speak (38:1).

But what can God possibly say that might satisfy Job, let alone the audience. And which God is speaking? The God of the prologue willing to gamble on Job's integrity? The theologically consistent and unimpeachable God of Job's friends? The seemingly arbitrary and unfair tyrant of Job's complaint? Or any of the myriad anthropomorphic projections onto God of prophets and psalmists, storytellers and wisdom teachers to be found in the rest of the Hebrew Bible? And how could any answer avoid a charge of blasphemy or idolatry against the author from contemporary reli-

² Raymond Scheindlin, *The Book of Job: Translation, Introduction and Notes* (W.H.Norton and Company, New York London 1998), p. 204.

gious fanatics? And even if the right words were found, how might the actor, brave enough to speak them, colour and shade their meaning?

Perhaps we will find our own answers in our studies this week. And if not, since, after all, it is only a story³, we may have to settle for the timeworn but hopeful conclusion: and Job lived happily ever after.

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³ One Amora suggested to Rabbi Samuel ben Nahmani that Job never existed and the whole story was just a parable (*Baba Batra 15a*). Resh Lakish conceded that Job existed but that the story was only a fable to indicate that had he experienced such suffering, he would have withstood it! (*Genesis Rabbah 57:4*)