

Newsom Guide to the Divine Speeches in the Book of Job

Reference: Carol Newsom, Introduction and Commentary on the Book of Job, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 4, Abingdon Press, 2006, p. 595-632.

- 38:1-3 God speaks from the whirlwind to confront Job, not Job's friends, regarding his accusations that God is mismanaging the world since God doesn't act justly toward Job. God challenges Job, not on the basis of his humanity or even his arrogance, but for his lack of knowledge about God's counsel (plan or design) for creation. Job has disparaged God's design and maintenance without knowledge. God does not address Job's demand that God "tell me what charges you have against me" (10:2b) or "Show me my sin" (13:23 author's trans.). because those questions are relevant only in Job's concept of what managing the world means. God begins with creation of the foundations of the Earth
- 38:4-21 God's rhetorical questions confront Job with the the limits of his knowledge and contrasts it with the wisdom and resourcefulness of God, and create a vivid picture of God's creative process. God questions Job about his experience of the four dimensions of the world, the great deep (v 16), the underworld (v 17), the expanse of the earth (v 18) and the heavens (vv 19-21). It begins with the creation of the foundations of the Earth, carefully measured and securely laid. The sea, often associated with chaos, has a place in God's creation. It is both birthed and constrained, the object of divine care and restriction. In the ancient Near East, each morning was part of the continuing work of creation. The morning light constrains the activity of wicked who operate in darkness. Light reveals the earth in detail like clay stamped with a seal. Like the constraint of the sea, the light of day contains and limits, but does not eliminate, the wicked from the world.
- 38:22-38 Job is asked if he has knowledge of the springs that water the sea or the ocean depths or where the darkness goes when the light comes. In verse 24, light refers to lightning. Snow, hail and lightning are normally considered destructive forces as was the East wind which destroys vegetation in cultivated lands (Gen 41:6, Ezek 19:12, Jonah 4:8). Storehouses imply control of these forces by God. God even provides rain for the desert, which is uninhabited by humans, in order to allow grass to grow. Nature is important to God whether it benefits humanity or not. Job is asked who is responsible for rain, dew, ice, and frost. Dew seemingly appears from nowhere. Ice and frost mysteriously appear on one cold day but not the next. Possibly the movement of the constellations was associated with the rainy and dry seasons. The rhetorical questions relate to wisdom regarding command of rain which was always considered a valuable resource.
- 38:39-39:30 It is not hard to imagine that the topics of cosmology and meteorology are difficult for Job to comprehend. God now turns to subjects with which Job might be more familiar, although in a negative sense. To appreciate these passages, it is important to understand that in Job's time, the uninhabited wilderness areas would have been considered hostile and dangerous places. The desert was a symbol; of chaos and divine punishment. Wild animals were a part of such desolate places took on the aura of those places. Jeremiah wrote of God's destruction of Babylon, "Therefore wild animals shall live with hyenas in Babylon, and

ostriches shall inhabit her; she shall never again be peopled, or inhabited for all generations. As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbors, says the LORD, so no one shall live there, nor shall anyone settle in her.” (Jer 50:39-40) Note that except for the war horse, all these animals are wild animals, not domesticated animals. Job knows nothing about how God has taken care of these creatures. “When Job had looked on the wasteland and its inhabitants, whether in sympathy or in contempt, all that he could see was a place of rejection. God’s presence in such a place had utterly eluded him.” The ostrich and war horse are associated because of their speed, exuberance, and their disdain for fear. In Job’s time, the ostrich was thought to abandon its eggs, a behavior foreign to domesticated animals and humans. God takes credit for this arrangement as well the joy of the ostrich. The last vignette deals with the mysterious flight (migration) of raptors annually from eastern Europe to their wintering territory in Africa. (see also Prov 30:18-19). The bird translated as “eagle” is more likely a vulture since it feeds on the corpses of those killed in battle. It is a carrion eater, not a predator. “The term “slain” is used almost exclusively of humans in biblical Hebrew. Literally it means ‘pierced’ ...pierced by the sword. In the most disconcerting way, the divine speech asks Job and the reader to look at battle not from the human perspective of victory or punishment, liberation or oppression, but through the eyes of the vulture, who finds it nourishing.”

40:1-6 God challenges Job yet again. “Why does the encounter with God not end here? Why is this not enough? By word and gesture Job has indicated his intention to discontinue his argument and his acknowledgment of God's superiority in power, status, and honor. The issue of divine honor is an important one for the book of Job, but it is not the only issue. God has addressed Job concerning the way Job's words have obscured the design of God (38:2). Nothing in Job's reply indicates that he has yet perceived and understood the nature of that design and its significance for his own situation. Until he does, the encounter with God cannot find closure.” Job is thoroughly intimidated as his response indicates. Putting one’s hand over the mouth is an act of deference and respect as was done for Job (29:9). “Job here does engage in an act of self-humiliation as he implicitly acknowledges the gross impropriety of having ventured to rebuke God.” God has not directly addressed Job’s question yet about why he is suffering.

40:7-14 God again calls on Job to answer whether Job will continue to put God in the wrong. Will Job condemn God as unjust so that he can claim that he was right that God was wrong to let a righteous person suffer? Job is evaluating his situation in legal categories of right and wrong. Is God trying to show Job that such categories are not always appropriate for the type of world God has designed and now governs? “The arm signifies power and strength and the thundering voice connote the awe-inspiring quality of divinity. ...this section rhetorically asks Job if he has power comparable to God’s and the ability to bring down the proud. ... Behemoth and Leviathan thus serve as examples of creatures of power and pride that Job could not possibly overcome.” God challenges Job to bring down the proud and subdue them. If he could, he would be like God.

40:15-34 Behemoth, often represented as a hippopotamus, or water buffalo is a part of God’s creation, just like Job, but the most magnificent of God’s creations. While the powerful

Behemoth is described in placid terms, the proud Leviathan is described in terms of violence, smoke, fire, and a king over all that are proud. In mythology, Leviathan was a sea monster (Psa 74:12-14) and clearly beyond human control. God's speech is not about God's subjugation of the monster but a celebration of the creature's fierceness and terrifying power. Job "has been unable to recognize the presence of the chaotic within God's design and governance of the world." Note the connections: "the wild ass laughs at the noisy town (39:7), the ostrich laughs at the pursuing horse and rider (38:18), the war horse laughs at fear (39:22), and the animals of the field frolic (lit., "laugh") in the company of Behemoth (40:20), so also Leviathan laughs at the rattling lance (41:29). These creatures and the anarchistic, chaotic element of creation that they represent are utterly beyond the control of the human will." Yet, these are an integral part of God's creation. Is God challenging Job regarding the perspective from which he has constructed his ideas about morality?