

Holbert Guide to God's Speeches in the Book of Job

Reference: John C, Holbert, *Preaching Job* (St, Louis, Chalice Press, 1999) 125-148.

Chapter 38

- 1 Notice that God answered Job only, not Job's friends.
- 2 God's first question could also be translated as "Who obscures my design (*plan*) by words without knowledge?" Job has accused God of mismanagement. Job's words have served to darken or obscure God's ways of ordering the world. Job has given nine speeches accusing God of not taking care to ensure justice for the righteous and the wicked. Recall Job said that if he could just find an impartial judge, God would be convicted of mishandling his duty to Job.
- 3-38 God asks Job a series of rhetorical questions which he can't possibly answer with anything except maybe No or I don't know. This seems like Job's worst nightmare. It is exactly what he feared an encounter with God would be (see Ch. 9). None of this addresses the questions that Job has been asking. We tend to look at these through the eyes of Job. Perhaps we should try to see these questions from God's perspective. Job's ideas about God's managing the world have been centered on Job. Job imagines that God's primary job is to ensure the righteous don't suffer, only the wicked. Perhaps Job needs to be re-centered so that he might appreciate that the world is vastly more complicated and mysterious than Job's current moral dilemma. Could the harshness of God's tone be designed to stimulate Job to think outside his little box? God has the knowledge and responsibility to manage all the aspects of the world that these questions imply are needed. Clearly Job does not. Maybe Job's appreciation of God's management of the world should include more of these things that God is mentioning and less of what God should do for him. Notice that cosmology/meteorology are mentioned first. Does this imply that these things are God's first and major responsibility since without order here nothing can survive, and Job is certainly incapable of managing such things.
- 39-41 Being in control of the world involves such seemingly trivial things as making sure the raven has nourishment. No aspect of creation is beyond God's attention. Job certainly can't do this nor can humanity in general. Who has to do it?

Chapter 39

- 1-4 As if the previous questions on cosmology and meteorology weren't enough, God continues with more questions about animals. Notice that the animals mentioned are wild animals, not domesticated animals, except for the war horse. All these are animals Job knows nothing about. Who sees to their well being? Even the stupid ostrich is part of God's creation that must be looked after even though it is considered an unclean animal (Leviticus 11:13-19). Regarding the horse, who gave it its strength and courage? The hawk and eagle are also unclean animals, but are part of God's creation. Does this suggest that God might be showing Job that God's creation is a far more mysterious and complicated place than Job has taken time to appreciate?

Chapter 40

- 1-5 It seems that Job has been thoroughly intimidated and maybe didn't really understand anything that God was trying to say, not because of the content, but because of the

seemingly harsh and sarcastic style that God used. Job is not satisfied and perhaps even God is a little disappointed that his first speech was not successful.

6-8 You can almost hear Job thinking, Oh No! Here we go again. God's speech this time starts out much like the first one but without the reference to obscuring God's design. God asks Job a different type of question. Perhaps we can imagine a softer, more compassionate tone for God. God asks Job to think; given all that Job has seen about how competent God is at running the world, does he still want to maintain that God is incompetent just so he can say he was right that God doesn't reward the righteous and punish the wicked? How important is that compared to everything else God does?

9-14 God says to Job, if you think punishing the wicked is so easy, why don't you try it? You can almost hear Job thinking, how absurd, I can't do that. You can almost hear God thinking, of course Job can't do that, I don't do that either. The following verses explain why.

15-24 God describes the great land monster, Behemoth, which is sometimes pictured in ancient myths as a hippopotamus. It symbolizes chaotic and destructive forces, something to be feared. Yet God says that it is as much a part of God's creation as Job (vs. 15).

Chapter 41

1-34 God goes into detail to describe the strength and fierceness of the sea monster, Leviathan, another mythical creature sometimes pictured as a crocodile. This beast was also a symbol of chaos and destructive forces. Perhaps God is saying that the restraint of these creatures (40:19) and the chaos they represent is far more important than what Job had thought was God's primary function. Certainly the existence of such creatures in God's design means that Job needs to rethink his very simplistic, mechanical notion of what God should be doing for him. The fact that God does not destroy these forces of chaos and suffering is proof that God does not mechanically go about eliminating suffering, even for the righteous, as Job thought he should at the beginning of the story.

Chapter 42

1-6 Job apologizes for speaking against God without knowledge or understanding. His vision of God's creation and God's management of it has been expanded and it now appears wonderful.

7-9 God turns his attention to Job's three friends. Elihu is not mentioned. God says that Job has spoken what is right and they have not. Job maintained all along that God did not interact with humanity based on the accepted theology of the day, namely through rewards and punishments. Job was right, but for all the wrong reasons. Job was to offer a prayer for God not to deal with them according to their folly. Their folly, of course, was to say things about God which were wrong and thus, according to their own theology, should deserve punishment from God. Job, a righteous man, did pray for his friends and God accepted Job's prayer. We are left to wonder whether the friends who were now indebted to Job for God's forgiveness would be willing to listen to Job describe his new vision of this mysterious and complex world in which chaos and the potential for suffering, even for the righteous, are all part of God's "good" creation.