

Job, III

In this lecture we will be looking at theories of dislocations and additions in Job. The first observation is that the third cycle of dialogue seems to be truncated, or cut short. Eliphaz is the first of Job's friends to speak in each cycle, followed by Bildad. Bildad's third speech, in chapter 25, is quite abbreviated. His speech in chapter 25 is only 6 verses long, as compared to 22 verses in chapter 8 when he first spoke, and 21 verses in chapter 18 when he had his second opportunity. Thus his speeches consisted of 22, 21, and then a mere 6 verses. Moreover, Zophar, who is the third of Job's friends to speak in each cycle, does not speak at all in the third cycle. Therefore this third cycle has the appearance of being cut short, or truncated. Some have suggested that something has fallen out of the text or been messed up. Another observation along these lines is that the declaration of the principle of retributive justice in chapter 27 seems more appropriate, in the opinion of many people, in the mouth of one of Job's comforters than in the mouth of Job. In this chapter Job is talking like his comforters talk. But remember that he has been saying all along, "Who does not know all these things? Who could not say these things?" It seems that he is showing them, "I can say all this. I know what you are talking about. I can teach on this." That might be the explanation there. A third observation is that the submissive tone of chapter 28 is very different from the vehement protests that we hear from Job elsewhere in this dispute with his friends.

There are these three observations: the abbreviated third cycle of disputes, the fact that Job appears to be speaking like one of his friends in chapter 27, and Job's submissive tone in chapter 28 in his poem about where wisdom can be found. These three issues have suggested to some people that there may have been some textual dislocation at the end of the third cycle. Others would suggest that Job's speech in chapter 28 is the work of the author of the book and not of Job himself, and was not meant to be understood as the words of Job. There is nothing striking in the text that indicates a change of speaker at the beginning of chapter 28. At the beginning of chapter 27 it says, "And Job continued his discourse." He is speaking in chapter 26, through chapter 27, and Job continues his discourse that flows right into chapter 28 with no apparent break. This does not make it impossible that the narrator could have inserted his poetic interlude, but that is not demonstrated by the text. Chapter 29 does, like chapter 27, say, "Job continued his discourse." But as is the case in chapter 27, that introduction does not necessarily mean that someone else was speaking in the previous chapter.

How do we respond to these theories? We could say that even if they were right and the end of the third cycle is confused and has been reconstructed in some way, it would still be necessary to interpret the text that we have before us. This is the text we know and we would still want to interpret it. It does exist and demands interpretation. It is always more relevant to explore the present form than some hypothetical form that may or may not have existed. However, I would also say that it is by no means certain that the end of the third cycle has suffered any textual confusion or dislocations at all. Brevard Childs, who teaches at Yale, and others have mentioned that the truncated third cycle tends to dramatize the failure of the arguments of Job's friends. They run out of things to say. They have said it all, and they have not convinced him. They have not proven their case, and they have nothing else to say. Zophar was the more cantankerous of the three, and he just seems to get fed up with it eventually. He keeps calling Job to repent, and when he sees that he is not going to convince Job he seems to run out of things to say. That might be a better explanation than hypothesizing about how things may have been taken out of or added to the text. Moreover, we have seen that Job himself does not disagree theologically with the principle of retributive justice. He can teach a course on it if necessary; he can tell them all about it using terms that they had used. But he has resisted their over-rigorous application of this particular theological point to every single case, his own in particular. And so it is possible that he desire to propound wisdom on this point, just to show that he understands and knows what they have been saying. He can explain the power of God and the fate of the wicked, but he refuses their conclusion

that his own suffering proves his guilt. “I will never admit that you are right. Until I die I will not deny my integrity.” That is his consistent refrain.

The issue with chapter 28 is maybe a little less clear. The poem on wisdom may be the author’s parenthesis, as Kidner suggests. But Brevard Childs suggests that we really should link chapters 27 and 28 together. He says this:

In chapter 27, beginning in verse 11, this section serves now to introduce the great wisdom poem of 28 as a speech of Job. [...] The effect of placing chapters 27 and 28 in the mouth of Job is to reinstate Job as a sage. Job has refuted the false application of the [wisdom] tradition to explain his suffering. But the present role of these chapters rules out any theory that Job is therefore rejecting Israel’s wisdom per se. This is far from the truth. Job can even describe the certain fate of the ungodly in terms reminiscent of his friend’s arguments. The effect of assigning chapter 28 to Job is that it supports the move which will be made also in the Elihu speeches that Job also recognizes the divine limitations set on human wisdom. Only God knows the way of wisdom. The effect of chapter 28 is to provide a link between the portrayal of the patient Job of chapter two and the impatient Job of the dialogue.

The inclusion of the rubric summary of the chapter, “Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom,” brings the book of Job back into sync with the rest of the wisdom corpus, which has expressed the limitations of man’s ability to understand all that goes on. There is much that we can understand that is at our feet, but there is much that we cannot understand. Also, Job has become increasingly impatient in his debates with his friends, and he is anything but calm by this point. This calming chapter 28, as he seems to regain clarity and sanity for a while, does reinstate him and remind us of the earlier Job who said, “Should I receive good from God and not trouble also?” We can only work with impressions, but my impression is that there is a possible reading that would allow chapter 28 to be from the mouth of Job. I think that part of the dynamic of the text is that he is sensing that this may be the answer: that he cannot know the answer. “Where can wisdom be found?” Only God knows.

In chapters 29-31 Job turns to God in a final protest. Job longs for a time of past blessedness. He remembers his earlier days, but now God has stricken him. He then proclaims his innocence one last time in chapter 31. Chapter 31 is very interesting because it shows that nothing has changed from Job’s time to ours. Our age is more technologically advanced and such, but if you read the sins that Job is claiming innocence of, they are very much the same as the sins we deal with now: honesty in business, sexual morality, social justice, etc. These are the very same things that are part of the human condition now.

Job concludes with the call to God to answer him. At this point Elihu, the angry young man, interrupts, and we hear a new voice. He is angry with Job and his friends. He is angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God, and with the three friends for being unable to refute Job. Some have questioned whether the Elihu speeches were an original part of the book or whether someone has added them at some point. Depending on whether we take Job as an historical book or not, as telling a story of real people in real time, that issue is more or less problematic. We do know that some books were augmented. As we have seen in our study of Proverbs, remember that some Solomonic material was added to Proverbs. Thus it is possible that something could have been added to Job. However, if we understand this as an historical account of something that went on in the life of Job, it is a little more problematic to introduce a fictional character into an historical account. I do not think it is necessary to see these chapters as an insertion. I think it is possible to answer the objections and understand these chapters as being a part of the original account.

One of the reasons for the theory that these chapters may not be original is that when God finally appears to Job, He speaks to him and says something about the three friends, but He does not mention Elihu at all. This has troubled some people and they have thought that Elihu deserves a response. But the fact of the matter is that Elihu really makes no charges. He does not issue any charges, and so there is nothing really that God would need to respond to in Elihu's speech. A second observation is that Elihu's speech seems to interrupt Job's plea that God would answer him. Job calls on God to answer him, and then we hear Elihu's speech rather than God responding. The third observation is that Elihu's speeches seem to necessitate an extensive and exact knowledge of the speeches that have come before. The speaker seems to be working from a written transcript of the proceedings. It has been suggested, therefore, that someone later on familiarized himself with the book and thought, "I have an answer to that. I will insert my answer on the basis of my clear, concise, and precise knowledge of what has gone before." However, that argument is not overly compelling because it is quite possible that if this was an event that was taking place over a period of some days it is likely that this would have been recorded. When people gave speeches like this, they were recorded, like our political speeches today. Therefore it is quite likely that a scribe would have been recording these speeches. That scribe could well have been Elihu. Now, we are speculating here. But it is quite possible that he did have a knowledge of the speeches that came before, even if he was speaking a few days after the others rather than years later. We in the West are often astonished by the capacity of other people to remember things. Those who are not literate or who do not have the resources to transcribe things train their minds to remember things, far beyond our capacity. Elihu, living in such an oral culture, may have had a very commanding knowledge of what had gone before. The fourth observation is simply that Elihu adds nothing new to the discussion. Now, I really disagree with that. I think he does add some things that are new to the discussion. There are 74 occurrences of the verb "to know" in the Old Testament. What one can know would appear to be an important issue. And Job and his friends have been struggling to know; they are seeking answers through the whole book. In Job the frequency of the occurrence of the verb "to know" begins to peak in the Elihu speeches. Then in the confrontation between the Lord and Job the issue of knowledge and knowing becomes very, very important. That, I would suggest, is something that is a little new that is introduced by the Elihu speech.

Assuming that Job is the historical account of a real Job and his real friends, it has been asked whether we are to assume that Job and his friends spoke as we read them in the poetical style, or if this is the work of a poetical genius. That is a question that is very hard to answer. We do not generally carry on a dialogue in this elevated style, but simply because we do not do so does not mean that others would not. In fact, even today in our Western culture people do take very great care with their words when they are debating important issues. Thus it is possible that these could have been carefully prepared speeches. But we really do not know.