

# Development of the Message of Job<sup>1</sup>

Many interpreters have understood that the message of the book of Job is primarily dealing with the subject of the righteous suffering. However, this approach is myopic for the suffering Job is never told who was immediately responsible for his suffering nor the reason for his suffering. In dealing with the book's message, it would be more precise to view Job's suffering as a catalyst to explore the central concern of the book, viz., **God's administration of justice**. This refers to God either blessing a person for living righteously, remunerative justice, or judging a person for living wickedly, retributive justice. In 1:1-5 Job is pictured as having a genuine righteousness with the consequential blessings of an ideal family, wealth, social prestige, and a good reputation. Job was living proof of God's remunerative justice. However, in 1:6-2:10 Job's life of blessing is quickly changed into one of severe suffering and this was for no apparent action that Job could have been held accountable (see 1:8, 2:3). This situation challenges Job's understanding of this dogma of God's administration of justice. Job wants another explanation of how the moral sphere of this life is governed. Even his friends also find their understanding challenged. However, they tenaciously cling to their interpretation of God's administration of justice. We will briefly examine the various misguided applications of God's administration of justice followed by the divine interpretation of God's administration of justice.

## a. The Misguided Applications of God's Administration of Justice

Satan, Job's friends, and Job have various interpretations of this subject. We will summarize each of these.

### 1) God's administration of justice is inherently flawed.

This is the view of Satan. After having roamed the earth, Satan presents himself before God. God asks him in 1:8 if he had found anyone on earth as upright as Job. In response to this, Satan raises a question about God's administration of justice. **The catalytic question**. In 1:9-11 Satan reflects that if God would remove Job's blessings, Job would curse God. This is to say, Job is righteous because God has rewarded him. The implication is that God's system of justice does not promote genuine righteousness. Man serves God for His blessings and not for true devotion to God. With God's permission, Satan then removes God's blessings from Job. Job loses his ideal family (with the exception of his wife), wealth, social prestige, and even his reputation is questioned. Satan's goal is to get Job to curse God. By doing this, Satan will demonstrate that God's moral order has an intrinsic defect.

2) God's administration of justice is mechanically applied.

(Health & Wealth Gospel 101.) Job's three friends and Elihu share a common belief that God mechanically rewards and judges people for their actions. This was an immediate cause and effect understanding of God's administration of justice. This is demonstrated by their acceptance of the corollary of retributive and remunerative justice. The corollary of the former is this: if one is suffering, he had to be living in sin; and the latter: if one was prospering, he was living righteously. In each case the degree of results was directly proportional to one's behavior. Prior to Job's suffering, the friends viewed Job as living proof of the corollary of remunerative justice; however, after the extreme disasters that Job encountered, he was definitely living in extreme sin but apparently not extreme enough to have his life taken as his children's lives had been (see 4:7-9; 8:3-4; 11:4-6). The three friends and Elihu agree that Job was suffering because of sin (see 4:7-9; 8:3-4; 11:4-6; 34:11-12). They also agree that God will reverse Job's suffering if he presents his appeal to God or confesses his sin and lives righteously (5:17-27; 8:5-7; 11:13-20; 34:31-32). However, they disagree about the significance of Job's suffering.

- a) Eliphaz assumes in his first speech that Job's sin is minor and that he is basically an innocent man. In 4:3-6 he recognizes that Job is a blameless man who is suffering. This is a problem to his theology. His solution is that even one as righteous as Job will suffer deservedly at times, 4:17-19. He also assumes that Job's suffering is minimal and may be quickly removed (4:7). He further postulates in 5:17-27 that God uses suffering for correction purposes.
- b) Bildad is convinced that God has appropriately administered justice to Job and his family. He views Job as being sinful and deservedly suffering but not so sinful that God had to immediately take his life as He had to do with his children, 8:2-4.
- c) Zophar is convinced that Job is a hypocritical sinner. Since Job claims that he is clean in God's sight (11:4) and he is greatly suffering, Job must be concealing sin. For Zophar, God's retributive theology was not quid pro quo since God has mercifully overlooked a portion of Job's sins (11:5-6). If the truth had been revealed, Job was a greater sinner than any of his friends could have imagined.
- d) When the friends' argumentation against Job becomes ineffective with them becoming silent, another participant, Elihu, appears in 32:1-37:24. Like Job's three friends, Elihu is a defender of God's justice. Because he also accepted its corollary, he assumed that Job was suffering because of sin (33:27; 34:11-12,31-33,37; 36:8-10). Though Eliphaz had postulated that God used suffering for purposes of correction, Elihu more thoroughly develops God instructional use of suffering in 33:19-28 and 36:8-12. For Elihu suffering was not only for retribution but also for correction.

3) God's administration of justice is capriciously interpreted.

Until he had experienced his intense suffering, Job agreed with his friends about God's moral order. However, he has changed his mind. Since he is living righteously yet suffering, he is confused and looking for other explanations as to how God administers justice. Job's initial response to his calamities is a calm

acceptance of these as God's will for his life. After further prolonged reflection, he realizes that his understanding of the moral order of life has collapsed. We will summarize Job's argumentation and then note his wrong accusations against God.

a) Summary of Job's argument

In examining Job's thought, we will organize this summary around the sequential development of his speeches.

i) Job's complaint and his speeches from the first cycle

In his first speech in chapter 3 Job's complaint provides the occasioning incident for the friends to speak. Job reacts to his situation by wishing that he had never been born. Since this wish is impossible, he pleads with God to kill him in his second speech (6:8). In Job's third speech, he moves beyond his death wish and desires a declaration of innocence (9:2-3). In the heat of defending his reputation, Job accuses God of being hostile to him (9:8) and of oppressing him while smiling on the plans of the wicked (10:3). Because of God's posture toward him, Job realizes that God will never give him what he feels is his right, viz., a declaration of innocence (9:14-20). **This shows there is still some holdover of his previous (retribution) theology.** Job's thought develops further in that he feels that with an arbitrator it might be possible for him to enter into litigation with God (9:32-35). Job's desire for a court hearing with God grows stronger in his fourth speech for he requests a legal hearing with God before he dies (13:3,16-19; 14:13-17).

ii) Job's speeches from the second cycle

In his fifth and sixth speeches, he again wishes that an impartial mediator would serve as his defense attorney before God (16:18-22; 19:25-27). Job is convinced of his innocence and is confident that God will vindicate him, even if it is not in the present earthly sphere. However, Job's conviction of his innocence prompts him to accuse God of having wronged him (19:6). In his seventh speech he ponders God's system of justice in light of God permitting the wicked to live happy and long lives (21:7-26) and permitting them to even be buried with honor (21:27-34). Job is confused about God's moral order. However, he is still convinced that he wants no part with the counsel of the wicked since they do not recognize that God is the ultimate source of their blessing (21:16).

iii) Job's speeches from the third cycle

In his eighth speech, Job observes some enigmas in God's moral order (24:2-21). Yet Job is convinced God will rectify these enigmas (24:22-25). Job's quest for the vindication of his integrity moves him in his ninth speech to declare that God has denied him of his justice (27:2). However, he subsequently balances this out by affirming that God will judge the wicked (27:13-23).

iv) Job's final speeches

In his tenth speech, Job presents a poem on wisdom. In this poem he states that man does not have sufficient wisdom to solve some of the

problems in the world, only God has this type of wisdom (28:20-28). After reviewing his earlier state of blessing (29:1-25), he then ridicules those who have attacked him (30:1-15) and affirms that God has attacked him and refuses to respond to his requests (30:16-26). Job's conviction of his innocence and of God's justice compels him to take an oath of innocence in chapter 31. Job's oath poses a problem for God's moral order. If Job is innocently suffering, divine justice appears to be in error. In Job's desire to go to court with God, he is attempting to approach God as an equal. Though Job believes that God does have a system of justice, he is in effect accusing God of using it capriciously.

b) Job's wrong accusations against God

God accuses Job of speaking out of ignorance in 38:2, of making false accusations against Him in 40:2, and of discrediting His justice in 40:8. Because of these, we should understand that Job made a number of false accusations against God.

i) God has mistreated Job. In 10:3 Job accused God of oppressing him while smiling on the plans of the wicked, in 16:9-12 of attacking him in anger, in 19:6-11 of wronging him and counting him as his enemy, in 27:1-2 of denying his justice, and in 30:19-21 of ruthlessly mistreating him.

ii) God was not taking care of other suffering people. This is to say, God was not doing His job as ruler since he allowed the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the needy to be oppressed by the wicked, 24:1-12.

iii) By accusing God in this manner, though done in ignorance, and by desiring, consequently, to enter into litigation with God, Job was in effect passing judgment on God and, therefore, making himself out to be God's equal (pride). In effect, Job was maintaining that God capriciously administered justice. In response to this, there is only One who is able to speak *ex cathedra* on the administration of justice.

b. The Divine Interpretation of God's Administration of Justice

Rather than responding to Job's demand for a legal hearing, God appears in a storm. Rather than discussing Job's innocence or how He administers justice, God overwhelms Job with questions about His creation and management of the world. In both speeches the LORD challenges Job's anthropocentric view of the moral order of life and substantiates a theocentric perspective. Each speech will briefly be presented.

1) The LORD'S control of the universe is beyond anyone's comprehension (38:2-40:2).

God initiates this speech with an accusation against Job in 38:2. The point of this is that Job has darkened the LORD'S counsel with words spoken in ignorance. The LORD concludes this speech with the same type of accusation in 40:2 where He questions Job concerning the validity of his desire to legally contend with Him. God is reflecting with each accusation that Job does not comprehend His plan and work.

In demonstrating His accusation about Job's lack of wisdom, God raises a series of rhetorical questions. These can be broken down in a threefold manner: God's creation of the world in 38:4-11, His sustenance of the world in 38:12-38, and His management of the animal kingdom most of which were undomesticated in 38:39-39:30. The point of these is to demonstrate that Job is unable to comprehend what God is doing because he is not God's equal. God in His freedom as an all-wise and all-powerful Sovereign had created and is sustaining His creation. This is a God-centered world in contrast to the man-centered world and life view advocated by Job in his ignorance as well as his fellow wise men.

2) The LORD'S administration of justice is beyond anyone's comprehension (40:7-41:34).

Like the first speech, God makes another accusation in 40:8 against Job. With this accusation Job is accused of having discredited the LORD'S justice, condemning God to justify himself. As such, the LORD'S last speech does relate to His administration of justice; but it is not in the manner that either Job or his friends had expected. After this accusation, the LORD challenges Job in 40:9-14 to take over God's place and to execute retributive justice on the wicked. God then returns to continue questioning Job in reference to His control of the animal kingdom. His questions focus on two of the wildest animals in Job's day, behemoth and leviathan. God uses both creatures analogously to demonstrate to Job that His administration of justice is beyond Job's comprehension.

The LORD challenges Job to look at behemoth (possibly a hippopotamus or an elephant) in 40:15-24. The point is that Job himself could not readily control behemoth. God reminds Job in the middle of the speech, v. 19, that He has behemoth completely under His control. God concludes this speech with a challenge in v. 24 reminding Job of his inability to subdue behemoth. When we compare v. 24 with v. 19, God is stressing that Job was unable to capture behemoth (v. 24), yet God has him completely under His control (v. 19). We should compare these two verses with vv. 8-14. If Job cannot govern behemoth, how could he hope to humiliate all the proud ones of this earth (w. 11-14). If he cannot do either, how can he question God's administration of justice (w. 8-9). Thus Job should forget his request for vindication and completely submit to the LORD and His control of this world.

The LORD challenges Job to subdue leviathan (crocodile) in 41:1-34. God reminds Job in v. 10 that he was not fierce enough to arouse leviathan and, therefore, how could he hope to come before God with His claim. This is developed further in v. 11 where God highlights that He owns everything. Because of this, God does not have to respond to any created beings' claim against Him. In vv. 33-34 God brings this speech to a conclusion. Using personification, God describes leviathan as a unique creature. As such leviathan had no equal on earth. Being fearless, no creature could intimidate leviathan, v. 33. God further describes leviathan in v. 34 as looking down on all other creatures. As such, he is king over all the haughty including Job since Job could not approach him with a bridle (41:5). The *a fortiori* argument is this, if

leviathan is king over all the proud including Job, how much more so is his Creator, the Sovereign Lord of the universe.

If Job can neither capture and control behemoth nor leviathan, then how could he hope to take God's place in administering justice. God never tells Job how he exercises justice. This was impossible since God's control of the moral order of this life was beyond Job's creaturely comprehension. The LORD'S administration of justice is beyond any created being's understanding. Though Job does not have the issue of justice explained, he does learn that this is too profound for him and that he must submit to the Sovereign God who administers justice in perfect conformity with His nature and plan.

c. Summation of the Message of Job

Because of God's incomprehensible wisdom and incomparable power as reflected by His creating and sustaining the world and its inhabitants, He is its sovereign who freely administers justice correctly. Because this is a theocentric world, man must fearfully submit to the LORD and His sovereign will.

1. Robert McCabe. *Old Testament Poetic Books*. Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Allen Park, Michigan. 2004.