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## Job 42:6 and Telling the Truth

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In the last chapter of the Book of Job, after all the speeches had been made by Job and his three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – by enigmatic Elihu and finally by God Himself, God said to the oldest of the three friends, Eliphaz: „You did not speak truth like Job” and thus commanding that the three friends make an expiatory burnt offering and also ask Job to intercede for them to appease God’s wrath – which they did and Job prayed for them and so they did and were forgiven (Job 42:7-9). God’s statement is frequently interpreted as calling into doubt the veracity of the pronouncements of the three friends, and seeing the ten speeches of Job as enunciations of truths. For example, it is stated that the three friends „had condemned Job against their better knowledge and conscience, and therefore abandoned truth in favor of the justice of God, a line of defence abhorrent to Him” by regarding Job „as a deep-dyed sinner, and hypocrite”<sup>1</sup>.

It is quite clear that such an opinion is hardly defensible. The pronouncements of the three friends were full of true statements to the extent that some of them are even quoted in the New Testament: for instance, 5:13 in 1 Cor. 3.19, or a near-quotation of 5:9 in Rom. 11:33. Also, according to *The Companion Bible*, Appendix 61, there are in total 65 passages in Job referred to, if not exactly quoted, or referring to other books of the Bible: 37 in the Psalms; 18 in Proverbs; 9 in the Prophets; and 1 in the New Testament<sup>2</sup>. No doubt about veracity should be cast at least on these passages. On the other hand, Job’s speeches include statements whose truthfulness may not be not quite acceptable or which are at least

<sup>1</sup> Robert F. Hutchinson, *Thoughts on the Book of Job*, London: Samuel Bagster 1875, 272.

<sup>2</sup> 17 of these passages come from the speeches of the three friends.

theologically precarious. Job stated that God acted unjustly, at least, against him (19:6) and considered him His enemy (13:24, 19:11, countered by Elihu in 33:10); God holds him as a prisoner by keeping his feet in the stocks (13:27, cf. Elihu in 33:11) and multiplies his wounds for no reason (9:17); God destroys both the innocent and the guilty (9:22) and mocks at the despair of the innocent (9:23); God destroys the hope of man (14:19). This shows that God's „condemnation of the friends and the approval of Job does not mean that everything they said was wrong, and everything said by Job was right”<sup>3</sup>.

In what respect was Job right? Many answers have been proposed; for example, Job was right in his appeal to the divine justice (Eduard König); in attacking his friends thesis (P. Haghebaert); in his act of humility (Charles E.B. Cranfield); in his faith expressed in his statements (William Kelly); in his apology (L.W. Batten); in his innocence, in the fact that he „saw his fate as an incomprehensible mystery,” in his mistrust of the accepted arguments (Helmut Lamparter)<sup>4</sup>. As it also has been stated, the approval of Job „must be understood in relation to the main theme of the discussion”; on the other hand, the condemnation of Job's friends should be understood as pointing to the three friends' errors „on the vital issues”<sup>5</sup>. Yet the questioning of God's justice by Job seems to be very much one of the main themes. An argument can be made that Job himself pointed to the fact that his words should be taken with a grain of salt, although he was not quite specific about which words he meant. He said that because of the unbearable suffering, his words were rash and babbling (6:3), at least at times; because of his despair, his words are lost in the wind (6:26), easily carried by the wind, futile. Job effectively admitted that not all his words had been saturated with veracity when recanting what he has spoken (42:6). On the other hand, he exclaimed at one point that if his friends had been in his place and he were attempting to counsel them, he would have used the same advices they did when trying to find an explanation of his predicaments; he also would console them with his mouth (16:4-5). This can be taken to mean that if it were not for the suffering that befell him, he would have expressed the same views as his three friends; i.e., their views and his own were very much the same before the disasters struck. Sharing the same views very likely was one reason why they were his friends. Therefore, the statement that the three friends „did not speak truth like Job” should not be understood as a reference to all that Job has ever spoken – since,

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<sup>3</sup> Edward J. Kissane, *The book of Job*, Dublin: Browne and Nolan 1939, 297. Somewhat more cautiously: the author of the Book of Job „may put into the mouth of Eliphaz and the two others some very true ideas, just as he may make Job express some very exaggerated or debatable ideas,” Edouard Dhorme. *A commentary of the Book of Job*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1984 [1926], lxxxii.

<sup>4</sup> References are given in Jean Lévêque, *Job et son dieu*, Paris: Librairie Lecoffre 1970, 125.

<sup>5</sup> Kissane, *op. cit.*, 297. A supposition is made that the friends, like his wife in 2:9, encouraged him to blaspheme, p. xxxv, also accepted by Lévêque, *op. cit.*, 125-126.

by implication, this would also include the speeches of the three friends as expressing the views Job shared before their arrival – but what Job had spoken after his friends arrived.

The way God's chastisement should be understood is indicated by Job's desire that his friends should keep silence, thereby proving their wisdom (13:5)<sup>6</sup>. The emphasis in an interpretation of „you did not speak truth like Job” should not be placed as much on „truth” as on „speak” (along with „like”). The verse does not have to mean that the three friends did not speak any truth at all, but that they did speak truth, although not like Job. It is not primarily a matter of the way truth was pronounced but the situation in which it was pronounced. They spoke truth, but it would be much better if they did not, not now, not in the front of suffering Job. They should have commiserated with him in silence the way they did for the first seven days (2:13). This is when they truly pitied and consoled him, as was their original intention (2:11). The dialogue, or rather a series of monologues, took place on the eighth day for a couple of hours or so, for considerably shorter amount of time than the time spent in silence. And yet, they were not rebuked by God for this silence, but only for the words spoken during a rather short amount of time spent in the company of Job. The rebuke seems to mean that there should simply be a proper time and place, even for speaking the truth. Already Qoheleth had admonished his readers that there is a proper time for silence and a proper time for speaking (3:7), and according to Sirach, one should not show off his wisdom in an inopportune time (32:4). This is what the words of the three friends amounted to, to showing off their knowledge. However, the same words and the same thoughts in the mouth of Job have a different weight than they do when spoken by the three friends. They spoke from the sidelines about suffering and the reason for it, they analyzed it as observers. After they sat for seven days in silence overwhelmed by Job's suffering, they became uncompassionate theoreticians pontificating about what Job could have done in his life to have deserved it. Job's „cries of pain are met with the cold consolation of the friends who are content to comfort the righteous man in his agony with the theory of misfortunes of the wicked and the happiness of the innocent”<sup>7</sup>. In this, even if they were right, even if Job did what they claimed he did, this truth could do little to counter his suffering or to improve Job's situation; this truth could bring no relief but could only exacerbate the already insufferable misery of Job. „What Job needed from his friends ... was not theology, but sympathy”<sup>8</sup>. He needed silent empathy, he needed his friends to at least try to feel his pain. In-

<sup>6</sup> In which way, it can be added, „even a fool who keep silent is considered wise,” Prov. 17:28.

<sup>7</sup> Dhorme, *op. cit.*, lxxx.

<sup>8</sup> Harold S. Kushner, *When bad things happen to good people*, New York: Avon Books 1983, 88, and thus „their silent presence must have been a lot more helpful to their friend than their lengthy theological explanations were,” p. 91.

stead, he received lectures, filled with true observations and analyses, but more harmful than helpful, more exacerbating his suffering rather than alleviating his pain. In this situation, „prayer without words”<sup>9</sup> would be more valuable.

It is another matter when Job speaks. His words flow from the depth of his despair and thereby have an altogether different coloring than the same words spoken by a detached analyst. Job speaks, not to stir theoretical discussion of difficult theological issues, but to express his pain. The emotive side of his pronouncements is more important than the conceptual content. If his friends cannot help him, he wants their empathy, not their theorizing.

However, there is at least one positive result of the three friends lectures – the Book of Job. It can be stated that the three friends’ pain is our gain: had it not been for their speeches, there would have been no Job’s responses and then no Elihu’s responses to their speeches and no Job’s responses and finally, there would not have been the two speeches of God. The Book of Job would be reduced to the introduction with theologically curious if not troubling bargaining of Satan with God, and the closing where Job’s patience is rewarded. The loss would be incalculable, if only from the literary point of view<sup>10</sup>.

## SUMMARY

The interesting problem of the Book of Job is the „sin” of Job’s friends. What wrong did they say that Job was to pray that God would forgive them? Why their sober words were considered by God as sinful while Job’s speeches, full of anger, were judged as proper? The answer lies in the context – not in the text only.

### Key words

Job – communication – suffering – truth – belief

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<sup>9</sup> „Prayer without words – that mute wrestling agony of the soul which God will understand and not pass by with neglect,” as stated by Joseph Parker, *The book of Job*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls 1889, 408.

<sup>10</sup> According to Daniel Webster, „The Book of Job taken as a mere work of literary genius is one of the most wonderful productions of any age or of any language,” Charles Lanman. *The Private Life of Daniel Webster*, New York: Harper 1852, 102. Thomas Carlyle once said: „There is nothing written, I think, in the Bible or out of it, of equal literary merit,” *Lectures on heroes*, in his *Collected works*, London: Chapman and Hill 1864, v. 6, 221.