

JOB

Part 2: Three Cycles of Speeches Chapters 3-31

In the long second section of Job, we will look at a set of three speeches or conversations.

- First cycle of speeches (Chapters 3-14)
- Second cycle of speeches (Chapters 15-21)
- Third cycle of speeches (Chapters 22-31)

FIRST CYCLE OF SPEECHES (Chapters 3-14)

CHAPTER 3: Job curses the day he was born

“Perish the day on which I was born, the night when they said, ‘The child is a boy.’” (v 3)

In his introduction to chapter 3 and the first cycle of speeches, Peter Ellis, C.S.S.R., writes:

The first cycle of speeches in the unfolding psychological drama is begun by Job, who shocks his friends by cursing the day he was born. By implying that it would have been better if he had never been born at all, Job appears to be insinuating a lack of goodness and justice on the part of God for not taking him out of life. By seemingly impugning God’s goodness and justice, Job rouses his friends from their silence.

In the speeches that follow, each friend takes a turn defending God’s goodness and justice, and each in turn has his arguments refuted by Job. In the first cycle of speeches, the friends all believe that Job is being punished by God for some sin. Let Job repent, they say, and God will restore him to his former state of prosperity. Their tone is at first conciliatory, but when Job defends his innocence, their charges become more and more vehement.

The author’s purpose in the debates is to refute the stock arguments of the traditionalists who push the connection between sin and suffering to absurd lengths. The power and poetry of the language in these speeches has always been the delight and the envy of litterateurs. (Men & Message of the Old Testament, p.510)

The proverbial “patience of Job” comes to a dramatic end in chapter 3. The opening speech of the new Job is, above all, a desperate cry for relief by a man for whom life has ceased to have meaning. He is not yet in the mood for theology. While he doesn’t curse God, he does curse the day he was born and the night

of his conception. Job wishes his mother’s womb had become his tomb.

Verses 20-23. Commenting on these verses, Barbara Reid, O.P., writes:

“Job continues his lament in 3:20-23 with vivid imagery. Having been robbed of all he previously treasured, he speaks of wanting death so badly that this is now the hidden treasure for which he earnestly digs. In his dark despair he laments that it would have been better never to have been given light. Job feels “fenced in,” trapped in desperation and darkness. At the beginning of Job’s story, Satan had observed that God had “put a fence” of protection and blessing around Job and his house and all he had, blessing all that Job had and causing it to increase (1:10). Job has lost sight of God’s protection that still encircles him, even in his loss and anguish. The way out of his distress will be to shift his focus from his insistence on how undeserved his suffering to a self-abandonment in blind trust to God.”

CHAPTERS 4-5: Eliphaz’s first speech

“Reflect now, what innocent man perishes? Since when are the upright destroyed?” (4:7)

Beginning with a polite tone, Eliphaz suggests that the “instruction” Job has offered to others in the past should not be forgotten now that Job himself is in need (4:2-5). Then Eliphaz goes on to make his main point which is grounded in traditional wisdom of the Old Testament—that the innocent do not perish (v.7) and that he who suffers must have sown mischief (sinned) (4:8, 5:7).

In chapter 5, Eliphaz becomes more aggressive, taunting Job: *“Call now and see if anyone will respond to you.... Impatience kills the fool” (5:1-2).*

Pause: How do you feel when someone offers you lots of advice, when what you really need is a listening ear?

CHAPTERS 6-7: Job’s first response

“The arrows of the Almighty pierce me, and my spirit drinks in their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me.” (v.4)

“I have not transgressed the command of the Holy One.” (v.10)

“Is not man’s life on earth a drudgery? Are not his days those of a hireling?” (7:1)

Job responds to Eliphaz’s speech with a strong emotional outburst in 6:1-12 and then accuses his friends of being false friends (6:13-27). Job says: *“A friend owes kindness to one in despair ... My friends are undependable”* (6:14-15). Job challenges his friends to show him where he has erred or sinned (6:24).

In chapter 7, we have another lament by Job on how tough and meaningless life is: *“Is not man’s life on earth drudgery?”* (7:1). Job has no hope for a better life: *“My days...end without hope”* (7:6). Despite the futility and pain, Job says he will not be silent: *“I will speak in the anguish of my spirit. I will complain in the bitterness of my soul”* (7:11).

In 7:17-19, Job complains that God is giving too much attention to man and his attention is oppressive.

Pause: When we experience ‘anguish of spirit,’ is it our tendency to be quiet about our ordeal, or are we more like Job who gives expression to his pain?

CHAPTER 8: Bildad’s first speech

“How long will you utter such things? The words from your mouth are like a mighty wind. Does God pervert judgment?” (vv 2-3)

Bildad’s speech defends God’s justice. He is not nearly as conciliatory as Eliphaz in his approach. From the outset, his words are hostile. Bildad as much as says: *“When are you going to shut up, you old windbag?”*

Verses 5-7. Bildad believes that if Job would only repent, his former life and his possessions would be restored. To Job, this is quite irrelevant. His longing is not for his former riches, but for an *understanding of divine justice*, of why God is allowing him, a good man, to suffer so much.

Verses 8-19. Eliphaz claims that his message was delivered to him in a night vision while Bildad calls on the authority of the elders who interpret religious tradition. He chooses figures of speech that compare the fragility of natural growth and human life. Such vulnerability underscores the need to rely on God. These metaphors are meant to affirm the reliability of the theory of retribution.

CHAPTERS 9-10: Job’s response to Bildad

“How can I a man be justified before God?” (9:2)

“God shakes the earth out of its place.... He commands the sun.” (9:6-7)

“Even though I was right, I could not answer him.” (9:15)

“Would that there be an arbiter between us.”(9:33)

“I will give myself up to complaint; I will speak from the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God:... Why do you oppose me?” (10:1-2)

Commenting on Job’s response to God, Scripture scholar Diane Bergant writes:

“Job insists that he knows well the teaching that Bildad is imparting. He does not need Bildad to instruct him. He is also well aware of God’s unrivaled power, for God is, after all, the creator of the universe. However, none of this diminishes Job’s insistence on his innocence. It is precisely because God is creator that everything is under divine control. And as for the theory of retribution, it does not accurately explain Job’s predicament. It appears that Job has only one option—to issue a lawsuit against God. If divine justice is what Bildad claims it is, Job should get a fair hearing. However, even here Job is at a tremendous disadvantage. God would be the defendant in such a lawsuit, but God would also be the jury and the judge. How might Job be assured of justice in such a situation?”

In very moving words, Job addresses his creator. If God has taken pains to fashion him with such care and expertise, why destroy him now? If it was God’s plan from the start to destroy him, then why did God bring him to life in the first place? Job pleads to be left alone so that he can revive a bit before he must face death. Since the place of death is considered a place of darkness and gloom, a place of no return, if justice is to be exercised, it will have to be done in this life, not in some form of afterlife.” (Journey into the Bible Series – Job)

Chapter 10, like chapter 7, is another lament by Job on the pain of his situation: *“I will speak from the bitterness of my soul.”*

Pause: Have you ever argued with God about his ways? If so, how was that experience for you? Did anything get resolved?

CHAPTER 11: Zophar's first speech

"Shall your babblings keep men silent...? Shall you say: 'My teaching is pure and I am clean in your sight?'" (vv 3-4)

"Can you penetrate the designs of God?" (v 7)

"If you remove all iniquity from your conduct.... Surely then you may lift up your face in innocence." (vv 14-15).

Unlike Eliphaz who was initially polite, and like Bildad who didn't mince words, Zophar is very critical and judgmental of Job right from the start. He accuses Job of excessive babbling and reminds him that there is no contest between him and God: *"Can you, Job, penetrate the designs of God?"* (v.7). Zophar counsels Job to stop complaining and accusing God, and instead submit with humble and contrite heart, then all will be well for him.

CHAPTERS 12-14: Job's response to Zophar

"What you know, I also know.... You are glossing over falsehoods." (13:2-4)

"Is it for God that you speak falsehood?" (13:7)

"He will surely rebuke you." (13:10)

"Be silent, let me alone, that I may give vent to my feelings." (13:13)

"Pay careful heed to my speech.... Behold, I have prepared my case, I know that I am in the right." (13:17-18)

"What are my faults and my sins?...make them known to me!" (13:23)

"Man born of a woman is short-lived and full of trouble." (14:1)

Job begins his response by saying: "You may be smart, but so am I" (12:3). In a shame culture, "what the neighbors say" is very important. In verses 4-6, Job bemoans his misfortunes that have made him a mockery and brought him disgrace. He thinks that his friends have completely misunderstood the reason for his suffering.

In chapter 13, Job reasserts his intelligence and is fully cognizant of the traditional doctrine that they have been pushing on him, namely, that the cause of his affliction is sin. Job rejects this assertion and he wants to have it out with God (13:2-3). He accuses his friends of misspeaking for God (13:7), something God will agree with in the final chapter of the book. Job compares his friends to physicians who give false

remedies to their patients. He accepts that God is just and punishes sin, but his friends are wrong in assuming that Job's suffering is brought on by sin. Job challenges his friends to reveal to him his wrongdoings (13:23).

Chapter 14 is another lamentation on the drudgery of human existence. In verses 7-22, Job uses an image from nature to speak of his situation. A tree that is cut down has hope that it can grow again, but once a man dies there is no hope for another chance.

Chapter 14 ends the first round of speeches on a dim note. *"The issues are squarely on the table. For the friends, God's justice is at stake; for Job, the integrity of his experience. Given the choice, the friends side with God, or better, with their theory about God, which, all too easily for "religious people," replaces God. But Job will not give in. He holds to his experience and, perhaps even worse, refuses to keep quiet"* (Collegeville Commentary, p.685).

SECOND CYCLE OF SPEECHES (Chapters 15-21)

Scholars tell us that the second and third cycles of speeches add little by way of a new argument.

CHAPTER 15: Eliphaz's second speech

"Should a wise man answer with airy opinions, or puff himself up with wind?" (v.2)

"Are you privy to the counsels of God?" (v.8)

"I will show you, if you listen to me; what I have seen I will tell." (v.17)

In verses 1-16, Eliphaz attacks Job's wisdom. Verses 17-26 describe the blessings of the righteous, and verses 27-35 give a harsh account of what will happen to the wicked.

Pause: Have you had the experience of someone arrogantly talking to you as if he/she knew for sure that he/she was speaking for God? Are there preachers and talk show hosts who act like that today? If so, how do you react to such people?

CHAPTERS 16-17: Job's response to Eliphaz

"I have heard this sort of thing many times. Wearisome comforters are you all! Is there no end to windy words?" (16:2-3)

"God has given me over to the impious." (16:11)

“He pierces my side without mercy.” (16:13)

In this response, Job is sometimes addressing God and sometimes his friends.

Job is becoming weary and oppressed with the stupid words of his so-called comforters. If their situations were reversed, Job could show them how to be true comforters (16:5). Job describes his “comforters” as traitors (vv 8, 11), ferocious beasts (vv 9-10), bullies (v. 10), assault and battery muggers (v. 12). Commenting on these chapters, John Gibson says: *“Nightmarish is perhaps the best word to describe Job’s language as, in this and the succeeding speech, he veers between the emotional extremes of hopelessness and hope. It is almost impossible to decide which emotion is the stronger. Is it hopelessness, because these speeches both end on a note of depression? Or is it hope, because they contain brighter visions, and the flame of these is so intense that it can never quite be put out by the surrounding gloom?”* (Daily Study Bible Series, p. 135).

CHAPTER 18: Bildad’s second speech

“When will you put an end to words?” (v. 2)

Bildad begins by asking when will Job shut up. He should take time to reflect and then they could have a good conversation. The rest of Bildad’s speech is an extended description of what will happen to the wicked, not unlike Eliphaz in 15:20-35.

CHAPTER 19: Job’s response to Bildad

“How long will you vex my soul, grind me down with words?” (v. 2)

*“Oh, would that my words were written down!
Would that they were inscribed in a record:
That with an iron chisel and with lead
they were cut in the rock forever!
But as for me, I know that my Vindicator lives,
and that he will at last stand forth upon the dust;
Whom I myself shall see:
my own eyes, not another’s, shall behold him,
and from my flesh I shall see God;
my inmost being is consumed with longing.”*
(vv 23-26)

In verses 3-5, Job seems to be saying: “Even if I am at fault, that is my business; and you have no right to gloat over me.” In verse 6, Job stresses again that God has dealt with him unfairly. When he cries out for help, his cry falls on deaf ears (v. 7), and all of his

dignity is stripped away. *“God breaks me down on every side”* (v.10). Not only that, but everyone has abandoned him, his brethren, friends, even his servants treat him like a stranger. *“My breath is abhorred by my wife; I am loathsome to the men of my family”* (vv 11-19). Verse 21 expresses the depth of Job’s sense of abandonment by God.

Verses 23-26 have been made famous by their mention in Handel’s *Messiah*: “I know that my redeemer liveth.” For traditional Christianity, redeemer is of course Christ, but messianic prophecy has no place in Job’s worldview. Job expresses his conviction that sooner or later his innocence will be vindicated. Since this may happen later rather than sooner, he wishes that his words be preserved. As to the identity of Job’s “Vindicator” mentioned in verse 25, while we assume it is God, most scholars are not sure. They think it may be a third partner, a heavenly witness who will speak for Job’s innocence.

Verse 27 seems to indicate that Job knew of physical resurrection after death. Again scholars tell us that Israel’s belief in life after death came much later.

CHAPTER 20: Zophar’s second speech

In this speech, Zophar describes the fate of the wicked who ignore God and his commands. They set themselves up in God’s place. Zophar is inferring that this is what Job is doing.

CHAPTER 21: Job’s response to Zophar

“Why do the wicked survive, grow old, become mighty in power?” (v. 7)

“The wicked say to God, ‘Depart from us, for we have no wish to learn your ways!’” (v. 14)

The big part of the argument of Job’s friends thus far has focused on the fate of the wicked and the righteous. Job says that often the wicked do not suffer. Instead they prosper, live to an old age and, worst of all, thumb their noses at God: “Who needs you?”

THIRD CYCLE OF SPEECHES (Chapters 22-27)

In its introduction to the third cycle of speeches, *The Collegeville Commentary* states:

“Unlike the first two rounds, which proceeded in orderly fashion, the friends speaking in turn and Job responding to each, the third round is considerably confused. Eliphaz speaks, and Job responds; Bildad’s

speech, five verses long, is surely truncated; Zophar does not speak at all. In addition, part of what Job says seems more appropriate in the mouth of his friends (for example, 26:18-25; 24:13-21). Chapter 28 is generally recognized to be a separate composition.” (p.688)

“Can anyone teach God knowledge?” (21:22)

“Is not your wickedness manifold?” (22:5)

“If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored.” (22:23)

In this speech of Eliphaz, he accuses Job of a litany of sins though he has no evidence of such (vv 6-11). He just assumes that Job must have committed these sins, for otherwise he would not be suffering. In verses 21-30, he calls Job to repent and come to terms with God.

CHAPTERS 23-24: Job’s response to Eliphaz

“Oh that today I would find him.” (23:3)

“Even should he contend against me with his great power, yet, would that he himself might heed me!” (23:6)

“From the commands of his lips I have not departed; the words of his mouth I have treasured in my heart.” (23:12)

In chapter 23, in a long monologue addressed neither to God or his friends, Job releases all his pent-up frustration and despair in a moving protest against the mystery of a God who seems to be inaccessible to his creatures, and who leaves them at a loss to make sense of life’s inconsistencies and tragedies.

In verses 3-7, Job expresses his desire to come to God’s tribunal hoping that God might not only listen to him but answer him. He feels confident that he would be acquitted.

In verses 8-12, Job realizes how hard it is to find God. In verses 13-17, instead of finding light, he only sees more darkness. At this point of the drama, Job is in a deep depression.

CHAPTERS 24-27

As stated in the introduction to the third cycle of speeches, scholars have lots of textual problems with the next four chapters because of misplaced and unfinished fragments.

Chapter 24. Job considers the plight of the poor (vv 2-12) and reflects on the two ways: light and darkness (vv 13-17).

Chapter 25. Bildad reflects on the awesome nature of God.

Chapters 26-27—Job’s final reply. Job begins with a typical taunting of his friends. He rebukes them (vv 1-4), then continues with a description of God’s creation (vv 5-14) in the spirit of Bildad’s third speech. In chapter 27, Job once again maintains his innocence (1:1-6). Verses 7-21 concern the fate of the wicked and seem curiously out of place in the mouth of Job.

CHAPTER 28: Job’s poem on wisdom

“Whence can wisdom be obtained? Solid gold cannot purchase it.” (vv 12-15)

“God knows the way to wisdom.... For he beholds the ends of the earth and sees all that is under the heavens.” (vv 23-24)

This magnificent poem proclaims that Wisdom belongs to God and God alone and cannot be found amongst mortals. It is more precious than silver and gold and cannot be purchased.

CHAPTERS 29-31: Job’s self-justification

“Job took up his theme anew and said: ‘Oh, that I were as in months past, as in the days when God watched over me...as I was in my flourishing days.’” (29:1-4)

“But now they make sport of me....” (30:1)

“Does God not see my ways.... Let God weigh me in the scales of justice; thus he will know my innocence!” (31:4-6)

In these three chapters in which Job seeks to justify himself, he begins with a description of his past happy relationship with God (ch. 29), proceeds to a painful lamentation of his present situation (ch. 30), and ends, looking to his future vindication, with a resounding oath of innocence illustrated by a series of very specific moral behaviors (ch. 31).

Commenting on these three chapters, John Collins writes:

The final speech of Job in chapters 29-31 differs from his earlier outbursts. Up to this point, he had complained that his suffering was unjust, but had not discussed his past conduct. Here he paints a picture

of his prime, “when the Almighty was still with me, when my children were around me” (29:5). By his own account, he was a champion of righteousness: “eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame... a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger” (29:15-16). In return, he enjoyed respect: “young men saw me and withdrew, and the aged rose up and stood” (29:8). Moreover, he thought he had a deal with God: “Then I thought, ‘I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix; my roots spread out to the waters, with the dew all night on my branches’” (29:19-20).

In chapter 30, however, he expresses his profound disillusionment: “But now they make sport of me, those who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock” (30:1). He continues, in chapter 31, to set out what might have been fair punishment for various crimes: “If my heart has been enticed by a woman, and I have lain in wait at my neighbor’s door, then let my wife grind for another, and let other men kneel over her” (31:9-10); or: “if I have raised my hand against the orphan ... then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder” (31:21-22).

But there is considerable irony in all of this. Job is in no position to bargain with God. The fate that has already befallen him is worse than any of his imprecations. Moreover, he comes across as not only righteous but self-righteous. His contempt for the people he would not put with the dogs of his flock is damning. We need not doubt that Job is genuinely righteous in his behavior. His concern for his slaves is grounded in their common humanity: “Did not he who made me in the womb make them?” (31:15). He plays by the rules in life. But he also expects life to keep the rules as he understands them. (p.514)

CHAPTERS 32-37: Elihu’s speeches

Some scholars believe these six chapters were inserted into the book by writers other than Job as they seem to interrupt the flow of the book. After Job’s final speech (chs 29-31), the reader is ready to hear from God and not from the young Elihu. Scholars place these chapters at the end of the book as an appendix.

Out of nowhere, the young Elihu appears on the scene and gives four speeches.

First speech (32:6 to 33:33). After admitting his youthfulness, Elihu states that wisdom does not always come with age. It is a gift of the spirit. Elihu

first addresses the friends of Job and puts them down for failing to convince Job of his wrong position before God (vv 6-14). Verses 15-22 reveal a speaker full of his own ability to communicate effectively.

In chapter 33, Elihu speaks directly to Job and assures him (vv 1-7) that he need not be perturbed at his intervention. He then goes over (vv 8-11) what Job calls his case against God. Job is wrong in this, Elihu says, and wrong especially in suggesting that God refuses to answer him (vv 12-13). God speaks in two ways to men: in warning dreams (vv 14-18) and in the discipline of suffering (vv 19-22). If Job repents, his personal angel will intercede for him with God and he will be restored (vv 23-28). Job ought to pay attention (vv 29-33).

Second speech (Chapter 34). These words are addressed by Elihu to the friends and are little more than an attempt to preach to the converted. Job is not innocent (vv 2-9); God cannot do wrong (vv 10-15) — he is omnipotent and impartial in his justice (vv 16-20); he is omniscient and his judgments are infallible (vv 21-30), whereas Job speaks without knowledge and is a rebel (vv 31-37).

Third speech (Chapter 35). This speech is addressed to Job. Neither a man’s virtues nor his sins can affect God, but they can affect the man himself (vv 2-8). Oppressed people whose cries to God are not answered have fully learned their lesson (vv 9-16).

Fourth speech (Chapters 36-37). The first part of the speech (36:1-21) continues the debate from the previous sections. The fate of good and wicked people is reviewed again. Verses 16-21 are so corrupt that the new American Bible has omitted them. The second part of the speech (36:22 to 37:13) is a hymn of praise to the vastness of the Creator. God’s power, wisdom and knowledge are too much for us to understand. *The Collegeville Commentary* ends its commentary on Elihu’s four speeches in this way:

“Elihu is indeed an intruder on the scene, but nonetheless he is a real transition figure. His earlier remarks look back to the speeches of Job and his friends. Some of this is reviewed and attacked for one last time, without much new being added. The latter speeches look ahead, focusing more and more on God and ending with the description of a storm and a series of questions meant to humble Job. Now God will speak from the storm and with a similar list of questions.” (p.695)