

The Book of Job

Session 21: God's Speech 1 and Job's Response (Job 38-40:5)

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton introduces Yahweh's first speech and Job's subsequent response in Job 38–40:5. Walton explains that God does not address Job's legal oath of innocence or defend His justice, but instead demonstrates the complexity of the cosmos to highlight human ignorance. By distinguishing between order, non-order, and disorder, he shows how God refutes the retribution principle and rejects the idea that justice is the absolute foundation of the cosmic system. Ultimately, Walton emphasizes that while Job is humbled into silence, simple confessed ignorance is not the final goal of the book.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Yahweh Speeches (Job 38-40:5)

- A. The Third Discourse Section
 - 1. Follows the suspense built after Job's Oath of Innocence.
 - 2. Yahweh finally arrives to speak out of the storm/whirlwind.
- B. Characteristics of the Divine Arrival
 - 1. A storm or whirlwind traditionally accompanies God's presence.
 - 2. Implies that God is not pleased with the human discussions.
 - 3. God brings a corrective to everyone's flawed thinking.
- C. Key Omissions in God's Speech
 - 1. God does not respond to Job's Oath of Innocence, proving Job did not force His hand.
 - 2. God does not defend His justice, which is unexpected since all previous speakers based their arguments on justice.

II. Order, Non-order, and Disorder

- A. Definitions of Terminology
 - 1. Non-order:
 - a. Neutral in nature and not inherently evil.
 - b. Distinct from "chaos" which implies a personified, evil force.
 - c. Represents a beginning, unorganized state ready to be ordered (e.g., packed boxes in a new home, or Genesis 1:2).

- 2. Order:
 - a. Brought about by God's creative acts in Genesis.
 - b. God creates through wisdom, which is the pursuit of order.
 - c. Order is optimal but does not completely eliminate non-order (e.g., space outside the garden of Eden, or the sea).
 - d. Paralleled in ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, such as the Egyptian concept of Ma'at.
 - e. Ancient Near Eastern literature, law, and royal inscriptions often celebrate the king bringing order.
 - f. Humans are made in God's image as vice-regents to partner with God in order-bringing.
- 3. Disorder:
 - a. Threats against order that are derived from evil.
 - b. Inherently evil in nature.
- B. Human Misconceptions
 - 1. Job and his friends incorrectly assume all non-order (like suffering) in life is a direct result of disorder and evil actions.
 - 2. This assumption forms the basis of the retribution principle.

III. Refutation of the Retribution Principle

- A. Showing Order within Non-order
 - 1. God highlights areas of the cosmos that humans do not understand.
 - 2. Demonstrates that there is a complex divine order even to things humans perceive as non-ordered.
 - 3. Exposes Job's ignorance of cosmic operations.
- B. Rejecting Justice as the Cosmic Foundation
 - 1. Refutes the simplified formula that reduces the world's operations to a single proposition (the retribution principle).
 - 2. Rejects the idea that justice is the absolute foundation of the cosmic system.
- C. The Illustration of Rain (Job 38:25-27)
 - 1. Under the retribution principle, rain is seen as a tool of justice (bringing floods as judgment, or fecundity as a reward for prosperity).
 - 2. God points out that He cuts a channel for rain to fall on an uninhabited desert where no humans live.
 - 3. This proves that rain does not operate purely within a human-centered justice system, although God can choose to use it that way.

IV. Job's Response and the Limits of Ignorance

- A. Job's Humble Reply (Job 40:3-5)
 - 1. Job declares himself unworthy and unable to answer God's questions.
 - 2. He puts his hand over his mouth and vows to say no more.
 - 3. Acknowledges his inability to correct or contend with the Almighty.
- B. Rhetorical Use of Sarcasm

- 1. The divine speech contains a clear ring of sarcasm (e.g., Job 38:21).
- 2. Since the Yahweh speeches are literary constructs, the narrator puts these words in God's mouth to emphasize human ignorance.
- C. Why Confessed Ignorance is Insufficient
 - 1. Simply confessing ignorance is not the ultimate solution or goal of the Book of Job.
 - 2. The book aims to help readers develop a positive conviction about how to think about God's policies and cosmic order.
 - 3. This prepares the transition to God's second speech, which will move past Job's ignorance to offer positive advice through the figures of Behemoth and Leviathan.