I KNOW THAT MY REDEEMER LIVETH

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There are not many hopeful passages in the speeches of Job, but they play a crucial role in his slow recovery of faith. The first to surface is Job’s poignant wish of 9:32ff. for an arbiter to stand between him and God, who would see to it that the cards were not always stacked against him. The next is the famous passage in 13:15ff., translated in the AV “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” but more accurately in the RV, “Yet will I wait for him”. This is followed in the same speech by 14:13ff., where Job asks God to hide him in Sheol, and goes on “All the days of my service I would wait, till my release should come”. Finally, there are the two visions in 16:18ff. and, the celebrated passage with which we are concerned, in 19:25ff., in which Job calls God his witness and his redeemer.

There are, of course, many authorities who deny that these passages are hopeful. In particular, considering the subject of this paper, they deny that the witness of chapter 16 and the redeemer of chapter 19 are to be equated with God or some heavenly advocate; rather they represent metaphorically Job’s own stated case; his own words alone can speak for him until (if ever) God deigns to respond. Such views, namely that Job cannot be allowed to express hope in the God whom elsewhere he so remorselessly attacks, seem to me too modernistic for an Old Testament book. I mean, if given the opportunity, to engage more fully with them at another time. Meanwhile, I cite as chief evidence for my own view an archetypal Old Testament source.

It is probable that for these hopeful passages, which for a moment here and there pierce through the darkness of Job’s despair and anger, we should look to the model of the Lamentation Psalms, upon which Job draws so richly for the language of complaint and protest which otherwise dominates his rhetoric. There are in most, if not quite all of the Lamentation Psalms little warm sections called declarations of trust where the Psalmist, having made his attacks on God and being about to appeal to him for help, states his confidence
that the God in whom he had lost faith is, as he ought to have realised, fully able to answer his appeal and supply the remedy for his affliction. We cannot but feel the sudden infusion of warmth. A good example is Psalm 102, a prayer of one afflicted, as the heading tells us. In the first part of the psalm the Psalmist’s days are passing away like smoke, he is like a vulture in the wilderness or a lonely bird on the housetop (AV, probably wrongly, but much more poetically, has a pelican and a sparrow), he is taunted and derided by his enemies, and he knows that this is all due to God’s indignation, who has taken him up and thrown him away. But then at verse 12 there is an abrupt change of gear: “But thou, O Lord, art enthroned for ever . . . (16) For the Lord will build up Zion, . . . and he will regard the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their supplication” (RSV). Thereafter comes the appeal: “‘O my God’, I say, ‘take me not hence in the midst of my days, thou whose years endure throughout all generations’” (24) (RSV), and the psalm closes with praise to him, who is always the same and whose years have no end. The Lamentation Psalms have been well defined as “strategies for consolation”, they provide the words whereby the suffering and perplexed worshipper may edge himself gradually into the frame of mind, in which he can be sure in his God again and begin again to praise him; and the sections of trust and confidence are a vital component in such strategies. So it is, I believe, in the speeches of Job; the hopeful passages I mentioned show him resiling momentarily from his continuous onslaughts on God and winning through to the conviction that only God can – and will – restore his reputation and lead him to faith in the divine providence once more; their importance is out of all proportion to their numbers.

To fill in the background to the redeemer passage it is salutary to take a brief look at the witness passage in chapter 16. It is just when in both speeches Job is at his lowest that the light of hope breaks through. In chapter 16 it is of his anguished cries reaching at last to heaven, where they are taken up by a witness who will argue his case for him before God. If you read carefully (RSV), you will see that the witness too can only be God.

O earth, cover not my blood,
and let my cry find no resting place.
Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven,
and he that vouches for me is on high.
My friends scorn me;