Salient Features in the Book of Job

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1 Who Exactly is Job, and Where Does He Come From?

The author of the book of Job has a lot to say. He does not want to lose any time at the start and so tells us immediately that his hero is an eccentric person, in the literal sense, in no fewer than three dimensions: time, space and morals. Job is a celebrity from prehistoric times; he is not even an Israelite, and hence does not live in Palestine but somewhere deep in Transjordania, probably towards the south-east. It is all the more remarkable that Job is a follower of YHWH and that the author immediately praises him for his irreproachable behaviour, in moral and religious terms. Job is apparently the best friend YHWH has on earth, which is illustrated in the very first verse by the four terms (well, three plus one, actually) used to characterise the protagonist.

The author has picked up Job from Ezek. 14. In the second half of that chapter the prophet assures the debauched inhabitants of Jerusalem that their downfall is inevitable, even if they were to appeal to the spotless reputations of Noah, Daniel and Job.1 And this link between the books of Job and Ezekiel is not the only one: the author has let himself be inspired by the prophet for two keywords and a sentence on evil.

The two words are closely linked because they are each other’s anagrams: nicham and chinnam. The first, the verb ‘to console’, contributes to an envelope of narrative prose that in Job encloses the ‘body’ of the book (the huge poem), and has more than one function. The verb links the endings of ch. 2 and ch. 42 via a yes/no contrast, because what Job’s friends in the face of so much pain were unable to offer, consolation for Job (2:11), they do offer after the dénouement in ch. 42, as we are told in the concluding prose section in v. 11. What is more, with the verb nachem the predicate is put in a crucial position, in the very last half-verse, 42:6b. Job is the speaker to whom the author gave the last

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1 In Ezek. 14:14a, 20a the three names are mentioned; in vv.14a and 18a they are called ‘these three men’. The Daniel mentioned in Ezek.14 is not the same Daniel of the eponymous short Bible book (the latest of the OT books). Now that we know Ugaritic, which in its literature has a famous Daniʾilu figure, we may suspect that the name Daniel was already prestigious many centuries earlier.
word (of poetry), the short poem 42:2–6. How significant this is, and how all official Bible translations get it hopelessly wrong here, will be discussed below.

Then we have the adverb *chinnam* from Ezekiel. In the book of Job it has the effect of a bomb: this is the fatal word ‘for naught’ spoken by the Adversary in the divine council in 1:9, who in this way casts suspicion on Job’s piety. Thanks to God’s allowing this angel on duty to do his destructive work towards Job, this one word triggers the plot that carries the entire book and simply coincides with a wager that requires a result. Will Job break or not?

In the last two verses of Ezek. 14 the anagrammatic duo is combined with words we should not forget when we read Job 42:11. ‘You will be consoled for the disaster that I brought on Jerusalem,’ says Ezek. 14:22b. The author of Job uses the same words to put the blame for Job’s horrific suffering where it belongs. In 42:11 he betrays much of his own point of view by referring to the actor by his proper name; this person is the responsible subject of the adjectival clause that closes v. 11: the friends ‘comforted him for all the misfortune that YHWH had brought upon him.’

The adverb *chinnam* appears four times in the book of Job, and reverses a literary articulation that often occurs in Job: the 3 + 1 pattern. In the prose introduction, ‘for naught’ is the seed of the plot, as we saw; after that it reappears three times in the debate between Job and his three friends. Each of these instances is spoken by a different character, but they have a distinctive aspect in common: every time the speaker gives the adverb an emotional—or even vicious—twist. In 2:3 ‘for naught’ occurs in a reproach to the Adversary, spoken by his master. Shortly after the theft of Job’s cattle and the death of his children God truly seems to regret the mandate he gave his angel. His words come uncannily close to shirking responsibility. In 9:17 it is Job himself who speaks; he expresses the fear (and we readers consider this all too understandable) that God will ‘wound me much for no reason’ in a strophe (9:16–18) about the immense pressure God exerts. The fourth occurrence of *chinnam* is outright vicious and comes in Elifaz’s last contribution, in 22:6. During three strophes (22:2–9) this friend manages to accuse Job of exploiting, neglecting and abusing the weakest in society. Where does he get that from? It is the ultimate consequence of the traditional theodicy with which the friends attack Job. This doctrine of symmetrical retaliation—rewards to the good, punishment to the bad—produces a three-step interpretation: your suffering, Job, shows the hand of God (1), his intervention means punishment (2), and because God is a righteous God, this punishment naturally presupposes (3) that you have

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2 This Niphʿal of *nicham*, followed by the preposition ‘al, we will be needing for Job 42:6b.