Abigail Pelham


Pelham’s study of the Book of Job begins with a “Prologue” in which she sketches some familiar critiques of the historical critical method in biblical studies, with its strong concern for authors and recovering their original meanings. Pelham, however, wants to give more space to readers as those who author meanings of the texts they read. The author of the text, she contends, and “the scholar whose writing is inspired by that author” in some sense “meet as equals” (p. 15). She acknowledges the inevitability of multiple readings of texts and “the impossibility of being conclusively ‘right’ about the book of Job” (p. 19). Nonetheless she is not content to concede that all interpretations are created completely equal, and she candidly acknowledges that she in fact wants to be “right” about Job; that is, she wants to put forth a compelling reading of the book that will convince others (p. 23). In carrying out her work she subsequently regards the/her reading of Job as providing the interpreter with “a space for thinking in” (p. 17; italics original). The interpretive “thinking” Pelham offers reveals her strong literary sensibility and close attention to the text of Job. The result is a reading of Job that is in fact quite compelling, even if not all readers of her text will be equally convinced by all aspects of her arguments.

Pelham’s study seems largely motivated by the well-known problem of the epilogue of Job. How is one to understand the world Job inhabits at end of this book (where Job is secure, prosperous, etc.), which is so very close to the world of the book’s beginning, when the better part of thirty-nine chapters in between the prologue and the epilogue seemed intent on upending Job’s world in Job 1? For Pelham, after reading through Job, the epilogue evokes an avalanche of questions – twenty-three printed lines of questions, to be precise – and given not once (pp. 30–31) but twice (pp. 198–99)!

Pelham is conversant with a range of Job scholarship, particularly the work of Clines and Newsom. For Pelham, both writers offer important ways of understanding the problematic Joban epilogue. Neither, however, takes “enough note of the transformation that the epilogue works upon the book” (p. 34). To pursue her own solutions to this issue, Pelham proposes first reading Job “forwards,” and then, upon arriving at the book’s problematic final verses, reading “backwards.” Pelham believes such a re-reading will produce more clarity as to how earlier sections of the book (and the epilogue itself) can be understood in light of the book’s ending.

Pelham’s reading proceeds largely by analyzing relationships between persons (Chapter Two), time (Chapter Three), and space (Chapter Four)
throughout Job. Although some of what Pelham says will sound familiar to wisdom scholars – for example, Job’s paternalistic, patriarchal view of the social order; the divine rejection of anthropocentric perspectives; etc. – the analytical focus (relationships, time, space) is nonetheless helpful. Pelham’s study offers important, nuanced observations of much of Job – for example, the way the prologue’s rhetoric constructs Job’s “world-as-it-ought-to-be” and how the divine speeches construe God’s “world-as-it-is.” In Job’s world, Job (representing the righteous) stands at the center and in superior relationship to others. This world is also characterized by a lack of “change” (e.g., in Job’s privileged social relations) and by images that situate Job and the righteous in “inside” spaces (p. 138). The wicked have little place in this world (certainly no central place), and are cast out of it into what Pelham calls an “anti-world” (p. 97) of change (suffering most notably the change of “death”). The trials Job undergoes destroy his “world-as-it-ought-to-be,” and Job demands, essentially, that the divine restore it because Job believes his idea of how the world ought to be is also the divine’s idea of how it ought to be. However, in God’s world, humans are not imagined to be at the center. They occupy no special relationship in or with the rest of God’s wild creation. In God’s world all exists for its own sake and enjoys its own freedom. God even works positive change on the “outer spaces” of the wilderness by sending rain, thus converting it to inner space (Job 38:25–27), though one that is not designated for humans (pp. 178–79).

The real crux of Pelham’s argument comes in Chapter Five. Here she proposes an ingenious solution to the problem of the epilogue. Pelham takes her cue from the divine’s response to Job, which seems to imply that the deity believes Job to be a rival creator, a kind of chaos monster. When reading Job “forwards,” however, Job’s status as a rival creator is not fully evident. Although in a sense Job “created” the world of the prologue, he certainly did not do so in the way that Adonai’s myth-infused rhetoric in the divine speeches seems to assume he did. Yet by reading the book “backwards,” Pelham discovers more evidence for Job as rival creator who, like the Sea and Leviathan, remains outside of the divine creator’s ability, or even desire, to overcome or control completely.

For Pelham, reading the text backwards reveals more fully that Job has indeed created his own world in the prologue, but this creation, she contends, is in the form of a “daydream” (p. 208). Job imagines himself inside and at the center of a world without change. This Joban world, of course, is not identical to God’s world-as-it-is, that non-anthropocentric world, free even from the divine’s complete control. Nonetheless one can recognize Job’s world as a rival creation. For Pelham, Job 3 is not Job’s simple invocation of a creation myth or a cursing of the created order or even his despondent cry. Rather it is the place