Book Reviews

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Norman C. Habel


Norman C. Habel’s *Finding Wisdom in Nature: An Eco-Wisdom Reading of the Book of Job*, volume 4 of The Earth Bible Commentary series spearheaded by Habel, aims to move beyond traditionally anthropocentric readings of Job and to identify with Earth “as a presence or voice in the text” (p. 1). Sensitive to our present ecological crisis, Habel contends that Job’s recurring emphasis on the design, or wisdom, of the cosmos may hold the key to Job’s transformation and to the divine reality.

Over twenty chapters, Habel applies an “eco-wisdom” hermeneutic to major sections of the book of Job, calling for a “radical change of posture both in relation to Earth as a subject in the text and also our relation to Earth as readers” (p. 2). Drawing on the example of feminist biblical scholars, he advocates an intentional technique of retrieval to recover the perspective of the natural world suppressed in the book of Job and by its interpreters. To achieve such counter-readings, Habel explicates the major ecological issues and their implications for his chosen passage(s) and then ends each chapter with a poetic meditation spoken by “The Voice of Earth.”

To further situate his argument for an eco-wisdom reading of Job, Habel provides a brief intertextual study of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible as “the cosmic blueprint for the universe” (p. 11) that includes cosmological, innate, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. He also draws substantially on his own 1985 commentary on Job, expanding upon his original contention that Job 28’s meditation on wisdom forms the defining moment in Job’s “u-shaped” plot structure (p. 16). Where many interpreters have viewed Job 28 as irrelevant to Job’s
pursuit of justice, Habel understands it as a foreshadowing of the reorientation of Job’s worldview in the whirlwind in Job 38-41. Ostensibly spoken by the narrator, Job 28 offers up a celebration of the natural world as the principle “way” (derek) and hidden “place” (maqom) of wisdom. Here the narrator reveals that wisdom is not an attribute of God; rather it is God’s discovery of the wisdom of nature that enabled the creation of the cosmos.

Though Job, a model Earth being according to Habel, is thought to identify favorably with Earth, God’s answer to Job from the whirlwind forms the basis for Job’s full eco-conversion. In the author’s reading, God redirects Job’s focus from righteousness to wisdom, “challeng[ing] Job to be a true scientist and explore the wisdom innate in the domains of the universe” (p. 97). Their journey through the cosmos (mirroring the expedition of the narrator in Job 28) reveals a universe governed by an intrinsic intelligence that includes even the Divine in its design. Where Job’s friends repeatedly seek to confirm their preconceived beliefs about God’s retributive system of justice through observations from nature, Job develops a “cosmic consciousness” as he encounters the vast and mysterious nature of creation (p. 100). Behemoth and Leviathan are not symbolic of God’s control over chaos as conventionally thought; rather they are emblematic of the extraordinary splendor of God’s creative purview. Having seen the Divine in this cosmic design (Job 42:5), Job emerges transformed and liberated, abandoning the retributive worldview and his “anthropocentric” pursuit of justice (p. 117).

Habel’s work has numerous exegetical merits (his arguments regarding Job 28 being the most persuasive). However, his postulation of Job’s “eco-conversion” is no more or less convincing than previous arguments for Job’s transformation in the whirlwind. A narrative-critical approach more responsive to the contradictions, ambiguities, and silences in characterization, language, and plot may have afforded Habel a richer, if less programmatic, analysis. Habel assumes, for example, that the title character in the Joban drama is both stable and reliable. Though society’s outcasts are said to mock Job’s downfall (Job 30:1-14), Habel accepts Job’s self-characterization as a righteous man. Should we take Job’s devotion to the human community at face value? Ought we assume a parallel commitment to Earth and its care? After his cosmic vision, does he maintain these commitments or arrive at an altogether different (perhaps apathetic?) attitude toward creation? While Habel assumes that the narrator’s use of wisdom terminology (raʿaʿ, “to see” or “to observe”) to describe Job’s change in perspective is indicative of an authentic eco-conversion (p. 113; cf. Job 42:5), one could postulate other narrative possibilities to explain Job’s decision to withdraw his case against God.

Even more debatable is Habel’s reading of the divine character, whom he seems to characterize differently at different points to suit his interpretive