GOD'S ANSWER TO JOB

by

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To Ruth Stadtler

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God's answer to Job (chs. xxxviii-xli) is, at best, enigmatic. It seems to raise problems instead of solving them. Placed as it is after Elihu's speeches, and not directly following the dialogues of Job and his friends, how does it relate to those cycles of arguments and counterarguments? In what way is the answer relevant to Job's problems as he himself defines them within the main body of the book? Does it provide a satisfying solution? Conversely, in what way—if at all—does Job's reply to God's speeches clarify God's intent? Presumably, God's words should constitute the climax to the book as a whole, and elaborate the religious philosophy of the author who composed these chapters.

In order to answer these preliminary questions we must first consider the following points:

a. What are Job's problems, as he himself sees them? They can be schematically divided into three main categories. They are, first and foremost, the practical hardships of which we hear from the prose narrative (chs. i-ii) onwards: Job suffers physically, economically, socially, and emotionally. On the next level, and intertwined with the mundane ones, his problems are spiritual-religious and intellectual. Job interprets his undeserved misfortune as a sign of religious isolation, of disharmony with and removal from God. Finally, he suffers from a strong sense of moral injustice. Throughout his complaints he repeats his accusations that God is remote and unforgiving, and that he has done him a great injustice, for Job feels that he does not deserve this excessive measure of suffering. Therefore Job turns himself into an example of the inapplicability of the traditional theory of reward and punishment, a theory that advocates both divine providence and divine justice. All three aspects are summarized in Job's final plea, chs. xxix-xxxi.
b. The friends as well as Elihu are champions of the conventional theory of divine retribution which Job contests. Their words offer him no help. The friends do not supply a convincing solution to Job’s crisis or intellectual search, nor to his severe practical hardships. Neither does Elihu satisfy Job’s emotional, spiritual, or intellectual and philosophical quest. The alternatives Elihu suggests—that God reveals himself in dreams and in the suffering he inflicts upon human beings, presumably justly—are too light to be taken seriously.

c. God’s answer is divided into two parts by Job’s first retort (xI 3-5). How do the two parts differ from or complement one another, when we take aspects of meaning, significance, subject matter, and emphasis into account? Could they have originally been a single speech? Are both completely necessary? Are the two replies attributed to Job (xI 3-5 and xlii 1-6) authentic? Does the first one necessitate an additional divine response? Does Job’s second reply show internal development which is the result of hearing God’s second speech (xI 6 to ch. xlii)? In other words, is Job’s second retort different from the first one, a logical sequel to God’s second answer, or is it a mere doublet?

Attempts to solve the enigma—to pin-point and understand the import and religious significance of God’s answer and, through it, of the book as a whole—are numerous and varied. The purpose of the present article is neither to repeat those attempts nor to argue with them, but to suggest another tentative interpretation. A list of representative, as well as more esoteric, views is supplied below 1).

The debt to all commentators on Job is gratefully acknowledged. However, this article was written because most comments I have come across seemed incomplete, not satisfying in the sense that they