JOB IV 12-21: IS IT ELIPHAZ’S VISION?

by

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The vision in the first speech of Eliphaz is mysterious in its appearance and puzzling in its message. Tension and expectations entice the listener, for it purports to give some sort of supernatural insight into the problem of Job. Unfortunately, the vision did not solve the dilemma for everyone, for other more traditional and sometimes contradictory explanations were proposed by other speakers. Although the vision was quoted again in Eliphaz’s second speech in xv 14-16 and in a later speech attributed to Bildad in xxv 4-6, interpreters have had difficulty integrating this vision into the flow of the arguments between Job and his comforters. Since this vision is repeated three times and treats the central issue of the book, a person’s righteousness before God, it must have an important role in the overall development of the theological argument of the book.

Although almost all commentators except Tur-Sinai and Ginsberg have taken his to be Eliphaz’s vision, there are a number of reasons why this interpretation is problematic. First, if this is a divine revelation to Eliphaz which solves the riddle of Job’s suffering, why is Eliphaz condemned by God at the end of the dialogue in xlii 7? Should we conclude that this was a false vision inspired by “the Satan” of the prologue? Although no one takes this position, Andersen concludes that “Eliphaz is following a path of truth that will lead him into a great error” in iv 17-18. This suggests that the vision was either misunderstood or misapplied, or it was a half truth. Westermann claims that it promotes a “worthless

1 N. H. Tur-Sinai, The Book of Job — A New Commentary (Jerusalem, 1957), and H. L. Ginsberg, “Job the patient and Job the impatient”, SVT 17 (1968), pp. 98-107, reject this view.
argument” because the sinfulness of all mankind does not explain the cause of Job’s suffering.²

Secondly, if the central thesis of the vision is that no person can be just before God (iv 17), why do the friends consistently maintain the theological view that the righteous never perish (iv 7), that God judges the sinner and blesses the righteous (v 17, viii 3-6, 20, xi 13-20, xxii 21-9)?³ The friends seem to abandon the theology of the vision and conclude that a righteous person can be just before God and that God does not pervert justice (viii 3-7). If Job will only confess his evil, God will reward him and bless his latter days (viii 5-7). These questions cause one to wonder if Eliphaz actually received this vision. It might be more logical to conclude that he quoted this vision for the purpose of refuting it.

In the light of these difficulties, this study will: (a) look for references to a terrifying dream or a night vision in the rest of the book to see if these might indicate whether Eliphaz or someone else had the vision; (b) examine the literary indications that Eliphaz is quoting someone else’s vision in order to refute it; and (c) compare the theology of the vision to the speeches of Job and the friends to see who accepts its theological position.

References to the vision

Immediately after the vision report in iv 12-21 Eliphaz warns Job concerning the futility of calling on the holy ones to receive an answer to his problems (v 1). Instead, Eliphaz, placing himself in Job’s shoes for the moment, piously claims: “As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my charge” (v 8).⁴ This advice seems incongruous in the mouth of Eliphaz if the vision in iv 12-21 was given to Eliphaz by a spirit or angelic being (iv 15).

Why would Eliphaz think that Job would want to appeal to the holy

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³ Although there is progression and movement in the speeches of the friends, none of them gives up the view that righteous people who confess their sins can be just before God and will receive his blessing.