THE STRUCTURE AND MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF JOB

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No theological student, on being asked, "What is the book of Job about?" will hesitate long over the answer. "It is about the problem of suffering." This is indeed the orthodox answer...

The next question follows naturally. If the book is about the problem of suffering, what solution does it suggest? ...

There can be no doubt where the dramatic climax of the book does lie. It lies in the speeches of Yahweh in Chapters 38-41. This remains true even if, as a number of sober scholars do, we reject the second of the speeches as no part of the original work. We can only find the climax of the book elsewhere than in the divine speeches (or speech) if we are prepared to wield the critical scalpel so mercilessly as to make the work unrecognizable.

What then of the speeches of Yahweh? They speak of hippopotamuses and ostriches and whales, and of the breeding propensities of wild goats. They expatiate eloquently on meteorology and astronomy and cosmology, and on sundry other interesting matters. They are nothing if not discursive. But they never once mention the problem of suffering.¹

With these words Henry McKeating strikes a virtual mortal blow at the heart of the standard approach to the message of the book of Job, endorsed in one form or another, by nearly every commentator.² Even Westermann, who denies that Job is about the problem of suffering, affirms that it is about suffering.³ Even if this

standard approach to Job’s message is cast in the form of a discussion of theodicy (i.e., how can a just God allow a righteous person to suffer?), it nevertheless views the discussion of human suffering as the central concern of the book.

But what of McKeating’s observation? Satan (ii 5), Job’s wife (ii 9), Job himself, his three friends, and Elihu are all concerned in one way or another about Job’s suffering. But the central, and largely absent, character in the book—God—is not. He never once mentions Job’s suffering or suggests that he is even concerned about it (as he is about Job’s death, ii 6). He makes no attempt to justify his decision to allow Job to suffer. This would suggest that Job’s suffering is merely a foil for a larger issue. But how do we go about discovering what that issue is?

The Structure of Job:
Problems in viewing the books as a treatise on the problem of suffering

Perhaps we need to re-examine the structure of the book of Job. Like the traditional view of the book’s message, there is a fairly standard view of the book’s structure, along the following lines:5

I. Prose prologue (i 1-ii 14)
II. Job’s complaint (iii 1-24)
III. The speeches of Job and his friends in three cycles (iv 1-xxvii 22)
   A. First Cycle (Eliphaz, Job, Bildad, Job, Zophar, Job, iv 1-xiv 22)
   B. Second Cycle (Eliphaz, Job, Bildad, Job, Zophar, Job, xv 1-xxi 34)
   C. Third Cycle (Eliphaz, Job, Bildad, Job, Job, xxii 1-xxvii 23)
IV. A wisdom poem (xxviii 1-26)
V. Job’s complaint (xxix 1-xxxii 41)

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4 Though God is the subject of nearly every conversation, he himself appears only in i 6-12, ii 1-6, and xxxviii 1-xxii 6.