

Open Access

David H. Nikkel*

The Wildness of Creation: An Interpretation of the Voice from the Whirlwind in Job

DOI 10.1515/opth-2016-0063

Received July 6, 2016; accepted August 8, 2016

Abstract: The significance of God’s speaking through the voice from the whirlwind and Job’s subsequent repentance has often been interpreted as a scolding by God for questioning divine providence and/or as the assertion of inscrutable mystery. This paper offers an alternative hermeneutics consonant with an open and relational understanding of the nature of God, arguing that Job can best be interpreted as a strong endorsement of the unpredictability and wildness of nature, as God grants creation the freedom to act according to its own integrity. This argument compares Elihu’s speech, which asserts divine complete control of nature, with the voice from the whirlwind that asserts the wildness of rain and ice, of various animals, and of the Behemoth and Leviathan, these latter associated with chaos. It concludes that Job, in experiencing God in the wildness of the whirlwind, finds a new model of divine agency wherein God graces creation with freedom.

Keywords: Behemoth, divine governance, Elihu, freedom, Job, Leviathan, whirlwind, wilderness, wildness

The significance of God’s speaking through the voice from the whirlwind (chapters 38-41) and Job’s subsequent repentance has often been interpreted as a scolding by God for questioning God and divine providence and/or as the assertion of the inscrutable mystery of divine agency given the existence of evil and suffering. This paper proffers an alternative hermeneutics for this key passage from the book of Job consonant with an open and relational understanding of the nature of God. I will write more about this interpretation shortly. First I will summarize various interpretations offered in the scholarly literature to this point. Norman C. Habel in his influential, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, distinguishes four types of interpretation. The first two fit into the common scolding and/or acceptance of mystery models: 1) Capitulation or Abasement. This type entails complete and utter surrender to the will of God.¹ 2) Reconciliation. Job confesses his ignorance about divine governance, yet retains his dignity and integrity. But Job gains “new knowledge” about divine governance: “He knows at least that the design of God is not governed by a necessary law of reward and retribution. God’s wisdom is of a higher order and remains a mystery.”² Elmer Smick’s version of reconciliation insists “that God is Lord also of the moral order which includes the justice aspect of *mispat*,”³ even though the voice from the whirlwind offers no details as to how God accomplishes this.

The final two types move in an opposite direction from the first two, judging that Job rejects the divine declarations from the whirlwind: 3) Comic irony. Speaking tongue-in-cheek, Job mollifies God, now regarded as “a blind force and a blustering orator who is threatened by Job’s insights.”⁴ David A. Robertson

1 Habel, *Book of Job*, 577.

2 Ibid., 577, 579.

3 Smick, “Semeiological Interpretation,” 147.

4 Habel, *Book of Job*, 577.

*Corresponding author: David H. Nikkel, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, USA, E-mail: david.nikkel@uncp.edu

and William Whedbee serve as exemplars of this type.⁵ 4) Defiance. Heroic Job will no longer associate with a God he views as “unjust, unfeeling, and cruel.”⁶ James Curtis exemplifies this last type.⁷ These latter two interpretations appear to be a reaction or over-reaction to overly pious interpretations.

More recently, J. Randall O’Brien has identified seven possible interpretations of the voice from the whirlwind.⁸ In my judgment, however, six of these represent variations on or specifications of the four types Habel identifies, rather than any genuinely new type: “acquiescence” corresponds to capitulation or abasement, three represent versions of reconciliation, while “irony” obviously enough covers comic irony and/or defiance. Finally, the seventh possibility simply notes “the creative dissonance of the text,” “thereby keeping the question open.” The variation on reconciliation with the most potential involves the transformation of Job “by the power and presence of Yahweh,” who undergoes “a change of heart and attitude.” I would further specify this variation by emphasizing Job’s hearing of the voice as a religious experience, that is, a direct encounter with God: Though Job learns nothing specific about divine governance, through his intimate experience of God he trusts divine benevolence in governing the world and thus can live with the mystery. While I find this to be the most satisfactory version of a traditional interpretation, it obviously fails to offer any knowledge on the “how” of divine governance. Moreover, it may provide small comfort for those who cannot claim a comparable religious experience.

Frederick L. Downing for his part attempts “to show some of the movements in contemporary criticism relative to the interpretation of . . . Job.”⁹ Specifically, he focuses on language and a “poetics of experience,” informed by Paul Ricoeur, Northrop Frye, and Walter Brueggemann’s respective hermeneutical, narrative, and sociological approaches to the language of the book of Job.¹⁰ Yet the upshot of Downing’s analysis is that all three scholars interpret Job rather traditionally as the “restoration” of Job’s faith despite the lack of any answer to “the problem of theodicy.”¹¹

I now commence my interpretation, as an alternative to perhaps too pious interpretations as well as to reactions to the same, all of which end up emphasizing the negative—either by denying any positive knowledge about divine governance or by judging God as evil. Instead, this interpretation advances something positive and substantive about the nature of the divine in relation to the world. It proposes the interpretation of Job 38-41 as an endorsement of the unpredictability and wildness of nature, as God grants creation the freedom to act according to its own integrity. Comparing part of Elihu’s speech (chapters 36-37) to God’s speech, which immediately follows Elihu’s, proves instructive. While Elihu’s speech and the sections from the whirlwind about the Behemoth and Leviathan must be acknowledged as additions to the book of Job, my interpretation will consider the final redaction as a whole in its own right.

A preliminary point for this comparison is that Elihu asserts the complete inscrutability of God (36:25-36, 37:23). Key verses conveying that inscrutability consist of verse 26: “Surely God is great, and we do not know him; the number of his years is unsearchable”; verse 29: “Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds, the thunderings of his pavilion?”; and verse 23a: “The Almighty (Hebrew: *Shaddai*)—we cannot find him” (NRSV; all future biblical citations will be from the same translation). That both speeches concern God’s role in ordaining nature is the most significant point of comparison. Elihu for his part emphasizes divine control of everything in nature:

For he draws up the drops of water; he distills his mist in rain
which the skies pour down and drop upon mortals abundantly (36:27-28).
See, he scatters his lightning around him and covers the roots of the sea.
For by these he governs peoples; he gives food in abundance.
He covers his hands with the lightning, and commands it to strike the mark (36: 30-31).

⁵ Robertson, *Old Testament and Literary Critic*; Whedbee, “Comedy of Job,” 139.

⁶ Habel, *Book of Job*, 577-78.

⁷ Curtis, “On Job’s Response,” 497-511.

⁸ O’Brien, “World, Winds, and Whirlwinds,” 154-55.

⁹ Downing, “Voices from the Whirlwind,” 391.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 392-402.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 401.

Note well this last verse. His theme of total control continues in chapter 37:

He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning.
They turn round and round by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them
on the face of the habitable world.
Whether for correction, or for his land, or for love, he causes it to happen (37:11-13).

Elihu's reference to God's governing peoples and this last verse citing "correction" or "love" make clear that God's purposes in controlling nature are not limited to making nature run smoothly for the physical needs of creatures but also to respond to human moral and religious behavior, indeed, to punish or reward such behavior.

Notably, parts of Elihu's speech parallel the voice from the whirlwind (36:27-37:18). Indeed in verses 15-18, Elihu questions Job in the manner that God will: "Do you know?" (twice) and "Can you?" In light of the conclusion of the book of Job, where God indicates that Job's accusers have spoken falsely, Elihu appears to be presumptuous in assuming the role of God in questioning Job. While human moral freedom is assumed by Elihu, God seemingly makes this the best of all possible worlds given that assumption. By controlling nature and all things not determined by human decisions, God always saves the righteous who are unjustly afflicted, warns those committing evil to repent and then rewards them if they do, and punishes the wicked. Elihu's model of divine agency thus entails control of every detail in nature and every detail in human affairs save moral decisions.

Rather than speaking of nature as under control, the voice from the whirlwind emphasizes the freedom, indeed the wildness, of nature: 1) water in the forms of snow, rain, and ice: "Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?" (38:28-29). 2) the wild donkey: "Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, to which I have given the steppe for its home, the salt land for its dwelling place?" (39:5-8). The answer would seem to be that God has given freedom to the donkey. In any case, the animal is wild and free. Verses 7-8 go on to declare that the donkey will not serve, will not be controlled by humans. 3) Likewise, the wild ox will not serve humans (38:9-12). 4) the ostrich whose "wings flap wildly" (38:13) and who "laughs at the horse and rider" (38:18b); the fate of the next generation of ostriches appears to be left to chance rather than being under anyone's control, as the ostrich "leaves its eggs to the earth" (38:14), even though "a wild animal may trample them" (38:15). 5) the horse who "leap(s) like the locust," whose "majestic snorting is terrible" and who "paws violently, exults mightily" and "laughs at fear" (38:20-22a). Notice how often "wildness" is cited by the voice from the whirlwind.

As alluded to above, biblical scholars recognize the second time the voice speaks as a later addition, given its repetition of language from the first time as if there had been no previous speaking. Yet its addition to the final redaction coheres well with the book's overall perspective. For the second round by the voice even more strongly highlights the wildness of nature, taking things to a higher—or lower—level, as it expounds at length upon (semi)mythical creatures associated with chaos, the Behemoth (40:15-29) and, even more so, Leviathan (41:1-34). The voice describes the former, large and powerful (40:16-18), as "the first great acts of God—only its maker can approach it with the sword" (40:19). It appears to defy—or even revel—in chaos: "Even if the river is turbulent, it is not frightened; it is confident though Jordan rushes against its mouth" (40:23). Of course, it defies any human control: "Can one take it with hooks or pierce its nose with a snare?" (40:24). Additionally, the voice takes the opportunity to reference the wildness of other animals: "For the mountains yield food for it where all the wild animals play" (40:20). Smirk suggests that Behemoth serves as a cosmic evil power that God will eventually defeat.¹² However, such an interpretation seems to contravene its creation as a great act of God. Furthermore, nothing in the passage indicates a conflict between Behemoth and God.

The latter, the sea monster, a common figure in ancient mythology, is intimately associated with the primordial waters of chaos, still present in creation, readily manifest through the ocean. Thus, the list

¹² Smick, "Semeiological Interpretation," 147-48.

of God's particular creations comes full circle, beginning and ending with watery ones (snow, rain, and ice being the first [38:22-30]). The section on Leviathan begins with many verses concerning the inability of humans—or even gods—to control it (41:1-11). It continues by expounding upon its size, strength, and frightfulness (41:12-25). Several verses highlight its awesome and frightening nature: “There is terror all around its teeth” (41:14b); “From its mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap out. Out of its nostrils comes smoke as from a boiling pot and burning rushes. Its breath kindles coals, and a flame comes out of its mouth. In its neck abides strength and terror dances before it” (41:19-22). Even superhuman beings feel fear: “When it raises itself up the gods are afraid” (41:25a). The theme of inability to control it then returns, now in the third person rather than the second (41:26-30). Finally, this creature associated with watery chaos and the ocean makes the sea chaotic: “It makes the deep boil like a pot; it makes the sea like a pot of ointment. It leaves a shining wake behind it; one would think the deep to be white-haired” (41:31-32). The voice concludes its ruminations on Leviathan with these words: “it is king over all that are proud” (40:34b). Even more strongly than with Behemoth, Smirk interprets Leviathan here as an evil power opposing God.¹³ Yet the passage does not state such opposition. Instead it concludes by suggesting that Leviathan serves a divine purpose by humbling the prideful. Indeed, it brings low those who are so proud as to think they can control the chaos of creation.

A skeptic of this interpretation might counter that, though the voice clearly indicates that nature cannot be controlled by Job and other humans, this fact allows that God may exercise complete control. Yet given the overall context, I would counter that the absence of an explicit assertion of total control by God carries significant weight. Elihu—presuming to speak for God—has just asserted complete divine control of every detail of nature. While the whole tenor of the book weighs against tit-for-tat reward and punishment, one could still maintain God's complete control of nature in order to maintain morality and justice in a mysterious way unknown to humans. In whatever form, however, Yahweh chooses not to affirm absolute control. This lack of affirmation has two facets:

1. God declines the opportunity to explicitly state in any fashion that Elihu has just spoken correctly about God and divine governance. The closest the voice comes to suggesting control over events in order to punish the wicked occurs in verses where God ironically invites Job to assume possible divine characteristics in order to be in a position to judge God: “Look on all who are proud, and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand. Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below” (40:12-13). To interpret these as definitive attributes of God overlooks the indirect and hypothetical nature of God's speech here. Furthermore, if we take this passage as affirming the capability or power of God to summarily harm or kill the wicked, this is not equivalent to asserting that divine governance usually or ever actually involves intervening in or detailed control of the course of events in order to achieve such a result.
2. God as the voice of the whirlwind in chapters 38 through 41 never asserts complete control of creation. At the beginning, God speaks of setting up the basic boundaries and parameters of creation (38:4-21). But God never claims to control the details of the unfolding of creation. This whole section seems to be quite compatible with a general providence through the structure and integrity of nature, while eschewing particular providence, at least in the sense of controlling the details of creation to reward virtue and punish vice. Delving into two particular verses, somewhat speculatively I confess, God's query whether the rain has a father or whether the ice in effect has a mother (38:28-29) may be significant. That is, God may be denying the kind of control that a father or mother typically has over their children. Speaking of control, some commentators have claimed that the point of invoking the two monsters of chaos is to highlight that, though Behemoth and Leviathan are not under human control, God totally controls (the beasts of) chaos. I would ask, though, where does God ever assert such control? In 40:19 the voice says, “It [Behemoth] is the first of the great acts of God—only its Maker can approach it with the sword.” This verse asserts that God could kill Behemoth, if God so chose. But nowhere in Job 40-41 can we find the voice declaring that these creatures of chaos are fully controlled, which I find be very revealing. Obviously, chaos and its manifestations are not allowed completely free rein to destroy creation.

¹³ Ibid.

However, that hardly entails total control by God. Moreover, following Job's repentance, as alluded to above, God declares that Job's three friends "have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7). While God's pronouncement against Job's friends leaves out the upstart Elihu who believes he can do a better job of defending God than they, Elihu makes the same mistake as Job's friends and thereby fails to say "what is right" when he says that God controls every detail of nature in warning, correcting, and punishing those who do the morally wrong and in rewarding those who do the morally right.

In contrast, despite his repentance, Job had spoken rightly, precisely in rejecting the notion that God kept a strict moral accounting by controlling who suffered and who prospered. Job's repentance concerned his presumption that he knew how God was supposed to ordain creation, such that he, a righteous person, would not suffer. Therefore, though he had come to doubt that God was correctly following the model, he began with the very same model of divine agency as did Elihu and the three friends. That his suffering did not square with that model is the root and impetus of his anguished appeals to and rebukes of God—and for Job this anguish was worse than his physical or other psychological pain. I take it that a—indeed, the—primary purpose of the poet and of the final redactor of the book of Job is to discredit the model that all evil can be explained as just punishment administered by God for some sin committed by the sufferer in the recent or long distance, or by someone in the sufferer's family. Whatever contortions are made to try to make sense of this model just do not succeed. (Of course, biblical scholars generally agree that Job was written after the Babylonian exile, as the writer of Job and other parts of the Hebrew Bible could not judge the suffering Judah had endured as commensurate with its transgressions.)

In abandoning that model, however, I propose that Job is not left with total inscrutability. My interpretation runs counter to the conclusion of many commentators, namely, that we are left with pure mystery as to why innocent and good people suffer. I suggest, however, that these commentators do not adequately account for the fact that the voice spends what become numbered as four chapters describing nature and its workings. The sheer length appears to be overkill, if its purpose is only to demonstrate that Job, not in the position of being the creator of the world, controls little in nature and cannot know or judge the specifics of divine governance. If what happens in nature and creation is total inscrutability or complete mystery, why bother with all that verbiage? Why not leave it at a simple putdown of Job for speaking of things without knowledge and ending it with a few verses declaring that humans will never know anything about the workings of nature? On the contrary, I believe that Job learns a lot about divine governance of creation, as he previously had just heard about God but now in some sense sees God. Job grants that he does not know the details of how God ordains nature. Nevertheless, he has learned a general principle of divine ordination. Through his experience of God in the whirlwind, Job now has a different model, one that involves an element of unpredictability, chance, wildness, freedom, and chaos that even God does not totally control. This model takes seriously that the voice's long discourse on nature keeps returning to the wildness of creation—that it is not or cannot be completely governed, completely ordered. The Hebrew words usually translated as "wilderness" in English actually represent three different words: *arabah*, *midbar*, and *sadeh*. The common meaning these words share is that of a natural place which humans do not inhabit and only occasionally enter. I would further submit that these passages about the wildness of nature and creation are intended to convey a sense of beauty and wonder—and that they succeed in that purpose. I will include a note about wonder in my final paragraph below.

Before concluding my argument for the voice from the whirlwind as supporting freedom in creation, I will engage an interpretation from Smirk who finds in the words of the voice only support for God's freedom: "the sovereign freedom of the Creator and Sustainer" is not bound by our expectations but instead produces "natural paradoxes."¹⁴ Along these lines Smirk detects a "whimsical note" in the ostrich, "with legs that can tear open a lion, that has wings but can't fly yet can run faster than a horse."¹⁵ In a vein similar to my question above, why devote so much verbiage to divine freedom and sovereignty—especially since the book

¹⁴ Ibid., 146-47.

¹⁵ Ibid., 139.

never openly questions divine sovereignty but rather divine justice? Moreover, in terms of content as well as length, it seems passing strange that so much speech from the voice would recount the freedom and wildness of nature and its creatures, if the point is to tell us only about the divine nature, but not about the nature of the world.

In further support of the notion that divine governance involves some wildness, freedom, and chance, it is noteworthy that God speaks *through the whirlwind or tempest*. This motif, present in some other parts of the Hebrew Bible, opens itself to the interpretation that God speaks in/through and of/about the wildness of nature, of creation, as one way of revelation. As God manifests divine love in speaking to Job in his anguish, so God manifests love in granting freedom to creation. Job's declaration that "no purpose" of God "can be thwarted" (42:2) may then be interpreted not to affirm divine manipulation of every detail but that a major purpose of God is to grace creation with freedom. Such an interpretation in my judgment squares well with the suggestion that Job has encountered "things too wonderful for me" (42:3c), better than with an interpretation that the how of divine governance is an absolute mystery. (The Hebrew word here is *pala*, "to be wonderful"; the noun form is *pele*, "(a) wonder.") I at least do not find total inscrutability something "too wonderful," or that a view of divine governance as utter mystery—the abandonment of any model at all—should warrant Job's repentance for having held a narrow, rigid model of God's nature and divine governance. My interpretation allows that the cause of Job's wonder at the divine discourse about governing nature and creation is not a sheer negative but rather something positive: that God's governance involves wildness and freedom and their attendant beauty.

References

- Curtis, John B. "On Job's Response to Yahweh." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979): 497-511.
- Downing, Frederick L. "Voices from the Whirlwind: Contemporary Criticism and the Biblical Book of Job." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 26 (1999): 389-404.
- Habel, Norman C. *The Book of Job: A Commentary*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985.
- O'Brien, J. Randall. "World, Winds, and Whirlwinds: The Voice of God Meets 'the Vice of God.'" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30 (2003): 151-60.
- Robertson, David A. *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977.
- Smick, Elmer B. "Semeiological Interpretation of the Book of Job." *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 135-49.
- Whedbee, William. "The Comedy of Job." *Semeia* 7 (1977): 1-39.