

The Battle Between God and Satan in the Book of Job

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Right after introducing the hero of the drama, the author of the Book of Job takes the readers behind the real curtains and reveals the true source of Job's troubles. Satan is labeled an accuser and depicted as an opposing force to God. In dramatic irony, however, the characters in the story are oblivious to this and appear as blind people stumbling on a stage while the audience looks on. In the dark about Satan, they grapple with the righteousness of Job versus the justice of God and the concept of whether there is any order in the universe.

Order in the Physical and Moral World

Even the casual reader of the book of Job is aware of the numerous references to the creation of the world and the functioning of the universe. The speakers in the drama use "order in nature" to illustrate their arguments on the justice God, or the disorder in nature to illustrate His injustice.

Traditionally, the book of Job has been seen as addressing the question of suffering, and in particular, the suffering of the righteous.¹ Today the problem is seen as whether there is any moral order in the universe.² This is but a different way of saying the same thing. If there is no valid reason for the suffering of the innocent, there is no moral order in the universe.

Psalms and other Wisdom writers also cited order in creation as a backdrop for praise of God's justice. David, in Ps 19, begins with the observable order in the heavens (vs. 1-4), illustrated by the sun (vs. 4-6), which proclaims the perfection of the law of God (7-11). Prov 3:19-26 begins with a call to observe the order in the earth, the heavens, the deep, and the sky (vs. 19-21). Then

¹ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 2:1.

² David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1989), xxxix.

CHRISTO: THE BATTLE BETWEEN GOD AND SATAN IN JOB

comes the call to respect judgment and justice (vs 22-26). When one observes order in the natural world one is inclined to accept the moral order of what is unseen. “Order in creation buttresses belief in divine justice.”³

Eliphaz, the dominant speaker among the three friends, speaks first and longest, probably because he is the oldest and therefore considered wisest.⁴ His begins with the classic sowing-reaping illustration. Anyone can observe that law of nature. You reap what you sow (4:8). Therefore, Job’s righteousness should be his confidence (4:6). Eliphaz is certain that no one has witnessed the righteous perishing (4:7). He provides a doxology in the next chapter that begins with God’s creating and sustaining in the natural world (5:9, 10), which leads one to observe God’s work in the moral and social sphere (11-15).⁵

Bildad, the most narrow minded of the three,⁶ draws our attention to the papyrus which flourishes in water, but withers without it (11-12). Bildad looks at the withering Job and cannot help but conclude that what Job lacks is the Living Water (8:13). Bildad also describes a well-watered plant that flourishes for a while, but suddenly perishes. There is a reason for this. Its roots were mired in rocks (8:17) rather than in the marsh (8:11). The inference is that Job’s former prosperity was temporary and therefore not an indication of his integrity.

Zophar, obviously the least important of the three,⁷ speaks briefly. He points to the certainty with which day follows night (11:12) and uses it as an illustration of the certainty of security following trouble (11:18), if one would only put away evil (11:13-14). Zophar is aware that the wicked prosper, but he maintains that these are only for a short while (20:5). He views destructive elements of nature such as fire and flood as agents of God to punish the wicked (20:26-28).

The three friends have no doubt that the righteous sometimes suffer, just as they cannot deny that the wicked can be seen prospering, but they firmly believe that all scores will be settled with justice. Though delayed, punishment will come to the wicked and rewards to the righteous.

Job also uses nature to illustrate his arguments. But he asserts the opposite—that there is no order in nature. This view leads him to assume that there is no justice in the earth. Animals, birds, and fish can testify that life is not fair (12:7-9), and Job holds God responsible because he orders the universe (12:9).

³ James L. Crenshaw, “Wisdom in the Old Testament,” *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:956. See also Roy B. Zuck, “A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs,” *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy Zuck, Eugene Merrill, and Darrell Bock (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 218.

⁴ See 14:10; Eliphaz includes, on their side, the aged and the gray haired—those who are older than Job’s father.

⁵ Clines, 143, 144.

⁶ Bildad has complete confidence in the “faith of our fathers” (8:8). All new light is rejected in favor of the “Old-time religion” because we were born yesterday and cannot know better (8:9).

⁷ Zophar is probably the youngest, for he speaks last among the three and only twice, compared to three times for the others. His arguments are also the weakest, and he tends to repeat the wisdom of the former speakers.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

God is responsible for droughts and floods (12:15). Through his eyes of misery, Job sees only a world of disorder. God is anarchic. Like He plays around with nature, God wantonly makes fools of leaders, making them grope like fools in the dark (12:24-25). Wicked people perpetrate crimes on the innocent, but no one takes action against them (12:1-17).

Who is right, Job or his friends? Is there order in nature or not? The three friends are correct. There is a basic order in creation. It can be observed in the regular orbits of the earth around the sun, of the moon around the earth, and in the rotation of the earth on its axis. We see it in the life cycles of plants and animals. Physicists, chemists and biologists have discovered numerous laws which are followed without fail.

But Job is also correct. It is difficult to maintain that absolute order exists when a rabid dog bites an innocent pup, when a freshly blooming flower is trodden by a heavy foot, and when a baby acquires the HIV virus through no fault of its own. Natural disasters constantly take their toll of innocent lives.

Nature reflected God fully at creation, but since sin, creation has been marred. Humans lost their dominion over the created world and antagonistic forces developed. Animals now prey upon others, and diseases afflict the innocent. Thorns and thistles interfere. This is not the work of God, but, as Jesus says in His parable, "An enemy has done this."⁸

When Yahweh took the stage in the drama of Job, He immediately drew the attention of Job to the order in creation that He is responsible for—the boundaries of the oceans (38:8-11), the path of the rainstorm (vs. 25-30), and the laws of the starry heavens (vs. 31-33). Yahweh assumes responsibility for the activities of all creatures. His care for the goats, donkeys, oxen, ostrich, and horses has a lesson for us (chap. 39).

In chapter 40 Yahweh draws Job's attention to two more animals. The Behemoth is usually understood as nothing more than a hippopotamus, and the Leviathan a crocodile. However, if this is true, coming at the very end of the Yahweh speech, it is a very tame ending for an otherwise powerful drama. If these are mere earthly creatures, nothing will have been added to the lessons drawn from the horse and the lion. Therefore, a few scholars look to ancient mythology for interpretation of these as symbols.⁹

The hippopotamus and crocodile were Egyptian creatures that the readers of the book of Job were acquainted with. In Egypt, both of these represented Set—the god of the underworld and the most dreaded enemy of order and resurrection life.¹⁰ Both are God's creatures, but they are used as symbols of Satan,

⁸ Drawn, somewhat out of context, from Matt 13:28, but this is the context in which Ellen White uses the phrase in *Desire of Ages*, 20, 21.

⁹ John C. L. Gibson, *Job*, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 246-256.

¹⁰ See Frank Knight, "Egyptian Origin of the Book of Job," *Nile and Jordan* (London: James Clarke, 1921), 403, quoted in Edwin and Margaret Thiele, *Job and the Devil*, (Boise: Pacific Press, 1988), 125.

CHRISTO: THE BATTLE BETWEEN GOD AND SATAN IN JOB

just as the lion is used sometimes, because they are animals that threaten human beings and terrorize them.¹¹

The Role of Behemoth and Leviathan in Disrupting Order

Yahweh begins by describing the physical aspects of Behemoth. He eats grass and has a powerful body (40:17, 18), but the next sentence, “he ranks first among the works of God,” indicates that it cannot be applied to the hippopotamus anymore. The hippo was neither the first animal to be created (reptiles were earlier), nor has anyone ever suggested that it ranks as the best of God’s creatures.

Prophets often moved from the literal to the metaphorical. Ezekiel turned a description of the king of Tyre (Ezek 28:1-20) into a description of Satan—the “model of perfection,” blameless from the day God created him. (28:13-29). Certain characteristics prevent us from applying the latter attributes to the literal king of Tyre. He was not in Eden (28:13), and he was not a guardian cherub (28:14). Isaiah began an oracle against literal Babylon, but shifted into a metaphorical description of Lucifer, who had “fallen from heaven” (Isa 14:12) and who had attempted to raise himself to God’s level (14:13).

The Leviathan described here has many characteristics in common with the crocodile. It has a tough hide (Job 41:7, 13), incredible strength (41:12, 13), fearsome teeth (41:14), and lives in the water (41:31). But other characteristics prevent us from identifying this animal with the crocodile. It has scales (41:15, 16), its eyes are like the rays of the dawn (41:18), fire and smoke come from its nostrils (41:19, 30), its chest is as hard as rock (41:24), it causes the depths of the sea to churn like a cauldron (41:31), and nothing on earth is its equal (41:33). None of these can be claimed for the crocodile.

The Hebrew *liwyatan* is related to the Ugaritic *Lotan*,¹² which is described as a dragon. The Greek translates *Liwyatan* as *draconta*, from which we get our English word “dragon.” *Draconta*, as used in the New Testament, is usually understood to symbolize “Satan.”

The Old Testament depicts the dragon as Yahweh’s enemy who was defeated at the creation of the earth (Ps 74:14) and who will be punished at the end of time (Isa 27:1). The book of Revelation tells us the dragon was in heaven, but it fought with Michael, lost, and was cast down to earth (12:7-9), sweeping a third of the angels with him (12:4). The dragon is called the “serpent,” “devil,” and “Satan” (12:9; 20:2). Spirits of demons emerge from his mouth (16:3), but in the end he will be destroyed in the lake of fire (20:10).

Job is brought to understand that a powerful Satan is responsible for his sufferings. The dragon cannot be subdued (41:9), terrifies the mighty (41:25), and

¹¹ Gibson, 255.

¹² J. Barton Payne, “*Iwh*,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:1090.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

is unconquerable by conventional weapons (41:26-29). It rules as king on this earth (41:33, 34). Only God is mightier than the dragon (41:10, 11).

We note that at the end of the Yahweh speeches, Job recants all he has said and submits himself to God. What, we may ask, is the reason for his changed attitude? Several theories have been set forth as to the nature of the solution to Job's problem: (1) The very appearance of God satisfied his wish for an audience; (2) God distracted Job's attention away from his misery to the marvels of the universe; or (3) God somehow showed Job the reason for his suffering and convinced him of a just solution.

Job had already espoused a belief in resurrection and eventual justice (14:14-17; 19:25-29),¹³ but now God reveals to him that suffering in the world is the work of Satan. Job now understands what the readers knew all along. This is a very reasonable conclusion, considering what the author took great pains to reveal to the readers at the beginning of the book.

If, as many believe, the book of Job was the first to be written, then the first thing God can be seen as revealing to humanity—especially to all those who are innocent and suffer—is the fact that it's not His fault, He is not responsible for all the evil in this world. Now Job can take the long view, a view that includes an end to the great conflict between God and the dragon, a judgment that will find Job blameless and lay bare the dragon's perfidy, and the final rewards of all people. There will no longer be any question in anyone's mind about what God has been doing about suffering. The originator of evil will be destroyed, the great controversy will end, and order in the universe will be restored.

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¹³ See C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 59. See also Gordon Christo, "The Eschatological Judgment in Job 19:21-29: An Exegetical Study" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Andrews University, 1992).