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Of Stars and Sea Monsters: Creation Theology in the Whirlwind Speeches

KATHRYN SCHIFFERDECKER

Virginia Woolf, in a letter to a friend, once wrote: “I read the book of Job last night—I don’t think God comes well out of it.”¹ I suspect the average reader of Job would agree with Virginia. For a number of reasons, the vision of God in the book of Job is a disturbing one. God enters into a wager with the Satan² to see whether Job really does “fear God for nothing” (Job 1:9).³ God afflicts—or allows the Satan to afflict—Job with incomprehensible suffering. Then, at the end of the book, God shows up in a whirlwind and answers Job, but the answer seems more of

¹Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume II, 1912–1922*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 585.

²The Hebrew text of Job refers always to “the satan”—that is, “the adversary” of God. Most modern translations simply use “Satan,” though NJPS prefers “the Adversary.” I will refer to “the Satan.” The term as it is used in Job seems to be a title rather than a personal name, referring to a figure who is more of a prosecuting attorney than a demonic personage.

³It is not the purpose of this essay to talk about the genre of Job. Nevertheless, I should say that I do not understand the book to be a historical account. It is a meditation on undeserved suffering which uses as its primary subject the figure of Job, known in the ancient Near East as a paragon of righteousness (see Ezek 14:14, 20).

The whirlwind speeches at the end of Job (Job 38–41) depict a cosmos that is radically non-anthropocentric. This cosmos includes creatures and places indifferent towards human beings and quite dangerous for them. Nevertheless, God delights in these wild creatures and places and gives them a place in creation. Job responds to the whirlwind speeches by choosing to live with the same freedom God grants all of God’s creatures.

a harangue than anything else. No mention is made of Job's suffering or of the wager with the Satan. There is no hint of an apology or even of sympathy for the beleaguered sufferer. Instead, God takes Job on a whirlwind tour of the cosmos and asks him question after daunting question:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (38:4–7)

The two speeches of God go on for four chapters, and by the time one finishes reading them, one may very well agree with Virginia Woolf and other disgruntled readers of Job. Solomon Freehof, for instance, says of the whirlwind speeches, "Job cries, 'I am innocent.' And God responds, 'You are ignorant.' The answer seems not only irrelevant but even unfeeling and heartless."⁴ William Safire puts it more colloquially: "It is as if God appears in a tie-dyed T-shirt emblazoned with the words 'Because I'm God, That's Why.'"⁵ God does not come out of this book well.

And yet, there is something about these whirlwind speeches that moves Job from profound despair to this statement: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know....I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (42:3, 5). The latter statement is made all the more significant when one realizes that it fulfills a desperate hope of Job's uttered chapters earlier: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another" (19:25–27).⁶

What is it about these speeches that permits Job to see God? What is it that moves Job out of his despair and into life again? For that is what happens. In the last chapter of the book, Job regains his prosperity. Most significantly, Job and his wife have more children. Like a Holocaust survivor, Job's most courageous act is to have children again, to risk bringing children into a world full of inexplicable suffering, to risk loving children even when he knows the pain that such love can entail.⁷

⁴Solomon B. Freehof, *Book of Job* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1958) 236.

⁵William Safire, *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today's Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992) 22. One of my students, Keith Long, opined that the back of the T-shirt should say, "And you are...?"

⁶The Hebrew of these verses is difficult, but the wish to see God is clear.

⁷Thanks to Ellen F. Davis for this insight in *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2001) 141. Her chapter on Job, "The Sufferer's Wisdom," is the best short theological essay on Job that I know. She writes of the epilogue: "It is useless to ask how much (or how little) it costs God to give more children. The real question is how much it costs Job to become a father again" (142).

What is it that moves Job out of despair and into life again? The answer lies in the vision of creation set forth in the whirlwind speeches.

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE⁸

Much could be said about God's speeches at the end of Job.⁹ They are, outside of the creation accounts in Gen 1–3, the longest sustained reflection on creation in the Bible. They move from the realm of the cosmological to the meteorological, from the zoological to the mythological. While the prologue of Job describes Job's abundance of livestock (sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys), God's speeches describe "where the wild things are." From the morning stars who sing at the dawn of creation (38:7) to the sea monster Leviathan who makes the deep boil like a pot (41:31), the creatures who inhabit the whirlwind speeches are untamed and untamable by human beings.¹⁰

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The use in Job of a particular Hebrew word may help illustrate this point. The word קנח means "to laugh" or, sometimes, "to scorn." It is used a number of times in the book of Job, mostly in the whirlwind speeches. Eliphaz uses it as he assures Job that God will redeem him: "At destruction and famine you shall laugh (קנח), and shall not fear the wild animals of the earth" (5:22). Job himself uses the word two times in quick succession to contrast his former life with his present circumstances. He begins by describing when he used to sit at the city gate, admired by everyone:

They waited for me as for the rain;
they opened their mouths as for the spring rain.
I smiled (קנח) on them when they had no confidence;
and the light of my countenance they did not extinguish.
I chose their way, and sat as chief,
and I lived like a king among his troops,
like one who comforts mourners.
But now they make sport (קנח) of me,
those who are younger than I,
whose fathers I would have disdained
to set with the dogs of my flock. (29:23–30:1)

⁸With apologies to Maurice Sendak. The monsters in his classic children's book are appropriately fierce, but they cannot hold a candle to Leviathan as depicted in Job 41.

⁹For a much fuller treatment of the whirlwind speeches, see my book, *Out of the Whirlwind: Creation Theology in the Book of Job* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁰The one possible exception is the war horse, described in Job 39:19–25. Even this creature, however, cannot be called "tame." Though used by human beings for their purposes, the war horse retains a certain ferocity, delighting in human combat and facilitating the killing of human beings by other human beings.

Eliphaz promises that Job will laugh at trouble and not fear the wild animals. In the whirlwind speeches, however, it is not Job who laughs. It is not, in fact, any human being, whether elder or outcast, who laughs. Instead, it is the wild animals who קחש, and the object of their laughter (or scorn) is often humanity or humanity's inventions. To take one example, the wild donkey, unlike its domestic cousin, will not be used by human beings:

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?
 It scorns (קחש) the tumult of the city;
 it does not hear the shouts of the driver. (39:5–7)

Once Job owned hundreds of donkeys (1:3), but he cannot control the wild donkey. In fact, this untamed creature laughs at the uproar of the city, that quint-essential human habitation. In the next passage, a similar thing is said of the wild ox who, unlike his domestic cousins, will neither bring in Job's harvest nor plow his fields (39:9–12). These are free and wild creatures who will not be used by human beings.

In a similar vein, God speaks of the ostrich, who laughs (קחש) at the horse and its rider (39:18). The war horse itself laughs (קחש) at fear and does not retreat from the sword (39:22). The wild animals—the ones that Eliphaz told Job he need not fear—frolic (קחש) in the mountains beside the formidable Behemoth (40:20), a sort of super-hippopotamus, who cannot be captured by human beings (40:24).¹¹

Imposing as Behemoth is, the place of preeminence in the whirlwind speeches is given to Leviathan, the legendary sea monster.¹² The description of Leviathan is the longest and last in God's speeches. That description begins,

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,
 or press down its tongue with a cord?
 Can you put a rope in its nose,
 or pierce its jaw with a hook?
 Will it make many supplications to you?
 Will it speak soft words to you?
 Will it make a covenant with you
 to be taken as your servant forever?
 Will you play (קחש) with it as with a bird,
 or will you put it on leash for your girls?¹³
 Will traders bargain over it?

¹¹Behemoth does not appear elsewhere in the Bible or the ancient Near East, but the way he is described in Job seems to match the characteristics of a hippopotamus, albeit a hippo whose limbs are like iron (40:18).

¹²For more on the figure of the sea dragon in the Bible and the ancient Near East, see John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹³Note that in Ps 104:26, it is God who plays (קחש) with Leviathan. The NRSV translates the verse, "There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it [the sea]." The verse can also be translated, "There go the ships, and Leviathan, whom you formed to play with."

Will they divide it up among the merchants?
Can you fill its skin with harpoons,
or its head with fishing spears?
Lay hands on it;
think of the battle; you will not do it again! (41:1–8)

The thought that Job might use Leviathan in any of the ways that human beings use animals—as food, as beasts of burden, as objects of sport, as pets—is ludicrous. Leviathan is the fiercest of all creatures. It cannot be used by human beings. It cannot be captured by human beings. Indeed, like the other wild creatures of the whirlwind speeches, Leviathan laughs at humanity and its inventions.

It counts iron as straw,
and bronze as rotten wood.
The arrow cannot make it flee;
slingstones, for it, are turned to chaff.
Clubs are counted as chaff;
it laughs (קחש) at the rattle of javelins. (41:27–29)

Every creature described in God’s speeches lives outside the realm, outside the control, of human beings. Even their habitats—wilderness, mountains, ocean—are inaccessible to human beings. The wild ass romps on the barren salt plains, inhospitable to human beings (39:6). The eagle makes it home on a high cliff (39:27–28). Job cannot enter into “the springs of the sea” or “the recesses of the deep” (38:16), while Leviathan causes the sea to “boil like a pot” and the deep to be covered with foam (41:31–32).

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In contrast to texts like Gen 1 and Ps 8, where humanity is given dominion over the wild animals, the whirlwind speeches of Job emphasize again and again the ferocity and freedom of Job’s fellow creatures. Job’s ordered world, where he used to sit as “king” (29:25), is broken open, and he is made to see places and creatures he never previously imagined. As if to drive the point home, in the last verse of the speeches God says that it is Leviathan (not Job) who is “king over all that are proud” (41:34). Throughout the speeches, from stars to sea monsters, God describes, with obvious pride and delight, the wild things and the wild places that make up God’s magnificent world.

A PLACE FOR THE SEA

One particular “wild place” bears special mention. The Sea, like Leviathan, was a symbol of chaos in the ancient Near East. From Yamm (Sea) in the Ugaritic

Baal cycle to Tiamat in the Mesopotamian creation myth *Enuma Elish*, the personification of the sea is ubiquitous in ancient Near Eastern mythology. In each case, the sea (or the sea dragon) must be defeated by the gods in order for the world to be created. Several biblical passages, including passages in Job, allude to this myth.¹⁴ In the whirlwind speeches, however, the situation is decidedly different. Here, the Sea is not destroyed; it is *born*, and God acts as its midwife:

Who fenced in Sea with doors
 when it came bursting out from the womb,
 when I made a cloud its clothing
 and thick darkness its swaddling clothes?
 I prescribed my boundary for it
 and set a bar and doors.
 And I said, "Thus far you will come and no farther.
 Here shall your proud waves be stopped." (38:8–11, my translation)

The Sea in this passage is not a primordial enemy to be destroyed. It is an overly rambunctious infant (albeit a very powerful one) who must be tightly swaddled so that it won't hurt itself or others.

God speaks in this passage of "fencing in" the Sea. This use of the Hebrew verb שׂוּר/סוּר echoes its two earlier uses in Job:

Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence (שׂוּר) around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land." (1:9–10)

Job himself uses the word in his first speech of the dialogue:

Why is light given to one in misery,
 and life to the bitter in soul,
 who long for death, but it does not come,
 and dig for it more than for hidden treasures....
 Why is light given to one who cannot see the way,
 whom God has fenced in (סוּר)? (3:20–21, 23)

The Satan asserts that God has created the world in such a way that the righteous are kept from all harm. God places a fence around the righteous to protect them. In this, the Satan's worldview is very similar to that of the three friends in the dialogue; that is, the world is ordered in such a way that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished.¹⁵

Job holds to this worldview himself at the beginning of the book. He is a "blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8). He offers "preemptive sacrifices"¹⁶ for his children just in case they have sinned and "cursed God in their hearts" (1:5). His is a very ordered world, one in which right-

¹⁴Ps 29; 74; 89; 114; Isa 51:9–10; Job 9:8; 26:12–13; et al.

¹⁵This worldview is also articulated, of course, in other biblical passages, including Deuteronomy.

¹⁶Davis, *Getting Involved with God*, 137.

teousness yields prosperity; but when that world collapses around him into ashes, Job eventually comes to a different conclusion about cosmic order. He accuses God of fencing him in, of drawing that formerly protective hedge in so tightly that it threatens to suffocate him.

Am I the Sea, or the Dragon,
that you set a guard over me?...
What are human beings, that you make so much of them,
that you set your mind on them,
visit them every morning,
test them every moment?
Will you not look away from me for a while,
let me alone until I swallow my spittle? (7:12, 17–19)

The ordered world that Job knew in the prologue has become for him an oppressive place, governed by a God inordinately concerned with human beings and their sin, a capricious God who destroys both the blameless and the wicked (9:22), who overturns mountains and rulers alike (9:5; 12:24).

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Such are the two worldviews espoused by the Satan and by Job in the earlier chapters of the book. When God speaks, both of these worldviews are called into question. God, too, speaks about “fencing in” (שׁוֹרֵף/סוֹרֵף), but God shifts the object and scope of that term. God does not set a fence (whether protective or oppressive) around Job or any other human being. God sets boundaries for the Sea: “Thus far shall you come and no farther” (38:11). There is a tension in that creative act, and it is crucial for understanding the creation theology of the whirlwind speeches to note that tension. J. Gerald Janzen puts it well:

All systematic attempts to read existence...according to a principle of justice involving strict recompense or retribution break themselves against the fact that the sea is given a place in the cosmos. All attempts to exegete the Book of Job in such a way as to arrive at the conclusion that God there is indifferent to matters of justice overlook the fact that the place of the sea in the cosmos is delimited by divine decree.¹⁷

God places limits on the Sea, that ancient symbol of chaos, but God also *gives it a place* in the created order. That order is neither what the friends imagined it to be, a place where the righteous are protected from all harm, nor what Job claimed it to be, the playground of a capricious God inordinately concerned with human beings. The forces of chaos are not allowed free rein; boundaries are set, but those boundaries do

¹⁷J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 235.

not exclude all things wild and dangerous. In fact, God seems to take special delight precisely in those creatures and forces that are most wild: creatures indifferent towards—and therefore dangerous to—human beings, such as the Sea, the wild animals, Behemoth, and Leviathan. They have a beauty and a value that are intrinsically tied to their wildness. In the creation theology of the whirlwind speeches, the world is not a perfectly safe place for humanity, but it is an ordered place, and one of profound beauty and freedom.

LEARNING OUR PLACE

Though the whirlwind speeches describe in detail creatures both celestial and terrestrial, there is one glaring omission from the catalogue, one creature conspicuous only by its absence: humanity. People are mentioned only in passing, as beings peripheral to the world God describes.¹⁸ In fact, some of the most common Hebrew words for “person” or “man” (אִישׁ and אָדָם) occur in only one passage in the whirlwind speeches:¹⁹

Who has cut a channel for the flood,
and a way for the thunderbolt,
to cause it to rain upon the uninhabited land (אֶרֶץ לֹא-אִישׁ)
the wilderness where no person lives (מִדְבָּר לֹא-אָדָם בּוֹ);
to satisfy the desolate and wasteland
and to cause the parched land to sprout grass? (38:25–27, my translation)

In the Hebrew, the point is more explicit. Translated literally, the phrases in verse 26 are “land with no-person” and “wilderness with no-man in it.” Appearing nowhere else in the whirlwind speeches, these very common Hebrew words for human beings are in this passage *negated*: *no-person*, *no-man*. In other words, in this long catalogue of creatures, human beings have little place. God sends the precious resource of rain on a land unused and unusable by human beings, simply so that the earth will sprout grass—a gift for the wild ass, perhaps, but not for people.

The whirlwind speeches contrast sharply in this regard with other biblical creation accounts. In Gen 1 and 2, humanity is the crown of creation, the only creature created in the image of God (Gen 1:27); the only creature given the task of tending and keeping the garden (Gen 2:15). In Ps 8, as in Gen 1, humanity is given dominion over all the other creatures. Even in Ps 104, which is in many respects similar to the whirlwind speeches, humanity is given a position of some prominence and is the recipient of God’s providence. God provides “wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart” (Ps 104:15).

The whirlwind speeches, with their almost complete silence concerning hu-

¹⁸See 38:13; 39:7, 18, 30; 40:11–13. Most of these references are to “the wicked” or “the proud.” In 39:30, humanity actually becomes food for the animals; the young eagles drink the blood of slain warriors.

¹⁹The word אִישׁ is also used in 41:17 (Heb. 41:9), but in the sense of “each” or “one,” to refer to Leviathan’s scales clinging “one to the other.”

man beings, set forth a vision of creation that is radically non-anthropocentric. In what is probably a parody of Ps 8, Job asks early in the dialogue, “What are human beings?” (7:17). He and his companions answer that question in different ways, but they all operate out of the assumption that humanity is at the center of God’s attention. The whirlwind speeches call that assumption into question and focus the reader’s attention instead on the care with which God provides for the wild creatures of the world, and the pride that God takes in them. “Look at Behemoth,” says God to Job, “which I made just as I made you” (40:15). This Creator delights in wild things.

*Humanity has a place in God’s creation. It is a place,
however, not of dominion, but of humility and of wonder.
Job is invited to reorient himself, to understand that he is
not the center of the cosmos.*

There is one caveat to this statement, of course. Though humanity plays little part in the whirlwind speeches, it is a human being who is the sole passenger on this tour of the cosmos. Job is the audience for these speeches, and through him, so are the readers of the book. Humanity has a place, then, in God’s creation. It is a place, however, not of dominion, but of humility and of wonder. Job is invited in the whirlwind speeches to expand his vision and to see the world in a new way. He is invited to reorient himself, to understand that he is not the center of the cosmos. He is invited to see the world from God’s point of view and to understand anew his place in that world.²⁰

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Job does indeed respond to the vision afforded to him in the whirlwind speeches: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (42:5). It is the next verse that is difficult. Many English translations have something like, “Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6).²¹ The better translation of the Hebrew, however, is something like, “Therefore I recant, and I change my mind about dust and ashes,” with the phrase “dust and ashes” (עפר ואפר) being a metaphor for humanity.²² Job in the dialogue had spoken about God as inordinately concerned with human beings and their sins. He had spoken about the world as a chaotic place governed by a capricious God. Granted now a vision of the cosmos which includes, but is not centered on, human beings,

²⁰This creation theology of the whirlwind speeches has obvious ecological implications, though such a discussion is outside the purview of this essay.

²¹For a detailed discussion of the translation issues in Job 42:6, see Schifferdecker, *Out of the Whirlwind*, 186–188, and Janzen, *Job*, 254–259.

²²See Gen 18:27 and Job 30:19, the only other two places in the Bible where the phrase עפר ואפר occurs.

granted a vision of the cosmos which includes all things wild and free, Job has come to a new understanding of the world and of his place in it.

In the concluding verses of the book, Job responds to this vision of the whirlwind speeches. He prays for his friends. He has more children. He gives his three beautiful daughters sensual names: Dove, Cinnamon, and Rouge-Pot (42:14), and an inheritance along with their brothers, a practice unheard of in ancient Israel. As Ellen Davis argues, the very careful patriarch of the prologue, the one who offered “preemptive sacrifices” for his children, has become a parent after God’s own heart, giving his children the freedom that God gives God’s whole creation and delighting in their beauty.²³ Davis writes, “The great question that God’s speech out of the whirlwind poses for Job and every other person of integrity is this: Can you love what you do not control?”²⁴ It is a profound question. Can you love what you do not (and cannot) control: this wild and beautiful creation, its wild and beautiful Creator, your own children? Job, by choosing to live again after unspeakable suffering and to do so with a certain abandon, answers yes to that question.

William Blake, in his 1826 *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, portrays a similar interpretation of the book.²⁵ In the very first illustration of the prologue, Blake shows Job and his family praying beneath a tree. Job and his wife hold books, perhaps Bibles or hymnals. Job’s wife clasps her hands in prayer, and the grown children kneel around them. It is a picture of great piety, but it is also static. There are musical instruments hanging in the tree, silent. The sun is setting, and the sheep in the foreground are fast asleep.

In the last illustration, Blake revisits this scene. There is the family again (albeit the new set of children) under the same tree, with the same musical instruments and the same sheep in the foreground. This time, however, there is movement. Job and his wife and the sons are playing the musical instruments, the daughters and the entire family are standing upright in lively poses, the sheep are awake, and the sun is rising. In Blake’s illustrations and in the book of Job itself, the pious patriarch of the prologue moves through death to new life. And it is the vision of creation granted him in the whirlwind speeches that enables him to embrace that new life in freedom and in faith. ⊕

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²³Davis, *Getting Involved with God*, 142–143.

²⁴Ibid., 140.

²⁵William Blake, “Job and His Family” and “Job and His Family Restored to Prosperity,” *The William Blake Archive*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, at <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/copy.xq?copyid=but550.1&java=yes> (accessed July 26, 2011).