

What does Job see?

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After enduring Job's calamities, his howling laments, the speeches of his "friends," a hymn to wisdom as an entr'acte, Job's plea of innocence, an awkward interruption by Elihu, and then four chapters of the LORD speaking from the whirlwind, we finally arrive at the 42nd and last chapter of Job.

We discover that no one much agrees what it means. The problems are lexical and grammatical as well as theological.

Has the writer led us all this way to allow the story to slip away into vagueness? By no means--but the Joban poet will insist that we probe the ambiguities for ourselves and surrender all the glib answers.

"You declare to me," says the LORD. But what Job does declare is by no means clear: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted." Is Job bowing down submissively to the bullying voice of the whirlwind? Or is he rising to full stature and new heights, a human creature who can now more fully appreciate the fantastically complex dimensions of God's creation?

The poet risks everything in this encounter. Job has longed to see God (19:25-6). But "now my eye sees you," says Job, in wild contradiction to the LORD's pronouncement that "no one shall see me and live" (Ex. 33:20). What Job sees is by no means clear. God has made him see a lot in the past four chapters: "Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you" (40:15). What Job sees, however, changes everything. The poet's rendering of Job ends with this: "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in

dust and ashes."

After all he has been through, does Job give up so easily? That seems a perfectly unsatisfactory response to God's revelation from the whirlwind, as well as an inadequate conclusion to the drama of Job. The Jewish Publication Society offers a different translation: "I recant and relent." Having "seen" all that the voice from the whirlwind insisted he see, Job now recognizes that his laments, his protests, and even his hopes were too small. Not wrong, not wicked, but rather inadequate to the human situation.

While the phrase "dust and ashes" is familiar to us, it occurs in the Bible only three times. It has to do with human existence before the face of God. Abraham contends for justice and fair treatment for Sodom: "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the LORD, I who am but dust and ashes." The phrase speaks of humility, but a humility with feet firmly grounded in the earth, and one that stands up to address the LORD boldly: I may be dust and ashes, but I am dust and ashes with a voice that the LORD has made to be heard. "Dust and ashes" is formidable stuff and a human-sized vocation.

Job's final words may be fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty. But whatever reading we make of them, our judgment should be congruent with the LORD's verdict that adorns Job in royal robes (40:10) and finally anoints him with the priestly task of praying for his friends (42:8). And God's sentence on Job's friends--"you have not spoken of me what is right"--should steer us away from glib, pious pronouncements, from sermons that sound like the preacher has walked all around God and taken solemn measurement.

If reading Job's final chapter does not rattle our theology, we are not reading it right.