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Short Note

Job 42:2–6, a (Possible) Key to the Message of the Book

By Ernst Wendland

Assuming that the author of Job placed the essence of his poetic message near the *end* of the text, where it would be most noticed and remembered (literary end stress), I would argue that Job's final cited speech (42:2–6) is likely to convey such thematic significance. This short discourse occurs immediately after and in response to the climactic speeches of Yahweh (chapters 38–41) and right before the book's narrative resolution in 42:7–17 (the so-called epilogue). So what has Job learned from this challenging divine discourse as reflected in his concluding, now confessional reply?

1 וַיַּעַן אִיּוֹב אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמַר׃
2 יָדַעְתָּ (יָדַעְתִּי) כִּי־כֹל תּוּכָל
וְלֹא־יִבָּצֵר מִמְּךָ מְזִמָּה׃
3 מִי זֶה ׀ מַעְלִים עֵצָה בְּלִי דָעַת
לָכֵן הֵגַדְתִּי וְלֹא אָבִין
נִפְלָאוֹת מִמֶּנִּי וְלֹא אֵדָע׃
4 שְׁמַע־נָא וְאָנֹכִי אֲדַבֵּר
אֶשְׁאָלְךָ וְהוֹדִיעֵנִי׃
5 לְשֵׁמַע־אֹזֶן שְׁמַעְתִּיךָ
וְעַתָּה עֵינִי רָאָתְךָ׃
6 עַל־כֵּן אֶמְאָס
וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל־עָפָר וָאֵפֶר׃ פ

The symmetrical literary structure of this key periscope, after the initial speech margin (1), may be outlined as shown below:

A. **AFFIRMATION** by Job: I know now that you (YHWH) can do all things (2)

B. **QUOTATION** of God: Yahweh's rebuke of Job—speaking without knowledge (3a)

C. **CONFESSION** by Job: I spoke without understanding (3b)

B' **QUOTATION** of God: Yahweh's challenge to Job—listen…answer (4)

A' **AFFIRMATION** by Job: I have heard…seen you (5)

C' **CONFESSION** by Job: I renounce [my knowledge] and my claims;

I retract my demand/right to speak with you, i.e., my legal case (6)

This passage may be summarized as follows: Despite his sufferings—past, present, and potentially future—and in view of the awesome, unanswerable (cf. 40:4–5) divine revelation that he has just experienced, Job publicly confesses Yahweh's

- omnipotence in v. 2a (כֹּל תּוּכָל),
- his omniscience in v. 3c (הֵגַדְתִּי וְלֹא אָבִין), and his
- immanence in v. 5b (עַתָּה עֵינִי רָאָתְךָ).

This last-mentioned characteristic of God was especially important for Job. Thus, far from being a transcendent deity who was remote from and uncommunicative with his people, as both Job (31:35–37) and Elihu (35:12–14) had claimed, Yahweh was nearby and close enough for Job to hear his very words of

majestic assertion concerning his diverse creation and manifold preservation of the cosmos. One might also detect here a possible initial fulfillment of Job's confident prediction that, despite his current depressing predicament, he would one day see his "Redeemer/Defender/Vindicator" (גֹּאֲלִי) and God "with his own eyes" (לִי וְעֵינַי) (19:25–27).

So how does Job respond to Yahweh's verbal (and perhaps also visual) reprimand? We hear this response in the crucial and climactic verse six where Job makes a double *repudiation*. First, in 6a Job says in dramatic conclusion (Therefore" עַל־כֵּן) "I despise…" (אֶמְאָס), but this verb normally requires an object, as in 9:21 where Job laments, "I despise *my life*" (אֶמְאַס חַיָּי). Thus the addition of an implied object, "myself," as in many translations (e.g., NIV, NET) is certainly possible. But could the poetic theologian be subtly suggesting something else by deliberately leaving an object implicit? One could argue that what Job is despising here is something implied in the immediate context, namely, in the verse that corresponds with this in the text structure outlined above—v. 3. This would be the very knowledge that Job sought to determine about God's dealings in the world, especially with regard to his own case of perceived injustice.

Therefore, an alternative, contextually-shaped rendering for אֶמְאָס in this pericope might be: "I repudiate [my claim of understanding/or quest for knowledge, *implied*].[1] From a larger perspective in relation to the book's macro-theme, Job is in effect lamenting his own lack of wisdom that did not manifest the appropriate "fear of the LORD" (יִרְאַת אֲדֹנָי, 28:28; cf. 1:1).[2] At the same time, he confesses his human ignorance about God's overall plan or "design" (עֵצָה) for the universe and his all-encompassing program for making its diverse components cohere. This is in response to Yahweh's rebuke at the beginning of his discourse in 38:2, which Job reiterates in seeming self-condemnation in 42:3: "Who is this that darkens my counsel without knowledge."

Recalling his periodic, pain-induced complaints in the sequence of debates with his antagonizing "friends," Job realizes that he had gone too far in this regard ("Surely [לָכֵן] I spoke of things I did not understand…"). Thus, he either assumed, or desired to know, more than he actually did, or could truly comprehend about how God operates (alternatively: how he should or *should not* operate) in relation to humanity, especially during times of calamity and crisis. The key terms for "knowledge," "wisdom," and "understanding" are found throughout the book, especially in the divine speeches of chapters 38–41, so it would not be surprising for these concepts to figure prominently in this concluding word of Job—which is another instance of this man of God speaking rightly (or accurately), as the LORD himself immediately affirms (42:7b, 8c).

Following from the preceding argument, in v. 6b Job then renounces his right to present a case of aggrievement before the Creator—a desire to defend his civic righteousness and personal integrity, perhaps even his moral standing before God.[3] Here again the translation needs to reflect what Job is asserting as clearly as possible—thus, not "repent" (niphal of **נחם**, which gives the implication of some sinful behavior in English, e.g., NIV, NET), but better "retract," entailing something like "accusation, case, [or] formal appeal" as an implied object. This too is in response to Yahweh's initial rebuke in 38:3, which Job cites in v. 4: "I will question you, and you will answer me"—that is, "answer" in a legal or judicial sense.

All in all, there was clearly a problem as far as Job's potent, persistent verbal questioning is concerned, for Yahweh brings the issue up once more at the very end of his first discourse and immediately again at the onset of his second revelation: "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" (40:2); "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (40:8). It is possible to see a reflection of this matter also in the middle of Yahweh's description of *Leviathan*: "Who then is able to stand against me? Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything

[1] This interpretation is supported by W. D. Reyburn, *A Handbook on the Book of Job* (United Bible Societies, 1992, p. 772). The suggestion is that this refers to what Job has been saying in general about God, which is Norman Habel's argument (*The Book of Job*, Westminster, 1985, p. 576). Here I construe the implied object as having a rather more focused reference.

[2] Job 42:2–6 thus reflects back on the crucial wisdom poem at the center of the book (chapter 28). In biblical poetry, end points and central cores are often thematically significant and closely related to one another (cf. chapter 1 in Wendland, *Lovely, Lively Lyrics: Selected Studies in Biblical Hebrew Verse*, SIL International, 2013).

[3] Habel, *op. cit.*, calls attention to the importance of recognizing the judicial, legal-dispute genre as a hermeneutical frame of reference for understanding the book of Job as a whole and with respect to its sequential progression.

under heaven belongs to me" (41:11). Leviathan, that legendary beast of terror which was "king over all that are *proud*" (41:34b—the final words of Yahweh's discourse), was, for all his dreadful magnificence, still, like Job, a mere creature under God's total control and governance.

How then do the "dust and ashes" (עַל־עָפָר וָאֵפֶר) fit into this passage? A *literal* reference is certainly possible—namely, to the ashes that Job was apparently still sitting in (2:8) and the dust that his friends threw up into the air upon seeing him in this condition (2:12)—and so the author suggestively brings us back to the initial narrative frame, before the poetic speeches began. As the narrative resumes then in 42:7, it seems as if Job reappears in his same wretched condition, a situation that does not change—dramatically so—until after he has interceded for his friends at the request of Yahweh (42:10). However, I think that a *figurative* (metonymic) reading perhaps better reveals the prominent character of this poetic, alliterative phrase. Thus, Job recants before his divine Sovereign in a spirit now of deep humility,[4] which reflects also his character as portrayed in the first two chapters of the book and clearly contrasts with the overly proud attitude that Elihu had implied that Job was guilty of (33:17, 34:37, 35:12, 36:9), and perhaps also Yahweh as well (41:34).[5]

Are there any implications for Bible *translators* in view of the preceding textual observations? That depends of course on the degree to which one accepts the arguments set forth in relation to this passage and the nature of one's translation (whether more, or less literal/idiomatic). The following are several possible applications (which must be evaluated in relation to other exegetical and translational options):

- The explicit marking of the alternation of speakers (as Job quotes God) in the middle of the dialogue would be important in many languages to avoid confusion, for example: "*You asked*…" (3a); "But I declared…" (3b), "*You said*…" (4a)—along with the use of internal (single) quotation marks, as an indication perhaps to the reader, to modify one's intonation at these points.
- The verbs and associated nominal forms (objects, adjuncts) would need to be adjusted in the problematic v. 6, for example: "Therefore, I *renounce* my claim to knowledge, and I *retract* my case in complete shame" (a more traditional rendering could be included in a footnote, e.g., "…for I am but dust and ashes"). It would be helpful also to give pertinent cross-references to earlier passages in the book (noted above) that focus on these issues and Job's burning desire to debate with Yahweh.
- Finally, it would be important to employ an appropriate discourse style in the consumer language that highlights the importance of this climactic portion of direct speech—if not poetry as in the original, then some manner of rhetorically heightened prose. In addition, special stylistic emphasis might be given to Job's personal confessions (3b, 6) which effectively withdraw his personal mistaken assumptions concerning God's justice, along with his prior assertion of the right to have his day in the heavenly court.

In conclusion, we must all take Yahweh's advice to carefully "listen when he speaks" (42:4). This cannot be done *immediately* as was the case for Job, but regularly occurs *mediately* in and through his Word. Then, perhaps in this life but certainly in the next, we will, like Job, "see" God—that is, experience a personal encounter with the Lord that will transform our eternal destiny (42:5; cf. 19:25–27, 42:7–17).

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[4] This metonymic reading differs from that of D. Patrick, "The Translation of Job XLII 6" (*Vetus Testamentum* 26, 1976), 369–70, which is supported by Habel, who comments: "Thus the text ought to be rendered 'I repent/relent of dust and ashes,' meaning that he forsakes his position of lamentation among the dust and ashes and forswears remorse" (*ibid.*, 576). In context, this would seem to be a rather trivial understanding of this key passage within the book, especially considering the fact that Job has not yet been restored by Yahweh (42:10).

[5] This implication is strengthened by the strategic location of this final text (41:34, that is, just prior to Job's response to Yahweh's speech of reproof). Another possible metonymic interpretation is possible, namely, one that follows the LXX and views this as Job's denigrating self-reference, i.e., Job is in no position to dispute God's wisdom and justice because he is "nothing but dust and ashes" (cf. 30:19–20 as well as Abraham's similar usage in prayer with Yahweh in Genesis 18:27).