

SILENCE IN THE BOOK OF JOB

The book of Job begins with a conversation. After a short description introducing the book's main character, Job, and his righteousness, the story moves from earth to heaven as a council is convening. It is in the midst of this heavenly gathering that the first conversation in the book of Job begins: "The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From walking to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it'" (1:7).¹ The conversation proceeds from here as the Lord brags to Satan about Job, who is "a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8), and Satan convinces God test Job's faithfulness (1:9-12). From here the story is well known: Satan takes away all that Job has; Job persists in his righteousness; Satan takes away Job's health and still Job persists in refusing to curse God. The plot then moves away from the heavenly scene and the reader is left with Job on the ash heap as his friends come to comfort him.

The prose narrative of the first two chapters of the book of Job serves two functions. First, it sets up the plot and the narrative story for the book of Job. If there were no wager in heaven there would be no cause for discourse between Job and his friends, which fills the rest of the book. Moreover, the narrative introduces the major characters who will act in this plot: Job, his friends (who arrive at the very end of chapter two), and God (who will reappear at the end of the book). The second function of this initial prose narrative, aside from establishing the motivation for the book, is to establish the mode of the book. Unlike other wisdom literature, the book of Job does not consist of songs of lament and praise, nor does it consist of wise sayings; it is not a

¹ All biblical quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Translation unless noted otherwise.

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narrative plot which tells a story, moving the reader from one era to the next through a series of characters and actions. Rather, the book of Job is a series of conversations. As far as the reader knows, time stops on the ash heap and the conversations between Job and his friends occur within a single day. It is a book of discourse.

The book of Job can be overwhelming in many ways. From the beginning, the theology of the book is disturbing as God acts in ways we do not expect and are not comfortable with: “The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him’ ... The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life’” (1:12, 2:6). We do not expect God to hand over our livelihoods and well-being to the Satan; we do not expect God to give us up for a wager designed to test our faithfulness in adversity. When we read of God doing just that, to an upright and blameless person, we begin to question what kind of God we worship. Indeed, this is what Job begins to do as he curses his life (3:1) and pleads for God to “look away from me for awhile” (7:19). From here the theological questions and inquiries only get deeper and more poignant as Job gives voice to his experience of profound suffering: “how can a mortal be just before God ... who shakes the earth out of its place” (9:2, 6)?

The book is overwhelming in more ways than its theological situation, however. The sheer verbosity of the book is enough to make anyone feel as though they were slogging through mud after only a few chapters. Within the first set of speeches the friends are throwing words against Job: ““To which of the holy ones will you turn? Surely vexation kills the fool, and jealousy slays the simple”” (5:1-2). And Job returns with insults and attacks of his own. This barrage of words causes the reader to feel as though they are stuck in the middle of a violent volleyball match where words are served up and spiked back and forth between those who claim

to be friends. Added to the nastiness of the words is their sheer number. The discourses between Job and his friends begin in chapter three and continue for twenty-eight chapters until they finally cease in chapter thirty-one, only to be picked up again by Elihu, who speaks for another five chapters ending in chapter thirty-seven, after which God begins and adds to the speeches for another four chapters leaving the reader exhausted and worn out for the final ‘resolution’ of the book in chapter forty-two.

Indeed, words play a key role in the book of Job as each individual tries to put words to their truths while at the same time blowing away what they perceive as the false words of others. Job says early on, “I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (7:11); moreover, he affirms that, “my lips will not speak falsehood, my tongue will not utter deceit” (27:4) and he will not stop until someone can teach him and show him his inequities (6:24). As the friends continue to fail, speaking only the wisdom of tradition and failing to hear fully Job’s complaint and understand his situation, Job continues to give voice to his experience and accuse the friends of offering empty words (30:20) and preventing him from telling his story (13:13).

Into this deluge of words and speeches there are four key moments when the words stop. At the very end of the prologue, Job’s friends arrive and sit with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights and “no one spoke a word to [Job]” (2:11-13). Twenty-nine chapters later, after an onslaught of speeches and missed communications, Job ends his speeches (31:40c). After which, his friends end theirs (32:1). Finally, in the middle of God’s speech out of the whirlwind, God pauses and commands Job to speak, but Job only offers up an excuse and remains silent (40:4-5). This ceasing of speech, while not entirely silence, is an anomaly in a

book chock-full of words. It is to these anomalies that this paper will now turn, both to explore them in their own right and also to see if they add any illumination to a book of words.

In the first moment of silence, the book of Job has barely gotten started. While God and Satan have had two conversations, there has only been a brief conversation on earth between Job and his wife. In many ways, this moment of silence acts as a mode of transition. Coming at the end of the prose narrative prologue, and prior to the poetry of the speeches, the silence of Job's friends helps to transition between Job's righteous answer to the destruction of his life and his speeches of lamentation and complaint. Indeed, when we leave Job in the prologue he has "not sin[ned] with his lips" (2:10) and has rebuked his wife for suggesting he "curse God and die" (2:9), but when we meet Job again in chapter three, after seven days of silence, he begins by cursing "the day of his birth" (3:1). To move directly from the first attitude to the second would be abrupt and confusing; these seven days of silence seem to work as a transition. In order to understand how, it is helpful to look at the silence not only as a narrative means of transition, but also as an emotional means of transition. In the wake of tragedy and loss, the initial human response is often one of shock. We do not need to discount Job's initial faithful response, but perhaps, after seven days of silence the reality of loss and grief have finally set in and Job, while still not cursing God, is able to respond more honestly to his situation.

In this initial silence, we also see the compassion of Job's friends who seem to know, at least at this point, that there are not words for Job's loss: no words of comfort that could change or assuage how Job is feeling. In his commentary on Job, Normal Habel writes, "these visitors have come to perform a traditional role of the friend in ancient society, namely, to 'console' and 'comfort.' A 'friend' is characterized by deep loyalty and close bounds of faithfulness."² As

² Normal Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 97.

Habel goes on to point out, it will be exactly these qualities which the friends exhibit on the ash heap that Job will accuse them of forsaking later in the speeches.³

The second moment of silence cannot necessarily be called such; it is more appropriately titled a cessation of speech, which while not as poignant as seven days of silence is still significant given its placement after twenty-nine lengthy chapters of speeches and insults: “Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities” (22:5). Having made nine speeches to his friends, and having heard eight of their speeches, in chapter thirty-one, “the words of Job are ended” (31:40c). Throughout the book, the narrator has introduced the speakers: “Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered ... Then Job answered” (4:1, 6:1), but not once has the narrator ended any of the speeches; rather, the discourses simply end and the narrator introduces the next person, who picks up with a new speech. This single statement of conclusion is significant as the only formal statement of cessation thus far.

The statement is primarily a narrative transition, which serves to move the discourse forward from Job and his friends’ speeches to Elihu and, eventually, God’s discourse. Yet, it is also an emotional transition. In Job’s final speech (29-31), there is a change in tone as Job’s argument begins to shift and Job appears to be, at least potentially, more receptive to hearing God’s discourse. Looking at the narrative again in light of the loss and destruction Job has suffered, we see both in his final discourse as well as in his willingness to stop speaking a readiness to hear new answers. While Job’s speeches have primarily been understood as responses to his friends, they have also been outlets for his anger and grief over what has happened to him. Job spoke first, before any of his friends, lamenting his life and God’s overly attentive, harmful actions to him. His subsequent speeches have responded to his friends’

³ Ibid.

insistence that his theology (and by extension, his experience, out of which his theology emerges) is wrong, but they have also been motivated by the need to tell and retell what has happened to him and to grieve (often through anger) the injustices he has experienced.

Job's willingness to stop speaking says something new. His friends have not changed their arguments nor agreed with Job, nor has Job merely exhausted his grief; rather, he seems to have reached a new stage in his lament where he is willing to acknowledge that perhaps his continued speech is not getting him any further. While his cessation does not lead to silence, but rather Elihu's speech, it does provide the space, eventually, for God to speak to Job. Previously it would not have been possible for Job to hear anything God had to say, for his anger and grief were too great to hear another voice.

In a similar fashion, and immediately following Job's cessation, the friends "ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes" (32:1). Where Job's cessation might be construed as an emotional turn and readiness for something new, the friends' cessation is best understood as a defeat or giving up – they have not been able to convince Job of his errors and now that Job has stopped talking they too have nothing further they can say. They are not giving into Job nor agreeing with him, but merely giving up on their efforts to convince him. Again, this cessation provides the space into which a new voice can be heard: first Elihu, who transitions us, and then God. Habel writes, 'the way is now clear for a new narrative moment and the advent of the next spokesman – be he God or someone else.'⁴

Elihu and God speak for eight chapters (32-40) before there is another break in the words and we hear again from Job. Elihu's speech has transitions the readers from the traditional theology of the friends, "you [Job] say, 'I am clean, without transgression ...' But in this you are

⁴ Ibid, 447.

not right” (33:9,12), to the more mystical theology we will hear from God, “remember to extol [God’s] work ... Surely God is great, and we do not know him” (36:24,26). When his speech is finished, the narrator moves seamlessly into God’s speech, which comes not only in a deluge of words, but out of the chaos and strength of a whirlwind (38:1). From God the reader hears a creation theology/description that both amazes and baffles: the rhetorical questions (“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth” (38:4)?) draw the reader, and presumably Job, up short and place us in the role of observer to the amazing work of creation; yet, God does not seem to respond to Job’s situation at all, never once referring to Job’s situation or previous complaints, and the reader is left baffled as to God’s purpose. Halfway through God’s speech however, God pauses and turns to Job: “shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond” (40:1-2). And with that the focus is back on Job as the reader stutters to think how she might respond to such a question, leaning in with curiosity to hear Job’s response. Yet, despite all of Job’s grandiose and poignant speeches earlier, he responds only, “see, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further” (40:3-5). It is both a bold refusal to engage the command of the Lord to answer and at the same time a wise decision to acknowledge his own humility and lack of wisdom. According to Gutierrez, Job’s answer to God “is a statement that he will not give an answer, a declaration that he will remain silent.”⁵ While Job’s silence is filled with God’s second speech, it is important not to glance over. Job’s silence is a admission of humility and smallness, but it is not an apology nor an admission of guilt. It is as if Job has not yet heard enough to respond, which readers can appreciate as God’s first speech leaves us with more questions than answers. At any rate, Job

⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 76.

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seems not to be angered or irked by God's speech and he does not interrupt his self-imposed silence to contend with God anew. Rather, his silence is an assent for God to continue. And God does, awing the reader, and Job, with even more astounding creation and filling the whirlwind with images of beauty and wildness one almost does not know what to do with. It is only after this second speech that Job is able to respond to God. Meanwhile, we have had our fourth and final insertion of silence into a book of words.

Having explored not only the verbosity and importance of words in the book of Job, but also the four moments of silence inserted into the barrage of words, what can now be said about silence within the book of Job? Three observations are in order. First, silences are used in the book of Job to move the narrative forward. In the beginning, the seven days of silence transition the narrative from the prose of the prologue to the poetry of the speeches. In the middle of the book, Job and his friends' cessation of speech serve to move the dialogue from argumentative discourse to the declarative speeches of Elihu and God. And finally, in between God's two speeches, Job's silence prods God into saying more.

Second, silence is used in the book of Job not only to move the narrative forward, but also as a means of emotional transition. The main character in the book, Job, is not a static one, but rather changes and grows as the book progresses and reality of his innocence and his grief sink in. In the first instance of silence we see Job move from an accepting servant of God to a grieving complainant against God. In Job's cessation of speeches, we see a movement from anger and railing against God to an openness to hear a new word spoken into the situation. And, finally, in Job's refusal to answer God after God's first speech, we see Job struggling to grasp both God's presence and God's speech and pushing God for more information.

Third, the insertion of silence at all into the book of Job serves to highlight the intentionality of the verbosity of the book. It is possible to wade one's way through the book of Job exhausted, but concentrating only on the theology and situation of suffering and injustice that is presented through the speeches. Yet, the sheer number of words and speeches seems to be intentional by a writer who only allows for a few breaths of air between movements in the discourse. In this way, it becomes clear that the feeling of exhaustion after reading through the book of Job is intentional and perhaps a key part in understanding the book. It cannot merely be a book of theology, but must also be a book of experience that draws the reader in and makes her feel the weight of emotions being thrown about by the words of the characters.

Where then does this leave us? Again, three conclusions emerge. The first is an appreciation for silence. Reading Job all the way through leaves one craving both space and silence after what can only be described as an emotional barrage of words. Second, an appreciation for the violence words can do – Job is harmed not only through God's actions, but also through his friends' unwillingness (after the second chapter) to stop talking and listen to his story. It is words, not only actions, that have the power to both heal (as in the case of God's speech in the whirlwind) and harm. Finally, the book of Job leaves us appreciating the ways in which Scripture is able to draw us in and make the literature of years gone by relevant for us in our context. It pushes us to insert ourselves not only into the book of Job, but into all of Scripture, wondering what experience we might have if only felt the words as well as read them.