Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

H3. Job and his companions

The poetry begins with a speech of Job cursing the day of his birth and wondering why he didn't go straight from birth to the grave. 3:11-19 are a description of Sheol, traditionally the home of the dead in the basement below the earth. It is a benign picture: in the grave everyone is at rest. It may be boring, but the divisions and distinctions and the troubles of this life are over.

Job is not serenely trusting in God at all; in fact, he is in despair. His state of mind is described in 5:2 and 6:1 as vexation. He is frustrated and angry because he doesn't understand what is happening to him.

We see this in particular in chapter 7. Life, says Job, is hard and pointless. You work all day for your wages and they are gone before you have time to turn around (verses 1-6). He talks about the anguish of his spirit and the bitterness of his soul (11), his restlessness, sleeplessness and bad dreams (3-4,13-15). All this, he says, is brought on by God as punishment for our sin. But why should God bother to persecute us so much? What is it to him if we have sinned? Why does he not just leave us alone or else forgive us and have done with it (17-21)?

While Job rails against God's governance of the world, the three companions are the upholders of orthodoxy. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar all believe that Job's suffering is evidence that he has sinned. Their solution is to urge Job to repent in order to regain his standing with God. For the companions, Job's words simply go to prove that his problem is sin and their efforts to persuade him to repent by repeating the orthodox formulae become increasingly strenuous.

Eliphaz, the first to speak, bases his argument on the conviction of a personal vision (4:7-end). He is rather like the person who says, 'The Lord has told me.' His solution is for Job to submit to the Lord's reproof in order to regain his state of blessing (5:17-27). Bildad uses the same argument but his authority is tradition and authority (8:8-10). Since we know that God is just, the fact that Job is suffering proves that he must have done wrong. All he needs to do is to repent and God will restore his former glory. Zophar is the most dogmatic of the three, so black and white that he ends up directly accusing Job of sin (chapter 11).

A great part of the power of the book is that the companions' solutions are all pious and right. They all say things no one can disagree with. And yet we know, because of the prologue, that they do not apply to Job's situation. Thus prose and poetical sections combine to place a question against the conventional wisdom. Rather than passively and trustingly accepting his fate, Job is refusing to accept it and railing against God. Yet he remains the hero of the story, and the writer of the prologue knew this. So he challenges the easy assumption that equates goodness with prosperity and vice versa. All the good and right things that the companions urge on Job are made to sound hollow, complacent and cruel. When Job refuses to do what they want they become angrier and angrier and end up trying to defend God. Their speeches might almost be sub-titled: 'How not to counsel someone in trouble'.

Job's reply to his companions is that he knows the current orthodoxy as well as they do but that it does not fit his situation. His speeches express despair, anger, bewilderment and above all a sense of abandonment: God has left him to his fate without telling him why. In particular, he accuses God of being the author of his sorrows. In 6:4 he is like an archer using him for target

practice, in 9:19 like a strong man picking on a weakling, in 16:9 like a wild animal attacking him, and in chapter 19 comes a series of evocative images:

Job 19:8-12

He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass,
and he has set darkness upon my paths.
He has stripped my glory from me,
and taken the crown from my head.
He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone,
he has uprooted my hope like a tree.
He has kindled his wrath against me,
and counts me as his adversary.
His troops come on together;
they have thrown up siege-works against me,
and encamp around my tent.

Secondly, Job wants God to come down to his level and explain himself. Anderson calls chapter 9 Job's 'Promethean defiance'. The companions have asked him, 'Can mortals be righteous before God?' (4:17) and 'Does God pervert justice or the Almighty the right?' (8:3), to which the orthodox answer is 'No'. But Job wants to challenge this: the reason humankind cannot be righteous before God is that we can't argue with him; he is too powerful for us and will always win the argument, or if he can't win the argument he will terrify us with his power. How do we know that God is just? He destroys both blameless and wicked (22), he brings calamity on the innocent (23), while the wicked always get away with their wrongdoing, as everyone knows (chapter 24). But God refuses to explain himself. There is no one to play the impartial umpire in a debate (33), who would enable Job to speak without fear.

Thus the hero of the story is the one who, with anger and anguish in his heart, is prepared to challenge God's providential ordering of the world. Yet in the midst of his sufferings, Job is struggling his way towards faith. By 16:19 he is convinced that he has a witness in heaven who will stand for him and plead his case before God. In 19:25, in the middle of a passage in which he is accusing God of being the author of his suffering, he breaks into hope, looking forward to a 'go-el' or 'redeemer', the kinsman in Israelite society whose role was to defend the cause of the destitute, acting as an advocate in court and rescuer from debt.