

Job 39: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Job chapter 39. Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the carving of the does? Can you number the months that they fulfil? And do you know the time when they give birth? When they crouch, bring forth their offspring, and are delivered of their young?

Their young ones become strong. They grow up in the open. They go out and do not return to them. Who has let the wild donkey go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift donkey, to whom I have given the arid place for his home, and the salt land for his dwelling place?

He scorns the tumult of the city. He hears not the shouts of the driver. He ranges the mountains as his pasture, and he searches after every green thing. Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will he spend the night at your manger? Can you bind him in the furrow with ropes, or will he harrow the valleys after you? Will you depend on him because his strength is great, and will you leave to him your labour? Do you have faith in him that he will return your grain, and gather it to your threshing floor? The wings of the ostrich wave proudly, but are they the pinions and plumage of love? For she leaves her eggs to the earth, and lets them be warmed on the ground, forgetting that a foot may crush them, and that the wild beast may trample them. She deals cruelly with her young, as if they were not hers. Though her labour be in vain, yet she has no fear, because God has made her forget-wisdom, and given her no share in understanding. When she rouses herself to flee, she laughs at the horse and his rider. Do you give the horse his might? Do you clothe his neck with a mane? Do you make him leap like the locust? His majestic snorting is terrifying. He pours in the valley, and exults in his strength. He goes out to meet the weapons. He laughs at fear, and is not dismayed. He does not turn back from the sword. Upon him rattle the quiver, the flashing spear, and the javelin. With fierceness and rage he swallows the ground. He cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet. When the trumpet sounds, he says, Aha! He smells the battle from afar, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting. Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars, and spreads his wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up, and makes his nest on high? On the rock he dwells, and makes his home. On the rocky crag, and stronghold. From there he spies out the prey. His eyes behold it from far away. His young ones suck up blood, and where the slain are, there is he. Job chapter 39 continues the Lord's speech to

Job from the whirlwind. Chapter 38, the first part of the speech, focused upon the cosmos, the meteorological elements, and began to speak of the animal kingdom at the very end. Chapter 39 continues this panoramic vision of the creation, especially focusing upon the animal kingdom. The Lord grants Job a different perspective upon the creation. By his questions, he offers Job a sense of how he looks at his creation, and in the process he shakes Job out of his narrow anthropocentric perspective. What might look like arbitrary divine power to Job in the middle of his sufferings appears very differently when he steps back from the immediacy of his human situation.

Job's vision of creation, which had naturally focused upon and been ordered around his limited human vantage point, is answered by a divine vision of creation, where human beings are virtually entirely absent from the picture, and the cosmos is instead a place of immense and powerful celestial bodies, wastes and wilds, untamed and proud beasts, boisterous meteorological forces, and the dreadful deep and underworld, the engulfing primordial darkness, and all of these things operating under the rule of a gracious creator, who both sustains and bounds them. These forces and creatures and realities, threatening and indeed hostile to man on occasions, are nonetheless part of God's good creation, graciously given their place within the whole by the Lord. Robert Alter sheds light upon the way that the Lord's speech to Job from the whirlwind revisits and reconsiders some of the imagery and examples that appeared earlier in the dialogues, and that we need to read the two alongside each other.

[4 : 17] For instance, in Job chapter 4 verses 10 to 11, Eliphaz describes the lions as predators, and images of oppressors and wicked people. The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion, the teeth of the young lions are broken, the strong lion perishes for lack of prey, and the cubs of the lioness are scattered. However, when the Lord speaks about the lions, he presents them in a strikingly different light. In chapter 38 verses 39 to 40, can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in their thicket? The lion's hunting is supported and aided by the and it is the means graciously ordained by God for them to sustain themselves and their cubs.

In Psalm 104, the Great Creation Psalm, we have a similar expression in verses 21 and 22. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. When the sun rises, they steal away and lie down in their dens. Predation, which Job might regard as a force merely of death and chaos, is, in God's economy of creation, also a force of life. The Lord's speech is full of images of animals caring for their young. Such images in the mountain goat and the eagle bookend this chapter, and also, by strong implication throughout, these images afford us a way of thinking about how God himself relates to his creation. Alter especially foregrounds the relationship between Job's anguished discussion of the creation and existence in chapter 3, where he cursed the day of his birth, and the Lord's portrayal of it in these chapters. He writes, In direct contrast to all this withdrawal inward and turning out of lights, God's poem is a demonstration of the energising power of panoramic vision. Instead of the death wish, it affirms from line to line the splendour and vastness of life, beginning with a cluster of arresting images of the world's creation, and going on to God's sustaining of the world in the forces of nature and in the variety of the animal kingdom. Instead of a constant focusing inward toward darkness, this poem progresses through a grand sweeping movement that carries us over the length and breadth of the created world, from sea to sky, to the unimaginable recesses where snow and winds are stored, to the lonely wastes and craggy heights where only the grass or the wildest of animals lives. In Job's initial poem, various elements of the larger world were introduced only as reflectors or rhetorical tokens of his suffering. When the world is seen here through God's eyes, each item is evoked for its own sake, each existing thing having its own intrinsic and often strange beauty. In chapter 3, Job wanted to reduce time to nothing and contract space to the small dark compass of the locked womb. God's poem, by contrast, moves through eons from creation to the inanimate forces of nature to the teeming life on earth and, spatially, in a series of metonymic links, from the uninhabited wasteland, in verse 26, to the mountain habitat of the lion and the gazelle, the end of chapter 8 and the beginning of chapter 39, and the steps where the wild ass roams.

Job then wants to return to the darkness of the womb and the tomb and to extinguish life in that place. The Lord's response is the inverse of this. It's a bracing celebration of the manifoldness, the wonder and the goodness of life. What has been presented as images merely of death and chaos in Job's curse upon the day of his birth appear in the Lord's response as elements of a vast vista of a glorious and good creation, each with their own part to play. If Alter is right, the Lord's speech sets itself up in responsive dialogue to Job's curse through presenting its own portrayal of the creation in careful literary contrast to Job's. For instance, chapter 3, verses 7 to 9, describes the night of Job's birth, wishing that all of its stars were extinguished.

Behold, let that night be barren. Let no joyful cry enter it. Let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan. Let the stars of its dawn be dark. Let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning, because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes. In chapter 38, verses 4 to 7, the birth of the earth is described by the Lord, with the angelic stars themselves as a chorus of celebration. 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 sons of God shouted for joy?

[9 : 02] The Lord's response to Job is full of images of birth, accenting its wonder, glory, and mystery, answering to Job's tragic and annihilationist desire. Alter writes again, The poetics of suffering in chapter 3 seeks to contract the whole world to a point of extinction, and it generates a chain of images of enclosure and restriction. The poetics of providential vision in the speech from the storm conjures up horizon after expanding horizon, each populated with a new form of life. In chapter 38, verse 8, the sea is an infant coming forth from a womb and being swaddled by the clouds. The ice and the frost also come from their womb. In chapter 38, verse 29, beasts and birds giving birth and providing for their young are throughout chapter 39.

Creaturely life is exuberant and overflowing. This is seen most especially in its divinely given power of procreation. As Robert Alter observes again, the Canaanite cosmogonic myths, their stories accounting for the origin of the universe, tended to focus upon the act of creation as victory over a sort of chaos monster, creation through battle. While God's creative works are poetically depicted in such ways at points in scripture, what is notable is the way that such images are also subverted. In the Lord's response to Job, different motifs predominate. Rather than battle, creation is described in terms of procreation. Alter again. What we are invited to imagine in this fashion is creation, not as the laying low of a foe, but as the damming up and channeling of powers nevertheless allowed to remain active. The poet uses a rather unexpected verb, to hedge in, in order to characterize this activity of holding back the womb of the sea. And that is a double allusion to God's protective hedging round of Job mentioned in the frame story, and to Job's bitter complaint toward the end of his first poem of having been hedged in by God. Images of warfare are also seen at several points, in the Lord's speech. The warhorse is a notable example. The creation is a realm of awe, dread, fear and wonder, and such responses to it are nowhere more elicited than when we see the might of the creation and its creatures exhibited in the full expression of their strength in battle or predation. The hailstorm, reserved for the day of battle and war in chapter 38 verses 22 and 23, and the power of the warhorse snorting, shaking his mane, stamping, every muscle poised and waiting for the release of the command to charge, are images of the power and terror of the creation, and in the warhorse an image of how that can be mastered by someone for the cause of battle.

The mighty elements are like the Lord's own warhorses. The portrait of creation here is one in which God can set vast and mighty forces loose, but he never loses absolute control over them. By great contrast, a human being like Job is incapable of mastering, truly understanding, or controlling the dizzying array of forces and creatures enumerated by the Lord. The chapter begins with the mountain goats and their giving birth. Once again, the focus upon birth helps us to think of the creation as a place of burgeoning life and also of tender provision. There are also subtle plays off Job's initial speech to be found here. For instance, in verse 2, Can you number the months that they fulfill, and do you know the time when they give birth?

The numbering of the months was also mentioned in Job's initial speech. In chapter 3 verse 6, That night, let thick darkness seize it. Let it not rejoice among the days of the year.

Let it not come into the number of the months. Like the mountain goats, the wild donkeys live in wildernesses, in uninhabited regions where human beings do not dwell. Men do not watch over them or see their comings and goings, but the Lord does. He knows their most hidden and secret ways. He has graciously provided their dwelling places for them.

[12 : 58] The wild ox, like the wild donkey, will not serve man. He is a free and mighty beast, driven by his own will. The ostrich, which comes next in verses 13 to 18, is an interesting case.

She has an unusually careless attitude towards her young. God the creator has made all of his creations gloriously different. In the process, the desire to reduce everything to a universal principle is thwarted. God has given the ostrich speed to outrun its predators, but also to compensate for its stupidity. That stupidity also comes from God and is part of his good purpose of creation.

While David Clines questions their legitimacy, many see in the figure of the ostrich a comparison with Job's own condition, being deprived by God of a degree of wisdom. Some commentators have seen in verse 18's reference to the horse and his rider, a transition that moves us to the figure of the warhorse in verses 19 to 25. The warhorse is a majestic creature, seen in its full power in the context of battle. Warhorses fearlessly charging towards the enemy lines are a stirring sight.

The images of this chapter are not just images of power, tamed and untamed. There are many differences that the Lord highlights between the creatures that he portrays. He wants Job to recognise not just the untamed might of the creation, but also the variegated majesty of it.

The chapter ends with the hawks and the eagles, who soar in the heavens, a nest in inaccessible heights from where they espy their prey. These are birds of prey and carrion, but though associated with death, they too have a place within God's good order. The sucking up of blood and the eating of dead bodies is a means by which their young ones are given life. In book 12 of *The City of God*, St. Augustine speaks about the goodness of the transitory character of animal life. Although from a limited perspective it may seem to be a bad thing that animals die, in the larger scheme he sees it as a good thing. There is a fitting beauty to that which is transitory, to the seasons. Even the terrible process of death can be subordinated, and the servants of, a good order of life. Things have to perish in order that new things can come into existence. He writes, of this order the beauty does not strike us, because by our mortal frailty we are so involved in a part of it that we cannot perceive the whole, in which these fragments that offend us are harmonised with the most accurate fitness and beauty. And therefore, where we are not so well able to perceive the wisdom of the Creator, we are very properly enjoined to believe it, lest in the vanity of human rashness we presume to find any fault with the work of so great an artificer. He goes on later, all natures then, inasmuch as they are, and have therefore a rank and species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are certainly good. And when they are in the places assigned to them by the order of their nature, they preserve such being as they have received, and those things which have not received everlasting being, are altered for better or for worse, so as to suit the wants and motions of those things to which the Creator's law has made them subservient, and thus they tend in the divine providence to that end which is embraced in the general scheme of the government of the universe, so that, though the corruption of transitory and perishable things brings them to utter destruction, it does not prevent their producing that which was designed to be their result. In this speech the Lord is in many respects giving Job something of the perspective upon the whole that Job naturally lacks from the limited vantage point of his own suffering. Graciously granted such a vantage point, Job might begin to be better placed to understand his own sufferings. A question to consider, in this chapter the Lord sends Job to consider the animals. When we read accounts of creation in scripture, in Genesis 1-2 for instance, or in the Great Creation Psalm of Psalm 104, animals are very prominent in the picture.

[16 : 54] Why did God create the animals? What can we as human beings learn from reflecting upon them? And what do we lose when they drop out of our vision of creation?