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**Sovereignty of God in the Book of Job**

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**Introduction**

The book of Job tells of the disappointments of an upright man in the eyes of God, but who goes through a dramatic situation in spite of his faith. This man Job is presented as if he was a personality of the patriarchal time. We do not know much of him, except the few indications given in the introduction to the book which bears its name: He is known as originating in the country of Uz, but nothing is told as about his parents nor even of his people. The prominent Patriarchs in the Old Testament are presented differently: Abraham is the son of Terah; Isaac is the son of Abraham and Sarah; Esau and Jacob are sons of Isaac and Rebecca; etc. As for Job, he does not seem to enter in the tradition of Abraham. Only, his story sends us back to the animated history of Israel, more precisely at the patriarchal age. That is seen by the role of priest played by the principal actor. It is said for example that Job sanctified his children each time they returned from festivities, because he said to himself, which knows if my children would not have offended God in one way or another. Such a behavior refers to the era of the Patriarchs where the family chief was the priest within this one too. Job is presented as one that feareth God, an irreproachable man in his spirituality, a man that God himself personally knows and for which he can give evidence on behalf of. Thus, God challenges the accuser: “*Hast thou considered my servant*

*Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?” (1,8, cf. 2,3).<sup>1</sup>*

Such a testimony from the Creator is more important than any testimony done by men. Then, the question to ask is to know why such a treatment of Job. Job is declared right in front of God, however he will have to undergo a test which seems to contrast with the fact of being faithful to God.

Our study is made of three parts. Initially, we will deal with the question of the testing period of Job and the initial reactions, those of concerned followed those of the friends. Then, we will examine some texts which, in the mouth of Job, magnify the sovereignty of God. Lastly, we will see in which terms God speaks about his own sovereignty. It will be question of a rereading the answer of God to Job and to his friends.

#### **A. When one wants to justify God**

According to chapter II, Job's three friends had gone to the bedside of the patient. And they are quoted: Eliphaz of Teman, Bildad of Shuah and Zophar of Na'amah<sup>2</sup>. The two first will do each one three speeches which are directly followed by retort of Job (Chap. III - XXVI). Zophar only makes two speeches (Chap. XI-XIV/XX-XXI). Then comes one monologue moment (Chap. XXVII-XXXI), which is stopped by the long speech of Elihou (Chap. XXXII-XXXVII). The three friends are introduced like specialists in the tests, like people having answers about suffering. It is at the end of seven days that they spoke, in turn, to humiliate their friend. They awaited Job's reaction before speaking in their turn. Job arrived at end of patience because the suffering reached its paroxysm. The only sure person to whom he could confide in was his wife. But this one had rather suggested to her husband cursing God and that thus he puts an end to his atrocious sufferings<sup>3</sup>. However, it is necessary to know the fact that his woman

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The resumption of this episode in 2,1-7 appears as an addition which could be due to the forwarding of text by the scribes. This forms a doublet.

Further, another friend, Elihou (chap. 32) will enter in competition, without will bring the least proof of culpability of Job. Moreover, Job does not even answer him, which made say to several exegetes that this last account would be a late addition to the primitive text.

The Hebrew verb used here is rather "Barak", to bless. André CHOURAQUI keeps the translation "Bless Elohim, and die", cf. A. CHOURAQUI, Job (the Bible), Paris, Desclée de Brower, 1974, p. 20. As for us, we follow the majority of the modern translations which leave it rather within the meaning of the verse: "His wife says to him: 'Curse God, and die'", 2,11; even smell that in 1,5.

was not indifferent to the situation of Job, but like him, she also lost her ten children. The role that one makes her play in this poem seems to discredit her. Thus, by keeping with the verb “*Barak*” its real significance, Midrash seeks to give a positive reading to the words of the woman: “*Sing the praise of God and then die as a righteous*”; “*You see well that you will be able nothing to make of other, God is strongest and early or late, it will be necessary for you to die!* »<sup>4</sup>. Replying to his wife, Job leads her to see things within the sphere of God’s sovereign will. Thus, he uses first person plural, seeking to make her share his resignation. The dialogue is not broken; Job condemned certainly the remarks of his wife, but does not reject her. With respect to his new condition, Job curses the day of his birth (v.3-5), but not God. In fact, he despises the day which did not prevent his design in the belly of his mother (v.10). Job wants to understand why God lets people live in suffering<sup>5</sup>; he would prefer the rest of the shehol rather than a so unhappy life. He does not want to fall into the trap that Satan sets for him so that he admits a kind of dualism in the government of the world. For Job, it is clear: there are not two authorities which control the affairs of life; God alone is Master of all. And the life itself must be regarded as a fight between the good and the evil, but all is with the capacity of the Creator. Job recognizes it well and the fact knowledge with his wife<sup>6</sup>. As for the friends, they decided to support him by expressing their great desolation to him. Then, later, they will attack and badger him. The first to speak is Eliphaz (chap.4). He reacts to the remarks of Job, and wants to bring him back on the way of the hope in God (v.6). His speech is rather directed towards the theology of revenge, v.7-8: Only the sinner deserves punishment. Eliphaz wants to bring Job to the way of repentance because he believes in God’s forgiveness of (cf. v. 17-19).

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<sup>4</sup> J. Eisenberg and E. Wiesel, *JOB ou Dieu dans la tempête*, Paris, Fayard / Verdier, 1986, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word *Sevel* means « Suffering ». Two other derivates from that word are *Savlanout* = “To be patient”, and *Sovlanout* = “Tolerance”. It is important to be patient in suffering, to wait the end of suffering... Suffering does not drive us in the view of exclusion, but must teach the tolerance”, J. EISENBERG & E. WIESEL, *op.cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> It is the only part - negative besides - which one makes play woman. In the continuation known account, it does not reappear any more, even not when God will be caught some to the friends of Job. What made say to more one that this episode would be a late addition with the primitive account. It will be the same in the continuation with the intervention for Elihou which does not bring any additional argument to those of the three friends quoted to the beginning (cf. chap. 32-37). God will not say anything to Elihou, which is nevertheless curious because it is in the same terms that it condemns Job.

## **B. The sovereignty of God in the mouth of Job**

We saw it, to make his mourning, Job confessed the sovereignty of YHWH from the first day of his successive tests (cf. 1,21). He had been humiliated before in front of God as a sign of total obedience to His supreme will. When he says for example: “*YHWH gave, YHWH hath taken away, blessed be the name of YHWH*”, he confesses by that the greatness and the total sovereignty of God. In the same way, as we have mentioned above, when his wife has tired she suggested to him to curse God, Job says: “... *What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God happiness, and shall we not receive evil?!* ” 2,10ss (Semeur). And even when Job curses the day of his birth, he does not dare to curse YHWH. However, in the continuation of the account, faced with the friend’s attacks, these funny comforters, Job blames God’s justice, but never his sovereignty. We will examine texts where Job magnifies precisely this Sovereign God. “*For the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit: the terrors of God do set themselves in array against me*” (6,4). Eliphaz is bringing Job far away. He led him on the way of confession, and Job complains about his condition but with full confidence in YHWH. The poisoned arrows about which Job speaks will think of the fact that he was taken for target, without knowing why<sup>7</sup>. If God judges Job now, it is because he is Sovereign; he does what he wants and as he decides it. Job is seen saturated with pains. He wants that his cry arrives at the ears of YHWH Who only is able to return true justice. It is this same cry which comes back into 7,7: “*O remember that my life is wind: My eye shall no more see good*”. Job looks like a starving man who crosses a desert. His pain is so large that he understands nothing there. In this manner, he realizes that even the friends are incapable of bringing the consolation he needs under such circumstances. For this reason he turns to God to request a favor: the right to die in all dignity (cf. 6,8-9). Job implores YHWH to crush him by death rather than by atrocious sufferings which he cannot support any more. Job does not want to put an end to his days by his own initiative; He wants to die by God’s hand. Moreover, death had

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<sup>7</sup> The image of poisoned arrows here is very strong. This is seen by the Hebrew term *immadi* also used in 9,35; 10,12-27 and 13,19,20?, which indicates a “total and deep touch”. Calamities and pains are on human beings reach the soul, vital principle. Terrors are lined like an army on a battle”. E. ROBIN In L. PIROT & A. CLAMER, p. 734.

already started to make its work through the pain. For Job, even if he could all loose, there would remain to him the greatest consolation, the Divine presence<sup>8</sup>. Thus, he does not ask to his friends only to be judged in an equitable way. He wants each one of them, instead of condemning him as if he had really sinned, to be able to understand that what arrives to him is in the sovereign YHWH's plan. And when Job is addressed directly to God, he challenges him on his fate: "*What is man, that you shouldst magnify him? and that you shouldst set thine heart upon him?*" (7,17, cf. PS 8,4-9). Through Bildad's speech also, appears the tendency to justify God. For this other friend, it will be necessary that Job remembers even sins that his own sons would have made because it is not possible that God bends the right or that he torpedoes justice. Job's retort consists in being recognized small compared to YHWH: "*How should man be just with God?*" (9,1b/2). Job turns to God's justice as response to all the attacks. He confesses his weakness and asks God to restore him: "*Your hands have made me and fashioned me*" (10,8a). The same accent returns in Zophar's speech too. He harasses Job by condemning his pretensions: "*Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?*" (11,7).

Facing all these accusations, Job confesses God's in creation and history (cf. 12,13-25). Indeed, to God belongs wisdom and power. The man cannot reassure another in this direction, and Job does not want to resort to human wisdom. All is to the power of the Creator of life; and it is him who destroys the human's pretensions and wisdom (v.17). God confuses even king's wisdom. In this manner, he alone decides on the fate of his servant. Job's disease is in this supreme will of God. As we read it in a note of the Bible of the Sower (Semeur), "Job paints here the vision of sovereign God, who sends misfortune to men without there being reason, and without possibility to defend themselves. This vision plunges him in despair"<sup>9</sup>. In spite of this powerlessness, Job can trust in this God who can do and which does all that he wants, supremely: "Surely I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God" (13,3). Giving the situation of

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ps 119,50, where a similar of full confidence is found: "In my misery, my comfort is your promise which makes me live".

<sup>9</sup> The v. 14 takes up this idea: "Here: what he destroys, no one does not rebuild it. And if het locks up a man, nobody will open".

powerlessness of the friends to comfort with right words, Job turns to the Almighty God (' *El Shadday*). "He waits with hope because until every hope is expectations. God himself is in expectations. God is expectations. He await, with human, until delivery arrives. Just like the man, he awaits the Messiah"<sup>10</sup>. Like this, Job can retort to his friends speaking to them with authority: "*Hold your peace, let me alone...Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own way before him*" (13,13a.15). Finally, Job's even starting to confess his trust, which is central in the whole of the book: "*I know that my Redeemer (Go'el, Defender) is alive. And that he shall stand at the talar day upon earth*" (19,25)<sup>11</sup>. For Job, God will be the last (' *aharôn*) to close the debate because he will restore him in his rights. Whoever, the length of the test, God, his God, will not fail to defend the cause of his servant. "Job asks God bring his justice and to allot his right remuneration to him, and he expresses the certainty of it"<sup>12</sup>. The same accent is read in the continuation when Job continues to retort with his friends. On several occasions, he designates God by the "*El Shadday*", name to which is attached at the same time His force, His power and His wisdom, therefore his sovereignty<sup>13</sup>. After having given all the arguments in which he expressed his faith in God in response to the hard tests to which he is subjected, Job kept silent. He has not much strength to even retort to Elihou which was presented as the youngest of all the friends even if he is not quoted at the beginning of the book. After the long monologue of this in which he wanted to justify God and condemned any claim of his friend Job, there is a great silence. Elihou seems to ignore the other friends; he is talking to Job, to him only<sup>14</sup>. He challenges him so violently from the beginning: "*Hear my speeches ... I have opened my mouth, my tongue hath spoken in my mouth*" (33,1-2). His speech which is like an introduction to the intervention of YHWH, is centered on three arguments: 1°. The suffering is for God a teaching method to

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<sup>10</sup> J. EISENBERG, E. WIESEL, p. 279.

<sup>11</sup> Go'el was the avenger of blood in antiquity. Later this term was used to indicate that which had the right of repurchase (cf. the case of Ruth, 4,4-6) or that which could recover what had been catch (cf. Numbers 5,8). In Israel, God is that which repurchases his people by restoring all his rights to him.

<sup>12</sup> E. ROBIN, p. 785

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 21,15; 29,; 31,2, etc.

<sup>14</sup> In the same way, at the end of this saga YHWH does not challenge Elihou. It is as if this man had never existed. J. EISENBERG & E. WIESEL, p. 320.

challenge the man (chap. 33 and 36); 2°. To claim to be justified whereas one sinned, it is arrogance. God alone is right, and Job's words are condemnable (chap. 34 and 35); 3°. All that God does is perfect, and none can add or take anything away. Thus, the essentials of Elihou's speech constitutes an effort to demonstrate Job's fault. Midrash allots to Elihou the title Satan: "Satan had schemed and then disappeared. Then, he would return; at the moment when Job's friends have run out of arguments, to take back their speeches by reinforcing it"<sup>15</sup>. God being Sovereign, Job has only to endure what he imposes to him. And it is after Job's and his friends' silence that God intervenes.

### **C. God speaks about His sovereignty**

Until the end, God remained quiet. It is as if he wanted that Job's friends arrive at the end of their argumentation, and that Job himself reaches the greatest point of his suffering. But one can also understand this silence as we read it in the profession of faith of the patient (cf. 19,25).

God intervenes "out of the storm"<sup>16</sup> and starts by speaking to Job before making reproaches to the friends of this last. Let us note besides that the intention of the book is specified: Let God intervene! This shows that his silence is not an absence.

#### **1. Answer if you can, Job!**

YHWH poses a series of questions which require a humble answer: "I do not know"; "I cannot". The questions, as well as the answers are obvious and magnify God greatness and his sovereignty. However, many times Job had expressed the wish to plead his cause in front of YHWH. The occasion is thus favorable for him of saying what was in his heart. God does not let himself impress; he will prove to Job that only Himself can all and that nothing can darken His intentions. That is why Job's remarks of Job are treated "words devoid sense".

YHWH is presented as the Architect of the universe; He brings back Job to the old times, to the creation. He only knows the finality

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<sup>15</sup> J. EISENBERG & E. WIESEL, p. 320.

<sup>16</sup> The appearance of God (theophany) is expressed here by the expression "out of the storm", an expression which one finds also elsewhere, cf. PS 1,3.

of his work. The themes approached by the Lord, God of the universe, follow a precise order: Job is destined for an attentive listening of the divine speech which risks to condemn him: - Creation of the world; - the foundation of the ground; - stars deployed in the sky; - extent of the sea; - limits of the ground and the seas; - the mystery of death; - the light; snow and hail. Job seems disturbed; he cannot answer the obvious questions of YHWH. “God knows well that Job was absent during creation and that he would be quite unable to order the dawn! But while speaking about the song of creation, God becomes song, and allows Job to attend the birth of this song”<sup>17</sup>. And as Job cannot say anything in front of sovereign God, the Lord continues his speech by calling upon the animal world successively, the alternation of the seasons, the stars, the power of wild beasts<sup>18</sup>. Until the end, Job had an attentive ear; but he ends up recognizing his smallness: “*Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay my hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken, but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further*” (40,4-5). Job belittles himself, and humiliates himself too. He seems to have understood. Despite everything, YHWH continues to knock him (40,6 - 41,26).

In front of all these attacks, Job withdraws into himself, and lets himself go to the Sovereign God. He speaks again even though he said that he puts his hand on the mouth: “*I know that you canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from you. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes*” (42,1.5-6). Job understood that God is Sovereign; he was transformed by the tests. For this reason he ends up confessing Yahweh’s sovereignty: “*I have heard of you by hearing of the ear: but now my eye seeth you*”. He understood that nothing is too difficult for God (cf. Gn 18,14). This said, he awaits only the last word of this God whom he knows differently from now on.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Eisenberg and E. Wiesel, p. 371.

<sup>18</sup> Those are two monsters which, in the Jewish apocalypse, play a very important part: Behemoth (main of the sea) and Leviathan (main of the ground). God invited Job to observe well these two frightening animals which, however, are in his capacity. However, YHWH alone is the Master of all nature. He is not limited but has all to be able and any power. He does what he wants, and none does not have the right to require accounts of him.



## 2. Epilogue

The account ends in the interpellation of Job's the friends of Job by God, and the re-establishment of Job. Two facts stand out through chapter 42: - YHWH makes reproaches with the alleged friends whom he describes as "nasty"; Elihou is not challenged.<sup>19</sup>

Job's friends did not speak about YHWH with soundness. Only Job did. God calls Job "my servant" and justifies him. He expresses his wrath towards the three friends: "*My anger is ignited against you (Eliphaz) and your two friends, because you did not speak about me with straightness like my Job servant does*" (42,7). The paradox, in this account is that "that who seemed to blame God was his lawyer; those who claimed to defend him spoke false"<sup>20</sup>. God thus condemns the three friends and asks them to repair their wrongs. They are invited to make sacrifices of repair: Seven bulls and seven rams (figure of plenitude). It is at this price that Job will request for them, and that their sin will be forgiven. The most interesting thing is that they obeyed.<sup>21</sup>

**The re-establishment of Job:** God restores Job, and restores all to him that he had lost. Even the friends who had harassed him in the past will become true friends. Job finds again a normal life; he has a new family: seven sons and three daughters like in the past. The account ends in a great blessing of Job which leads to dead "*being old and full of days*". God actually had the last word. He was present within the distress of Job. He heard the Job's friends words who tried to justify him. He heard Job's heart. Only, He could intervene only in His time; it is not possible to jostle Him so that He intervenes in a given situation. For this reason, in His sovereignty, He rises the last on the ground and puts an end to the suffering of his servant, by restoring him<sup>22</sup>. This history constitutes a call to the contemplation of

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<sup>19</sup> The Talmud comments on this omission by the fact that it regards Elihou as Satan which, at the beginning of the account, was present at the divine court, but which disappeared to reappear at the end.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. E. ESEINBERG & E. WIESEL, p. 391.

<sup>21</sup> Job is invited to request initially for his friends. This attitude will attract great blessings to him. This made think of the ancestor Abraham who interceded in favour of the impious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18,20-33). God wants that one thinks initially of the others in their distress; he blesses when one obeys this principle.

<sup>22</sup> The girl's names are quoted; their names refer to fruitfulness and the beauty. Moreover, the text insists on the fact that through the East, there were girls more beautiful than the girls of Job. Moreover, the three girls receive their share of heritage as well as the boys. This shows that from now on the things will be different. To look further  
[Footnote continued on next page ... ]

this God who has the last word upon the distress of those that He recognizes as His children and His servants. His sovereignty extends to all the generations. Such is the teaching to derive from the account of the suffering of Job.

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into the study in English language, to see: - V. McGee, *Job*, Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991; - E. - H. PETERSON, “Introduction to Job”, in *The Message*, Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002; - France. I. ANDERSEN, *Job: Tyndale OT Commentary Series* (London: InterVarsity Near, 1976; - P. - H. GIBBON, *A Cal to Heroism*, New York, NY, Grove/Atlantic, Atlantic Monthly Near, 2002; - J. - E. HARTLEY, *The Book off Job (NICOT)*, Large Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing CO, 1988; - William Henry GREEN, *Conflict and Triumph: The Argument off the Book off Job Unfolded*, Carlisle, Pa: Banner off Truth, 1999; - D. ATKINSON, *The Message off Job: Suffering and Grace, “The Bible Speaks Today Series”*, Downers Grove, IT, InterVarsity Near, 1999.