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Wilson, Gerald H.

Job

New International Biblical Commentary

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The editors of this series state in the foreword that the approach to be taken is that of “believing criticism,” a critical approach, but from the stance of faith. This is a helpful guide to the approach to be taken in each volume. Gerald Wilson in this volume on Job discusses the critical issues in his introduction. He usefully distinguishes between the final form of composition of the book, which he dates to the postexilic period, suggesting a possible dislocated Diaspora community living not long before 200 B.C.E., and the older components that make up the book. This is a posited dating considerably later than most suggestions, based largely on the view that Job has a very different understanding of suffering than exilic or early postexilic works and so must postdate them. In opting for this dating, Wilson does not place Job before Ecclesiastes in the chronological development of wisdom literature and opt for a fourth-century B.C.E. dating, as is usual in Job scholarship. Rather, Wilson sees Job and Ecclesiastes as pretty much of a pair, both containing pessimistic and questioning wisdom.

In relation to the various older components that make up the book, Wilson airs the possibility of an independent dialogue written earlier and then reworked into the Diaspora context. This leads him to some interesting suggestions concerning the original theological function of the dialogue, as opposed to the one it now gains in its final form.

He writes, “First, in its original, independent state, the poetic dialogue wrestles with the incomprehensibility of human suffering in relation to a retributive world view” (11). He sees the Elihu speeches as “monologues” written in response to the dialogue and thus having had no independent existence. The God speeches, however, could have been an independent wisdom reflection, later placed in the book of Job. Wilson sees the final form of Job as an “intentional editorial unity with a cohesive purpose and message in the canonical form of the book” (11) Wilson argues interestingly that the prologue relativizes the dialogue so that no longer can the reader wonder whether Job is sinful or innocent, as one has been told that Job is the latter. Thus the dialogue is no longer about the reason for innocent suffering. Furthermore, the retribution debate can no longer illuminate Job’s circumstances, as the reader has been told that his suffering is a result of a test set by God and the satan. Thus the reader of the final form must look for a new central issue, which is found in the satan’s question: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (Job 1:9). In other words, is disinterested righteousness possible? Thus the question posed by the dialogue is: “Is it possible to endure, holding on to God, even if one dies *without being acknowledged as righteous?*” (12, emphasis original). Wilson notes that Job’s chief concern moves from maintaining his own integrity in the light of the friends’ comments to public vindication by God. Chapter 28, which Wilson regards as a speech of Job rather than an independent hymn to wisdom (as is usually maintained), is seen as marking the transition in Job’s chief concern. The recognition of the inability of human beings to discover divine wisdom leads Job to realize his absolute dependence upon God.

The dislocation of the third cycle of speeches, an issue that so exercised scholars of a previous generation, is passed over lightly by Wilson, who leaves the speeches in their original characters’ mouths, to speak in their final form, rather than attempting to rearrange them. In relation to the Elihu speeches that follow Job’s own monologues in Job 29–31, Wilson sees their function in the final form being to delay the climax of God’s appearance. He makes the interesting point that, after the Elihu speeches (in Job 38:1), it is made clear that God addresses Job and not Elihu from the whirlwind, suggesting that Elihu’s presence is being acknowledged by whoever wrote this section rather than him being a complete “intruder” on the scene, as often stated by scholars. He writes, “It is necessary to clarify the recipient at this point to indicate that God is responding to Job and not to Elihu, whose speech has just ended (or was interrupted). The use of this new formula would only be necessary if the Elihu speeches—regardless of their origin—already stood sandwiched between the final speech of Job (chs. 27–31) and God’s response (chs. 38–41)” (422).

Wilson has an interesting interpretation of the God speeches. He sees them as stating the absolute otherness of God, a Being totally removed from human experience and completely unknowable. Yet this is in tension with the fact that God is prepared to answer

Job in response to his call for an encounter. Wilson thus stresses human insignificance in the presence of the divine and uses this insight to comment upon Job's first response. He writes, "Job fades away before the presence of God not because he is sinful, but because he can do no other in the face of the holy God" (14). Wilson regards Job's first response as a "non-response," a moment of relief in the middle of the divine onslaught. This, like the Elihu speeches, causes dramatic tension. There is then a second speech by God to which Job's second response provides resolution. Wilson sees the portrayal of God in the speeches as

mysterious, distant (and yet near!), fearsomely other than humans. He is the powerful creator and sustainer of the universe who is still in control.... we see the mystery of God in his essential otherness, but also in the reality that holy God permits evil to exist in this world even in the face of righteousness. Humans are unable to fully understand what God is about in this world and so God is able to act freely, limited only by his essential holy character. (14)

Job in his second response acknowledges God as the foundation of all existence and hence the God whom Job desires to worship. In 42:6, Wilson argues that Job is not repenting of a named sin but rather that this marks his change in opinion about God. The friends, on the other hand, are chastised by God for their naïve view of retributive justice.

Wilson makes the interesting point that restoration is not a foregone conclusion in the book—at the first reading the "reader" might be surprised by it. Rather, restoration is a free act of God. Again the epilogue had an original purpose—divine reward for faithful living—but is altogether more complex in its answers in relation to the final form of the book. The commentary on individual passages is kept on the briefer side, with discussion of Hebrew terms (in transliterated form) or contested readings, where relevant, and with footnotes containing more detail or further bibliography. There is interesting cross-reference to other Old Testament passages and some discussion of rabbinic interpretation. There is a short list of commentaries and other works for further reading at the end of the book. This commentary seeks to steer a line between critical discussion referring to original language and accessibility to believing Christians, hence its relative brevity in dealing only with really key interpretative issues and in staying succinct and to the point in its discussions. It is clear that much scholarship lies behind it according to the author's expertise. It will be particularly valuable to preachers and teachers of the Bible in many contexts. It is well written and accessible and is a worthy companion to other more lengthy volumes of commentary upon Job. It is sad that Gerald Wilson died before this commentary came out. In the light of this sadness, I found the final words of the commentary particularly touching:

And so he died, old and full of years. Job did die—he was only mortal after all. But his death came not only after a long life but after a satisfied one as well.... The narrative of Job comes to an end not in suffering, but in satisfaction.... for Job there is satisfaction in seeing this God, satisfaction that is more important than any wealth, pleasure, and personal vindication that this world can contain. This God, says Job, is even worth dying for, penniless, bereft of friends and family, and reviled as a sinner! Aren't we glad that the incarnate Word of God felt the same about us? (477)