

June 30, 2002
All Saints Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Because he was the last to speak among Job's (alleged!) comforters, we should presume that Zophar was the youngest of those three. Whereas the Massoretic text speaks of him as a "Naamathite," likely in reference to a site in northwestern Arabia called Jebel-el-Na'ameh, the much older Septuagint version identifies him as "the king of the Mineans," a tribe in southern Arabia. Zophar was, in either case, an Arab.

Rather Arabian, too, was his attitude toward Job's problem, because Zophar's was a God experienced in the starkness of the desert. Arabs and other ancient nomads, unlike the tillers of the soil who were their contemporaries, were not people accustomed to thinking of God in terms of agricultural cycles and seasons. Gods of fertility, to say nothing of goddesses, were not much worshipped in the desert. While the nomad certainly invoked a Sky Father, that invocation normally had nothing to do with an Earth Mother, for only seldom did the desert dweller witness the rain that prompted the farmer to think of the Sky Father as a god of fertility .

Little preoccupied with earth, the religion of the Arabian nomad was not burdened with the complex and intricate rites and narratives associated with the agricultural divinities. It was, rather, a simpler religion concentrated on heaven, that vast vault overarching the trackless sands. For if the desert provided the Arabian with no constant and discernible path, heaven certainly did, because across its face moved the myriad celestial bodies in their appointed rotations and everlasting courses. The dweller in the desert would very quickly become lost unless he took his guidance from the stars above, so the religion of the desert was at once less complex and more predictable, its lines marked by a steadiness and predetermination unfamiliar to the rather undependable and often uncertain future of the farmer. And while the vastness and height of the sky proclaimed its independence from every human hope and need, the order-even the punctuality-of its regular gyrations conveyed the stable transcendence of solidly simple truths, entirely dependable because utterly unalterable. It was from the relentless desert that the mind of mankind learned the eternal and apodictic moral law.

Zophar, whose arguments are found in Chapters 11 and 20 of the Book of Job, was the spokesman for that stern, demanding, moral religion learned across the sands beneath the vaulted heavens. He argued that if Job was suffering, then Job most certainly deserved to suffer: "The heavens will reveal his iniquity, and the earth will rise up against him" (20:27). Eternally just is the moral structure of the universe. Indeed, he tells Job, "God exacts from you less than your iniquity deserves" (11:6).

Zophar, a man familiar with "the poison of cobras" and "the viper's tongue" (20:16), regarded Job's protestations of innocence as mere exercises in pretense: "Do you not know this from of old, since man was placed on the earth, that the triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite is but for a moment? Though his haughtiness mounts up to the heavens, and

his head reaches to the clouds, yet he will perish forever like his own refuse. Those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?' He will fly away like a dream and will not be found" (20:4-8).

Even Zophar's abrupt rhetorical style resembles some turbaned rider from the desert, swooping down swiftly from the dunes, camel at the gallop, robes flowing in the wind, scimitar whirling aloft and menacing. Speaking of "my anxious thoughts" and "the turmoil within me" (20:2), Zophar's is the fierce, impetuous voice of the sandstorm. Whereas Bildad and Eliphaz speculated about Job's afflictions as a philosophical problem, Zophar will have none of it but is even insulting to the sufferer. Job accuses Zophar of mockery (cf. 21:3, where the verb is in the singular) and the insensitivity of someone unfamiliar with personal affliction (12:4f).

Zophar, in short, is not much given to calm, detached dialogue. Unlike Eliphaz the Temanite, he makes no appeal to his personal experience, nor, like Bildad the Shuhite, does he argue from the studies of the ancients. Zophar believes that things are what they are. The laws overarching the world are unalterable, and if Job cannot accept that fact, then he is "a man full of talk" (11:2), "a stupid man" (11:12), to be numbered among the "worthless" (11:11) and "the wicked" (11:20). In the book's structure, Zophar's fierce impatience with Job functions as a major foil to Job's patience.

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