

September 8, 2002

The Sunday Before the Elevation of the Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Following the Bible's mystical number of fullness, Job is addressed seven times by his three comforters, an arrangement that permits the first of those speakers, Eliphaz the Temanite, to address him three times. It is probably because he is the eldest of the three men (cf. Job 15:10) that Eliphaz speaks first, and this is surely also the reason why, near the end of the book, God addresses Eliphaz directly as the spokesman of the group (42:7).

A native of Teman, Eliphaz represents the ancient wisdom of Edom (cf. Genesis 36:11), concerning which Jeremiah inquired, "Is wisdom no more in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom vanished?" (Jeremiah 49:7) Eliphaz represents, then, the "wisdom of the south," the great desert region of the Negev and even Arabia, where only the wise can survive.

In his initial response to Job (Chapters 4 and 5), Eliphaz appeals most confidently to his own personal religious experience. Unlike the other two comforters, Eliphaz is something of a visionary. He has seen (4:8; 5:3) and heard (4:16) the presence of the divine claims in an experience of such subtlety that he calls it a "whisper" (shemets - 4:12). This deep sense of the divine absolute, born of Eliphaz's religious experience, forced upon his mind a strong conviction of the divine purity and justice. This profound conviction in his soul became the lens through which Eliphaz interprets the sundry problems of life, notably the problem of human suffering. Consequently, he is offended by what appears to be Job's presumption in raising his voice against his own existence.

In the relationship of Eliphaz to the other two comforters, moreover, we observe a graduated decline of wisdom. Eliphaz begins by invoking his own visionary experience. However, the second comforter, Bildad the Shuhite, appeals to no experience of his own, but only the experience of his elders, so what was an insight in Eliphaz declines to an inherited theory in Bildad. Mystical insight becomes moral tradition. The decline goes further in the third comforter, because Zophar the Naamathite is unable even to invoke the tradition. He

demonstrates neither the experience of Eliphaz nor the learning of Bildad; his is simply the voice of established prejudice. In these three men, therefore, we watch insight decline into theory, and then theory harden into a settled bias.

We also find that Eliphaz, at least when he begins, is the most compassionate and polite of the three comforters. Still, he is shocked by Job's tone. Instead of asking God to renew His mercies, Job has been cursing his own life. And since God the Creator is the source of that life, Job's lament hardly reflects well on God. This perverse attitude of Job, Eliphaz reasons, must be the source of the problem. Job's affliction, consequently, is not an inexplicable mystery, as Job has argued, but the result of Job's own attitude toward God. Job's lament, Eliphaz believes, was essentially selfish, expressing only Job's subjective pain. Therefore, Eliphaz becomes more severe in his criticism of Job, referring to him as a "fool" (5:2.3).

This severity becomes the dominant temper of his second and third speeches (Chapters 15 and 22), where Eliphaz no longer shows deference and compassion. His former sympathy and concern for Job are no longer possible, because Eliphaz has repeatedly listened to Job professing his innocence. By emphatically denying a moral causality with respect to his afflictions, Eliphaz believes, Job menaces the moral structure of the world, and he now responds with aggression and even a tone of threat. Is Job older than Adam, he asks, or as old as wisdom itself (15:7; cf. Proverbs 8:25), that he should be engaged in such dangerous speculations about the hidden purposes of God? The irony, of course, is that Job is the only one whose discourse manifests even a shred of intellectual humility. He has never, like Eliphaz (4:12-21), claimed to discern the divine mind.

What should be said, then, of this Edomite's argument against Job? Though it is too severe and personally insensitive, it is basically a sound case. Indeed, in God's final word to Job near the end of the book, we meet some of the themes initially seen in the first discourse of Eliphaz. Moreover, in the final verses of his first speech (5:25-26), Eliphaz foretells, as it were, the blessings received by Job at the end of the story (42:12-17).

**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**

[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**

[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)

**Pastoral Ponderings:**

[http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral\\_ponderings.php](http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php)