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*Covenant in the
Persian Period*

From Genesis to Chronicles

Edited by

RICHARD J. BAUTCH and GARY N. KNOPPERS

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“When the Friendship of God Was upon My Tent”

Covenant as Essential Background to Lament in the Wisdom Literature

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Introduction

Perhaps the classic statement of the Wisdom Literature’s rejection of covenant came from Walther Zimmerli in his article “The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of Old Testament Theology.” As a starting point to his broader argument, Zimmerli (1964: 147) contends that, “Wisdom has no relation to the history between God and Israel. This is an astonishing fact.” And, were this notion sustainable, it would indeed be an astonishing fact. For such an extensive section of the OT/HB (Old Testament/Hebrew Bible) canon to reject what is, arguably, the central driver of the rest of that canon would be extraordinary. There is a very real sense in which the history of Israel’s relationship with YHWH is the prelude, precursor and underpinning to all that we read in the OT/HB. So, if it truly does reject or ignore that history, then the WL (Wisdom Literature) is indeed unique within the canon. And, of course, pertinently for our current discussion, if there is no history between God and Israel then there is no revelation of YHWH as a covenant God, nor can there be any expectation of this type of promissory relationship between God and “his” people.

Zimmerli’s argument became somewhat axiomatic within studies of the WL for some time. For example, Roland Murphy (1992: 927) comments of the WL: “The most striking characteristic is the absence of elements generally considered to be typically Israelite: the promises to the patriarchs, the Exodus experience, the Sinai covenant, etc. . . . exceptions prove the rule: salvation history is absent from the realm of wisdom.” Elsewhere (Murphy 1978: 36) he comments on “the observable fact that WL is strangely silent about God’s interventions in Israel’s history (Exodus,

covenant, cult etc.)” James Crenshaw (1998: 36), even more directly, argues that “the Sages . . . proclaimed a world-view that offered *a viable alternative to the Yahwistic one*.” Elsewhere (Day, Gordon, and Williamson 1995: 1), we read: “Since the wisdom texts paid little attention to cult and even less to covenant it was virtually inevitable that, as long as the quest (for a centre to OT Theology) persisted in this form, wisdom would be on the sidelines.”

However, despite its axiomatic status, Zimmerli’s contention that WL neglects the main focuses of the OT/HB has come under serious question since the literary turn in biblical studies. During the era of the interpretative dominance of source-critical approaches, it was very easy to marginalize texts in the WL that seemed to point to a greater awareness of the OT’s classic loci as late additions and, therefore, of dubious value.¹ However, final form approaches to the text reinstate some of the indicators of covenantal awareness as legitimate aspects of wisdom thought. Arguably, the arch example of a connection between the Israelite wisdom tradition and covenantal theology is the prominence of the “fear of the LORD” theme in Proverbs.² However, it is my contention that covenant ideology underpins the WL in many ways, both subtle and transparent. One of the ways in which that relationship is evidenced is in the logic of lament in canonical Wisdom. The primary example of this thought process is to be found in the book of Job, an extended lament, where—although the *language* of covenant is not prominent—the concept is essential for the argument of the book to make any sense at all. This is an argument in four parts:

1. Locating Job in the Persian period
2. Discussing the difference between covenant as a theological construct and the historic covenants
3. Examining the attitudes behind other ancient Near Eastern lament texts in order to analyse the key operative dynamics that come into play in this lament poetry

1. The classic example of this tendency would be McKane’s (1970) threefold categorization of the Proverbs which demoted expressly religious proverbs to the status of “Class C” maxims. These were presented as late correctives to the “original,” largely observational and empirical, proverbs that somehow lay at the very heart of wisdom.

2. The importance of this theme is emphasized by its use as an *inclusio* demarcating both the first section of the book (Prov 1:7 and 9:10) and the book as a whole (1:7 and 31:30). The “fear of the LORD” theme, therefore, acquires an obvious importance for textual approaches because the *inclusio* points to a hermeneutical key for understanding the text. In this way, relationship with the *covenantal* God becomes vital in any attempt to understand the wisdom of the sages in Proverbs, thus reuniting wisdom with the theme of covenant. See Bartholomew 2001 and van Leeuwen 1997 for further discussion.

4. Considering the importance of the question of relationship with God—and, by implication, *covenant* relationship with God—in the book of Job

Grounding Job in the Persian Period

As I have written elsewhere (Grant 2010), establishing the historical provenance of poetic texts is extremely difficult and, apart from the broadest of terms, most poetic texts defy close contextual categorization. However, having said this, it does seem likely that the book of Job reached its final form within the Persian period. Dell (2003: 337), for example, comments that “the book of Job is generally dated between the sixth and the fourth century BC.” And there are many indications that would affirm this broad estimate. First, it seems appropriate to surmise that the writing/editing activity of Israel’s sages reached prominence in the Persian period (Vargon 2001: 379). Second, given that the book of Job appears to be a response to a certain type of interpretation of Proverbs, one would have to allow for the completion of Job sometime after Proverbs was in wide circulation.³ Third, other indicators—such as the preponderance of Aramaisms (Bartholomew and O’Dowd 2011: 128) and Dhrome’s (1967: clxix) observation of similarities to the texts of Zechariah and Malachi—all point to the likelihood that the book of Job reached its final form in the Persian period.⁴ Gerstenberger (2011: 373) comments:

For one, the work’s language with its Aramaisms, the motifs (e.g. the figure of Satan, the heavenly scenes), the wisdom-shaped speeches of God, the theological trend towards skepticism all point to pessimistic Babylonian wisdom and, for another, perhaps, to the Persian period as an initial piece of data.

So, while it is impossible date the book of Job definitively, it does seem reasonable to draw at least tentative conclusions on the basis of this text regarding the sages’ attitudes toward the concept of covenant in the Persian period.

Covenant as Theological Construct

For this discussion to be valid as it unfolds, an important distinction must be made: covenant as a theological construct extends beyond the

3. I appreciate that a number of indeterminate questions come into play here, making this a difficult argument to sustain with a strong degree of certitude. However, Proverbs probably reached its final form in the Exilic or early Postexilic Period, meaning that the formulation of Job must have followed some time thereafter. See Goldsworthy 1995 for discussion of Job and Qohelet as a response to overly rigid interpretations of the worldview of Proverbs.

4. See Seow 2013 for further discussion.

historic covenants. Clearly, YHWH has entered into covenants with his people in time and space. Taking the OT/HB narrative at face value, Noah, Abraham and the Patriarchs, Moses and Israel, and David and his line all entered into historic covenants with their God. Explicit reference to these (or other) historic covenants in the WL is marked largely by its absence.⁵ However, questions arise regarding the significance of this omission. As mentioned above, it is often suggested that lack of the reference to the historic covenants implies that the sages were simply disinterested in the idea. The argument below, however, suggests that—far from being indifferent to the theme—covenant *underpins* many of the key discussions of the WL. This is not as paradoxical as it might seem because the concept of covenant, while encompassing the historic covenants, clearly goes beyond them. This is true to such an extent that Israel ultimately comes to view YHWH as being by very nature a “covenant keeping God” (Deut 7:9)—covenant is essential to the very identity of YHWH in relation to his people.

To limit our consideration of covenant to the specific historic covenants significantly underplays the pervasive importance of the idea in the theology and worldview of ancient Israel. While the discussion of “centers” to Old Testament theology has (probably rightly) become somewhat passé, Eichrodt’s argument concerning the centrality of covenant to the theology of the OT/HB is undeniable (Eichrodt 1960).⁶ Equally, the collocation of the language of covenant alongside other word groups that pervade the OT/HB (e.g., חסד, צדקה, אמת, etc.) is another indication of the significance of the covenant concept in the mentality of the biblical authors. The חסד word group is particularly significant for the discussion that follows below. As McConville (1996: 752) points out,

Steadfast love is the typical quality of the covenant relationship, a quality of God (Ps 136; Jer 9:24[23]), and required of his covenant partners (see Ps 50:5, where “my consecrated ones” who “made covenant with me” are חסידים, a nom. related to חסד; and, again Deut 7:9).

The expectation of חסד is, clearly, a two-way street. Just as YHWH expected his people to show חסד, so also Israelites would expect no less of YHWH. It is this ideological expectation that drives the discussion that comes

5. I have argued to this effect in another article that focuses on a similar theme (Grant 2003). Some scholars contend that the link between the WL and the historic covenants is mediated through Solomon; however, this link can—at best—be described as tangential.

6. See also, for example, Snaith 1964 on the development of and the importance of the covenant theme in the OT/HB.

to the fore in the theodicies of the WL. To that end, while *the historic covenants* may be absent from the WL, *the concept of covenant* is essential if the reader is to make sense of the theology and ideology of the sages.

The Ideology of Lament in the Ancient Near East

The basis for Job's extended lament is grounded in the accusation of covenant rejection by YHWH and in the quest for renewed covenant relationship with God. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to contend that the significance of relational (covenantal) expectation as a backdrop to lament is an ideological premise that, if not unique to the Israelite wisdom tradition, is certainly unusual within lament ideology in the ancient Near East. In order to establish this contention, it seems appropriate to survey some examples of ancient oriental lament in order to examine the worldview and ideology prevalent in these accounts.

Lament is an amorphous concept. Sometimes lament equates to no more than the poetic, hymnic or melodic expression of deep sorrow, regret or pain. This is true of the majority of the ancient Near Eastern lament corpus. Lament is an expression of loss and pain, rather than an expression of the type of complaint based on covenantal expectation that is more typical of Hebrew lament. This difference in dynamic, as we will see, is quite key to our argument. A few examples help to make the point.

Man and His God

One text that is frequently compared with Job in terms of content and tone is the Sumerian *Man and His God* (Kramer 1969: 589–92). Although a relatively short text and quite incomplete to us, the similarities revolve around the protagonist's rejection by his god as evidenced in his affliction with a severe illness (lines 29–111); the concomitant rejection by his peers (lines 32–38); his longing for encounter with his god (lines 55–59); and deliberations on the topic of uprightness, sin, and retributive justice (lines 101–11). So there are certainly themes present that appear to be similar to those found in Job. However, the dynamic of lament is quite straightforward. According to one of the translators of this text (Kramer 1969: 589–91), "The main thesis of our poet is that in cases of suffering and adversity, no matter how seemingly unjustified, the victim has but one valid and effective recourse, and that is to continually glorify his god and keep wailing and lamenting before him until he turns a favourable ear to his prayers." The essence of the lament is based on the premise that, if we pray/lament/wail long and loud enough, the gods might hear and relent. Essentially, lament revolves more around the hassle-factor than any

profound sense of expectation of justice (see Hartley 2008: 346–60, for fuller discussion).

The differences when compared to Hebrew lament are clear. The sufferer does not present his god as being in control of all things (the demons of fate and illness act autonomously, although ultimately they were chased away by the god) and the supplicant makes no appeal to divine justice. While it is always good to exercise caution before developing an argument from silence, given the tone of the poem, this omission is telling. If the supplicant believed in a god of ordered relationship it would be logical for him to voice his appeal based on that sense of expectation. However, the sufferer does not do so, and this likely reflects the fact that the appellant had no expectation of “just” relationship with his deity. The gods could be fickle and their followers could suffer as a result of either divine neglect or caprice.⁷ With that in mind, the active dynamic of lament in the *Man and His God* is relatively basic—pray long and hard and hope that your god finally hears and relents.

The Babylonian Job

Another ancient Near Eastern document (Pritchard 1969: 434–37; Hallo and Younger 1997: 486–92) that is frequently cited as a parallel text to the book of Job is the Akkadian *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* (otherwise known as *The Babylonian Job* or *I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom*, from its opening line).⁸ The primary association with Job revolves around the petitioner’s (Šubši-mešre-Šakkan) claims of innocence in the face of apparently retributive suffering that has been poured out on him by the god Marduk. However, the key differentiation from Job, unfortunately, seems to appear at a point where the text is incomplete. One reconstruction reads line 58 of tablet 3 as Šubši-mešre-Šakkan’s confession that he failed to revere the goddess properly (Gleb 1956: 170). Regardless of this disputed reconstruction, line 60 of the same tablet clearly states that “he [Marduk] caused the wind to carry away my trespasses.”

So, the key difference between Job and his Babylonian equivalent is that the latter ultimately is not deemed innocent, merely ignorant of his transgressions (Bricker 2000: 205). Job clings to his awkward and angular claim of innocence right to the very end of the book.⁹ Therefore, despite

7. This is classically illustrated in the Babylonian cosmogony the *Enuma Elish* and is otherwise evidenced in many of the texts of the ancient Orient (see Walton 2007: 87–112).

8. The opening line in Akkadian is *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*.

9. Of course, this raises the thorny issue of how Job 42:6 should be translated. It is not possible to deal with this question in detail here, but suffice it to say that—along

their similarities, the attitudes and effects of their laments are quite different. These differences are further emphasised by contrasting views of the nature of the gods to whom the respective protagonists pray. We will discuss Job's understanding of Yhwh below but even a superficial reading of the text of Job displays a strong expectation of divine justice and consistency (Hartley 2008: 349). However, Šubši-mešre-Šakkan sees Marduk as distant, removed, and generally disinterested in human affairs. There is no sense of relationship. The gods are unknowable, contrary, and likely to act out of jealousy and spite (lines 33–47). The aim of Šubši-mešre-Šakkan's lament is simply the removal of suffering. The concept of reconciliation with the deity is both an irrelevance and an impossibility (Hartley 2008: 350–51).

Before turning to the content of Job itself and returning more explicitly to the question of covenant in the WL, it seems appropriate to survey one more set of ancient Near Eastern texts to assess the content and worldview of its lament: namely, the Sumerian city laments. Normally compared to the biblical book of Lamentations, the six city laments discovered so far give some insight into both the dynamic of lament in the ancient Near East and the expectations of those offering their lament vis-à-vis the gods toward whom they are directed (see Ferris 2008: 410–13, for a succinct overview of the texts discovered to date).

The Sumerian City Laments

The two most significant laments in terms of size and completeness are the *Lament over Ur* and the *Lament over Sumer and Ur* (Pritchard 1969: 455–63; Hallo and Younger, 1997: 535–39; Pritchard, 1969: 611–19, respectively). One interesting dynamic of the city laments is that it is the local deity (Ningal) who laments the destruction of the city at the hands of the storm god, Enlil. A few key features seem relevant to our discussion. First, the rationale that lies behind the gods' decision to destroy is often petty and insignificant. For example, we are told simply that Enlil ordered the destruction of Ur “in hate” (line 203). Or, in the *Uruk Lament*, the people of the city have become a nuisance to the gods, so they decree the city's destruction (Ferris 2008: 411). In fact, Ferris (1992: 54) argues that “the arbitrary, capricious anger or wrath of the gods would be the logical

with many commentators—I do not read this verse as a confession of moral guilt (see, for example, Janzen 1985: 254–59 or Newsom 1996: 628–29, for fuller discussion of the various readings of this verse). See also Ngwa 2005: 46–71 for a history of interpretation of the controversial Joban epilogue; many of these interpretations are shaped by the commentator's reading of 42:6.

starting point for theoretical ordering” of the city laments. Common to the six city laments is a degree of pettiness, pique or spite in the activity of the gods. Second, the active dynamic of the lament is focused on the deflection of the gods’ wrath and the removal of suffering. As we have seen in the other Akkadian and Babylonian materials, the question of relationship with the gods is simply an irrelevance and it is for this reason that some scholars question the application of the term *theodicy* to these texts at all (Bricker 2000: 214).¹⁰

For a lament to be described as a theodicy, there must be some *clear* underlying expectation of divine justice that needs to be affirmed in the light of the apparently contradictory evidence of suffering or evil.¹¹ However, what we have seen from the variety of ancient Near Eastern texts that we have examined is that—while we may also quibble about the reality of the concept of justice that comes into play—there is no inherent expectation of *relationship with the gods*.¹² Therefore, the purpose of lament becomes solely focused on the relief of affliction through constant petition, proper cultic practice or the intermediacy of priests, enchanters or lesser gods. To that end, it seems that the very dynamic of lament found in the book of Job (and elsewhere in the OT/HB wisdom tradition) is actually quite different from that found in response to suffering elsewhere in the ancient Near East. The key dynamic that sets the two apart is *the concept of lament over the loss of relationship with the deity*. Here is an area where we see the profound underlying effect of the concept of covenant in the OT/HB Wisdom Literature.

Covenant Expectation in Job’s Lament

From beginning to end of the book of Job, the expectation of divine justice is at the heart of the text and goes hand-in-hand with lament over the loss of divine, covenantal relationship. Clearly, Job’s suffering is central to the narrative, and the dialogue with the friends incorporates many of the classic philosophical discussions regarding theodicy. However, that

10. See also see also Dobbs-Allsopp 1993 for further discussion of the ancient Near Eastern city laments.

11. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *theodicy* as “The, or a, vindication of the divine attributes, esp. justice and holiness, in respect to the existence of evil; a writing, doctrine, or theory intended to ‘justify the ways of God to men;’” (Online: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/200356>).

12. Or, at least, the justice of the gods is so opaque as to be unknowable, therefore, their actions may be “just” in their own terms even although they appear to be unfounded in the eyes of the sufferer (see Walton 2007: 106–8).

does not mean that the discussion is monochrome (Nicholson 1995: 71–82). One of the motifs that is part of the spectrum of color that flows from the book’s dialogue is the question of Job’s relationship with God and *vice versa*. This theme is prominent throughout the whole book and, it is my contention, that *we cannot fully or properly understand the book’s argument unless we give due consideration to the interpretive significance of the covenantal dynamic between Job and God*. It seems reasonable to argue that Job has an expectation of covenant relationship with God and that one of the main reasons for his lament is that he believes God to have withdrawn from that relationship. In order to make the case for the underlying presence of the covenant theme in wisdom laments, we need to outline the centrality of the divine-human relationship in the book of Job.

Fear, Blessing, and Curse in the Prologue

The issue arises first in the prose prologue where **יְהוָה** lays out his challenge regarding Job in *relational* terms. Of course, the prominence of this discussion in the prologue points toward the hermeneutical priority of the relationship theme.

“Then Satan answered the LORD, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’”
(Job 1:9, NRSV)

If we read the idea of the “fear of the LORD” in relational terms, as implied by Deut 10:12–13 and 14:23,¹³ then Yahweh points out that Job is without peer in terms of his *righteousness* and *his relationship with him* (1:8), and the satan replies in the same terms. Is it “for nothing” that Job fears God (1:9)? The implication of the accuser’s question is clear: take away the trappings and benefits of wisdom and Job will turn from the fear of the LORD in a heartbeat. *What is at stake is the very issue of relationship with God*.¹⁴ The whole dynamic of Job’s blessing/curse revolves around the idea of maintenance of relationship with YHWH or the rejection of relationship with YHWH. Implied in this dialogue is the assumption that

13. Both of these texts are significant in terms of emphasising the relational nature of the “fear of the LORD” concept. If we read Deut 10:12–13 epexegetically, then the subsequent commands—walk, love, serve and observe—emphasize the strongly relational nature of the command to fear the LORD. Deut 14:23 adds to this equation by indicating that this should be the habitual practice of God’s people (see Ticcianti 2005: 54, for discussion of how this links with the presentation of Job in the prologue).

14. Ticcianti (2005: 1) highlights 1:9, along with 1:1, as a “hermeneutical key” to the book of Job. “This is to shift the emphasis from what is most often seen as the burden of the book—the problem of evil or unjust suffering—to the problem of obedience, sanctification, or transformation of self.”

Job “fears” (relates to) God because of the benefits that he accrues from that relationship—remove the benefits and relationship will be lost, is the satan’s confident assertion. However, following the loss of the trappings of wisdom, Job opts to maintain relationship rather than to disaffiliate. So, from the privileged rhetorical perspective of the prologue, the reader is given insight into the *crux interpretum*: will Job turn aside from relationship with God or not (Pope 1973: 12)?

This theme is continued, of course, in the personal affliction of Job in chap. 2, as YHWH himself puts it, “without reason” (חנם, 2:3¹⁵) where Job’s righteous response is called into question by his wife (“Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die!”[2:9]). Once again, the link between justice and relationship is maintained. The crux of the issue revolves around the question of whether Job will maintain or break relationship with God. This is the essence of the “curse” question: to keep relationship with God or not? As Walton points out (2012: 67) regarding Job 1:11: “The Challenger [השטן] is questioning *God’s blueprint for divine-human relations*.”¹⁶ In summarizing the scene-setting of the prologue, Ticciati (2005: 61) comments: “As we will see, Job’s wrestling, in all its vehemence, continues to be a wrestling *with the covenant*—which Job never lets go or leaves behind.”

The Friendship Question

By Job 3:1 this key question of relationship is actually answered, and the cycles of speeches essentially revolve around the issue *how* Job is going to be able to maintain relationship with God. The focal question of Job’s relational response to God is decided by 3:1. All our anticipation revolves around the issue of whether or not Job will curse God and die. The curse, when it comes, is directed not toward God but toward the day of Job’s birth.

After this point, the relational decision is made and the discussion in the speech cycles explores the supposition that God has somehow rejected Job. But throughout the narrative we see consistent expressions of Job’s desire to cling to relationship despite the fact that he appears to accept the friends’ suggestion that God has rejected him (see, for example, Job

15. This term has the overtone of an action being performed on someone “undeservedly” (*HALOT* 3032).

16. See also Ticciati 2005: 53–57, which compares Job’s experience to that of Abraham in the *Akedah* and highlights just how key the question of relationship with God in Job 1:9–10 (“prologue piety,” as Ticciati calls it) is to a proper understanding of the book as a whole.

13:13–28 or 19:23–29).¹⁷ Job’s complaint therefore focuses on the “why” question: for what reason has God chosen to turn his back on him? Ticciati (2005: 26) sums up Job’s post-prologue situation well:

Indeed . . . the concern expressed in the Satan’s question is put to rest within the limits of the prologue. Job passes the test; no more need be said. He is capable of worshipping God in hardship; or, alternatively, he does not need the hope of reward to incite him to piety.

And she goes on to add (2005: 56):

In the poem the question of whether Job will bless or curse God in response to affliction (cf. 1:11) is considerably complexified. This simple choice is no longer what is at stake. There is no question of Job’s letting go of God; the question is *just how* is he to hold on to him.

So, as we see, the relational—covenantal—question continues through the whole discourse. Job’s faithful response to God is established in the prologue and the question moves on in the speech cycles to consider *how* Job will maintain relationship with a God who appears to have turned against him.

Job’s Defense

Questions of divine justice and the divine-human relationship continue throughout the book. The apparent loss of divine relationship is the particular focus of Job’s defence in chaps. 29–31. As Job presents it in 29:1–6, it is the loss of God’s friendship that led directly to the descent from his previous good standing in society (29:7–25) to the current scenario in which he is rejected by society’s rejects (30:1–15). This in turn leads to Job’s defense of his moral standing in response to the assumption that his rejection by God is the result of moral failure on his part (Job 31). However, it is the loss of relationship with God that is presented as foundational to all that follows in Job 29:1–6.

Surprisingly, most commentators are quite quick to pass over 29:1–6 as a mere prelude to the description of Job’s sense of loss regarding his public fall from grace in society. However, this pericope is essential to the argument that follows. Job’s high standing in society is the result of

17. These are two of the better-known examples of Job’s conflicted desire to maintain relationship with God. However, there are many other passages that point in the same direction despite the ambiguity of Job’s position before God. This desire to maintain relationship is indicated by Job’s persistent habit of addressing God directly throughout the speech cycles (e.g., Job 7:11–21 etc.). See Phillips 2008: 31–43 and Ngwa 2005: 102–10 for fuller consideration of the importance of Job as intercessor.

God's protection (שמר, v. 2), light (אור, v. 3), and counsel (סוד, v. 4).¹⁸ So, if Job's societal position flows from the blessings that result from divine relationship, then the conclusion must follow that the loss of this standing comes from the removal of divine relationship. The heart of Job's lament is seen in the formulations of 29:4–5—“When the friendship of God was upon my tent; When the Almighty was still with me” (בעוד שדי עמדי בסוד) (אלוה עלי אהלי). These formulations reflect the perception of loss of covenant relationship. The essence of covenant in its patriarchal presentation simply revolves around the promise of God to be with the patriarch (cf. Gen 26:3, 24; 31:3; 48:21), and the implication of Job 29:4–5 is that the Almighty has withdrawn from that promissory relationship with Job. As Job sees it, the Almighty is no longer with him—that covenantal relationship has been removed. Wilson (2007: 313) sums it up well:

The statement, when the Almighty was still with me, offers a glimpse into what Job considered to be his present state. *His focus remains on the loss of relationship with God* rather than on loss of possessions and wealth. Job is keenly aware of his feelings of abandonment by God.¹⁹

YHWH's Response and Job's Restoration

Interestingly, when YHWH speaks in chaps. 38–41 the issue of relationship does not arise at all. This should come as no surprise to readers who have the benefit of the prologue because we are given the privileged insight that YHWH has at no point turned his back on Job. Job's experiences were never the result of abandonment. In fact, if anything, they were the consequence of his *good standing* with the Creator. YHWH's response is limited to Job's accusation that God's control over his life is somehow flawed or nonexistent. The interrogative focus of each of the YHWH speeches points to the basic idea that, as Creator, YHWH's design is always perfect even if it is beyond human comprehension. However, the relational question does not arise on YHWH's lips because it was never his issue.

Job comes to this realization in his response to the YHWH speeches in 42:1–6, where he describes his transformation in understanding, once again, in relational terms: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5, NRSV). This verse points to a sea-change in Job's relationship with YHWH. Following the “events” of the book and the (perhaps theophanic) encounter with YHWH in his speeches, Job has come—quite simply—to a better understanding of who God is

18. The modern English versions are justified in translating סוד as “friendship.” The term seems to imply the intimate counsel shared between friends (*HALOT* 6475).

19. Emphasis mine.

and, by implication, to a deeper relationship with him. Habel (1985: 582) is helpful here:

Job's response is a public declaration that he has not only heard God but "seen" him with his own eyes. Behind this declaration lies Job's long search to find God (23:3) rather than wisdom and to present his suit before God's face (13:24 cf. 23:9, 15, 17). Job's hope was to see God with his own "eyes," even if that meant a post-mortem miracle (see on 19:26–27). But Job "sees" God while he is still alive; YHWH's advent in the whirlwind is a revelation of his presence which anticipates the descent of his glory on Sinai. Job's seeing is not some mystical sense of the divine, a fresh appreciation of God's nature or a mediated discernment of his majesty in creation. . . . Rather, his "seeing" of Yahweh is personal and intimate. . . . That moment was as numinous for Job as the voice from the burning bush was for Moses (Ex. 3:1–6).

Finally, in this attempt to establish the centrality of covenant to Job's lament, *the restoration* of Job, once again, is described in terms of relationship with God. As I have argued elsewhere (Grant 2011), the reinstatement of Job is not evidenced primarily in the (problematic) return of his wealth and family but rather in YHWH's appointment of him as intermediary on behalf of his friends. Without developing this argument in great detail here, the issue revolves around the translation of Job 42:7–8, where YHWH rebukes the friends for not having spoken, traditionally, "about him" what is right, as Job did.

The question at hand is grounded in the "speaking" referred to in these verses. In particular, we should note that the Hebrew simply combines דבר plus אל in these verses, a frequently occurring combination that is most commonly translated "speaking to" rather than "speaking about."²⁰ The combination of דבר plus אל is used several times elsewhere in Job to refer to "speaking to" rather than "about."²¹ So, at the very least, there is an argument to be made for translating these verses as "you have not spoken to

20. Of course, דבר plus אל can refer to "speaking about someone or something" as is clear from the *HALOT* entry for אל (p. 491). However, so great is the preponderance of instances within the Hebrew Bible where דבר plus אל is translated as "speaking to," that there should be compelling reasons before the idiom is translated as "speaking about." Phillips points out that there are 435 instances of this idiom in the MT where the phrase clearly means "speaking to," whereas there are only seven instances where the identical phrase must be translated as "speaking about." We find a further 13 appearances where the best translation option is ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so (see Phillips 2008: 39). Kenneth Ngwa argues that this idiom in 42:7–8 is deliberately ambiguous and is designed to imply both talking *to* and *about* God (2005: 25).

21. Job 2:13; 4:2; 5:8; 13:3; 42:9; etc. (see Ngwa 2005: 12).

me as is right, as your friend Job has.” This possibility is further underlined in the context of the epilogue because Job is then appointed as intercessor in 42:8, maintaining this intermediary role of one who speaks to God. Job alone has spoken to God in the speech cycles so he is called on to continue this speaking role in intercession on behalf of his friends.

The relevance of this representation of Job in 42:7–8, of course, is that he is portrayed as the one who maintained—and sought to maintain—relationship with YHWH rather than merely philosophizing about God. In speaking *to* God rather than *about* God—even though his prayer is voiced as vociferous complaint—Job makes the effort to cling to relationship with God because he knows that only in this relationship will he ever be able to make any sort of sense out of his experiences. Granted, Job’s prayer is redolent with errors of fact, false assumptions and a belligerent tone but it *is* prayer. Of all of the human protagonists in the book, Job is the only one to address God directly and this commitment to relationship is recognized by God in the epilogue. Once again, just as we saw at the beginning of the book, relationship with God remains the central issue right to the end.

With this in mind, it seems fair to suggest that the book of Job is actually quite different in focus from the typical laments of the ancient world. The unique focus of Job is its rootedness in the concept of a covenantal relationship with God. The relational question is key to the interpretation of the text, therefore, this wisdom lament cannot be properly understood apart from an awareness of the concept of covenant.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, the Hebrew concept of lament, so prominent in wisdom texts, cannot be understood apart from its covenantal underpinnings. While the historic covenants are not an explicit focus of the WL, the concept of covenant is so deeply ingrained in the religious psyche of the sages that it constantly lurks just below the surface. The theme of relationship with God—which is, at its most basic level, the very essence of covenant—is properly basic to the book of Job. This arch wisdom book cannot be understood apart from awareness of the interpretative significance of the divine-human relationship. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that any summation of the WL that seeks to *exclude* covenant from its pages is a misrepresentation of the ideology at work in these texts. On a *prima facie* level, it is very easy to conclude that the WL is not “about” covenant in the same way that, say, Deuteronomy is “about” covenant. However, if we are to be sensitive to the WL *as literature*, then we must acknowledge that covenant ideology is firmly “in play” in the books of the sages.

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