



Metaphorical Paths and the End of Wisdom in the Book of Job

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THE ONE PATH TO LIFE AS DESCRIBED IN A GOSPEL SONG

There's a gospel song by the Louvin Brothers that asks, "How many different ways can you reach that city, where angels sing God's praise for soul-redeeming love?" The song answers, "There's only one way in which you can enter, and your key is your record above," before breaking into the jaunty chorus, "No, you can't go by plane, 'cause they ain't got no landing field, and you can't go by train, like some folks sing about, and you can't go by ship, 'cause they ain't got no harbor. Through grace by faith if you're made whole, you'll meet him in the clouds."¹ The song plays on the metaphor that describes life as a road and one's decisions about how to live as a path, treating this metaphorical path as if it is potentially accessible to various modes of transport. In the end, however, there is only one way to reach

¹The Louvin Brothers, "You'll Meet Him in the Clouds," originally released on *Keep Your Eyes on Jesus*, Capitol Records ST 1834, 1963.

One way or many? In the Bible, traditional wisdom, including Job's own, has argued for a single path toward righteousness: fearing the Lord and departing from evil. But in God's own speeches, God provides Job with a new vision: Job has been limited rather than enriched by clinging to his one path and avoiding all others. To follow in God's footsteps is to move in various ways, and God's questions challenge Job to follow God by walking the many paths of life.

“that city,” and it turns out not to be a mode of transport at all, but a way of behaving and believing. Making the confident claim that there is only one way, the song simultaneously assumes that there are a multitude of different ways *not* to reach the goal. The song names three—plane, train, and ship—but it could easily include more. The point is that there is only one way that leads to heaven, and heaven can be reached only by getting on and staying on *that* path, a path characterized by right behavior and right belief.

The song’s idea of the one path is clearly drawn from New Testament teachings. Jesus’s claim, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” provides the clearest analogue (John 14:6). The Old Testament, however, also uses the metaphor of the path to describe right behavior; it characterizes this right behavior as indicating one’s possession of wisdom: the one who is righteous is also wise, and vice versa. Stephen Geller points out that, in the wisdom literature, “‘Path’...is almost a code term for piety....He or she who finds wisdom finds life, its paths are paths of life, and so on.”² In Prov 7 and 8, for example, we see first the strange woman seducing a youth down the path that will lead to his destruction, and then Woman Wisdom, who calls youths to walk down her path, which is the path of righteousness leading to abundant life.

there is, according to Proverbs, only one way to have life, and that is to follow Woman Wisdom down her singular path

WOMAN WISDOM’S SINGULAR PATH

In this example, though, it would seem we are not presented with one right road and a multitude of wrong roads, but with only two roads, one right and one wrong. A person can either choose the path of Woman Wisdom, who points with outstretched finger and calls with a clear voice, or he can choose the path trodden by the strange woman, who walks with swaying hips, casting beckoning glances over her shoulder and motioning the hesitant youth to follow. But Woman Wisdom is a singular figure. She is described in Prov 8:22–31 as the first of God’s creation, with whose assistance the rest of creation was brought into being. The strange woman, by contrast, could be anyone. The speaker in Proverbs introduces her as simply “a woman” (Prov 7:10); compared with Woman Wisdom, she is anonymous. While there is only one Woman Wisdom (look at her credentials!) there could be any number of strange women. James Crenshaw points out that Woman Wisdom invites her guests to “a sumptuous banquet in a royal palace” whereas “her opposite, Madam Folly, plies her trade like a common harlot.”³ The one is royal, one of a kind, while the other is common, a dime a dozen.

²Stephen A. Geller, “‘Where is Wisdom?’: A Literary Study of Job 28 in Its Settings,” in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. J. Neusner, B. Levine, and E. Frerichs (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 169.

³James L. Crenshaw, “In Search of Divine Presence,” *Review & Expositor* 74/3 (1977) 356.

The only thing required of the strange woman is that she lead one down any path other than the one belonging to Woman Wisdom. Although this path may be conceptualized as one path, it is not *one* in the way that Woman Wisdom's path is one. "How many different ways can you *fail* to reach that city?" There are many different ways. There is, though, only one way to have life, and that is to follow Woman Wisdom down her singular path.

THE ONE RIGHT PATH IN JOB'S "HYMN TO WISDOM"

Job 28, often designated the "hymn to wisdom," identifies one right road of behavior and belief and contrasts this with the multitude of ways in which it is possible to go wrong. In Prov 7 and 8, it is obvious that "path" is being used as a metaphor for the way a person chooses to live her life. At the outset, by contrast, Job's hymn to wisdom⁴ does not seem to be using "path" as a metaphor at all, but instead refers to actual paths. Yet, as will be seen, it is the metaphorical usage with which the hymn is actually concerned. Job's hymn, like the Louvin Brothers' song, plays with the metaphor, pretending to speak of actual paths but, in the end, revealing that it is the metaphorical path of right behavior that is at issue.

Job's hymn begins by describing the ways in which humans have probed the depths of the earth to extract valuable metals and precious stones (vv. 1–6). It creates the impression that it is relaying a success story, sounding a tribute to human power and ingenuity. It is only as the hymn continues that it becomes evident that these miners have chosen a wrong path. In the same way, in their initial context, verses 7 and 8 seem to be saying that even the mightiest of wild beasts cannot compete with humans when it comes to seeking out the earth's treasures. Path imagery recurs here. We read, "That path no bird of prey knows, and the falcon's eye has not seen it. The proud wild animals have not trodden it; the lion has not passed over it." Although path imagery has not been used literally in verses 1–6, verses 7–8 cause it to be retroactively inserted. What path is it that the birds of prey have not sighted from their airy heights, and which the proud beasts have not trodden? It is the path walked by human beings as they have delved deep into the earth, bringing its hidden recesses to light. To have executed these feats of engineering is to have walked a path, one that the animals, for all their might, have not been able to travel. In verses 9–11, the hymn's praise of human endeavor reaches its climax. Humans have overturned mountains, cut channels in rocks, discovered the sources of rivers, and found every precious thing the earth's depths contain. These paths have led them to victory, as is evidenced by their possession of the spoils of the earth.

Suddenly, however, Job's poem shifts focus; in verse 12 it asks, "But where shall wisdom be found?" This question undermines everything that has come be-

⁴Some scholars argue that this chapter cannot be spoken by Job, as the traditional piety it affirms is at odds with the accusations Job has brought against God. To me, however, these words do not seem out of place in Job's mouth. Job still fears God (as God ought to be) even as he accuses the God who is afflicting him of deviating from God's rightful nature.

fore in its implication that, of all the things humans have laid hands on, they have failed to find the one thing worth having. In verses 13–20, the undermining effect of the question in verse 12 is taken to the next level. Although verses 7–8, with their claim that the great beasts do not know the path, seemed to imply that human being *do* have access to the important paths, that assumption is struck down by verse 13, which reads, “Mortals do not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living.” Although human beings have walked many secret paths, they have not, the poem says, walked the one right path, which—as in Prov 8—is the path of wisdom. The hymn continues by insisting that wisdom is not concealed in the depths of the earth and neither can it be purchased with the gold and jewels that can be extracted from those depths. In addition, we are told that it is “concealed from the birds of the air” (28:21b), a claim that necessitates the reinterpretation of verses 7–8. The path unknown to the birds and the wild animals is not, after all, the path by which humans have sought out the earth’s secret material treasures. The path referred to in verses 7–8 can only be the path that leads to wisdom. In retrospect, it matters not at all that the animals do not know the paths of human ingenuity, for those paths are shown to be the wrong paths, leading only to death. Where those verses seemed to pay *tribute* to human beings, in reality they do not; they look forward to the announcement of the only path that matters, the path of wisdom.

*humans have overturned mountains, cut channels in rocks,
discovered the sources of rivers, and found every precious
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find the one thing worth having*

Although wisdom is present in the world, living creatures can have access to it not by carving up the earth but by fearing God and departing from evil (28:28). God is the one path. “I am the way,” says God, “no one comes to wisdom except by me.” With God’s declaration that the way to wisdom is to fear the Lord and depart from evil, the chapter’s use of the image of the path as a metaphor for the way one lives one’s life is made evident. The hymn is no longer talking about mining or voyages of discovery but about ways of living. The right way of living is characterized by fear of the Lord and turning away from evil. As in Proverbs and the Louvin Brothers’ song, there is one right way. If we were to map the hymn to wisdom onto the gospel song we might sing, “No, you can’t find it in the depths of the earth, ’cause they ain’t got no wisdom there, and you can’t follow the birds, ’cause they don’t know the path, and you can’t pay your way, ’cause they don’t take no currency. But fear the Lord and depart from evil, and wisdom you will find.”

Like the gospel song, the hymn moves between the metaphorical and the actual—and, for both, the actual is something of a ruse. The hymn is not trying to make a point about mining, just as the song is not saying anything about the validity of planes, trains, or ships as modes of transport. In the hymn, according to Job,

there is one right way to live and a multiplicity of wrong ways. In the first part of the chapter (vv. 1–6, 9–11), people are shown engaged in a variety of activities—mining the earth, finding the sources of rivers, etc.—akin to traveling by plane, train, and ship in the gospel song. None of these activities—or, more importantly, their metaphorical equivalents, whatever they may be—leads to wisdom. Wisdom is found through one specific path of belief and behavior and one only.

JOB'S JOURNEY ON THE ONE RIGHT PATH

In chapter 28, Job describes a multiplicity of paths that do not lead to wisdom and ends by affirming that there is only one way to find wisdom. He is so certain of this one way that he puts its revelation in God's mouth, saying, “He [God] said to humankind, ‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding’” (28:28). Although, in chapter 28, Job does not identify himself outright as one who has adhered to wisdom's path, just that is implied. Job, after all, has already been described as “one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1b). Moreover, when Job makes his oath of innocence in chapter 31, he says explicitly that this is the case, providing a list of the ways in which he has turned away from evil, which is the corollary to fearing God. In his oath of innocence Job asks, “Does he not see my ways, and number all my steps?” and answers by swearing, “If I have walked with falsehood, and my foot has hurried to deceit—let me be weighed in a just balance, and let God know my integrity!—if my step has turned aside from the way...let what grows for me be rooted out” (31:4–7a, 8b). The implication is that Job's foot has not strayed. This echoes Job's earlier claim that “[God] knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside” (23:10–11). Insisting that he has adhered to the one right path, Job presents himself as both righteous and wise.

“HOW MANY DIFFERENT WAYS...?” THE MULTIPLICITY OF PATHS IN GOD'S SPEECHES

When God responds to Job in chapters 38–41, God, too, uses path language, but seems to be speaking nonmetaphorically about actual roads instead of ways of behaving or believing. Yet, as seen in the gospel song and in the hymn to wisdom, it is possible to play with the terms in such a way that, while one seems to be talking about actual paths, one is really speaking metaphorically. I want to contend that God's words about paths are intended to address Job's description of the metaphorical paths along which one lives one's life.

That God questions Job about what paths he has traveled is apropos. Job has been waiting for these questions and has been ready to answer, “I have not traveled any path except the one right path.” Job expects that, when God sees the path Job has walked, God will realize that he has suffered unjustly and will be swift to set things right. Yet, although God does question Job about his paths, God's questions

are not the questions Job has expected, and Job finds that his prepared answer is not adequate.

In his first speech, God asks Job whether his paths have led him to the extreme ends of the earth:

Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
 or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
 or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?...

Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
 and where is the place of darkness,
that you may take it to its territory
 and that you may discern the paths to its home? (38:16–18a, 19–20)

How can Job answer this? Henry Rowold has suggested that the implied answer to all of the questions asked by God from the whirlwind “is not merely, ‘No, I can/did not,’ but rather, ‘No, I can/did not, but you (Yahweh) can/did,’”⁵ a view that is widely accepted. The assumption here is that it is completely obvious that Job must answer these questions in the negative. J. Gerald Janzen, however, offers a counter-reading of the implied answers to God’s questions. Referring to this passage specifically, he writes,

*Is it the case that Job in no sense has ever taken darkness to its territory and delimited its sway through an act which images what God did in Genesis 1:3–5? ...[O]ne cannot gainsay the fact that Job’s periodic imaginative ventures of hope toward God...do in fact delimit the darkness in which his own life is engulfed. At least in these ways Job has seen the gates of darkness and from there has commanded a morning.*⁶

For Janzen, Job, in his suffering, has walked these paths; Job says as much in chapter 19 when he laments, “[God] has set darkness upon my paths” (19:8b).

But if it is true that in some sense Job has walked these paths, we must ask whether he sees any value in this journey. It seems doubtful. If Job is able to answer yes, it must be tempered by regret. From Job’s perspective, to walk the paths leading to the gates of the deep and to the place of deep darkness is to stray from the one right path. If Job is able to answer yes, he must view it as evidence that the world is not as it ought to be; he has been thrust off the right path into a “pathless waste” (12:24), where he gropes his way through deep darkness toward he knows not what. If, by contrast, Job can answer, “No, I have not,” to God’s questions about these paths, it must be with some pride. Job has walked only one path—the path of righteousness and wisdom—and it is based on this that Job is able to affirm his innocence and call on God to answer him. Job is prepared to say, “No, of course

⁵Henry Rowold, “Yahweh’s Challenge to Rival: The Form and Function of the Yahweh-Speech in Job 38–39,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47/2 (1985) 201.

⁶J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 237.

not. You know I have not walked those paths.” If he does not blurt it out at once, it must be because of a dawning uncertainty about the answer God would consider correct. Given the context of God’s questions, it must occur to him that God would prefer the answer to be yes.

As God presents it, there is a multiplicity of right paths, and the more one has walked, the better. Job has been limited rather than enriched, as he supposed, by clinging to his one path and avoiding all others. To follow in God’s footsteps is to move in various ways, and God’s questions challenge Job to follow God by walking the many paths of life.

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THE END OF WISDOM

In chapter 28 Job has depicted God as saying to humankind, “Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding” (28:28). In chapters 38–41, however, when God actually speaks to Job, he asks him questions that presume the desirability of a different kind of knowledge, one that would be attained by walking a great multiplicity of paths instead of keeping to the one path of right behavior previously identified and walked by Job. Moreover, in his subsequent description of the paths walked by the wild animals, God includes the ostrich, of which he says, “God has made it forget wisdom, and given it no share in understanding” (39:17). If Job thinks he has identified the one path to wisdom, God throws a wrench into Job’s suppositions by saying, “Well, there are other things besides wisdom. Look at the ostrich. It follows the way of foolishness, and, not only do I approve, but I set it on that path in the first place.” Later in his speech God depicts hawks and eagles soaring through the sky, looking not for wisdom as Job had claimed in chapter 28, a quest in which they are unsuccessful, but for blood, which they do find; having found it, they drink deeply of its life-giving draughts, succoring their young with the blood of the slain (39:26–30). In his depiction of these animals, God describes himself as the creator and guardian of a great multiplicity of paths, a great variety of ways of behaving, which are certainly not reducible to Job’s one right way. In a sense, God asks Job, “Are the birds of prey in the wrong because they do not find wisdom?” God’s answer would seem to be, “No. They are not looking for wisdom, but for blood. They are not on the wrong path.”

God’s questions signal the end of wisdom as Job has conceived of it. The one path down which Job was so careful to direct his steps loses its significance. God directs Job’s vision out along a multiplicity of paths, showing him that there is a great variety of ways of being in the world and that God’s creation is too diverse

and multifarious to be so reduced. In chapter 28, Job has insisted that “the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom” (28:28). In God’s speeches, however, what such fear looks like is not straightforward. Here, fearing the Lord takes a decidedly strange turn, as God walks with lions and ostriches and through the recesses of the deep. In chapter 42, when Job gives an inheritance to his daughters, perhaps he is following this God, behaving strangely and embarking on a different path.⁷ 

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⁷On the “unheard of” practice of giving an inheritance to daughters in ancient Israel, see Kathryn Schifferdecker’s article in this issue, “Of Stars and Sea Monsters: Creation Theology in the Whirlwind Speeches,” *Word & World* 31/4 (2011) 357–366.