

Exegetical Brief: Did Job ‘Repent’? (42:6)¹

The book of Job is replete with *hapax legomena*, unusual spellings, vexing text-critical questions, and highly compressed and elliptical constructions. Usually the main point is still discernible, but many scholars have found the point of 42:6 to be somewhat elusive—which is unfortunate in view of the significance of the verse within the book’s message. One often hears that Job “repented” after the theophany in the whirlwind. But did he—and of what exactly?

The verse reads:

עַל־כֵּן אָמַאֵס וְנִחַמְתִּי עַל־עֲפָר וְאֶפֶר:

Taken in order, difficulties in the verse include:

- 1) What is the object of אָמַאֵס?
- 2) What conjugation is וְנִחַמְתִּי, and what does it mean?
- 3) What is the relationship of the עַל־ phrase to the rest of the verse?
- 4) What exactly does עֲפָר וְאֶפֶר connote?

For present purposes it is useful to list the difficulties in this way, but it is disingenuous to pretend that they can be tackled piecemeal. A decision about any of them impinges on all the others. Every decision will also be heavily influenced by what an interpreter expects Job to say at this point in the discourse—and appropriately so, provided that these expectations are articulated and defended rather than simply assumed.

This article will examine the questions above, not as they occur in the verse, but in this order: 1, 4, 3, and 2 (In my decision to proceed in this fashion a perceptive reader may have already noticed a thumb on the scale, tipping it in the direction of one particular interpretation).

- 1) What is the object of אָמַאֵס²?

In *qal* this verb is transitive (like “reject” in English) and needs an object. The translation “abhor myself” (KJV, NKJV), *schuldige ich mich* (Luther), or “despise myself” (NIV 1984 and 2011, RSV, NRSV, ESV) requires somehow giving the verb a reflexive sense. Although *Brown-Driver-Briggs* lists four other occurrences of this verb with the object omitted (Job 7:16, 34:33, 36:5, and Ezekiel 21:18 where BHS finds the text “dubious”), none of these establishes a reflexive meaning for the verb in *qal*.³ In each case it is necessary to infer an object from context.

If we take this approach to Job 42:6, theoretically Job could be rejecting (and repenting of) dust and ashes (42:6b). Patrick opts for this understanding and interprets the verse as a Job’s exchanging a posture of mourning for one of joyful praise.⁴ David Clines also understands Job

¹ Thanks to the students of the Summer Quarter class OT 5030 (Exegesis of Job). Many of the conclusions of this article are those we arrived at together.

² Possible derivation of the verb from a by-form of מָסַס “to melt” has also been suggested (See HALOT “II מָאֵס”). Despite the LXX’s inclusion of this option in its “double translation” of the word, this derivation and the resulting meaning are unlikely. William Morrow, “Consolation, Rejection, and Repentance in Job 42:6,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105(2), 1986, p 215.

³ Dale Patrick, “The Translation of Job XLII 6,” *Vetus Testamentum* 26(3), July 1976, p 24.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 370.

as rejecting dust and ashes, but in an entirely different way.⁵ For Clines, in 42:5 Job says only that he has now had a visual experience of God to add to those rumors about God that he had previously heard. Nothing prevents a reader, says Clines, from understanding those rumors as reports that God treats people unfairly. In 42:6, Clines has Job saying that this opinion about God has now been confirmed for him. Rather than answering any of Job's complaints or affirming Job's righteousness, God has berated Job with a series of sarcastic rhetorical questions. Then he parades his great works of power before Job in order to bully him into submission. Job will not submit, however; instead, he crafts a highly ambiguous response to God's speeches that can be read as a disavowal of repentance of any kind.

Interpreters who do not approach sacred text in search of ambiguities that subvert its claims (in this case, the text's claim that Job is a God-fearer, 1:1, 1:8, and 2:3) will find little in Clines's reading to recommend it. The problem is not, however, that this reading cannot be justified on the basis of the semantics and syntax of 42:6 (It can). The problem—for us, though not for Clines—is that the reading is not helpful in reconstructing what an ancient Israelite author could plausibly have wanted to say.

A second possibility is that the object of **דָּבָרֵי** is **רִיבֵי-עֲמֻשׁ** (“an ear-rumor,” v 5), which would represent the second-hand knowledge about God that Job had before God arrived in the whirlwind. Morrow construes this phrase as “an elliptical reference to the wisdom theology of retribution heard from the lips of Job's comforters and which he himself shared.”⁶ In other words, Job would now be saying, “I realize that the theory I held previously (that suffering is a punishment for sin) was too simplistic, and I reject it.” While this proposal satisfies the desire of many interpreters to be able to identify precisely what Job has learned by the end of the book, it seems to over-interpret the “ear-rumor” phrase. In addition, the Job we know from the Prologue (1:21, 2:10) does not seem to hold to naïve retributionist notions that are based on hearsay or in need of correcting.

In his article Morrow correctly observes that “no translation of 42:6 is without difficulty or free from ambiguity.”⁷ He contents himself too readily, however, with the conclusion that the ambiguity is intentional and that the passage simultaneously means *all three* of the possible interpretations he proposes. An interpreter's sense that the available options are equally problematic is not enough to prove an intentional ambiguity; such a case needs to be based on evidence that the original readers/hearers were meant to experience the text in this way.⁸

Actually, a satisfactory option appears when the context is considered more broadly. Nahum Glatzer perceptively notes that the key words “knowledge,” “wisdom,” and “understanding” run throughout the book in general and the divine speeches in 38-41 in particular.⁹ Throughout the dialogue, Job has longed for his day in court with God, when he will present his case that he is innocent of wrongdoing and has therefore been punished unfairly.¹⁰ God then speaks from the whirlwind and declares that in questioning divine justice Job has entered upon matters that he cannot begin to understand. Job's brief speech in response brings two citations from the

⁵ David Clines, “Job's Crafty Conclusion,” paper delivered at the Society of Biblical Literature convention, November 24, 2008. The third volume of Clines's Job commentary is regrettably still unavailable at this writing.

⁶ Morrow, p 220f.

⁷ Ibid, p. 223.

⁸ Charles Muenchow, “Dust and Dirt in Job 42:6,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108(4), 1989, p 598f.

⁹ Nahum Glatzer, *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings* (NY: Schocken, 1969), p 6f.

¹⁰ Norman Habel shows the importance of recognizing the legal-dispute genre of much of the material for a correct understanding of the book. *The Book of Job*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

beginning of God's: "Who is this who, without any knowledge, conceals good advice?"¹¹ and "Listen now, it's my turn to speak; I will question you, and you will inform me [*lit.* cause me to know]." These two citations frame Job's "rejection": "Indeed, I had made a declaration, but I didn't understand; these things are too wonderful for me to know."

In other words, what Job is "refusing" or "rejecting" in v 6 is not himself, but the stance he had assumed in the dialogue. In other words, he now eschews his attempt to take God to court with its implicit claim that Job has enough knowledge to dispute about justice with his Creator. The *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* appears to understand Job in this way when it lists this passage as an instance of **מָאָס** with the meaning "to reject what one has said previously, revoke." Translations that appear to opt for this understanding include NASB 1995 ("retract"), the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* ("take back my words"), and *God's Word* ("I take back what I said").

4) What exactly does **עָפָר וָאֵפֶר** connote?

It will be helpful to settle on a meaning for this word pair first before addressing its role in the passage. Suggestions have included: 1) the location from which Job issues his retraction, *i.e.*, the garbage dump on which he has been seated since 2:8; 2) the location onto which Job will sink in a gesture of shame; or 3) the "dust and ashes" with which Job will cover himself in a gesture of repentance.

The trouble with the first option is not only that "dust" was unmentioned in 2:8; it is also hard to see what reason Job would have for drawing attention to the place where he has been sitting. The second option, Charles Muenchow's intriguing suggestion,¹² has not to my knowledge met with widespread acceptance.

Commentators who opt for the third have perhaps been too quick to associate "dust and ashes" with mourning or repentance, perhaps because without realizing it they have mentally substituted "sackcloth and ashes" which regularly has these connotations (Esther 4:1, 3; Isaiah 58:5; Jonah 3:6, Matthew 11:21, etc). The phrase "dust and ashes" is actually rarer in biblical Hebrew than one might suppose.¹³ It occurs only here, in Job 30:19, and in Genesis 18:27 (See also Sirach 10:9 and 40:3).

In 30:19, Job used the phrase to refer to what he has come to look like as a result of his having been thrown into the muck by God, and there is certainly no suggestion of repentance there.¹⁴ The occurrence in Genesis 18:27 is even more pertinent. As Abraham pleads with God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah, he excuses himself for venturing to speak to the Almighty despite his being "dust and ashes." Here again, repentance or mourning is not in view; the point is Abraham's recognition that his creaturely frailty and finitude leave him in no position to enter into negotiations with his Creator. Job's point in 42:6 is almost exactly the same. In the stance he adopted in the dialogue he had overstepped his bounds as God's creature—a mere clump of dust and ashes.¹⁵

¹¹ Translations are my own.

¹² Muenchow, p 609f.

¹³ Morrow, 216.

¹⁴ Clines, *op. cit.*, invokes this dirt as the same "dust and ashes" that Job is rejecting in 42:6.

¹⁵ **אֵפֶר** is not limited to "the residue left after burning something" as English "ashes" is. See its entry in HALOT.

2) What is the syntactical relationship of the **עַל־** phrase to the rest of the verse?

and

4) What conjugation is **יִנְחַמְתִּי**, and what does it mean?

If “dust and ashes” is to be understood locatively, then **עַל־** will naturally be translated “upon” (Muenchow) or “in” (as in GNT’s “I sit in dust and ashes to show that I am sorry”). If “dust and ashes” are taken as tokens of repentance on Job’s part, then “in” (most versions) or “with” would be the preferred options. If, as I am arguing, “dust and ashes” connotes Job’s creaturely finitude, then “because [I am]” is the correct translation. Patrick, however, opts for “about,” and his argument is my primary reason for taking up the matter of the preposition together with the meaning of **יִנְחַמְתִּי**.

While it is sometimes proposed that this verb should be analyzed as a *piel*¹⁶ (which would mean “comfort” or “console”), the *piel* is transitive, and this would again leave an interpreter searching for an object (unless Job is “comforting” or “consoling” the dust and ashes—hardly likely). The *nifal* normally means “to regret,” “to be moved to pity,” or “to comfort oneself.” God is by far the most frequent subject for this verb, and it almost never¹⁷ means “repent” in the theological sense; “repentance” is normally expressed by forms of the root **נחם**. A meaning like “to regret,” “to relent,” or “to change one’s mind” will account for the majority of uses of **נחם** in *nifal*. Job 42:6 is not an exception.

This returns us to the question of the sense of **עַל־**. Patrick observes that when it follows **נחם** in *nifal*, **עַל־** normally expresses that “about” which the subject is sorry or has changed his/her mind.¹⁸ His argument assumes his conclusion, however--*i.e.*, that the verb and the preposition go together, when this has not yet been established. The Masoretes understood the syntax of the verse differently, as they showed by placing an *attach* on **יִנְחַמְתִּי** to indicate that the major break in thought in the verse comes between the preposition and the verb. Clearly the Masoretes did not see the **נחם על־** idiom here.¹⁹

In summary, the prepositional phrase might indicate *where* Job will show his regret for what he has said, *how* Job will show his regret for what he has said, or *why* Job regrets what he has said. The last is the position of this article, Job’s reason being his realization—brought about by the speeches from the whirlwind—that he is in no position to dispute about God’s justice “because” he is nothing but dust and ashes.

יִנְחַמְתִּי, then, essentially reiterates for purpose of emphasis the point of **סָמָאָה**. Job regrets having rashly presumed to know enough about the world, either as it is or as it ought to be, to take God to court. The proposed translation, then, would be something like:

Therefore I reject [my claim] and drop it, because [I am] dust and ashes.

¹⁶ Muenchow, p 597

¹⁷ Jeremiah 8:6 is an exception.

¹⁸ Patrick, p 370.

¹⁹ Muenchow, p. 609f n53.

My translation of 6b does not differ substantially from LXX's ἡγημαὶ δὲ ἐμαυτὸν γῆν καὶ σποδόν ("I consider myself dust and ashes"), though some²⁰ believe that the translator arrived at it by means of a *Vorlage* other than יִתְמַחֵנִי.

I would go so far as to tentatively propose another approach to the meaning of עָלַי. Recall that it appears in the verse twice—once at the beginning with the object כֵּן ("thus"), and again at the end with the object "dust and ashes." It might be possible to view its second appearance as a sort of resumptive, with "dust and ashes" parallel to "thus." This would yield a translation like:

For this very reason I reject [my claim] and drop it: because [I am] dust and ashes.

Regardless, the meaning is the same. Strictly speaking, Job's "confession" is not a blanket admission that he is a guilty sinner before God. It is a targeted and specific acknowledgement, brought on by the theophanies, that during the dialogues he had pressed a claim that he now realizes was absurdly presumptuous and inappropriate. In this acknowledgement—though certainly not here for the first time—Job spoke "accurately" (42:7).

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²⁰ Muenchow, p 598.