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Translating an Extraordinary Trope: A Note on Job 34,11

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כי פעל אדם ישלם־לו וכארח איש ימצאנו:

For He repays a man for his work,
And as *a man finds* his path, so He makes *the path* to find *the man*.

More easily perceived in biblical Hebrew grammar than English, the thrust of the trope of Job 34.11 is difficult to deconstruct. The subject of both cola in 34.11 is »God,« understood from verse 10. In the first colon, whether the פעל אדם, »work of a man,« is good or bad, God will ישלם־לו, »repay *it*;« that is, *good* for good or *evil* for evil. The literal reading of the second colon is, »According to the path of a man (כארח איש), He causes him/it to find him/it (ימצאנו)«. In light of the parallelism with the first colon, we might expect the reference of the 3rd person, suffixed pronoun of the finite verb of the second colon to be the distributed object of the first colon, פעל אדם.

This mental model is disappointed, however, by the diction of the finite verb in the second colon, ימצנו, »cause to meet,« which makes much better sense when taken with the phrase, ארח איש, »path of a man,« the object of the adverbial prepositional phrase from the second colon, rather than פעל אדם, the direct object of the first colon. Though we are forced to abandon strict grammatical parallelism by the verbal idea of ימצאנו, the two phrases, פעל אדם and כארח איש, from the first and second colon still evoke a thematic parallelism, and the reader will anticipate in the second colon a reciprocity between the action of the verb (»meet«) and the object of the prepositional phrase (»path of a man«).

But to do so presents a further problem. In the first colon, we had an easily intelligible reciprocity: »As man does his work, so God does it back to man.« In the second colon, the tenor of the reciprocal idea is a little more difficult to gather: »Man meets a path, so God causes man to meet it [a path].«

This is puzzling, until we recognize that we have a *progression* of thought rather than a simple *reciprocity*, as the reader was expecting. The kind of progression turns on the exact figure that we choose to supply for the idea of a »path« that »meets« someone. If we see »path« as strictly a metonymy for »evil« – that is, a path fraught with evil –, then Elihu would merely be saying to Job that a man will experience the disastrous consequences of his decisions.[1] Though possible, this requires a transition from the subject of the first part of

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[1] Delitzsch states, »Far removed from acting wickedly and wrongfully, on the contrary He practices recompense exactly apportioned to man's deeds, and ever according to the walk of each one … He cause it to overtake him, *i.e.*, to happen to him.« (F. Delitzsch, Job, trans. Francis Bolton, Commentary on the Old Testament, 10 vols, reprint ed.,

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the colon (a personal, moral God of retribution) to a figurative agent (»evil«) that is abstract and passive.

However, if we see »path« as a metonymy for the character and moral nature of an individual, we can better retain the idea of moral reciprocity. Just as a man chooses to »meet« a path in life, so God »makes« that path to »meet« him, i.e., causes it to define his character, and thus seal his fate. Our thoughts and actions form a moral direction and pattern of life that is self-reinforcing. The trope is poetically compelling because, on first blush, it seems to posit a reciprocal action by an inanimate entity, which is unexpected. To communicate the reflexive idea, an English speaker may have used a very different mode of expression. Consider:

> »You are what you eat.«
> »Violence begets violence.«

Taking just the first example, the logical reciprocity involves someone first eating food, then food determining his makeup and health. Grammatically, »what you eat« is the latter phrase in the sentence, but implies what is temporally anterior – eating. The phrase, »You are« implies a logical result of the act of eating. Thus, just as in our Hebrew colon, we have the following progression: subject acts on object, personified (former) object acts on (former) subject.

For the actual translation of our Job text, we could opt for the more literal choice, »And according to *a man's* path – *He* causes *it* to find *him*.« The verse is thus rendered with repetition of the personal pronoun, »He,« but no explicitation of the intended reference of the pronouns, »it« and »him.« Since the distribution of the subject to a subsequent verse, colon, or (in the case of the present translation of the author) hemistich is more readily accomplished in biblical Hebrew than in English, we could supply the pronominal references: »And according to *a man's* path, He causes *the path* to find *the man*.« This comes much closer to giving the actual sense of the colon for most English readers, but lacks a certain element of poetic satisfaction due to its lack of terseness and symmetry.[2]

Finally, then, we could supply the implied verb מצא to the first part of the hemistich and take the *waw* as consequential:[3] »And as *a man finds* his path, so He makes *the path* to find *the man*.« This rendering features excellent fidelity to the original trope with very modest departures from literalness. Note how the poet Elihu discriminates between the causative Hiphil form of מצא (explicit in the second phrase of the hemistich), and the Qal form (which must be inferred by the reader in the first part of the hemistich) with basic transitive force. Elihu thus places into even stronger, contrasting parallelism man who *chooses* his path and God who retains his sovereignty over man by confirming man in his path, as He *causes* man *to choose*.

1982), 4:249; cf., NAB; R. Gordis, The Book of Job, Moreshet, 2, 1978, 387; N.H. Tur-Sinai, The Book of Job: A New Commentary (rev. ed., 1967), 478; M.H. Pope, Job, AB, 3rd ed., 1979, 254; J.E. Hartley, The Book of Job, 1988, 453–54.

[2] For instance, Driver has, »For the work of man he repayeth unto him, / And as (is) the path of each (such is what) he causes to befall him.« (Samuel Rolles Driver and George Buchanan Gray, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job, ICC 14, 1921, 1:296). Delitzsch (249) translates similarly.

[3] BDB, 254; HALOT, 259.

The sophisticated trope of Job 34.11 suggests the value of more careful translation of texts in the OT poetic corpus.

Le trope exigeant de Job 34, 11 confirme l'importance d'une traduction méticuleuse des textes poétiques de l'Ancien Testament.

Der anspruchsvolle Tropus von Hiob 34,11 zeigt den Wert weiterer sorgfältiger Übersetzungen poetischer alttestamentlicher Texte auf.