

The Intrinsic Worth of Water in Job 38:22–38: Urging the Abandonment of an Anthropocentric Worldview

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Abstract

Christianity has often been accused of promoting an anthropocentric worldview that has contributed to the current ecological crisis. Since Lynn White's accusation that Genesis 1:26–28 is responsible for the crisis, biblical scholars and theologians have been discussing this text. Although Genesis 1:26–28 contains hints of anthropocentrism, it does not represent the only way in which the biblical authors viewed humans and their relationship with nature. This article focuses on Job 38, which presents many phenomena of nature, inter alia water-related phenomena, as surpassing humans' understanding. The world does not revolve around humans. They are merely part of the natural world. Humans cannot control water-related phenomena, which are depicted as having their own worth.

Keywords: anthropocentrism; water; hail; snow; rain; clouds; dew; Job; Earth Bible

Introduction

Lynn White's article on "the historical roots of our ecological crisis" placed the blame for the modern ecological crisis upon Western Christianity and its anthropocentric traditions (1967, 1205).¹ The article sparked heated debates among biblical scholars and theologians as to its claims that the rape of the earth had been authorised by the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:26–28, according to which humans regard themselves as superior beings (*imago Dei*) and the centre of the cosmos. According to White (1967,

¹ For White (1967, 1205), Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever known as it establishes a dualism between humanity and nature.

1207), “we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.”

White (1967, 1206) proposed that Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) should be regarded as the patron saint of ecologists since “Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures.” What Francis attempted had already been elucidated in the book of Job. In Job 38 the elements of nature exist and function independently of the human sphere. It is probably no accident that most of Job 38 examines various forms of water, since water is perhaps one of the elements of creation that needs no human help to perform its natural functions.

Therefore, it is not surprising to see how Job 38:22–38 comprehensively reflects on major aspects of water for their own intrinsic value, and not for their usefulness for human beings. Job 38 asks a series of rhetorical questions to which Job has no particular answers. In other words, human beings cannot understand all things, nor manage them (Tucker 1997, 15).

In the book of Job, humans are depicted as occupying a minuscule place in the universal scheme of things, a smaller place than many other creatures. Human beings are invited to adjust their anthropocentric vision of the world and to adopt a broader perspective of the complexity of the cosmos. The aim of Job 38–39 is to remind Job that much of the cosmos is beyond his understanding: the sun, the stars, the wild animals and specifically water-related phenomena (Brenner 1981, 132).

The question is then to what extent Job 38 can be used as a paradigm to question the so-called anthropocentrism that Christian traditions are accused of. In fact, this is hardly the place to give an adequate account of the meaning of Job 38. However, from an eco-theological perspective, one can say that the main goal of Job 38 is to clarify the limits of Job’s (humans’) knowledge, wisdom and power over the world (Tucker 1997, 13).

This article reflects on the intrinsic value of the water-related domains depicted in Job 38 as a paradigm to redefine the human relationship with nature. In fact, the multifaceted aspects of water made it an appropriated vehicle to convey, formulate, reformulate and communicate in comprehensible ways concepts that would have been difficult for Israel to express differently (Ben Zvi 2014, 27). Only the description of the manifold aspects of water-related domains was sufficient to question Job’s view of himself and humanity.

The main goal of this article is to contribute to the modern debate about humanity’s relationship with nature. In fact, as White said, “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (White 1967, 1205). What we do about ecology depends on our ideas about the human–nature relationship. More science and more technology will not get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion or rethink our old one (White 1967, 1206).

Job 38:22–38 was not written primarily to argue a case for humans’ contribution to the ecological crisis. However, its distinct depiction of elements of nature as existing independently of the human sphere is ecologically sound. Water-related phenomena are described as existing and functioning without any contribution or intervention by human beings. Job 38:26 points out that the rain, for instance, can even fall on a land empty of human life to highlight that humans are not the masters of creation. As such, this text can be relevant in the contemporary world in which people selfishly exploit nature to meet their own needs, to the detriment of the created order.

The purpose of this article is neither to repeat points made in the great monographs on Job 38 nor to contest them, but to consider the retrieval of ecological wisdom from the description of the water-related phenomena in Job 38 as a way to dismantle the anthropocentric view of creation. The question is what assumptions about or attitudes towards water are reflected in the author’s use of distinct water-related domains in his attempt to dismantle a human-centred conception of creation.

The answer to this question will touch on the perceptions the ancient author might have had of the *value* or the *intrinsic worth* of water in a land where water is scarce. The depiction of the intrinsic value of water-related domains in Job 38 testifies to the awareness that “God creates for God, not for human beings, and need not answer the single-minded Job who assumes he is the centre of the universe” (Clifford 1994, 194).

Brief Overview of Approaches to Job 38:22–38

To my knowledge, no research has yet been done on the ecological significance of water in Job 38:22–38. Commentators are mainly interested in “the voice from the whirlwind” as God’s response to Job’s allegations that the world is filled with chaos. Scholars argue that God’s rhetorical speech in Job 38–39 invites us to embrace a kind of cosmic humility and see creation from the creator’s perspective (Patrick 2001, 115; Bauckham 2010, 40).

As far as I am concerned, all the commentators approach Job 38–42 from this angle. Their interest is less in the ecological significance of water-related domains than in the created order as a whole (see Habel 1985, 542; Schifferdecker 2008, 43; Clines 2011). There is to date no publication on the water-related phenomena in Job 38:22–38, especially as viewed from an eco-theological perspective.

Approach of This Article

Contrary to previous studies, this article is entirely devoted to the ecological significance of water and water-related phenomena as they occur in Job 38:22–38. In addition to clues from historical-critical and literary approaches, this article is informed by elements from the hydrological, geographical, cultural and agricultural contexts that might have informed Job 38:22–38. Finally, the article applies one of the six eco-justice

principles associated with the Earth Bible Project, namely the principle of intrinsic worth, which states that “the universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value” (Earth Bible Team 2008, 38).

Job 38:22–38 presents many exegetical problems. This article starts with a critical analysis of the Masoretic Text before proposing an alternative translation. This is followed by the retrieval of the ecological wisdom of the description of the water-related phenomena in the text.

Literary Considerations

Job 38:22–38, the Masoretic Text and a Translation²

22 הַבִּאת אֶל-אֲצֻרוֹת שְׁלֵג וְאֲצֻרוֹת בָּרָד תִּרְאֶה:

23 אֲשֶׁר-חֲשַׁכְתִּי לְעֵת-אֶצֶר לְיוֹם קָרָב וּמִלְחָמָה:

24 אִי-יִזְהַהֲדָרְדֹר³ יַחֲלַק אֹר⁴ יִפֵּץ קַדִּים עַל-יַאֲרֵץ:

25 מִי-פִלְגֵג⁵ לְשֹׁטֵף תִּעֲלֶה וְדָרְדֹר לְחַזִּי קִלּוֹת:

26 לְהַמְטִיר עַל-יַאֲרֵץ לֹא-אִישׁ מִדְּבַר-לֹא-אָדָם בּוֹ:

27 לְהַשְׁבִּיעַ שָׁאָה וּמִשְׁאָה וּלְהַצְמִיחַ מְצָא⁶ דְּשָׂא:

² A few changes to the NRSV are shown in italic font based on our understanding of the Hebrew text. The Masoretic Text includes bold numbers pointing to footnotes related to our emendation of a given word or verse.

³ Contrary to the NRSV, I render the word דָּרְדֹר as “way” rather than “place.” This rendition not only has a strong meaning in the Old Testament wisdom books, but also has significant eco-theological implications.

⁴ Scholars differ on how the word אֹר should be translated. There are two main positions concerning this. Habel (1985, 522) and Clines (2011, 1042) maintain that the wording of the Masoretic Text implies that the text concerns the storehouse of heat/lightning which is sent across the earth by the wind. Tur-Sinai (1967, 526) and Dhorme (1967, 587) propose that the word reflects something pointing to “air current” or “mist or cosmic flood.” The Masoretic Text’s editors and the Talmud propose that one should change אֹר to רִיחַ (wind), since the two parts of verse 24 are closely linked. This article accepts the Talmud’s assumption, since the idea of heat is not plausible in a text which is mainly about water-related phenomena.

⁵ I read in this verb not “creation” (in the past), but the regular cycle of nature. In this sense, I follow the translation by Clines (2011, 1061) of פִּלְגֵג in the present tense as “who cuts.”

⁶ The word מְצָא (“source” as in Job 28:1) is amended as צְמָא (thirsty land) as in Isaiah 44:3; also in accordance with the hiphil לְהוֹצִיא (to put forth) as in Ecclesiastes 5:1b. The word pair מְצָא דְשָׂא (place where grass springs) does not, however, fit with the idea of challenging Job. The emendation מְצִיָּה would be in line with the idea of the verse in the sense of making grass grow in the desert where no

- 28 היִשְׁלֵמְטָר אָב אֹ מִי־הוֹלִיד אֲגִל־טָל:
- 29 מִבְּטֵן מִיִּצָא הַקֶּרַח וּכְפָר שָׁמַיִם⁷ מִי יִלְדוּ:
- 30 בְּאֵבֶן מַיִם יִתְחַבְּאוּ וּפְנֵי תְהוֹם יִתְלַכְדוּ:
- 31 הַתְקַשֵּׁר מֵעֲדֻנוֹת כִּימָה אִזְמִשְׁכוֹת בְּסִילְתַּפְתַּח:
- 32 הַתְצִיא מְזֻרוֹת בְּעֵתוֹ וְעִישׁ⁸ עַל־בְּנֵיהֶם תִּנְחַם:
- 33 הַיִּדְעֵת חֲקוֹת שָׁמַיִם אִם־תִּשְׁמַע מִשְׁטָרוֹ בְּאֶרֶץ⁹:
- 34 הַתְרִים־לְעֵב קוֹלָךְ וְשִׁפְעֵת־מַיִם תִּכְסֶּךָ¹⁰:
- 35 הַתְשַׁלַּח בְּרָקִים וְיִלְכוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְךָ הֲגִנוּ:
- 36 מִי־שֵׁת בְּשִׁחוֹת¹¹ חֲכָמָה אֹ מִי־נָתַן לְשִׁכּוֹי בִּינָה:

humans live. Finally, the word להשביע should be translated as “irrigating” in relation to Genesis 41:29 and Proverbs 30:9, where the verb שבע implies the notion of abundance.

⁷ שמים is rendered as “sky” in the sense of “what is related to water” (Kee 2012, 185).

⁸ Driver (1956, 2) convincingly argued that the word עיש or עץ does not refer to a bear, but Aldebaran, while the word בְּנֵיהֶם does not mean children, but Hyades. I opted for this rendition for two reasons: first, Pleiades, Orion and Hyades occur together as markers of the changing season; secondly, the Hebrew עיש has the same meaning as the Arabic *gaitu* (rain) referring to the rain (Driver 1956, 1–2).

⁹ It is likely that the word pairs שמים (v. 33a) and אֶרֶץ (v. 33b) refer to physical entities as in Genesis 1:1. Therefore, מִשְׁטָרוֹ בְּאֶרֶץ refers to the rule of the skies (water-above) on earth. In this sense, the spiritualising tendency of heaven for שמים is avoided as is usually the case in commentaries.

¹⁰ Here the LXX reading καὶ τρόμος ὕδατος λάβρου ὑπακούσεται σοῦ; (and make the torrents of rain answer you) is preferred instead of the MT (and make the flood of waters cover you).

¹¹ The word שִׁחוֹת is rendered in the NRSV as “inward parts” following the Vulgate in relation to the sense of this word in Psalm 51:8. Burns (2001, 134) thinks that Job 38:36 was shifted from Job 39 to Job 38 as a result of a scribal error of *homoioteleuton*. More recently, Van Hecke (2011, 324) draws on the earliest version of the Rabbinic Targum and renders the word שִׁכּוֹי as the “heart” or the “inner part” of a human being. In relation to Job 38:37, this scholar argues that חֲכָמָה should not be understood as a property of the clouds, but that Job 38:36 asks a rhetorical question: Who put that kind of wisdom in humans’ inner part? By contrast, Habel (1985, 523) follows the proposal of Kissane (1939) connecting the word שִׁחוֹת to the Hebrew verb טוּחַ (to cover) and translates it as “cloud canopy,” which is then the parallel of סִכְחוֹ of Job 36:29 interpreted as “thick cloud” (see also Lamentations 2:6). This rendering seems in line with the weather-related context of the text, but it raises the problem of attributing wisdom and understanding to the cloud. This article follows the translation of the word לְשִׁכּוֹי (v. 36b) as “cock” and its parallel שִׁחוֹת (v. 36a) as “ibis” in relation to the Egyptian god Thot (Dhorme 1967, 540). The ibis and cock were renowned for their wisdom, and mostly for their skill in predicting natural phenomena such as the rain or the Nile inundation (Clines 2011, 1116). There is, for me, good reason

37 מִי־יִסְפֹּר שְׁחֻקֵימָה בְּחֻכְמָהּ וְנִבְלֵי שָׁמַיִם מִי יִשְׁבִּיב:

38 בְּצִקְתָּ עֹפֶר לְמוֹצָק וּרְגִבִים יִדְבְּקוּ:

- ²² Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,
or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,
²³ which I have reserved for the time of *scarcity*,
for the day of battle and war?
²⁴ *Where is the way where the wind is distributed,*
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?
²⁵ Who *cuts* a channel for the torrents of rain,
and a way for the *rainstorms*,
²⁶ to bring rain on a land where no one lives,
on the desert, which is empty of human life,
²⁷ *to irrigate the waste and desolate land,*
and to make the grass spring up from the dry ground?
²⁸ Has the rain a father,
or who has begotten the drops of dew?
²⁹ From whose womb did the ice come forth,
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of *skies*?
³⁰ The waters become hard like stone,
and the face of the deep is frozen.
³¹ Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,
or loose the cords of Orion?
³² Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,
or can you guide Aldebaran with its Hyades (trains)?
³³ Do you know the ordinances of the *skies*?
Can you establish their rule on the earth?
³⁴ Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,

why these birds (cock and ibis) are mentioned here, as they are both associated with the coming of rain, which is the main theme of Job 38:22–38.

And make the torrents of waters (rains) answer you?

³⁵ Can you send forth lightning,
so that they may go and say to you,
‘Here we are’?

³⁶ *Who has put wisdom in the ibis?
Or who gave understanding to the cock?*¹²

³⁷ Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the *skies*

³⁸ when the dust runs into a mass
and the clods cling together?

The Created Order and Waters in the Book of Job

The book of Job teaches wisdom from the perspective of the created order. However, the book does not have a single vision of the created order. Creation is presented in the book from three different perspectives: Job’s speeches, the friends’ speeches (mostly Elihu, Job 32–37) and God’s speeches (38–42).

Job’s speeches predominantly question God’s violent attack on parts of the cosmos (12:19). Job asserts that God’s power is arbitrarily used at the cost of innocent people such as him (12:2–3; 13:1–2). Job cursed the day of creation, wishing the return of חושך (darkness) on the face of the earth (see Gen 1:2), a way of denying the created order of Genesis. Job is then criticised by Elihu’s speeches (Job 32–37), which are cosmologically conceived as reactions against Job’s allegations prior to God’s speeches in Job 38–41 (Waters 1999, 41).

In almost the entire book of Job, the ecological insights of water and water-related phenomena are frequently used as vehicle. In God’s speeches the water-related phenomena, such as the rainstorms (38:22–27), are presented as having their own way (דַּרְךְ). For Habel (2001, 75), the terms מְקוֹם (place) and דַּרְךְ (way) throughout the book indicate the belief that earth is “not governed by direct divine intervention, but

¹² This translation follows NJB: **Job 38:36** Who endowed the ibis with wisdom and gave the cock his intelligence? Or the French rendering: *Qui a mis dans l'ibis la sagesse, donné au coq l'intelligence?* (TOB).

rather by internally regulated systems within which each component of Earth has its locus and function in the system.”

Creation is a self-sustaining system in which each part has its function. Humans are not superior beings in Job, because many elements of nature surpass their understanding. To elucidate this complexity of creation, most of Job 38 displays the complexity of water in its various forms and mutations (Brenner 1981, 133). The non-dependent aspect of water lends itself best to being a rhetorical vehicle to respond to absurd human questioning of God’s justice or injustice within the exilic/post-exilic contexts.

To evaluate this statement, this article will turn to ecological clues presented in Job 38. The primary aim is to scrutinise God’s speech in Job 38 through using water-related phenomena to challenge Job’s view of the world. Creation is greater than humanity.

Literary Position of Job 38:22–38

Job 38:22–38 belongs to God’s speeches in Job 38–41 describing the wonders of the created order that are beyond human understanding. God points to them not merely to show human limits, but mostly to invite humans to broaden their view and discover God’s wisdom and power reflected in the deeper ordering the cosmos (Fox 1981, 60).

God’s speeches in Job 38–41 are divided into two main parts (Job 38:1–40:2 and 40:6–41:26), which are linked by a brief answer from Job (40:3–5). The first speech (Job 38:1–40:2) consists of a series of God’s rhetorical questions to Job about the vast expanse of the created order and its wonders (the founding of the world, the sea, meteorological forces, the constellations and wild beasts). The second speech (Job 40:6–41:26) concerns two mythic animals: Behemoth and Leviathan. Both speeches “are majestic poems, rich in lyric artistry, literary ambiguity, and theological profundity” (Habel 1985, 526).

Job 38–41 is filled with many sequences containing water-related phenomena. The most important are Job 38:8–11, about the limits of the sea and earth; Job 38:22–38, containing various references to water and water-related phenomena; and Job 40–41, involving two beasts (Leviathan and Behemoth) that live around watery places.

Job 38:22–38 forms the core of God’s first speech, related to the founding of creation (Job 38:1–40:2). God’s first speech starts with the establishment of the created order in general (Job 38:1–21) and ends with wild beasts (Job 38:39–40:2). The central part, Job 38:22–38, contains comprehensive water-related phenomena depicted for their own sake and not for their usefulness to human beings. The text is dominated by the rain and rain-related domains such as the skies (upper-water), clouds as water-carriers, lightning as acolytes of rain, various forms of moisture (ice, dew, hail, snow), the wisdom of certain animals (the ibis and cock) to predict the coming rain and, finally, the stars in

rainy seasons. The intention is to show that humans can do nothing to influence these water-related domains.

Retrieval of Ecological Wisdom in the Text

The Ecological Value of the Storehouses (אוצר) (vv. 22–24)

The Hebrew concept אוצר can refer either to a treasure house (Nehemiah 10:39), the treasury or the valuable store/supply of food or drink (2 Chronicles 11:11) and wealth (Proverbs 8:21; 15:16), or the arsenal (Jeremiah 50:25) (Brown, Driver and Briggs 1968, 70). In Psalm 135:7 it is referred to as the store of the clouds, while in Ecclesiastes 43:14 it is the supply of the upper-waters. אוצר is a store of rain in Deuteronomy 28:12 or of wind in Jeremiah 10:13 and 51:16 as well as a store of waters (תהומות) in Psalm 33:7.

In Job 38:22 the plural אצרות is used for the storehouses of God for snow and hail. In the Bible hail (ברד) occurs with threatening aspects and mostly functions as a divine weapon to rebuke the wicked and enemies (Joshua 10:1; Isaiah 28:17; 30:30; Ezekiel 13:11). Agricultural effects of hail include the damage (הרג) of crops (Exodus 9:22–26) and vines (Psalm 78:47) and the smashing (שבר) of trees (Exodus 9:25). Hail is also reported as causing human and animal deaths (Exodus 9:19; Psalm 78:48). Here in Job 38:22 hail is carefully kept for the time of battle.

In Job 38:23 both the storehouse and its contents are kept for the time of scarcity (לעת צר) and battle (ומלחמה). Although the two parts of the verse present a parallelism of scarcity and war—in the sense that the time of war is a time of scarcity/distress—it seems that שלג (snow) relates to scarcity (v. 23a), while ברד (hail) is directly linked to battle (v. 23b). It is hail (ברד), and not snow (שלג),¹³ which is stored up for use as a threatening weapon in warfare (Clines 2011, 1109). The stock of hail may be translated as a mere military arsenal in accordance with the translation of Clines (2011, 1049):

Have you entered the **storehouse** of the snow? Or have you seen the **arsenals** of the hail? (Job 38:22)

In contrast, snow (שלג) is also carefully kept not as a damaging weapon, but perhaps as a source of water in time of scarcity due to its refreshing function in time of war. In Jeremiah 18:14, the prophet asks about the water-stores: “Will the snow of Lebanon leave the storing-place of Shaddai?” In a time of scarcity the snow is welcome as an

¹³ The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2008) defines snow as the small soft white pieces of ice that sometimes fall from the sky when it is cold. Hail is describes as hard balls of ice falling earthward from the sky. While the first is positive, the second is quite dangerous. In this sense, the dictionary gives two examples: 1) for the hail: “The Prime Minister was greeted with a **hail** of insults as she arrived at the students' union”; 2) for the snow: “Let's go and play in the snow!”

auxiliary source of water for crops. In ancient Israel, snow was seen as a moistening and fertilising agent of the land in addition to the rain, as declared in Isaiah 55:10–11:

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (NRSV).

The coolness of the snow at harvest time is metaphorically linked to its refreshing role in Proverbs 25:13: “Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest are faithful messengers to those who send them; they refresh the spirit of their masters” (NRSV). Snow is also a sign of cleanness (Lamentations 4:7). Job 38:22–23, thus, uses two water-related phenomena (snow and hail) that have two different functions during times of trouble. Job is unable to control these water-related domains.

What is striking is that these water-related phenomena are not only stored up in treasuries (place), but are designed to be used during specific “times” (of scarcity and battle). In this way the text accentuates the intrinsic worth of these water-related phenomena, which are valuable treasures for use when needed. But humans cannot decide when the hail and snow should fall from the sky. In Psalm 148:8 hail and snow are *valuable subjects* that are invited to praise *their* Lord, YHWH.

The repetition of the word דָּרְדָּר in Job 38:24–25 implies that the meteorological forces related to water respect a fixed course (דָּרְדָּר), the consequence of a deep order in the cosmos. Where the storehouses of water are the subject, it is stated that their windows intrinsically open and close themselves at the appropriate times. This occurred in Genesis 7:11 and Isaiah 24:18, where the windows burst forth (נִפְתְּחוּ, niph'al form), while in Genesis 8:2 the windows close themselves (נִסְּכְרוּ, niph'al form). In other cases God may decide to open them to bless his people (Malachi 3:10; Psalm 78:23). However, no human being is ever stated as having control over them in biblical texts.

The Intrinsic Worth of the Rain (vv. 25–27)

These verses differ from the anthropocentric description of the rain in Elihu’s statement in Job 36:27–28. Job 38:25–27 describes the delivery of rain to earth in torrents even on land empty of human life. The word תַּעֲלֶה is used as stream/channel for the flood (לְשִׁטָּה).¹⁴ The course (תַּעֲלֶה) that the rain takes links the sky (שָׁמַיִם) and the earth (אֲרֶץ), as in the flood story where the waters-above fall down via the great gate (אֲרָבֹת) of the

¹⁴ The piel פָּלַג comes from the root פָּלַג (divide), which is used here in the sense of cutting out a channel for the flood to fall earthward. In Psalm 65:10 the word פָּלַג is used in association with God, פָּלַג אֱלֹהִים (rivers of God): “You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God (פָּלַג אֱלֹהִים) is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it” (NRSV).

sky (Genesis 7:11). The word תַּעֲלָהּ (“course,” v. 25) is a strange word for the rain, which normally falls in drops rather than as an unending stream as in 2 Kings 18:17 or Isaiah 7:3, where תַּעֲלָהּ is used for a channel of a pool (Sutcliffe 1953, 101).

However, the focus in verse 25 is on שָׁטַף (flood of water-above), which was believed to be held back by the sky (שָׁמַיִם) and might sometimes fall earthward through rain along a fixed conduit (תַּעֲלָהּ). This airy aqueduct was viewed as a means both of ensuring and regulating the supply of upper-waters on Earth:

Given that these upper-waters are supported by the solid vault of the heavens [sky] and yet descend upon the earth, it was believed that there must be apertures [holes/channels] in the sky capable of being opened and shut as occasion requires. If these were opened and the water allowed to descend on the earth without the intermediary of clouds, the effect was devastating and destructive (Genesis 7: 11; 8:2, Isaiah 24:18) (Sutcliffe 1953, 99).

In this sense, the rainstorm (זִיזִי) also has a fixed route (דֶּרֶךְ) to follow in its distribution of lightning and moisture on earth. It should be noted that violent lightning often accompanied rains (see Psalm 135:7).¹⁵ Indeed, the terms תַּעֲלָהּ and דֶּרֶךְ (course/way) and the notion of “time” highlight the principle of the cosmic order; otherwise an accidental rain could have disastrous effects because:

Une pluie accidentelle venant au milieu de l’été ne serait guère utile si ce n’est pour rafraîchir l’atmosphère et donner un supplément d’eau potable; mais souvent elle risque d’être nuisible en détruisant les récoltes par sa violence (Reymond 1958, 5).¹⁶

In this sense, in the Ancient Near East, the solidity of the dome (רָקִיעַ) and the blue colour of the sky (שָׁמַיִם) were presumed to be holding back the upper-waters¹⁷ so that they may fall down at “specific times.” The word שָׁמַיִם is etymologically defined as “what relates to water.”¹⁸ Thus, “as water falls, in the form of rain, from on high, the only conclusion possible seemed to be that there exists above a great reservoir and the only position that could be assigned for this was above the vault of heaven” (Sutcliffe

¹⁵In ancient Israel people knew that lightning is often followed at once by increased violence in the rainfall (Sutcliffe 1953, 103).

¹⁶English translation: *An accidental rain falling during the middle of summer would only be helpful to refresh the atmosphere and give a supply of drinking water; but often it may be harmful by destroying crops through its violence* (Own translation).

¹⁷For the ancients the sky’s colour was blue like that of the ocean, because the water above was seen through the expanse. Some passages in the Bible declare that the upper-waters/fountains may rain down or pour out in a flood when the window in the skies is opened (Genesis 7:11; 8:2; Isaiah 24:18). For more details, see Kee (2012, 185).

¹⁸Sachs (2006, 130) maintains that the Hebrew letter שׁ prefixed to the three-letter root מַיִם extends the underlying idea of שָׁמַיִם (*sha-mayim*) as the superlative of מַיִם (water), suggesting that there is water above the sky.

1953, 99). The idea in Job 38:25 is not about ordinary rainfall (מָטָר or מְחָר), but torrential rain (פְּלֹג לְשֹׁטֵף) that follows a given course (תַּעֲלָה) to fertilise the Earth.

However, the significance of the פְּלֹג לְשֹׁטֵף (torrential rains) and thunderstorm (חֲזַיִז) is not just in their routes (תַּעֲלָה and דְּרָדָה), but mostly in their beneficial role in watering the land deserted by humans (v. 26). Unlike in Elihu's speech (36:26–28), where the rain falls earthward to ensure food for human beings, here the rains fall wherever they are designed to. God sends the rain to irrigate the desolate wasteland (שְׂאֵה וּמִשְׂאֵה) and to cause the dry ground and desolate (שְׂאֵה) land to put forth fresh grass (Job 38:27).

The word שְׂאֵה (*shoah*) implies total desolation and it is currently utilised for the World War II Holocaust (Crenshaw 2005, 182).¹⁹ The expression שְׂאֵה וּמִשְׂאֵה also occurs in Job 30:3 and Zephaniah 1:15 to mean “terrible affliction.” In Job 30:3 the words are used for people who are counted among dogs and “gnaw at the desolate ground.” Job 38:27 implies that God sends life-giving rain even to those places that Job (humans) usually despises. In other words, “God satisfies even such a desolate place, providing rain so that it sprouts grass, bringing forth life in a land that humanity has rejected as worthless” (Schifferdecker 2008, 71).²⁰

Job 38:26–27 testifies to the awareness of the intrinsic worth of water. The target of the rain in this text is not just the productive land worked to satisfy human hunger as in Job 36:27–28, but to transform a desolate land into fertile land. Although animals are not referred to explicitly, they are implied as the beneficiaries of such rain that leads to the dry ground putting forth food for the animals (Job 38:27).

The Intrinsic Value of Moisture (vv. 28–30)

This strophe shifts from the majestic torrential rainfalls to the softer forms of moisture: the rain (מָטָר, v. 28a), dew (אֶגְלֵי־טֵל, v. 28b), ice (קָרָח, v. 29a) and hoarfrost (כֶּפֶר, v. 29b). The unfrozen pair “rain and dew” falling in drops (אֶגְלִים)²¹ parallels the frozen pair “Ice and Hoar-frost” in verses 28–29 (Vall 1995, 505). The rhetorical question

¹⁹ See also the Holocaust interpretation of the book of Job in Alford (2009, 58).

²⁰ The springing up of grass (מִצֵּא דְשֵׂא) in dry ground in Job 38:27 echoes Genesis 1:11–12 (וַתֹּצֵא הָאֲרֶזֶץ וַתִּשְׂא דְשֵׂא). In both texts the land was in a state of desolation before God's actions. In Genesis the desolation is depicted in terms of תֵּהוֹ וְבוֹהוּ (formless wasteland), whereas in Job the land is in a condition of שְׂאֵה וּמִשְׂאֵה (total desolation). In Genesis the fertility of the land is made possible by further separation of waters resulting in the rise of the dry land (הַיַּבֵּשָׁה) that later puts forth grass. In Job the fertility of the land is caused by beneficial rainfall on a land despised by human beings, a desolate land. In both texts humans are not involved in sustaining the land.

²¹ This word is a *hapax legomenon*; it is not found anywhere else in the Bible. The rendering “drops” is based on the context and the ancient versions (Vulgate, Targum, Syriac).

“Does the rain have a father?” expects a negative answer.²² All the questions in Job 38:28–30 about the origin of these water-related domains expect the same answer.

Rain and Dew

The text implies that God is the one who brings rain, in contradiction to the myth of the Canaanite entourage of the storm god Baal comprising Pirdya, daughter of mist and Taliya (Dew), daughter of showers (Habel 1985, 542). In this sense, Schökel and Díaz (1983, 560) think that Job 38:28–29 is a remnant of a myth where the male sky fertilises the female earth through his semen, the rain and dew.

However, the rain and dew in Job 38:28 are not mentioned here for their fertilising role, but for their origin. The text focuses on their intrinsic value, not on their usefulness, as Job would expect. They are worthy in themselves whether they serve humans or not, since their being depends not on Baal or humans but on God (Job 36:27–28 and Jeremiah 14:22). It is implied that since they originate from YHWH (Job 38:1), God is the only one to decide to use them as he likes, regardless of the opinion of Job. Their divine origin would testify to the extraordinary functions they can fulfil on earth (Habel 1985, 543).

The author and the implied reader of Job 38:28 are surely aware of the relevance of rain and dew in Israel. That is why Job complains, asking why the rain falls on useless land. Israel’s agriculture depended exclusively on the yearly rainfall (Deuteronomy 10:11–17). Due to its ecological relevance for the land of Israel, rain was even a subject of prayers to the father of the rain, YHWH (1 Samuel 12:17–18; Joel 1:8). In this sense, the purpose of the Sukkot festival during the days of the Temple’s reconstruction was to ensure the falling of rain (Patai 1939, 253).

However, during the dry season, dew was a very significant source of water. That is why the pair “rain and dew” occurs together many times in parts of the Bible.²³ In fact, crops (olive, fig or grape) that grew during the dry months depended on dew, especially on the central coastal plain, where dew can produce up to 55 mm of water per year.²⁴ In Genesis 27:28 dew is part of the blessings which Isaac bestowed on his son Jacob, while Gideon could wake up early in the morning and wring dew from the fleece to fill a bowl

²² Buttenwieser claims that the question “Does the rain have a father?” should be answered “yes.” He claims that in Arabia and in Scotland the wind is referred to as “the father of the rain.” This scholar links the verse with Proverbs 25:23, which reads “the north wind brings forth rain” (1922, 289). I do not agree with Buttenwieser, because the goal of Job 38 is not to know the father of the rain. It is assumed that it is God. The aim is to demonstrate the limitation of the human mind.

²³ During the summer drought the growth of grapes depends on dewfall (Baly 1957, 143). See also 2 Samuel 1:21; Deuteronomy 32:2.

²⁴ Dewfall in ancient Israel depended on moist air from the Mediterranean (Gilead and Rosenan 1954, 120–123).

with water (Judges 6:38). In this sense, the absence of dew and rain is seen as a curse in 2 Samuel 1:21:

You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields!
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more (NRSV).

Rain and dew are so relevant in ancient Israel that the simile in Hosea 14:6 declares that God will be like dew of Lebanon for Israel, while in Hosea 6:3 it said that YHWH will come to Israel “like the rain, like the spring rains that water the earth.” We also know from the apocalyptic prophecy of Isaiah 26:19 of the idea that certain dead people could receive revivifying dew as an unction that could bring them back to life (Martin-Achard 1956, 106).

The significant ecological message of Job 38:28–30 is that rain and dew do not need any human intervention to fall earthward, as reaffirmed in Micah 5:7:

Then the remnant of Jacob, surrounded by many peoples, shall be like dew from the LORD, like showers on the grass, which do not depend upon people or wait for any mortal (NRSV).

It is thus implicit in Job 38:28 that the falling down of rain and dew is not an accidental feature, even though it does not happen to serve the interests of human beings.

Ice and Frost

The other forms of moisture are frost and ice (Job 38:29–30). Psalm 78:47 depicts frost as a dangerous agent that can destroy a sycamore/tree, while Zechariah 14:6 views the day of the Lord as the absence of the threats of cold and frost. Ice is often described as volatile as it vanishes with the rising heat (Job 6:16–17). However, in Job 38:29–30 ice plays the great role of hiding the face of the Deep (תְהוֹם) and its chaotic terrors directed against the created order (see Job 38:16–17). In other words, although Job may think that ice and frost are useless, verses 29–30 show how every water-related phenomenon has its value and was designed play its role accordingly. There is a deeper order in the cosmos designed by the Father of all.

Briefly, humans are not the father of the rain, dew, frost and ice. Still, these natural phenomena play relevant roles in the cosmos, even though Job complains that they do not serve his interests the way he would like them to. In Job 38 humans are not the centre of creation. In this sense, the water-related phenomena are viewed as having their own intrinsic value and their “way” (דֶרֶךְ) in the created order, and are not considered for the way that they can be useful to humans.

The Role of Stars Related to Water (vv. 31–33)

The four stars in these three verses are all linked to the coming of rains. The identity of Pleiades and Orion is widely accepted, while that of Mazzaroth and Aldebaran is still a matter of debate among scholars.²⁵ The presence of these four constellations here is perhaps due to their function of forecasting rain, while Job cannot do this. In other words, if Job were responsible for the destiny of the universe, as he had alleged earlier, he would at least have been able to manage these stars whose rain-forecasting role is vital on earth (Clines 2011, 1112). As in Genesis 1:14–18, it is not their identity with which the text is concerned, but their role as signs of the time or seasons.²⁶

The question “can you bind (קָשַׁר) the Pleiades and loose (פָּתַח) the cords of Orion” (v. 31) presumes the ability to maintain these rain-related constellations, which are the portent of spring and herald of winter respectively (Clines 2011, 1113), in their place. In other words, to “bind” the Pleiades would essentially mean to check the spring rains that they release, while “loosing” Orion’s cords implies disabling the autumn rains (Driver 1956, 7).

As one can see, the question is not about creating these stars, but controlling their role as foretellers of spring or autumn rains. Newsom (2003, 242) thinks that the binding of the Pleiades refers to their invisibility during the hot time (the beginning of April), while loosing Orion’s cords²⁷ refers to the month of July onward, when Orion’s arrows of heat and dryness have been discharged over the earth. The context suggests the question of whether Job, like God, can control their supposed seasonal influences.

The phrase “bringing out (אָצַר) Mazzarot and guiding (נָהַג) Aldebaran with its Hyades” in Job 38:32 is another complex question put to Job. The verb אָצַר also occurs in Isaiah 40:26, where God calls out the stars by their names, and is ecologically relevant here. Job is asked whether he can bring out into the night sky the star known as Mazzaroth. The action of guiding (נָהַג) the star Aldebaran and its train (Hyades) poses the same challenge.

Verse 33 is more challenging, since it concerns the impact of the sky on the earth. The שָׁמַיִם (sky) impacts on life through its water. The word שָׁמַיִם (sky) is closely related to

²⁵ The Pleiades are a cluster of stars in the constellation of Taurus. The Hebrew word כִּימָה for Pleiades probably means “herald.” Orion is one of the most easily recognised stars in the northern sky. Orion’s belt is made by three bright stars in a straight line. *Mazzarot* is a *hapax legomenon*, and has been variously identified with the zodiac circle, with Arcturus, Sirius, or Venus. Aldebaran is the bright star that forms the eyes of Taurus (see Driver 1956, 1–11).

²⁶ In neighbouring cultures the sun and the moon were some of the most important gods in the pantheon. They were credited with controlling human destiny and seasons on earth (see Wenham 1987, 21).

²⁷ Ancient peoples believed that the stars were suspended from the sky with cords, which could also be used to move them from side to side (see Hirschberg 1935, 130–132).

water in ancient cosmogonies such as the epic of *Enuma Elish*.²⁸ The point is that, generally speaking, the words denoting “sky” in the Semitic languages are prefixed by *sh* to the word meaning “water” (Van Wolde 1998, 24).²⁹ The word שָׁמַיִם in Hebrew or Aramaic and *shamu* in Akkadian could therefore be seen as terms combining “of/one of which” (ש) and “waters” (מַיִם) assuming that the sky is “one of the waters/of the waters” (Kee 2012, 187). These are the waters that follow a channel (cf. Job 38:25–27) to reach the earth through rainfall.

It seems that the rule governing these upper-waters falling earthward is one of the laws referred to in Job 38:33. The related text in Job 28:26 affirms that the rain does not occur accidentally but follows a law (חֹק) set for it. It is not about the rules governing the ways of the stars as in Isaiah 47:13, but the constancies linking a given star with the spring or autumn rainy seasons (Clines 2011, 1114).

This is a comprehensive answer to the questions of Job 12:13–25, where Job alleged that the cosmos is made up of chaotic and unruly things. God’s response in Job 38:33 points to the cosmic order in which earth and sky are united by “laws.”³⁰ These laws might presume the Sumerian concept *Me* relating to preordained divine decrees by which the natural order, religion and society are ordered (Van Dyk 2001, 38).

The Clouds as Water-Carriers (vv. 34–38)

These last verses concern the falling of rain from the clouds as a response to God’s voice. These verses depict three things: (1) God’s control of the rains (vv. 34–35); (2) animals’ ability to forecast the rain (the cock and ibis, v. 36); and (3) the famous image of the sending down of the rains and their effects on earth (vv. 37–38).

The strophe as a whole presents God’s involvement in his universe and his wisdom in its maintenance. With the question “Can you lift up your voice ...” (v. 34), Job is challenged as to whether, like God, he can command the waters above to fall down on earth. It is ironically implied that even if Job is able to shout as hard as possible, his voice will not even reach the clouds, the carriers of the waters above (Job 36:29) that fall earthward as rain (v. 35).

²⁸ See comparisons between *Enuma Elish* and the Priestly texts in Sparks (2007, 629).

²⁹ Van Wolde (1998, 24ff) thinks that the letter -ש of the word שָׁמַיִם (sky) might have been used as an abridged form of the relative pronoun אשר (that), and thereby the word שָׁמַיִם would mean “that relates to” מַיִם. This would explain why the function of שָׁמַיִם (sky) in Genesis 1:6 aims only at separating the מַיִם above from the מַיִם below, since prior to this שָׁמַיִם, there was only a vertical and unspecified mass of water called תְּהוֹמוֹת characterized by utter darkness, חֹשֶׁךְ.

³⁰ These laws in Job 38:33 might presume the word Ma’at in Egyptian referring to the maintenance of the creative order in שְׁלוֹמִים (peace) and צְדָקָה (justice) (Schmid 1984, 105).

The idea of the intrinsic worth of nature and human limits in controlling nature is reiterated in the text. Interestingly, the text presents water-related phenomena as subjects that can hear voices and answer “Here we are” (הִגַּנְנוּ). The response הִגַּנְנוּ presents the lightning as servants acting as full subjects to accomplish a specific mission the way human beings do in response to God’s voice (Samuel in 1 Samuel 3:8; Isaiah in Isaiah 6:8).

Ecologically speaking, the clouds, the torrents of rain and their accompanying lightning have intrinsic worth and act purposefully. God is apparently challenging Job (humans) to reconsider his claim that nature testifies to the tyranny of God, and instead discover the intrinsic value of the Earth teaching God’s wisdom in nature (Habel and Earth Bible Team 2001, 32).

The idea of the wisdom of God in nature continues in verse 36. The rendering of the verse as being about the wisdom of the clouds would be in line with the meteorological context of the text. It must be admitted that it sounds strange to attribute wisdom to the clouds or mist, as the Revised Standard Version does. The contention in this article is that there is good reason to view this verse as concerning the wisdom and understanding of the ibis and cock, since these two birds were often seen as foretellers of the arrival of rain from the clouds (Peters 1914, 153).

The ibis (טְחוּת) was famously respected for its ability to foretell the rising of the Nile in Egypt, while the cock (שָׁכֹן) was valued for its ability to forecast the rain from clouds (Jaussen 1924, 575). This translation is based on Job 12:7–8, supporting the idea that certain animals and birds have wisdom. The rising of the Nile and the coming of rains are two events which fit with the main theme of the text. Therefore, Today’s English Version merely renders the verse as:

Who tells the Ibis that the Nile will flood? Or who tells the Rooster that the rain will fall? (Job 38:36)

The response is obviously “God.” It is implied that these birds have special wisdom (חִכְמָה) and understanding (בִּינָה) invested in them by God. By contrast, Job (humans) lacks this skill of foretelling the rains in addition to his (their) inability to command the rainfall and the lightning. These birds are a testimony to the actions of the clouds as water-skins pouring rain down earthward.

In this sense, Job 38:37 depicts how, in order to bring rain to earth, God first counts (סָפַר) the clouds before “tilting” (שָׁכַב) or literally “to cause to lie down”³¹ (note the

³¹ The expression נְבֵלֵי שָׁמַיִם (jars of the skies) implies that the clouds form a container of the waters-above (Job 26:3) that can be emptied by tilting it or causing it to lie down (שָׁכַב).

hiphil form) these “water jars”³² so that their contents spill out on the earth. In the Bible the clouds are water-jars of life-giving rains since:

As the celestial reservoir contains the water already in liquid form and ready to come down as rain, the most obvious hypothesis would seem to be that the water passed through the firmament into the clouds to be carried by them to that part of the earth which was to receive the rain (Sutcliffe 1953, 100).

Therefore, the verb סָפַר in Job 38:37 about the sky denotes “the question of counting the clouds rightly, for they are water-skins whose contents should only be poured out with deliberate purpose” (Dhorme 1967, 594). The ecological effect of this life-giving rain is the compact amassing of the dust (v. 38).³³ Hillel (2006, 146) views this natural phenomenon as a sign of fertility because:

The effectiveness of rain in sustaining crops depends on the presence of a receptive and retentive soil. To be productive, the soil must be able to absorb the rainwater rather than shed it and to store the moisture in the rooting zone of the crops to be grown.

This clue testifies to the text’s consciousness of the preciousness and intrinsic value of the water over which Job (humans) has no control. Still, the rain fertilises the earth.

Eco-theological Synthesis

Water is mentioned in the text not as something that humans may benefit from but as something that has intrinsic value. The intrinsic worth of hail and snow is shown in the fact that these water-related phenomena are not only kept in treasuries (places), but also designed to be used during specific times (of scarcity and war) (Job 38:22–23). The occurrence of the word אֲרָרָה in Job 38:24–25 implies that the weather forces that convey the rain follow a fixed course (אֲרָרָה) in accordance with a deep order in the cosmos.

In contrast to Elihu’s speech, rain is not considered here for its usefulness to humans, but for its own value that can create life in a desolate land. The target of the rain here is not just the fruitful land worked to feed people, but the wilderness, a home for other creatures (vv. 25–27). The benefits of creation were not made to serve only the interests of human beings.

In Job 38:31–33 the text presents the four stars linked to the coming of rain. As in Genesis 1:14–18, it is not their identity with which the text is concerned, but their role

³² In Lamentations 4:2, a “water jar” (בַּיָּד) is viewed as the work of a potter. A water jar always occurs attested in the Hebrew Bible in relation to wine storage (1 Samuel 1:24; 10:3; 2 Samuel 16:1; Nehemiah 5:18; Jeremiah 13:12) or oil container.

³³ Job 38:38 probably implies the early rains of October–November that fall after the summer heat and thus enable the fertility of the land, as mentioned earlier, on rain, in Job 36:26–37:13.

as signs of the time and seasons. Finally, Job 38:34–38 presents the clouds as water-carriers. Excitingly, the text presents the rainstorms in terms of subjects that can hear and respond “Here we are” (יִנָּדְוּ). The word יִנָּדְוּ presents the rainstorms as God’s servants with the same status as humans. The text also presents some birds that can sense the coming of rain, a skill that humans lack.

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