Conversations about chaos and order: making the world in the Book of Job


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Abstract

Setting their sights on the splash thrown up by Leviathan in chapters 3 and 41, many interpreters have argued that the conflict between chaos and order, as embody combat mythology, is a theme in the Book of Job. Although I agree that issues related to chaos and order are central to the book, the assumption that any discussion of chaos and order must be related to combat mythology does not stand up to scrutiny. Order and chaos, I maintain, are broader terms. I define them as “how the world to be,” and “how the world ought not to be,” respectively. Using these broader, and, I think, more accurate definitions, the Book of Job can be read as a long discussion about chaos and order, without requiring that we identify characters as forces embodying chaos or order who fight each other for control of the world, an interpretation which is an over-simplification of what is going on in the book.

As “how the world ought/ought not to be,” order and chaos are container terms, capable of being filled in a number of different ways. That is to say, we cannot look at Leviathan (or Tiamat) and extrapolate characteristics of chaos that are applicable across the board. Rather, what constitutes chaos or order will depend on the particular circumstances and point of view of the person doing the labeling. In this thesis, I identify three pairs of concepts around which chaos and order are commonly conceived: singularity/multiplicity, stasis/change, and inside/outside. Taking these pairs one at a time, I examine how the various characters in the Book of Job describe order and chaos. What emerges is not a dictum as to what constitutes order or chaos, but a number of possible visions of how the world ought and ought not to be, none of which is definitive.

At the end of the “conversation about chaos and order” that is the Book of Job, both God and Job make strong bids for their right to “make the world,” by deciding how and ought not to be. In his speeches from the whirlwind, God identifies himself as the world’s creator, presenting an ordered world that is vastly different from what Job presumes order to be. Regardless of how Job's response to God in 42:6 is understood—and it is interpreted in a great number of ways—in the epilogue Job can be seen to make his own bid for creator status, as he proceeds to inhabit a world that bears no similarity to the world God has just described. Job’s epilogue-world denies the ultimate reality of God’s whirlwind-world, but God’s whirlwind-world casts doubt upon the reality of Job’s epilogue-world. In this way, the book ends ambiguously; it curves back on itself, and the discussion about the nature of chaos and order continues, both within the book and beyond.
The Book of Job (Hebrew: יְהוָה; /dʒoʊb/) is a book in the Ketuvim ("Writings") section of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), and the first poetic book in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. Addressing the problem of theodicy – the vindication of the justice of God in the light of humanity's suffering – it is a rich theological work setting out a variety of perspectives. It has been widely praised for its literary qualities, with Alfred Lord Tennyson calling it "the greatest poem of ancient and...