

Job 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Job chapter 8. Then Bildad the Shuhite answered and said, How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Does God pervert justice, or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression. If you will seek God, and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you, and restore your rightful habitation, and though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great. For inquire, please, of bygone ages, and consider what the fathers have searched out, for we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow. Will they not teach you and tell you, and utter words out of their understanding? Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh? Can reeds flourish where there is no water? While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. Such are the paths of all who forget God. The hope of the godless shall perish. His confidence is severed, and his trust is a spider's web. He leans against his house, but it does not stand. He lays hold of it, but it does not endure. He is a lush plant before the sun, and his shoots spread over his garden. His roots entwine the stone heap. He looks upon a house of stones. If he is destroyed from his place, then it will deny him, saying, I have never seen you. Behold, this is the joy of his way, and out of the soil others will spring. Behold, God will not reject a blameless man, nor take the hand of evildoers. He will yet fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouting.

Those who hate you will be clothed with shame, and the tent of the wicked will be no more. Job chapter 8 is the first of the speeches of Bildad the Shuhite. His is the second in the first cycle of the speeches of Job's friends, after Eliphaz the Temanite. His speech is much shorter than Eliphaz's, and picks up on certain elements of Job's response to Eliphaz. It begins with a sharp and dismissive statement. How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Bildad's how long opening might look back in part to Job's statement of chapter 7 verse 19. How long will you not look away from me, nor leave me alone till I swallow my spirit? For Bildad, the justice of God's rule should not be challenged or questioned. The righteous moral governance of God is axiomatic. For Bildad, things are to be understood in terms of reward or retribution.

In a particularly insensitive statement, in verse 4 he says that Job's children had clearly sinned against the Lord, and as a result they were delivered over to destruction. All of this follows from Bildad's understanding of God's just moral governance. All of this is so obvious to him that he may not even be registering the inferences that he is making. Norman Harbel observes that his use of the language of sinning and dispatching in verse 4 is ironic given the background of chapter 1 verse 5, where the same two verbs are related to Job's pious action concerning his children. While we might perhaps infer it from his statement, Bildad does not directly accuse Job in the way that he accused Job's children of sin.

Rather, he presents Job with the possibility of restoration to his rightful habitation. He must plead with God for mercy and be pure and upright, and if he is, he has good grounds for hope for a bountiful restoration. While Bildad is quite wrong in his assessment of the situation, verse 7 is actually fulfilled in chapter 42 verse 12.

[3 : 35] To support his case, Eliphaz had referred to a mysterious vision that he had received at night.

Bildad turns to the wisdom of the ancients. In verses 8 to 10 he talks about the primordial wisdom of antiquity. Bildad, Job, and their contemporaries are people of short lives, yet the wisdom of the ancients has survived from time immemorial. It is to this tried and tested wisdom of bygone ages that Job should turn. Verse 9, talking about the brevity of their lives, might remind us of Ecclesiastes chapter 6 verse 12. For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?

Hubble raises the possibility that Bildad might not only have in mind the duration of time for which the wisdom of the ancients has survived, but also the exceptionally long lives of the ancients, and consequently the exceptional length of time they had to test and develop their thinking. In the verses that remain in the chapter he presents wisdom drawn from these ancients, in particular developing the metaphor of a plant. The papyrus or the reeds that cannot flourish without the marsh or the water might be a reference to the way that people cannot flourish without wisdom or God's grace to drink from. Such a metaphor resembles what we find in Psalm 1 verses 3 to 4. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. And in Jeremiah chapter 17 verses 5 to 8, thus says the Lord, cursed is the man who trusts in man, and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. [5 : 41] He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. The nature of the metaphor that Bildad is exploring here is not entirely clear, and commentators differ in their interpretation of it. Harbel, for instance, sees this as a metaphor of two contrasting plants. The first plant is the withering plant of verse 12, and the second plant is the lush plant of verse 16. In this interpretation he is drawing upon the work of Robert Gordas.

Gerald Johnson follows a similar approach, whereas David Clines, Robert Alden, and Tremper Longman all see either only one plant, or two images of the wicked within different plants. Those who read it as a contrast between the righteous and the wicked, see for instance the juxtaposition between the fragility of the spider's house in verse 14, and the strength of the house of stones in verse 17.

This is related to the contrast between the habitation of the righteous in verse 6, and the tent of the wicked in verse 22. The godless quickly withers, but in the reading advanced by Gordas and others, the lush plant thrives. However, in verse 18, it seems that the lush plant is eradicated, it's destroyed from its place, and the place seemingly forgets him. However, there is a reversal in verse 19. The lush plant that seemed to have perished comes up again. Harbel translates the relevant verses from verse 16 to 19 as follows. Another plant stays fresh, even in the sun. Its shoots reach beyond its garden. Over a rock pile its roots wind. A house of stone it spies. If its place should swallow it, and deny, saying, I did not see you, such is the joy of its way, that from the dust it shoots up elsewhere.

By contrast with this reading, David Clines reads the beginning of verse 19 as, that is the dissolution of its life. What springs up is not the plant itself thriving elsewhere, but other plants taking its place. It has been eradicated, forgotten, and now where it once grew, other plants are growing. Good arguments can be advanced for both of these readings. Perhaps one of the strengths of the reading presented by Harbel and Gordas is that it ties well with the conclusion of the chapter. Although Job seems to have suffered a terrible setback, he is in the position of the lush plant. If he is a righteous and blameless man, language that was used of him back in chapter 1, he will not be rejected. His misfortune will be reversed, and any who mock him will end up being put to shame. A question to consider. Both Job and his friends make arguments that are based upon the brevity of man's life. What are these different arguments, and how should they be assessed?