

Job 27: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 27. And Job again took up his discourse and said, As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter, as long as my breath is in me, and the Spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit. Far be it from me to say that you are right. Till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I will hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go. My heart does not reproach me for any of my days.

Let my enemy be as the wicked. Let him who rises up against me be as the unrighteous. For what is the hope of the godless when God cuts him off, when God takes away his life?

Will God hear his cry when distress comes upon him? Will he take delight in the Almighty? Will he call upon God at all times? I will teach you concerning the hand of God.

What is with the Almighty I will not conceal. Behold, all of you have seen it yourselves. Why then have you become altogether vain? This is the portion of a wicked man with God, and the heritage that oppressors receive from the Almighty. If his children are multiplied, it is for the sword, and his descendants have not enough bread. Those who survive him the pestilence buries, and his widows do not weep. Though he heap up silver like dust, and pile up clothing like clay, he may pile it up, but the righteous will wear it, and the innocent will divide the silver.

He builds his house like a moth's, like a booth that a watchman makes. He goes to bed rich, but will do so no more. He opens his eyes, and his wealth is gone. Terrors overtake him like a flood.

[1 : 4 1] In the night a whirlwind carries him off. The east wind lifts him up, and he is gone. It sweeps him out of his place. It hurls at him without pity. He flees from its power in headlong flight. It claps its hands at him, and hisses at him from its place. From chapter 24, questions of the proper ordering of the material of the book of Job have vexed commentators. This continues to be an issue in chapter 27, where many commentators believe that the material in our Bibles is wrongly ordered.

In taking this position, commentators are responding to several difficulties in the text itself. The final cycle of speeches is anomalous. Only two of the friends speak, Eliphaz and Bildad. Each previous cycle involved the final speech by Zophar, but that's missing here. Bildad's speech is also incredibly short. By contrast, Job speaks for most of the next few chapters, and all of the way from chapter 26 to 31, if we don't believe that chapter 28 and its poem concerning wisdom comes from a different hand.

By itself, this is not an overwhelming problem to account for. As several commentators have observed, the arguments of the friends have clearly reached an impasse. They were reheating stale old arguments on the one hand, and becoming more forcefully condemnatory of Job on the other. And it's very clear by this point, there's little to be gained by continuing. What potential the conversation ever had seems to have been exhausted by this point. Indeed, as Gerald Janssen argues, Job chapter 26 may be Job interrupting Bildad before his speech can build up any momentum. The point that Job's speech is excessively long is also relatively easily answered. First, Job's speeches have always been significantly longer than his friends. Second, if chapter 28 is a different speaker, then chapters 26 and 27 are not a long speech at all, and chapters 29 to 31 would be a final statement summing matters up. Third, chapter 27 begins with an introductory statement, suggesting that it is a distinct speech from that of chapter 26.

The tougher issue to address is the presence of material in chapters 24, 26 and 27 that seems to represent not Job's position, but that of his friends. More particularly, chapter 24 verses 18 to 24, chapter 26 verses 6 to 14, and chapter 27 verses 7 to 23. In this chapter, verses 13 to 23 present an especially keen problem for the interpreter, as their portrayal of the wicked is something that we have come to expect from the mouths of the friends, but definitely not from Job. On the surface of it, some might even wonder whether Job has given in to the friends' interpretation of matters.

While he attributes chapter 26 verses 6 to 14 to Job, John Hartley relocates chapter 27 verses 13 to 23 after 25 verses 1 to 6, and reads it as the words of Bildad, drawing upon Zophar. Norman Harbell's position, one of the most popular approaches, treats the first 12 verses as Job's, and the rest of the chapter is Zophar, the missing speech. Janssen suggests that chapter 27 verses 13 to 23 are Job's anticipatory parody of Zophar. Perhaps the pause before the speech was Job waiting for Zophar to take his turn, but Zophar said nothing, and now Job gives his speech for him. David Clines forms a third speech for Zophar by joining in order chapter 27 verses 7 to 10 verses 13 to 17, chapter 24 verses 18 to 24, and chapter 27 verses 18 to 23, leaving verses 1 to 6 and 11 to 12 of this chapter as Job's own speech.

[5 : 31] Marvin Pope cuts off the speech of Job at verse 7, and attributes verses 8 to 23 to Zophar. Harold Rowley only attributes the first six verses to Job. Other commentators seem to be just perplexed and uncertain about what to make of the anomalous elements. C.S. Rod, for instance, seems to fall into this camp. There are plenty of commentators, though, who still read the entirety of chapter 27 as the words of Job, even without stretching the idea of Job's voice to the extent that Janssen does.

They don't believe it's necessary to see Job as engaging in a parody at this point. Toby Sumter, reading the book in terms of the theories of René Girard, stresses the importance of the political background of what's taking place in the book. Job is the king of his people, and what the friends are doing in their discourses with him is trying to discredit him and undermine his rule. They are claiming that God has decisively ruled against him, and as a result, he should be divested of authority. This should help us to recognise that even for the friends, this was never a detached discussion of God, evil and suffering. It was an attempt to gain political power. The issue of the book isn't just a narrow question of suffering. Why do bad things happen to good people? Nor is it even just about personal vindication and being in right relationship with God, which is clearly a concern for Job. There is more going on here. Job's desire for vindication is not just a private thing. It's a desire for public vindication, for restoration to his societal and political standing, for deliverance from people like his friends, who are playing the satanic role of the accuser. Sumter writes,

The argument has always been a rhetorical wrestling for political power. It is only here, where God has suddenly started turning the tables, that Job takes control of the conversation, and like Solomon, can speak proverbs, can speak of what God does to evildoers. They are punished, and the innocent are delivered. The rich and oppressive go down to death, and are carried away in the storm and the wind.

This is only out of place if Job is in exactly the same spot as he began. Yet Job has emerged into the light, and while the dust has not yet settled, the momentum of the battle has turned, and Job can affirm without impunity that the wicked will be blown away by the storm, because that is even now happening. While I am not completely persuaded of this reading, I think it is a promising approach to the text, and may have some insights to give us.

Job begins chapter 27 with an extended oath. His friends have been trying to persuade him to give in, and to admit that he has done something wrong, to confess, to acknowledge his crime. Eliphaz gave a litany of different sins that he thought that Job must be guilty of, back in his first speech of the third cycle. As in a show trial in a totalitarian society, the verdict has already been determined. [8 : 23] The important thing being sought is the accused person's submission to the accusations, and acknowledgement of his guilt. This is really what the friends are looking for. The strength of Job's refusal at this point needs to be seen in light of that. I believe that Rene Girard and Sumter are correct in seeing that the friends are not just looking for Job's admission of his guilt to support some theories that they have about God's justice. They're looking for something more. They have a political end in view. All of this gives Job's refusal to give in a greater force. From his oath to maintain his innocence, Job moves to an imprecatory statement, a curse concerning the people who are opposing him. As he has been doing throughout the book, Job is calling for God to act decisively in history, to establish justice, bringing wicked accusers to shame, and upholding the righteous against their adversaries. There is no reason to believe that Job has abandoned any belief in justice. He is greatly dismayed that it is not being done in his situation, and he also points out a great many other situations where it is absent. But his very stubbornness in appealing to God consistently suggests that there is more going on here. He refuses to let go of a belief in divine justice. Even when all of the appearances are otherwise, he will appeal to it.

In verses 11 to 23, as we've seen, the reader is faced with a great many questions, while verses 11 to 12 are more generally acknowledged to be Job's words. How they relate to what follows is unclear. The you that is being addressed is plural, so it would be strange to put these words in the mouths of the friends towards Job. Robert Alden writes, Because the canonical shape of the book must have made sense to its first readers, and there is no compelling reason to amend the text, it is best to understand these verses as Job's. He argues in a manner similar to Janssen, that Job is summarising the arguments of the friends in the final verses.

It certainly seems to pick up on earlier themes in their portraits of the wicked, particularly in the second cycle of speeches. Job refers to meaningless talk, or vain talk, in verse 12. Alden argues that this is referring to what he summarises in verses 13 to 23. Perhaps another consideration when we approach verses 13 to 23 is that it matters who speaks particular words. In the mouth of Zophar, these would mean very different things than they mean in the mouth of Job. Perhaps the reader is being challenged to reflect upon this. This is a point made in Proverbs chapter 26 verses 7 and 9. Like a lame man's legs which hang useless is a proverb in the mouth of fools. Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools. Job, if these are his words, has not abandoned a sense of justice. He calls upon God to act with justice, not just in his own situation, but against his adversaries. Here, again if these are his words, he expresses a confidence in the way that God will bring justice to pass in history, the way that the wicked will be brought to nothing. However, this hope is not just a mechanical hope. It's connected with prayer for divine vindication and action. It's an expression of faith, not just of sight. It does not deny the existence of anomalies, nor does it try to pretend that the acts of God are completely scrutable, as the friends have often tried to do. When we hear these words coming from the mouth of Job, we know that they come with all these other qualifications. We know that they are balanced, that they come with this sense of faith, not sight.

[11 : 49] Such statements, we should recall, are found at many points in scripture, particularly in the Psalms and the book of Proverbs. The statements given by the friends are often seemingly biblical ones, but yet the way that they are using them is profoundly foolish. Perhaps by forcing the reader to hear similar words from the mouth of Job himself, we're being taught to think a bit more carefully about the way that wisdom and speech relates to speaker, context and words, and those things can't be separated from each other. Job presents a number of images here of the wicked being cut off or brought to nothing. The primary focus is on inheritance and legacy. The legacy of the wicked is cut off.

His children and descendants are brought to nothing. His wealth falls into other hands. People do not mourn him. His house proves as fragile as a moth's chrysalis. He piles up riches, but they'll soon be required of him. He's suddenly removed, and there's nothing left, and God in his power mocks at him.

A question to consider. Can you think of other ways and places in which the scripture teaches us how to use wise words wisely?