

# Job 38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Job chapter 38. Then the Lord answered Job after the whirlwind and said, Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge, dressed for action like a man? I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know. Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed limits for it, and set bars and doors, and said, Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed? Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? It is changed like clay under the seal, and its features stand out like a garment. From the wicked their light is withheld, and their uplifted arm is broken.

Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this. Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, that you may take it to its territory, and that you may discern the paths to its home? You know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great.

Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail, which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war? What is the way to the place where the light is distributed, or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth? Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no man is, on the desert in which there is no man, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground sprout with grass? Has the rain a father? Or who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb did the ice come forth? And who has given birth to the frost of heaven? The waters become hard like stone, and the face of the deep is frozen. Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the Maserath in their season, or can you guide the bear with its children? Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth? Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go, and say to you, here we are? Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? Who can number the clouds by wisdom, or who can tilt the water skins of the heavens, when the dust runs into a mass, and the clods stick fast together? Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their thicket? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God for help, and wander about for lack of food? In Job chapter 38, for the first time since the prologue, the voice of the Lord is directly heard. We might recognise some of the connections between chapter 38 and the preceding two chapters, where Elihu challenges Job, sometimes in similar terms. In chapter 37, Elihu had discussed things like the Lord's power in meteorological forces and the storm, and now in chapter 38, the Lord comes in the whirlwind. The Lord's stormy advent on the scene might remind us of other appearances of the Lord in scripture, in places like 1 Kings chapter 19, where the Lord appeared to Elijah at Mount Horeb, or we might think of the Lord's appearance to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The questions that the Lord asked Job here are also similar to ones that we see elsewhere in scripture. We might think of passages such as Isaiah chapter 40, verses 12 to 26.

Statements from those verses include things like, Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who has measured the spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? Later on, Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in. From the Lord's rhetorical questions to Job, a cosmological vision, and a portrayal of the Lord's creative power and wisdom can be derived.

[ 4 : 56 ] The Lord's statements here should also be read over against such things as Job's own ironic doxological statement in places like chapter 12 verses 13 to 25.

He leads counsellors away stripped, and judges he makes fools. He looses the bonds of kings, and binds a waistcloth on their hips. He leads priests away stripped, and overthrows the mighty.

He deprives of speech those who are trusted, and takes away the discernment of elders. He pours contempt on princes, and loosens the belt of the strong. He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light. He makes nations great, and he destroys them. He enlarges nations, and leads them away. He takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth, and makes them wander in a trackless waste. They grope in the dark without light, and he makes them stagger like a drunken man. Discerning the tone and the purpose of the Lord's speeches is not easy. David Clines raises the interesting question of the tone of the Lord.

Is the Lord being bullying? Is he intimidating, patronising, or is he being playful with Job? Does the Lord, as it were, have a twinkle in his eye? Or is he sternly rebuking Job? Clines, weighing up the different options, argues that the Lord's tone is indeed severe and not at all gracious, yet not offensive and by no means cruel.

The intended message and the intended purpose of the Lord's speech is also something that divides commentators. How are we to make sense of it? We should probably begin by thinking about some of the elements or details that orient or limit our interpretations.

[ 6 : 49 ] Reading the Lord's speeches in a way that just affirms the position of the friends is untenable. The friends are later declared to be incorrect in their assessment of Job, and Job is vindicated.

On the other hand, Job is challenged. The Lord speaks to him, and there certainly seems to be a corrective tone here. A further thing to note is that in the Lord's challenge to Job, the focus is upon Job's words, upon what happens in the discourses, not upon something that Job did prior to the disasters falling upon him.

This contrasts with the three friends, though perhaps not with Elihu. We should also be alert to the use of irony, which can complicate the apparent meaning of the Lord's words. Gerald Janssen, for instance, makes a lot of this in his interpretation of the book. We should also consider not merely what the Lord is saying, but what he is seeking to accomplish by what he is saying. Why does the Lord speak at this point? Why doesn't he just retain his silence? In answering that question, we should not forget the concerns of the prologue that the Lord expresses, and the concerns of the dialogues that Job expresses. In the prologue, the Lord set up Job as a champion, presenting him against the charges of Satan. And in the dialogues, Job was concerned to have an audience with the Lord. He wanted to appeal against the injustice with which he perceived the Lord had treated him, and he wanted to be vindicated by the Lord. While he does get the vindication in chapter 42, the confrontation with the Lord does not go as he expects. He is not the one confronting the Lord. The Lord is the one confronting him. When reading the book of Job, we should always have in the forefront of our mind that these speeches are not occurring in some airless theological space, where everyone is just dispassionately discussing the Lord's justice and the relationship between that and evil in creation. No, there are vital interests at play.

The Lord is concerned to disprove the statements of Satan, and to show that his servant Job, in whom he delights, does not just serve him for mercenary purposes. Job is devastated by being seemingly cut off and abandoned, and indeed condemned by God, and desperately wants to be vindicated. He's lost his authority and his rule within the society, and his counsellors and the society around him have now gathered against him and are treating him as a scapegoat, calling for him an innocent man to confess his fault. He wants to challenge God's apparent injustice, and for God to intervene in his situation and vindicate him. The friends, for their part, are in various ways insisting upon the traditional school teaching of retributive justice, but we might also discern some political motivations at play. They are the political vultures circling. As the king is losing his authority, they likely envisage rich pickings if Job's downfall is complete. And some progress seems to be made in the book. Job does not end up in exactly the same position as he was at the beginning.

He seems to have been matured and blessed through the experience. As we read in James chapter 5 verse 11, Behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

[ 9 : 53 ] In James' reading of the book of Job, the Lord has a purpose through all of Job's sufferings, not just to prove his point against Satan, but a compassionate and a merciful purpose towards Job himself. He wants Job, having gone through the experience, to be more than he was than when he began it. Toby Sumter emphasises these themes in his commentary, drawing attention to the sacrificial elements, particularly in the prologue. Job is being set up as a sacrifice, and through this sacrificial experience, he'll be raised up to a new level. He is maturing into a new form of sonship.

Gerald Janssen makes a similar point. The questions, as from another burning bush, have to do with the issue of Job's willingness to enter upon human vocation to royal rule in the image of God, when the implications of that image are intimated in terms of innocent suffering.

Like a later description of a son in the book of Hebrews, Job learns obedience through the things that he suffers, not as punishment, not even as correction, but as a means of learning steadfastness and endurance in faith. The fact that God answers Job then should be considered seriously.

God could easily have just ignored Job. If God's purpose was merely to dismiss Job, then he needn't have said anything at all. The fact that God speaks to Job, even in this challenging way, suggests that he wants to communicate with Job, for Job to learn something, and by the lesson that he learns, for Job to grow. Let us not forget that the Lord delights in Job.

Despite the force of the Lord's challenge to Job in these chapters, the Lord's fundamental favour to Job should not be forgotten. Chapter 38 contains a number of extended rhetorical questions to Job, presenting in succession different realms of the creation. It begins with a question about the foundation of the earth. The Lord describes the creation as if it were a house or an edifice that he had constructed. It has a foundation that's laid, its measurements are determined, a line is stretched out upon it, its bases are sunk, its cornerstone is laid, and there is a public celebration for its establishment by the sons of God, the angels in heaven. The varied terms here give a sense of the many forms of competence that the Lord has in creation. He acts in manifold, purposeful, and wise ways to establish and maintain the world that he has created. Job has, throughout this book, been trying to get to the bottom of things, but yet he was not there when the Lord laid the foundations of the earth.

[ 12 : 15 ] He cannot, by his very nature as a creature, get to the bottom of things. He doesn't know what underlies it all. Job is here being reminded of how much the creation is hidden to him. He cannot, by its very nature and his very nature, comprehend it. In verse 8 we move from the earth to the sea, and the sea is an important image. The sea is connected with the primeval deep. The sea is an untamed, threatening realm. It's a realm in mythology associated with hostile forces to the order of the world, a chaotic realm, always threatening to overflow the land, and to undermine its order. The Lord describes the sea as if it were a boisterous infant. It has burst forth from the womb, and the Lord has wrapped it in the veil of clouds, and with the swaddling bands of the darkness. The storm clouds and the darkness that veil things and are threatening elements to man are things that the Lord has placed upon the sea like clothing upon a beloved child. And there's something of the ambivalence of the sea expressed in these verses.

As Jansen observes, The sea is both restrained and sustained. It's treated like an infant, but it's also bounded. It's prevented from going beyond its limits. The Lord prescribes limits for it and sets bars and doors.

He observes the parallels between the sea and the limits that the Lord placed upon Satan in the narrative of the prologue. The attentive reader needs to recognise that chaos has a place in God's world.

But it's a bounded one. The sea has a place in the picture, but that place is limited by the Lord, who is the master of the sea. There is a lesson here for Job concerning his own sufferings.

The world of God's creation is a place of both darkness and light. And in verses 12 to 15, the Lord asks Job concerning the dawn. Does Job have the power over the morning and the dawn?

[ 14 : 01 ] When the Lord brings light, he dispels the darkness. And here the advent of the morning is connected with the dispelling of the darkness or wickedness. Tremper Longman writes of some of these verses.

The description of the morning light hitting the earth is powerfully subtle in verses 13 to 14. First, the light is seen as enveloping the earth so that it grabs the horizon. Evil is often done in the cover of night, so the coming light is seen as shaking wicked people out of the earth, like a cloth is shaken to get rid of dust. Verse 14 provides a second image.

A seal is pressed on flat nondescript clay to produce meaningful impressions on the clay. In darkness, the earth looks flat and featureless, but the light reveals hills and valleys.

Verse 14b is difficult, but may describe the same phenomenon of hills and valleys by comparing them to the folds of a garment. Again, it is important to notice the analogies between this and Job's experience.

The Lord created both the darkness and the light, and Job's recent experience has been one of deep darkness. Yet the existence of the night does not deny the fact that God is the God of the dawn.

[ 15 : 07 ] He is the God of both the light and the darkness. He created them both. Such a God can have a purpose for the time of darkness, even if it is a time when the wicked prosper and the righteous seem to suffer. In verses 16 and 17, the Lord asks Job concerning the deep, the abyss, death and the realm of deep darkness. Once again, these are realms of terrifying forces for man, forces that overwhelm simplistic accounts of the universe, but yet they too are under God's control.

Likewise, the expanse, the dwelling of light and the dwelling of darkness, both of them have their place. The Lord knows them. Job does not. Then there are the storehouses of the elements, of the snow and the hail.

Arsenal, arsenals of the great storms that God can send on the day of war. In verses 25 following, we might be reminded that mankind does not directly appear within the picture that the Lord is creating. Man is being addressed in the person of Job, but much of what God describes occurs outside of man's vision. Perhaps the Lord is suggesting to Job that Job is not the centre of the universe. The Lord has purposes for his creation that far exceed his human creation.

He takes concern for the land where no man is found, for the uninhabited wilderness. And if Job would lift his eyes upwards, he will see the stars in the heavens that the Lord set there to rule. Job once again can neither control nor understand these. In this challenge, Job is being put in his place as a creature, but he has not been denied a place as a creature. The Lord, let us never forget, is speaking to him at this point. That alone is a truly remarkable thing for the creator of all these things to do to such a humble creature as a human being. The concluding verses of the chapter move from what we might term the inanimate creation, although within the Lord's portrayal, many elements of it seem to be very much alive, to the animate creation of the animal kingdom.

The creatures focused upon in verses 39 to 41 are not creatures that are domesticated by man. They are wild beasts and birds, the lions and the ravens. They are also animals that prey upon others.

[ 17 : 07 ] As in Psalm 104, the Lord is involved in predatory processes. The Lord is the God of darkness, not just of light. The Lord is the God of the underworld, not just of the overworld. The Lord is the God of the predators, not just the herbivores.

The Lord is the God of the restless and fierce sea, not just the dry land, of the destructive hailstorm, and not just the light rain shower, of the vast and desolate wilderness and desert, not just the habitable and well-watered land. All of this should teach Job and the reader that the Lord is involved and over seemingly chaotic and dark and dangerous and predatory forces.

They have their place within the divine order, but the divine order isn't chaotic, predatory and dark. The world is rich and variegated. It has apparently contrary forces and elements, but they have their proper place within the whole, all governed and controlled by a gracious and wise creator. The presentation of the cosmos in this chapter has a lot more of a comprehensive character to it than, for instance, within Job's ironic doxology in chapter 12. Job's statements in chapter 12 presented the world as if the forces of chaos, darkness, predators and the deep had the upper hand, and as if God was chiefly the God of them, not also the God of the dawning light that exposes the wicked in their deeds, or the God of the rain that sustains human life in the land.

The God of this chapter is a God who delights in, who sustains and preserves his creation, even in its contrary and ambivalent elements. And although Job has been appealing for justice, justice seems to fall out of the picture here. Or rather, we might say that justice is part of the picture, but it is not all the picture. The Lord, by presenting the creation in the way that he does, gives Job a way of thinking of justice as a part of the Lord's governing of creation, but not all that there is to say about it. A question to consider, what things might we learn by reading this passage alongside Genesis chapter 1?