

Job 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 18. Then Bildad the Shuhite answered and said, How long will you hunt for words? Consider, and then we will speak. Why are we counted as cattle?

Why are we stupid in your sight, you who tear yourself in your anger? Shall the earth be forsaken for you, or the rock be removed out of its place? Indeed the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of his fire does not shine. The light is dark in his tent, and his lamp above him is put out. His strong steps are shortened, and his own schemes throw him down, for he is cast into a net by his own feet, and he walks on its mesh. A trap seizes him by the heel, a snare lays hold of him. A rope is hidden for him in the ground, a trap for him in the path. Terrors frighten him on every side, and chase him at his heels. His strength is famished, and calamity is ready for his stumbling.

It consumes the parts of his skin. The firstborn of death consumes his limbs. He is torn from the tent in which he trusted, and is brought to the king of terrors. In his tent dwells that which is none of his. Sulphur is scattered over his habitation. His roots dry up beneath, and his branches wither above. His memory perishes from the earth, and he has no name in the street. He is thrust from light into darkness, and driven out of the world. He has no posterity or progeny among his people, and no survivor where he used to live. Lay of the west are appalled at his day, and horrors seize them of the east. Surely such are the dwellings of the unrighteous. Such is the place of him who knows not God. In Eliphaz's first speech in the second cycle of dialogues in chapter 15 verses 20 to 30, he had presented a portrait of the wicked. The wicked man writhes in pain all his days, through all the years that are laid up for the ruthless. Dreadful sounds are in his ears. In prosperity the destroyer will come upon him. He does not believe that he will return out of darkness, and he is marked for the sword. He wanders abroad for bread, saying, Where is it? He knows that a day of darkness is ready at his hand. Distress and anguish terrify him. They prevail against him like a king ready for battle. Because he has stretched out his hand against God, and defies the Almighty, running stubbornly against him with a thickly-bossed shield. Because he has covered his face with his fat, and gathered fat upon his waist, and has lived in desolate cities, in houses that none should inhabit, which were ready to become heaps of ruins. He will not be rich, and his wealth will not endure, nor will his possessions spread over the earth. He will not depart from darkness. The flame will dry up his shoots, and by the breath of his mouth he will depart. In the next speech by one of the friends, by Bildad in chapter 18, there is another portrait of the wicked presented. However, there is a difference between the way that Bildad presents the wicked, and the way that Eliphaz does. For Eliphaz, the portrait of the wicked was designed to be cautionary for Job. In the case of Bildad, it is more directly condemnatory. To Bildad's mind, Job clearly belongs in the category of the wicked, and there is not much of a promise laid out for his repentance and restoration. His speech serves more as an indictment. Bildad's speech in this chapter, as with a number of Job's speeches and several of the friends' speeches, begins with a dismissive statement directed towards an interlocutor, in this case Job. Bildad's question, why are we counted as cattle, presumably referring to him and the friends, might be a reference back to chapter 12 verse 7, and Job's statement there? But ask the beasts, and they will teach you, the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you. Job had been scathingly dismissive of the friends' council, but yet he had turned their attention to the animals. In Job's protest to this point, he has seemingly been challenging the Lord's moral governance of the universe. Bildad asks in verse 4 whether he expects that the whole world should be thrown into upheaval, the whole cosmic order reordered for his sake.

Norman Harbell suggests that the rock at the end of verse 4 might be a reference to the cosmic mountain. While this is a possibility, for Bildad, it is clearly the case that if Job is going to follow through with his protest, the whole of the cosmic order is thrown into uncertainty. Confidence in the Lord's righteous moral governance of the world is just as important as the stability of the ground beneath your feet. Throw the Lord's moral governance into question, and all is cast into turmoil.

In the preceding chapter in Job's speech, in verses 11 to 12, he had said, in David Klein's reading, My days have passed, broken are my plans, the desires of my heart, which had turned night into day, brought light nearer than darkness. In verses 5 and 6, Bildad picks up the imagery of light and darkness of the lamp of the wicked. The wicked man is deprived of what light he has, plunged into a realm of darkness. Klein's observes a series of key metaphors that played throughout the rest of the chapter. The lamp in verses 5 to 7, the trap in verses 8 to 10, the disease in verses 11 to 13, dryness in verses 15 to 17, and annihilation in verses 18 to 20. The wicked man is a person who is caught in his own traps. In his development and exploration of this metaphor, Bildad might be playing with a way that he has characterised Job's words back in verse 2. Bildad literally speaks of Job trying to snare with words, something that Norman Harbell notices, relating it to the imagery of the trap later on in the chapter. Job will be trapped on account of his own words. From the wicked falling into traps, being caught in snares, and being surrounded by terrors on all sides, Bildad moves to presenting him as one who is sapped of his strength, consumed, and torn from his habitation.

[5 : 56] In verses 12 to 14, the habitation of the wicked is destroyed in the verses that follow. With the trapping of the wicked, his wasting away, and the destruction of his habitation, the reputation, name, progeny, and posterity of the wicked are entirely wiped out upon the face of the earth.

His memory is extinguished, one of the most terrible fates that could befall someone in the ancient world. Bildad had already insensitively referred to Job's children back in chapter 8 verse 4, where he had suggested that the children had sinned against God, and that they had been wiped out for this reason. Here the suggestion seems to shift to Job being the one responsible for the destruction of his children. Job's children were wiped out in order to obliterate his name from the earth. Bildad sums up his message in verse 21, Surely such are the dwellings of the unrighteous, such is the place of him who knows not God.

The wicked is a person condemned to dryness, darkness, disease, distress, and finally annihilation. A question to consider, where else in the book of Job, and elsewhere in the Old Testament, do we find extended portraits of the wicked?