

Job 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 26. Then Job answered and said, How you have helped him who has no power! How you have saved the arm that has no strength! How you have counseled him who has no wisdom, and plentifully declared sound knowledge!

With whose help have you uttered words, and whose breath has come out from you? The dead tremble under the waters and their inhabitants. Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering.

He stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth on nothing. He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them.

He covers the face of the full moon, and spreads over it his cloud. He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters, at the boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of heaven tremble, and are astounded at his rebuke.

By his power he stilled the sea, by his understanding he shattered Rahab, by his wind the heavens were made fair, his hand pierced the fleeing serpent. Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him, but the thunder of his power, who can understand?

[1 : 0 9] In chapter 26, Job answers Bildad dismissively and sarcastically. It's quite possible that Job interrupts Bildad, and Bildad's speech is so short, because Job prevents him from finishing it.

Harbel and various other commentators have argued that verses 5 to 14 of this chapter are actually the words of Bildad, and that Job's response should be read after them. However, if verses 2 to 4 are a response to a speech to Bildad that concludes with verses 5 to 14, it would jar somewhat to go from such a doxology to a dismissive and caustic statement on Job's part.

Job, we would naturally assume, would not disagree with anything in the doxology. It is the inferences that his friends draw from such doxologies that is the issue with him. Janssen raises the intriguing possibility that Job interrupted Bildad's final speech, and then finished Bildad's speech more adequately for him.

He argues that in chapter 27, Job also gives voice to the argument that Zophar would have done. He already knows what the friends are going to say, so he preempts their arguments. However, in both cases, he gives the argument in a way that turns them to his own purposes.

Verses 5 to 14 are a remarkable portrayal of God's sovereignty, power and wisdom in creation. Robert Farl observes, What is worth noticing here is that this chapter in a small compass anticipates the structure of Yahweh's speeches in chapters 38 to 41.

[2 : 3 4] Verses 1 to 4 are a challenge. Yahweh also begins with a challenge. Then verses 5 to 10 correspond to chapters 38 to 39, with their evocation of the mysteries of the universe.

And verses 11 to 14 touch on the mystery of supernatural evil, which is the thrust of chapters 40 to 41. Job describes the universality of God's dominion, his power over the elements of the creation.

He laid the foundations, he stretched out the canopy over it. He controls by his power the great might of the seas. Shattering Rahab, the great sea monster of various cosmogonic myths of the ancient Near East.

Despite these great and marvellous acts of creation, Job insists that these are but a small intimation of who God is. How small a whisper do we hear of him? It is noteworthy that the word whisper here is one that is only found on one other occasion in scripture, and it is also in the book of Job.

Fittingly, in this final speech of the dialogues, it refers back to the first of all of the speeches of the dialogues. Eliphaz's speech, where he had spoken about the vision that he had received in the night, and the whisper that he heard there.

[3 : 42] The transcendent majesty of God is distant and mysterious, and the friends have only the smallest hints of it. But next to this whisper, there is the thunder of God's power. The thunder of God's power that has shaken the entirety of Job's world.

Who can understand that? Janssen notes that the only other place where we see this word for power used is in chapter 12, verse 13. With God are wisdom and might, he has counsel and understanding.

In that context, the statement introduced Job's doxology, which explored the shadow side of God's majesty, the fact that we cannot discern or read God's purposes in his acts.

By his power, he works beyond human understanding. Chapter 27 begins with a resumptive expression, and Job again took up his discourse and said, For this reason, it might be best to read chapter 26 as a self-contained speech, and this will be a good response to many of those who argue that Job's speech here is too long, seeing it as going from chapter 26 to 31.

Whereas what we actually see are a number of distinct speeches of Job, and quite possibly punctuated by a speech by the author in chapter 28. This is concluding, and then also summing up, the case of Job.

[4 : 55] Considered this way, we should not be that surprised at the form that the text takes. A question to consider, where else in Scripture do we find other poetic descriptions of God's great creation deeds?