

Job 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 16. Then Job answered and said, I have heard many such things. Miserable comforters are you all. Shall windy words have an end? Or what provokes you that you answer? I also could speak as you do, if you were in my place. I could join words together against you and shake my head at you. I could strengthen you with my mouth, and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.

If I speak, my pain is not assuaged, and if I forbear, how much of it leaves me? Surely now God has worn me out. He has made desolate all my company, and he has shriveled me up, which is a witness against me, and my leanness has risen up against me. It testifies to my face. He has torn me in his wrath and hated me. He has gnashed his teeth at me. My adversary sharpens his eyes against me.

Men have gaped at me with their mouth. They have struck me insolently on the cheek. They massed themselves together against me. God gives me up to the ungodly and casts me into the hands of the wicked. I was at ease, and he broke me apart. He seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces. He set me up as his target. His archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare. He pours out my gall on the ground. He breaks me with breach upon breach.

He runs upon me like a warrior. I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin, and have laid my strength in the dust. My face is red with weeping, and on my eyelids is deep darkness, although there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure.

O earth, cover not my blood, and let my cry find no resting place. Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven, and he who testifies for me is on high.

[1 : 4 4] My friends scorn me. My eye pours out tears to God, that he would argue the case of a man with God, as a son of man does with his neighbour. For when a few years have come, I shall go the way from which I shall not return.

Job chapter 16 is Job's first response of the second cycle of speeches. Eliphaz has just accused Job of windy speech. Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge, and fill his belly with the east wind? Job here responds in kind.

Shall windy words have an end? Or what provokes you that you answer? His speech begins with a complaint against his friends. They are miserable comforters. They are failing to do what true friends should do.

If they were in his position, Job suggests, he would be able to give them proper counsel and comfort. We might read this statement as sarcastic, Job saying that he could give as good as he is getting.

But it is more likely that he is saying that he would be able to give true comfort, unlike what they are offering to him. With their misapplications of traditional wisdom, they are merely making his position worse.

[2 : 4 7] It might be better for Job if they were not there at all, than to have friends who merely put salt in his wounds. In verses 6-17, Job presents another complaint about his situation, presenting the Lord as his adversary and antagonist.

In a cycle of images, Job compares the Lord to a savage beast who is mauling him. In verse 9, to one giving him over to scavengers. In verses 10-11, as a violent fighter attacking him.

In the beginning of verse 12, as a commander setting him as a target for his archers. In verses 12-13, and as a great warrior breaching Job's defences, like the defences of a city might be broken down.

Job is experiencing God as his brutal nemesis, who will give him no quarter nor relief. He seems entirely bent upon bringing about Job's doom, and nothing that Job does can assuage him.

Whether he speaks or is silent, he gets no relief. The Lord hasn't just attacked him himself, the Lord has made Job abhorrent to all around him. The Lord is accompanied by the many scavengers that he has given Job to, to Job's friends and perhaps others of his society.

[3 : 52] Job's body has shriveled up and it testifies against him. His gaunt and haggard appearance testifies that he is a man judged and marked out by God, prejudicing all against him.

Where once God had, as we see in chapter 1, set up a hedge of protection around Job, now he has given him over to the wicked. They can prey upon him with impunity. The crowd has turned against Job.

Job used to be the leader of the people. He used to be a king among his people, one of the greatest of the men of the east. And now he finds that his society is accusing him. He is the scapegoat.

A signal judgment has come upon the people. There has been a destruction of the royal household. The royal flocks and herds have been wiped out. And the king has been stricken with the divine plague.

Now the king's advisors are with him, trying to persuade him to accept his guilt and to repent, that he might, by some means, be restored. But he is refusing to listen. In this situation, all of the indicators point towards Job's guilt.

[4 : 50] And he is not acknowledging it. And yet, Job knows for himself that he is innocent. And yet, he knows that God has brought this upon him, giving everyone the signs that he is in the wrong, when he is not.

The violence that God is inflicting upon Job here is gratuitous and cruel. It's vindictive and excessive. Blow comes upon blow. And there is no indication of any mercy. He's torn.

He's broken apart. He's seized by the neck and dashed to pieces. He's set up as a target to be shot at. In chapter 6, verse 4, Job described the Lord as an archer firing against him.

For the arrows of the Almighty are in me. My spirit drinks their poison. The terrors of God are arrayed against me. As if God's own arrows didn't suffice, God, as a military commander, has set Job up as a target for many archers under his command.

God seems to be playing the part of the accuser to Job. And God has established lots of little accusers in the friends to accompany him. It doesn't seem enough for God to bring one breach upon him.

[5 : 51] He has breached him in so many places. In his speech in the preceding chapter, Eliphaz has spoken about the wicked man as like an obese warrior, recklessly running towards God to attack him.

Job's response seems to be suggesting that the contrary is the case. God is the one who is running at him like a warrior. Job is utterly broken. He's in mourning. He knows he is innocent, that he has done nothing wrong.

And yet blow upon blow falls upon him from God's hand. In his earlier speech, Job had spoken about his wish that he might deal directly with the Lord, and that his case might be addressed in such a fashion.

He had even spoken about his wish that he might be covered up in Sheol for a time until the anger of the Lord had passed by, and then he might be summoned and restored to life, and he might find some vindication.

Now he presents another possible hope. He calls upon the earth not to cover up his blood, that his cry, his appeal for justice, would not be laid to rest. We might think here of the story of Cain and Abel, where Abel's blood called from the ground against Cain his brother.

[6 : 54] From addressing the earth, he looks to the heaven, where he believes that there is one who will plead his case, someone who will go between him and God, who will be an advocate for him, appealing for justice to be done in his case.

Verse 20 could be translated along these lines. John Hartley translates verses 20 and 21 as follows, Behold my interpreter is my friend, to God my eyes drip tears, and he argues for a man with God, as between a man and his fellow.

David Clines translates the verses as follows, It is my cry that is my spokesman, sleeplessly I wait for God's reply, it will argue a mortal's case before God, as a man argues for his friend.

There are clearly differences between the commentators and how to understand this. Some see it as a reference to a third party that's going to intercede on Job's behalf. Norman Harbell takes this approach, seeing the mediator as an imagined third party, perhaps like the angel of the Lord.

In Zechariah chapter 3 verse 1 we have an example of this, Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him.

[8 : 01] In chapters 1 and 2 Satan had been the heavenly accuser. Job is now looking for a heavenly advocate to speak on his behalf. Hartley argues that the advocate must be God himself.

He writes, To my mind, the positions of Clines or Harbell are both more likely than that of Hartley.

I would lean in favour of seeing this as the third party, perhaps an angelic figure of some kind, the angel of the Lord being the perfect candidate. Of course, from a broader Old Testament and New Testament theology, we can see that the angel of the Lord is identified with God himself, so Hartley's position may be theologically accurate, even if it is not the most exegetically convincing reading.

Job's statement here ends with a note of urgency. Job will soon pass away, so his cry needs to be heard as soon as possible. A question to consider, how might reflecting upon this chapter help us better to understand what it means for Christ to be our advocate, as we are told that he is as our High Priest in the New Testament?