

Job 28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Job chapter 28. Surely there is a mine for silver, and a place for gold that they refine. Iron is taken out of the earth, and copper is smelted from the ore. Man puts an end to darkness, and searches out to the farthest limit, the ore in gloom and deep darkness.

He opens shafts in a valley away from where anyone lives. They are forgotten by travellers. They hang in the air far away from mankind. They swing to and fro. As for the earth, out of it comes bread, but underneath it is turned up as by fire. Its stones are the place of sapphires, and it has dust of gold.

That path no bird or prey knows, and the falcon's eye has not seen it. The proud beasts have not trodden it. The lion has not passed over it. Man puts his hand to the flinty rock, and overturns mountains by the roots.

He cuts out channels in the rocks, and his eye sees every precious thing. He damns up the streams, so that they do not trickle, and the thing that is hidden he brings out to light.

But where shall wisdom be found? Where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says, it is not in me, and the sea says, it is not with me. It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price.

[1 : 28] It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire. Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.

No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal. The price of wisdom is above pearls. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold.

From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air.

A barren and death say, we have heard a rumour of it with our ears. God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens.

When he gave to the wind its weight, and apportioned the waters by measure. When he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder. Then he saw it, and declared it. He established it, and searched it out.

[2 : 29] And he said to man, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. Job chapter 28 is a remarkably beautiful poem, but it represents a great shift in the tone of the book.

From the fierce passion of Job's defence and the speeches of the friends, we come to a rich poetic meditation upon wisdom. A number of commentators have spoken of it as an interlude between the cycle of the dialogues with the three friends, and the sections that follow.

The rest of Job's speech, the speech of Elihu, the arrival and the speeches of God, and then the epilogue. There was another interlude back in chapter 3, in Job's cursing of the day of his birth.

But this poem doesn't just represent a shift in the tone, it also seems to be a shift in the subject matter. There is no mention of Job's defence here, rather it is a meditation upon wisdom more generally.

There is no address to an audience, there is no clear expression of the feelings of the speaker. As David Clines puts it, it is completely externalised. Speaker and audience are not identified.

[3 : 36] The refrain is an important part of it, and helps us to understand what the poem is about. In verse 12 and 20 we find statements of the type, But where shall wisdom be found, and where is the place of understanding?

It moves towards the final verse, which is, as Clines calls it, the nodal verse. It's the revelation that answers the great question of the chapter. And he said to man, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.

The general scholarly opinion holds that this poem is not the words of Job. Many attribute it to the voice of the narrator of the book. It's the sort of calm eye of the storm. It encourages the reader temporarily to stand back and reflect upon the deeper themes of the book.

What is this all about? When you step back from the immediacy of the drama, what is the message of the book of Job? Clines makes the case that the speech here is from Elihu.

It's the conclusion, he argues, to Elihu's fourth speech. He raises the possibility that the order of the strips of the scroll of the book of Job were accidentally disordered in the process of transmission.

[4 : 43] Elihu makes the most use of the language of wisdom, and so this makes most sense coming from his mouth. I'm unpersuaded. However, Clines does highlight some important questions.

The obvious one is, what is the poem doing here, and what purpose is it serving? One could call it an interlude, but why would we have such an interlude at this particular juncture? Also, what is this question of where wisdom is to be found, doing in the book of Job more generally?

What does it have to do with the material that surrounds it, with the interests of Job, his friends, and Elihu? What does it have to do with the broader message of the text? Why would Job, for instance, be asking this question at this particular juncture?

Gerald Janssen, Robert Alden, Toby Sumter, and a number of other commentators argue that these are the words of Job. I'm not completely persuaded. Even though these words aren't marked off from the rest of Job's speeches by a formal introductory statement, it seems clear that they stand apart from what surrounds them.

While some commentators see this as an independent poem that has somehow found its way into the book of Job, this chapter is not detached from its surroundings. Robert Feil argues that chapter 28, and indeed the entirety of chapters 26 to 31, function something like the voice of a chorus in a play.

[6 : 02] They collect and comment upon the themes that are surfacing to this point. Feil points out that this chapter identifies the question behind all of the other questions of the book, and it also serves as a metaphor for the whole book.

He argues that the structure of the chapter is as follows, verses 1 to 11, the mining for precious stones and metals as a metaphor for the quest of wisdom. Verses 12 to 22, the inaccessibility of wisdom.

Verses 23 to 28, wisdom and creation. The mine, he argues, can be seen as an image of Job's suffering to this point. It isn't detached from the preceding and the following chapters.

In particular, it anticipates much of the creation imagery of God's speech that will come later. For instance, in chapter 38, verses 16 to 20. 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?

[7 : 07] And where is the place of darkness? That you may take it to its territory, and that you may discern the path to its home. Reading through this chapter, we might also think of the way that it connects to some of the images that Job has used of his own suffering.

He has often referred to images of Sheol and the underworld. This might fit well with the imagery of mining in the depths of the earth. We might also think of the way that he has described himself as gold to be tested.

In chapter 23, verse 10. But he knows the way that I take. When he has tried me, I shall come out as gold. In verse 1 of chapter 28. Surely there is a mine for silver, and a place for gold that they refine.

This suggests to the reader, I believe, a pregnant analogy between Job and his sufferings, and the mining in the depths of the earth. Job is experiencing something of the depths of human experience.

He is descending into the gloom of human suffering, seeking if he can mine there for wisdom. The poem concerning wisdom does not tell us at the outset what its theme is. Rather, the speaker gives a description of the processes by which men seek for items of immense value, like silver, gold, and precious stones.

[8 : 18] Discovery of these items requires a descent into the depths, away from human habitation, into the darkness, the silence, and solitude. It is a place of danger and peril, a place where only the bravest will venture.

The quest for these precious stones and metals sets man apart from the animals. The birds and the beasts do not enter these subterranean vaults. The lengthy description of the processes of mining and seeking out precious stones and jewels might make the reader wonder what the point of all of this is.

What is this analogy about? In verse 12, it is revealed to us, But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Wisdom, it appears, is inaccessible.

It cannot be found in the land of the living. Question concerning its location, the vast deep and the great sea, both deny that it is in them. If it can't be located by mining, nor can it be purchased with the great treasures that man possesses.

Evaluation cannot be placed upon it. There is nothing of like worth that could be exchanged for it. All of these are similar images to those we find in the book of Proverbs. In chapter 2, verses 3 to 5 of Proverbs, Yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

[9 : 41] Chapter 3, verses 13 to 15, Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding. For the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold.

She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Chapter 16, verse 16, How much better to get wisdom than gold? To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.

Verse 20 repeats the key theme question, From where then does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? Once again, it cannot be found by the living.

Previously we were told that it is not found in the land of the living. And here we are told in verse 21 that it is hidden from the eyes of all living. The deep and the sea were interrogated concerning its location back in verse 14, and now it's Abaddon and Death, the deeper depths.

They've heard a rumour, but they've nothing more than that to give. So where is wisdom to be found? Verses 23 to 28 give us the answer. God is the one who knows the way to wisdom.

[10:45] This might seem strange to us. God is the one who has wisdom. God is the source of wisdom. Why would it speak about God knowing the way to it and knowing its place? Janssen suggests that the answer is found in part in the fact that wisdom is found in act, and God's act of creation is the place where wisdom is to be found.

In verses 24 to 27, this act of creation is recounted in various of its aspects. The focus is upon God's power and his ordering of the creation.

The creation itself is the product of divine wisdom, but it does not contain the wisdom by which it was created. The wisdom is found in the creative act, not the creation in and of itself.

So what then should a human response to wisdom be? Verse 28 has an expression that should be familiar from many other passages in the wisdom material. We find this in Psalm 111 verse 10.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All who practice it have a good understanding. In Proverbs chapter 1 verse 7, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

[11:51] In Proverbs chapter 9 verse 10, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. Just as in Psalm 111, or in the book of Proverbs, the statement here concerning the fear of the Lord is absolutely fundamental.

It expresses the core truth that should probably be seen to be at the very heart of the message of the book of Job. A further indication of this fact can be seen in the way that it is filled out in the expression to turn away from evil is understanding.

This return to the theme of the fear of the Lord, defining wisdom as fearing the Lord and turning away from evil, should cause the reader to prick up their ears. These are charged expressions.

They appear in the opening verse of the book. There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

In this final climactic statement, at the end of the reflective quest of the poem, we arrive at a statement that takes us back to the very beginning of the book. Janssen writes of this, Such a conclusion may strike one as disappointingly conventional, not to say banal.

[13:00] On the other hand, it may be that such a view, once freshly entertained, but become banal through superficial or thoughtless repetition, is here presented as renewed and refreshed through the searching reflection in which Job and the reader have been engaged since chapter 3.

Not all explorations issue in the discovery of totally new terrain. Sometimes exploration issues in the discovery, as though for the first time, of terrain in which one has always lived.

In such cases, this terrain may be occupied by conventional minds and by those newly awakened. The question then, and it is not easily answered, becomes, in what sense do they inhabit the same terrain, and in what sense are they worlds apart?

In terms of chapter 28 verse 28, one may ask whether this conclusion, at this point in Job's search, is crushingly banal, or fresh with chastened profundity.

[14:24] A question to consider. Do you think that it is possible to argue that the question, from where then does wisdom come, and where is the place of understanding, is the thematic question of the book of Job?

[illegible]