

Job 37: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 37. At this also my heart trembles and leaps out of its place. Keep listening to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth. Under the whole heaven he lets it go, and his lightning to the corners of the earth. After it his voice roars. He thunders with his majestic voice, and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard. God thunders wondrously with his voice. He does great things that we cannot comprehend.

For to the snow, he says, fall on the earth. Likewise to the downpour, his mighty downpour, he seals up the hand of every man, that all men whom he made may know it. Then the beasts go into their lairs, and remain in their dens. From its chamber comes the whirlwind, and cold from the scattering winds. By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. He loads the thick cloud with moisture. The clouds scatter his lightning. They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction or for his land, or for love, he causes it to happen. Hear this, O Job. Stop and consider the wondrous works of God. Do you know how God lays his command upon them, and causes the lightning of his cloud to shine? Do you know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of him who is perfect in knowledge? You whose garments are hot, when the earth is still because of the south wind, can you, like him, spread out the skies, hard as a cast metal mirror? Teach us what we shall say to him. We cannot draw up our case because of darkness. Shall it be told him that I would speak? Did a man ever wish that he would be swallowed up? And now no one looks on the light when it is bright in the skies, when the wind has passed and cleared them. Out of the north comes golden splendour. God is clothed with awesome majesty. The Almighty, we cannot find him. He is great in power. Justice and abundant righteousness he will not violate. Therefore men fear him. He does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.

With Job chapter 37, Elihu's speeches come to an end, as do the speeches of all of Job's friends. Earlier in chapter 36, Elihu had begun reflecting upon God's wonder in creation, the way that he displays his power and his wisdom in such things as the water cycle. In several respects, this passage of Elihu's speech anticipates what the Lord will say when he appears in the chapters that follow.

The direct challenge to Job, in which he peppers him with rhetorical questions, is Elihu's version of the speech that God gives to Job in chapters 38 to 41. However, perhaps this speech has a different sense coming from Elihu than it does when it comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Some commentators, as David Klein's mentions, have noticed in the pattern of Elihu's images a progression through the seasons. In chapter 36, verse 26 to chapter 37, verse 5, we have the season of autumn. It's followed by winter, in chapter 37, verses 6 to 10, or perhaps 13, followed then by spring, which some leave out, in verses 11 to 13, and then by summer, in verse 14, and that which follows.

[3 : 13] The imagery used in Elihu's speeches, and also in the Lord's speeches that follow, join together some more poetic representations of cosmology, alongside more phenomenological accounts of the creation, and perhaps even some proto-scientific elements. As an example of the latter, we might think of chapter 36, verses 27 to 28, for he draws up the drops of water, they distill his mist in rain, which the skies pour down and drop on mankind abundantly.

In chapter 38, we see similar meteorological phenomena described using different imagery. In verses 25 to 27, and 37 to 38, Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on the 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?

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? This chapter opens with Elihu interrupting his reflection to describe his own response to these phenomena. They provoke awe and trembling with him, and he has an immediate physical response.

The power and might of the Lord displayed in his handiwork in creation naturally and appropriately provoke fear and dread in his creatures. The thunder and the lightning are great examples of this. God's power can be seen in the mighty storm. Elsewhere in scripture, the imagery of the storm is associated with actual or imagined theophanic events.

The appearance of the Lord at Sinai is a great example of this. We might also think of Psalm 18, verses 10 to 15. He rode on a cherub and flew. He came swiftly on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him, thick clouds dark with water. Out of the brightness before him hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. And he sent out his arrows and scattered them. He flashed forth lightnings and routed them. Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare, at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.

[5 : 27] In such things we can see the power and the might of the Lord. We can also perceive his wisdom in the governing of his creation. However, although we perceive his majesty and his might, we lack the wisdom properly to understand what these things mean. Verse 7 is difficult to interpret.

The ESV renders the key phrase, he seals up the hand of every man. Literally, on the hand of every man he sets a seal. Various proposals for interpreting this expression have been advanced.

With commentators like John Hartley and Clines, I think it is best read as a reference to shutting people indoors. By the storm and other inclement weather, God prevents people from going about their customary affairs. Likewise in verse 8, supporting this reading, the beasts have to retreat to their lairs and dens when the terrible weather comes. God is the master of all meteorological affairs, of every season. Thunder and lightning, ice, rain and snow, all come from the Lord's hand.

The clouds are described like messengers and servants of the Lord, sent to do his bidding. Elihu suggests a number of different reasons for which they might be sent in verse 13. They can be sent for correction, as a form of cautionary judgment to restore people to the right way. An example of this can be seen in 1 Samuel chapter 12 verses 18 to 19.

So Samuel called upon the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day, and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. And all the people said to Samuel, pray for your servants to the Lord your God, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king.

[6 : 59] In that case, the thunder and the rain were a warning from the Lord to his people, to remind them of his power and of their disobedience. The second reason that Elihu gives is for the land. God cares for the well-being of his land and its creatures. His rains may be given to restore the land or to ensure its fruitfulness. And then for love. God's loyalty to his people is another reason for which he may give rain. In Israel, prayer for rain was associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, in contrast to the agricultural system of Egypt, which depended mostly upon the river.

In Israel, it was seasonal rains that were dependent upon for fruitfulness. And drought, as there was through the judgment of Elijah, could be devastating. As he moves towards a conclusion, Elihu addresses Job directly. He wants Job to follow his example in reflecting upon the wonderful works of God and his creation. Job, he stresses, does not know how or why God controls the creation as he does. God is perfect in knowledge, he has his reasons, but for Job they are beyond searching out.

Job cannot even control the heat of his own garments in the summer, let alone the actions of all of the elements. As the great creator, the Lord established the firmament, poetically described in verse 18 as like a hard cast metal mirror. By his manner of address to the Lord, Job had been speaking presumptuously, as if he was possessed of some greater knowledge that humanity in general lacks on account of their creatureliness. What makes Job think that he can speak to the Lord, as if to inform God of something that God did not already know? When the clouds clear and the sun is shining in its full radiance, it is too dazzling to behold. Verse 22 may refer to the way that the sun shines in the north of the heavens, an image of the awe-inspiring glory of the Lord. Others see here a theophanic image. God is coming from Mount Zaphon, the mountain of the north associated with deity in Canaanite myth. This reading is far from persuasive to many commentators, however.

Seeing the wondrous power of the Lord in creation and his wisdom in governing all of its meteorological forces should chasten anyone trying to render God scrutable to figure him out. However, we can be certain that he will not violate justice and righteousness. We may not see how, but we should be able to trust him with these things. The proper response of humanity to their creator is fear, awe and dread of the one who has the majesty and power of all the creation at his disposal, and indeed so far transcends them. Such a God looks upon the humble, but he pays no attention to those who are proud and lifted up in their hearts, who presume to call upon the Lord to give an account of himself, as Job has done. A question to consider. Why are the meteorological elements that Elëq's singles out, fitting images for God's power and rule in creation more generally?