

Job 25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 25. Then Bildad the Shuhite answered and said, Dominion and fear are with God. He makes peace in his high heaven. Is there any number to his armies? Upon whom does his light not arise?

How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure? Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not pure in his eyes. How much less man who is a maggot, and the son of man who is a worm? Chapters 25 and 26 of the book of Job raise many questions for commentators. At this point we are concluding the speeches of the third cycle, indeed of all the cycles, and there are anomalies at this point. Bildad has a very, very short speech. Job has a long speech.

There is no speech for Zophar. When this is coupled with all of the other textual questions, and the way in which Job's voice at certain points seems to be out of keeping with his character and his broader position, for instance in verses 5 to 14 of chapter 26, where Job gives a doxology that seems to go against the grain of some of his argument. It contrasts, for instance, with the doxology of chapter 12 verses 13 to 25, some have argued, which explores the shadow side of God's greatness. Many commentators honestly wrestling with some of these problems have tried to resolve them by attributing different sections of the text to different speakers, by suggesting that the text has gotten confused somewhere in the transmission, or that certain verses have been transposed. Such approaches should not be dismissed as possibilities, yet ideally we won't resort to such extreme hypotheses if less radical ones are at hand. Norman Harbel argues that chapters 25 and chapters 26 verses 5 to 14 are all Bildad, with chapter 26 verses 5 to 14 elaborating chapter 25 verse 2.

David Clines argues that all of chapters 25 and 26 are Bildad. Chapter 26 verse 1, in his understanding, was a later addition or transposition. Verses 2 to 4 then of chapter 26 are Bildad's words to Job.

However, even though the majority of commentators, and a large number of translations, reorder or reattribute material from chapters 24 to 27 in particular, there are a large number of dissenting voices.

[2 : 1 5] Francis Anderson, Robert Feil, Gerald Janssen, and Toby Sumter all make the point that the arguments of the friends are exhausted. At this point, they're sputtering or petering out. Bildad's speech is so short because he has very little to say that has not already been said. In fact, as Janssen argues, it may be because Job directly interrupts him, because Job recognises all too well that Bildad has nothing more to add. The attentive reader, for instance, will notice that Bildad is largely repeating an argument that we had in the very opening speech of the dialogues by Eliphaz. Chapter 4 verses 17 to 19.

Can mortal man be in the right before God? Can a man be pure before his maker? Even in his servants he puts no trust, and his angels he charges with error. How much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed like the moth? Eliphaz had made another similar argument in chapter 15 verses 14 to 16. What is man that he can be pure, or he who is born of a woman that he can be righteous? Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight. How much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks injustice like water. At this point it is apparent that if Bildad and others continue, they will just be repeating the same arguments. The cycle runs out of steam halfway, because the arguments are broken down.

In his brief speech, Bildad emphasises the sovereignty of God. He's the one who has dominion in the highest heavens. He rules over his armies, the stars and the angels. Anderson makes the point that Bildad seems to have retreated from his stronger arguments earlier on. Rather than talking about the scrutability of God's judgments upon the wicked, there is a greater sense of the incomprehensibility of God in this speech. Verses 3 to 6 alternate between the heavens and humanity, the armies and the light in the heavens in verse 3, then man and one born of woman in verse 4, in verse 5 the moon and the stars, and in verse 6 man being compared to a maggot and a worm.

The argument here is similar to that of Eliphaz earlier on, as we've noted. Eliphaz's claims concerned God's transcendent glory and holiness, against which mankind would always seem sinful. No man could ever make a realistic claim to be in the right relative to God.

Even the moon and the stars are pale in relation to God's glory. Man is a small creature of the earth. He is akin of the maggot and the worm, who will finally eat him up. He's a creature born of earth, who will return to the earth. It shouldn't be hard to hear an echo of Psalm 8 here. In verses 3 to 4 of Psalm 8 we read, When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? While the psalmist goes on to talk about the marvellous way in which the Lord does in fact care for his creatures, and the dignity and the glory that he has given to mankind, Bildad's point seems to move in the other direction, if anything, to downplay this. The psalmist wonders that such a transcendent God would have a meaningful relationship with human beings. Bildad, so emphasising the transcendence and the holiness of God, calls into question the notion that he ever could. We need to consider what lies at the heart of Job's claim. Job is claiming that a man can be in the right with God. This is not just an abstract claim of justice, nor should this be seen just as a matter of desiring self-righteousness. Job is calling for vindication, for a divine declaration that he is in the right, but this is not just to serve his own pride. Near the heart of Job's insistence is the idea that a man can truly relate to God. A man can be in right standing with God. A man can meaningfully interact with God, whereas the distant deity of Bildad cannot offer such a relationship.

[6 : 03] It is not that Job's confidence in this never wavers. For instance, in chapter 9 verses 2 to 4, Truly I know that it is so, but how can a man be in the right before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times. He is wise in heart and mighty in strength, who has hardened himself against him and succeeded. However, Job still stubbornly pursues such vindication that he would be declared to be in the right with God. As Janssen notes, Psalm 8 was also in the background of Job's statement in chapter 7 verses 17 to 18. What is man that you make so much of him, and that you set your heart on him, visit him every morning, and test him every moment? Janssen writes, If Job in chapter 7 ironically reinterprets the special attention for which the God of Psalm 8 has singled out humankind, he nevertheless sustains a sense of that special attention and vocation.

The resolution of the book of Job will suggest that Job's reinterpretation of Psalm 8 was right, but in a different sense than he realised, whereas Bildad's own reinterpretation is simply wrong.