

## THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB

### The Third Cycle of Dialogues (22-28)

If the first set of dialogues was largely occupied with implied accusations of guilt and the second with the fate of the wicked and irreligious, the third degenerates even further with sharp accusations of personal transgression. That Job's friends cannot consider the legitimacy of his point of view by this time goes without saying, and indeed, they don't even try.

In this round, Bildad's speech is quite short, and Zophar will not speak at all. (Apparently, he has said all he intends to say.) The shortness of Bildad's speech and the silence of Zophar is probably a literary device showing that the discussions are grinding to a halt.

#### *Eliphaz Speaks (22)*

Eliphaz's opening salvo is to pose the rhetorical question, "Does God need humans?" which, of course, must be answered in the negative (22:2a). Rather, humans need to behave themselves in ways that are to their own advantage, which is to say, they need to be moral, since God will reward their morality (22:2b). Was the suffering of Job some sort of unreasonable backlash because Job was such a blameless and upright man? To Eliphaz, the whole notion was ridiculous! Hence, Eliphaz can only press upon Job the same old assertions—he must be guilty of something, and given the extent of Job's sufferings, it must be something serious! He can only offer wild speculations, of course, but nonetheless, he charges that Job's sins must be nearly endless (22:5).

For all his speculative accusations, one can at least say that Eliphaz has Job's best interests at heart, since in back-to-back imperatives he now appeals to Job to repent. Unlike Zophar, who has little capacity for mercy, Eliphaz urges Job to "settle with God" and receive God's instruction (22:21-22). If he does, all will come right, and he will be restored (22:23).

#### *Job Responds (23-24)*

Job opens his response by acknowledging once again his bitterness and suffering (23:1-2). God's hand has been heavy against him, and he bemoans his lack of access to God. If he could only lay his case before God's tribunal, then he would hear the answer he so desperately desired (23:4-5)! He was fully confident that God would be fair, and indeed, that if God would hear his case he would be vindicated (23:6-7)!

But therein lies the seemingly insurmountable problem! God was not accessible! Job has searched in every direction—east, west, north and south—but God is just as elusive as ever (23:8-9)! Still, Job is gradually coming to realize that even if he never fully finds the answer, God *does* know his plight, and in the end, this whole wretched experience will be revealed to be, not a punishment for sin, but a test of Job's unswerving faithfulness. Job may not know where to find God, but God surely knows where to find Job, and in this Job will be satisfied! The realization is beginning to dawn on him that in this test, he will emerge on the other side as pure gold refined by fire (23:10-12).

Job now poses the question as to why God has no fixed times for judging human depravity (24:1). His friends have argued that God distributes judgment quickly, but as Job observed earlier, any close observation of real life indicates that this is not necessarily the case. Evil people often survive to old age (cf. 21:7ff.). Various crimes seem to go unpunished, ranging from land-grabbing (24:2) to theft and oppression (24:3-4). The poor are forced to glean from the oppressor's vineyard or hunt wild game to survive (24:5-6). Because they have pledged their garment as security, sometimes they are compelled to sleep without even a covering, often wet and miserable (24:7-8). Heartless creditors have snatched from widowed mothers their very infants (24:9). Poorly clothed, hungry and thirsty, they labor on their oppressor's farms (24:10-11). All the way to early death marches this unrelenting oppression, and though the victims of this exploitation cry out for divine mercy, God allows it to go on (24:12).

Hence, very often such crimes seem to go unpunished, the oppressors living lengthy lives of security. Their deaths are much like everyone else's, not sudden but "like all others" (כָּכֹל). Job concludes by challenging his friends that they cannot prove otherwise (24:25).

### ***Bildad Speaks (25)***

This, the final speech of Bildad, is the shortest one in the book, while Job's response will be extensive. Zophar has now become silent altogether and will only be mentioned briefly at the very end (cf. 42:9).

Bildad's answer is less acerbic than formerly. Here, he contents himself with a series of rhetorical questions about how any lowly human could possibly think he would be justified before God (25:1-6).

On the face of it, this brief speech by Bildad seems to parallel things Job himself has said about the seeming impossibility of being in the right before God (cf. 9:2, 15ff.). The difference between them, however, is along the lines of hope versus despair. Job realizes, of course, that compared to God he is infinitesimally small—but nevertheless he has hope that the God, whose companionship he seeks, will reveal himself in the end (cf. 13:15; 14:14-17; 19:25-27; 23:10, 14). Bildad, on the other hand, consigns humans to the level of vermin for whom relationship with God is unthinkable.

### ***Job Responds (26-27)***

One thing about Job: in spite of his suffering, he is not hesitant about mocking his friends and their paltry advice! Earlier, some of his rejoinders were heavily sarcastic (cf. 12:1; 16:1), and here he is no less acerbic in his response to Bildad, who has chided him like a helpless, powerless empty-head, while assuming for himself the paternalistic role of counselor and wise man (26:1-4). Job's final stinger is the metaphor about "breath," which probably refers to Bildad's windiness.

Job does not long dwell on Bildad's presumptuousness. Rather, he embarks on a full and elegant description of God's majesty. The roles are now reversed: Job will teach his supposed teacher! In describing God's greatness, Job moves from the underworld to the visible world to the celestial world. In view of God's omniscience, the realm of the dead is utterly open—literally naked—to

God (26:5-6). The observable world is equally dependent upon God's creative and sustaining hand. The "void" (תֵּהוֹ = emptiness), a word apparently borrowed from the creation account in Genesis (cf. Ge. 1:2), is the context of God's creative handiwork, while the idiom "hanging the earth on nothing" (literally, "without what?") points toward God's infinite power (26:7). That God can fill the clouds with water like a huge bag or a wineskin without it bursting equally describes his omnipotence (26:8). He can hide the moon behind clouds (26:9) as well as map out the surface of the seas all the way to the horizon, the boundary between sunlight and darkness (26:10). The "pillars" upholding the heavens, possibly a metaphor for the mountains, quake before the divine epiphany, this imagery probably referring to the mighty crash of a thunderstorm (cf. Ps. 18:7-15; 77:18). God calmed the churning waters by his almighty power, shattering Rahab, the mythological monster of chaos (26:12-13). While using stock imagery familiar to people in the ancient Near East, the biblical text here demythologizes the Akkadian myth, treating the turbulent sea not as the god Yam but as the churning waters of natural phenomena.

The reader, of course, must bear in mind that when Job describes the universe he is speaking phenomenologically, which is to say, he describes the world from the vantagepoint of visual observation as well as human limitation, while couching his description in poetic metaphors and images that serve to reinforce the mystery of God's Being. One should not attempt to draw from Job's cosmology some sort of scientific view of the universe any more than one should treat his use of stock mythological imagery as a journalistic report about the creation. This is poetry and must be read as poetry.

Job now concludes his speech. He begins this concluding response to his friends with an oath formula, "As God lives..." (cf. 1 Sa. 14:39, 45; 2 Sa. 2:27; 1 Kg. 17:1, etc.). By introducing his comments in this solemn fashion, he once more affirms that his words are absolutely true. God's name is invoked as the ultimate source of justice, for only God can truly arbitrate between the accusations of Job's friends and Job's insistence on his innocence. Job holds fast to his claim of moral integrity (27:3-6). His conscience is clear! By speaking of his "righteousness," Job is not claiming sinlessness (cf. 31:33-34), but rather, that he is in the right and his friends are not. He closes with yet another oath formula, "Far be it from me..." In more contemporary terms, he is saying to his friends, "I'll be damned if I knuckle under to your aspersions" (27:5a)!

The entire next section (27:7-23) amounts to Job's curse upon his friends and their constant recriminations. The formula, "Let my enemies be..." should be taken as an imprecatory curse, and since his friends have falsely recriminated Job, he responds by recriminating them. Hence, the reference to "the enemy" in 27:7, while it is formed in general language, more specifically is an insinuation directed toward the trio of friends who have "risen up against me" (27:7). In this extended curse, Job is warning that the very things his friends have said about him might very well recoil on their own heads! They have not hesitated to condemn Job as a secret sinner, but the "seat of the scornful" (cf. Ps. 1:1) is a dangerous place, and the disaster one envisions for others might very well become one's own fate!

### **INTERLUDE: THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM (28)**

The poem in chapter 28 has aroused considerable scholarly debate. In the first place, it can stand alone, and nothing directly links it to the preceding dialogues between Job and his friends. This, in turn, seems to set off chapter 28 as an interlude. It seems best to read this poem as the voice of the narrator. The exchange between Job and his friends has now reached an impasse. Each has offered his own brand of wisdom, urging the cause-and-effect theology of sin and retribution in the present life. Job, for his part, has bluntly and stubbornly disagreed, arguing that very often there are no obvious repercussions to sin in the present life. As such, then, the poem on wisdom serves to demarcate what has gone before (the rounds of exchange between Job and his friends) and what will follow (a series of monologues given respectively by Job, Elihu and God).

Virtually all interpreters agree that this composition on wisdom is one of the most elegant in the Bible. The poem is carefully crafted, and the structure is clearly marked with linguistic dividers, setting off verses 1-11, 12-27 and 28. Wisdom in the ancient Near East specialized in everything from medicine to craftsmanship to diplomacy, and the Israelite concept of wisdom is especially captured in two words, חָכְמָה (= wisdom, aptitude) and בִּינָה (= understanding, insight), so much so that they are often paired, just as they are in 28:12 (see also Pro. 1:2; 4:5, 7; 8:14; 9:10; 16:16).

The poet begins with a series of technological examples of wisdom in the ancient world. Ingenuous humans have learned to mine silver, refine gold, and smelt iron and copper (28:1-2). They have found ways to illuminate dark underground shafts in order to extract ore (28:3), even finding precious treasure in obscure regions by such dangerous tactics as hanging from ropes in order to extract minerals from cliffsides or quarries (28:4-5).

This extended description of scouring the earth for precious metals and stones is hardly arbitrary. It is a rhetorical way of begging the question. Humans have clearly demonstrated their cleverness in acquiring silver, gold, iron, copper, lapis lazuli, and “every precious thing”—but they have been spectacularly unsuccessful in finding wisdom, which is much more precious than gold dust!

Hence, the abrupt turn to the implied question, now posed directly: “But where can wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” (28:12, 20). Where, indeed? At this point, Job and his friends have exhausted themselves in debate looking for it, but they seem no closer than when they began. In the meantime, God has remained silent. So, where is it, and how can one acquire it (28:20)? God alone knows the path to wisdom, for only he sees everything from horizon to horizon (28:23-24). In his creative work, he embodies wisdom in his ordering of wind, water, rain, and lightning (28:25-26). In the lightning storm, his mystery and power, and in particular, his wisdom, are declared, for it is in God’s role as the Creator of all these things that wisdom is to be perceived (28:27), as also says St. Paul in the New Testament (cf. Ro. 1:20).

If, indeed, God alone knows the path to true wisdom, then the final declaration to all humans is concise but poignant: true wisdom and understanding must derive from reverence for God (28:28; cf. Pro. 1:7; 9:10; Ps. 111:10). In all the debates between Job and his friends, we have come full circle. **Job may not have yet found an answer to his dilemma, but he certainly was following the path of wisdom in yearning for God to speak!**