

**A Little Lower than God:
Human and Divine Wisdom in Job**

BIBL 523: Contending with the Silence of Heaven:

A Reading of the Book of Job

2 Credit Hours

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*What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him?
And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him?
Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God,
And dost crown him with glory and majesty!*
-- Psalm 8:4-5¹

As David so artfully depicts in his psalm, humanity exists in a deep tension between being utterly insignificant on one hand and, on the other, comparable with God Himself. When we examine our biology we seem like every other species, yet we alone rule over the earth. On the other side, we can understand the inner workings of the atomic nucleus, yet be mystified by our own children. We are both exalted—breathing and reigning images of God—and lowly bumbler. Are we gods or are we dust? Though the book of Job is usually described as an exploration of suffering, at a deeper level it is a study of wisdom and mystery. Specifically, it explores our quest for knowledge, the limits to our knowledge and how we can live with not understanding everything.

The surface story in the book of Job is about a blameless man who endures terrific physical agony. But Job's complaints about his physical condition are quickly transformed into questions of "Why?". His quest for relief from his suffering is overshadowed by his need for understanding. Job's central quest is for an explanation: "Have I sinned? What have I done to Thee, O watcher of men? Why hast Thou set me as Thy target, So that I am a burden to myself?" (7:20). The reader of the book is also drawn into this quest. Having seen the heavenly council, the reader endures page after page of argument, waiting for God to reveal the truth to Job. In the end, the reader may well walk away disappointed. Not only does Job not receive an explanation for his suffering, but the reader does not really understand it either. Though God reveals a taste of the heavenly council and His discussions with the satan, the text does not adequately explain

¹ All biblical quotations are from the *NASB*, 1977 unless otherwise indicated.

what God has actually accomplished through Job's suffering.

Bruce Waltke said, "The book [of Job] is very unsatisfying to the intellectual because [he is] looking for a rational answer. The book is saying that there is no rational answer."² In this paper, I address the lack of a rational answer for Job's suffering in light of the meditation on wisdom in Job 28. After considering that passage, I examine Job's closing monologue to see where he stands relative to this description of wisdom. I then look briefly at God's speeches to see how he responds to Job's stance. Finally, I close with a reflection on what it means for us to live within the limits of human wisdom.

Wisdom: Divine and Human (Job 28)

After Job has concluded his refutation of his counsellors, chapter 28 contains a meditation on wisdom.³ The meditation begins with a celebration of humanity's exploits, then faces humanity's limitations, contrasts this with God, and finally provides a way forward.

The meditation develops a rich image of a miner using all of his cunning, strength and persistence to seek out precious metals and stones. He carries his lamp into the darkest recesses of the earth (28:3), hangs in mine shafts over the abyss, far from civilisation (28:4), and then plunders mountains and streams for their riches (28:9-11). Nothing within creation is too distant, concealed, or protected to be out of his reach. He is the master of his world. His determination, wit and strength leave nothing beyond his grasp.

Yet there is one thing that he cannot have: wisdom. It cannot be found (28:12). Though he may search the entire earth, he cannot find it. If he dives to the bottom of the ocean, the sea says, "It is not in me" (28:14). Even if the miner gains fabulous wealth from his exploits, he

² Bruce Waltke, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, tape 2540G (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College, 1996).

³ Most commentators see this chapter as an insertion by the author rather than Job's speech. See, for example, Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity P, 1985), 80-81. For

cannot buy wisdom because neither gold, silver, onyx, sapphire, coral, crystal, pearls nor topaz can be traded for it (28:15-19). The previously unstoppable miner is left asking, “Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding?” (28:20).

The meditation then turns to God. Though humanity cannot gain wisdom, “God understands its way; And He knows its place” (28:23). This is true because God not only understands wisdom, but created it: “He saw it and declared it; He established it and also searched it out” (28:27). This universal wisdom is not elusive to God, however no person can attain it. “Wisdom is an incommunicable attribute of God.”⁴

The meditation’s view of wisdom as inaccessible to humans seems to run counter to the message of Proverbs, where Lady Wisdom “shouts in the streets” (Prov 1:20) and speaks her plain offer: “Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you” (Prov 1:23). However the tension is resolved in the last verse of Job 28, where God reveals the way of human wisdom. “And to man He said, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; And to depart from evil is understanding’” (28:28). There is a distinction between divine and human wisdom. Human wisdom is not in knowing all things, but is in having a right relationship to God, who alone has universal wisdom. We cannot gain divine wisdom, but human wisdom is attainable.

It is important to note that the conquering miner is still celebrated. His exploits are truly marvellous and require that he have deep understanding. But his limitations are equally important. In terms of Psalm 8, he is crowned “with glory and majesty”, yet he truly is “lower than God” (Ps 8:5). Humanity is granted a glorious place in creation, however it is not the same

the purpose of this paper, I simply accept it as part of the message presented to the reader, regardless of the speaker.

⁴ George M. Schwab, “The Book of Job and Counsel in the Whirlwind”, *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 17:1 (Fall 1998), 38.

as God's place. We can know many things, but we must always remember that our "intellect [is] directed towards a world in which mystery predominate[s]."⁵ This distinction between divine and human wisdom is crucial to the Book of Job. God alone grasps the working of the universe, including the seeming chaos that Job is enduring. Our calling as people is to be wise *as people* rather than aspiring to the impossible place of attaining the wisdom of God. The foundation for our wisdom is contained in the parallel phrases "the fear of the Lord" and "to depart from evil".

This meditation makes clear that human wisdom is rooted in the full awareness of God's overwhelming superiority over humankind. Human wisdom "stands and falls according to the right attitude of man to God."⁶ Human wisdom is not the acquisition of the secrets of the universe, dragging them out of God, but living in correct relationship with the all-wise God. The result is a life of departing from evil, one that acknowledges and obeys God's holy ways. The opposite of wisdom, folly, is the loss of the fear of God, to raise oneself to equivalence with God. When human wisdom seeks too much understanding, it falls apart – not because there are "quantitative limitations [on] human capabilities" but because absolute knowledge "cannot be combined with trust in Yahweh."⁷ Human wisdom is not the same as divine wisdom. Divine wisdom apprehends every detail of the universe; human wisdom is rooted in the unknowable mystery of God, and then flowers in its study and use of His universe.

Job's Wisdom

Job is explicitly described in the prologue by both the narrator and God as one "fearing God, and turning away from evil" (1:1). From our argument above it seems that he must therefore be wise. However, it seems that his undeserved suffering has begun to undermine his

⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1972), 109.

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 69.

⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 102.

wisdom. Examining his references to God in his closing monologue, we see that Job accurately describes God's role in his suffering: "He has loosed His bowstring and afflicted me" (30:11), "He has cast me into the mire, And I have become like dust and ashes. I cry out to Thee for help, but Thou dost not answer me; I stand up, and Thou dost turn Thy attention against me" (30:19-20). Indeed, God has brought Job's affliction upon him⁸ and is not answering his questions. However, Job errs when he presumes to know God's purpose and ends. Job accuses God of cruel intentions (30:21) and concludes that God intends to kill him (30:23). However, the reader knows the prologue and knows that Job is wrong. God has specifically restricted the satan from killing Job (2:6) and He has shown no cruel intent toward Job.⁹ The reader understands that God is involved in some heavenly work that depends on Job's suffering but is not intent on causing Job's suffering with no purpose. When Job's "harp is turned to mourning, and [his] flute to the sound of those who weep" (30:31), the reader mourns with Job—not only because of his suffering, but because he has lost his understanding of God's higher purpose in the midst of his suffering. If right relationship to God is the basis of human wisdom, Job has sunk to a degree of folly for he has let his dire circumstances pre-empt his affirmation of God's mystery. In presuming to know God's purposes and ends, Job has stepped beyond the limits of human wisdom.

In his final defence (Job 31), Job reveals the source of his error. His plea is for equal retaliation from God. If he has sought another man's wife, he asks that his wife be given to another man (31:9-10). If he has not cared for the poor and weak, he asks that he be made a cripple (31:16-22). He demands that he be weighed "with accurate scales" so that God will know

⁸ Though the prologue implicates the satan as the instigator of Job's suffering, God takes responsibility for causing it (Job 2:3).

⁹ Even the most negative reading of the prologue would only lead to the conclusion that God is apathetic about Job's suffering, not cruel.

his integrity (31:6). Job still fears God, but he will not allow God to transcend his system of retributive justice.¹⁰ Insinuating that God has been using inaccurate scales to find fault with him, Job's mind cannot yet open wide enough to believe that his suffering may be linked to a higher purpose of God and be toward an end other than Job's destruction. Job's reverence is not deep enough to allow for the distinction between divine wisdom and human wisdom. Job insists that God's purposes and ends be evaluated on human terms: God must be cruel and seeking Job's destruction. In terms of the image of Job 28, Job believes he has dug into the bowels of the earth and uncovered the depths of absolute wisdom. Therefore he can challenge God on equal terms. He believes that it is *God* who lacks knowledge of Job's integrity, rather than himself who lacks knowledge of God's purpose. Thus he approaches God with his ironclad defence "like a prince" (Job 31:37). Job steps foot into the heavenly courtroom, seeking to learn God's accusation against him—the one piece of knowledge Job feels he still lacks—but instead he will learn afresh that God's wisdom is His alone.

God's Response and Correction

Job has requested one simple fact from God: what has he done wrong to deserve this punishment? Job believes that he grasps the workings of the universe and that he will be satisfied in his full understanding if he can fill in this one missing blank. Job is seeking after divine wisdom—a complete picture of his situation. He wants God to distribute gifts and punishment

¹⁰ This demand for the equality of human and divine justice is the same error about which Elie Wiesel's play *The Trial of God* pivots. As the characters argue over God's justice in light of human suffering, the question is whether God's justice can be higher:

Sam: Justice? Whose justice? Yours?

Berish: What kind of question is that? Justice is justice. Mine, yours, his: it's the same everywhere. Is there another?

Sam: There is that of God.

Berish: And it isn't mine? If that is so, then, with your permission—or without it—I reject it, and for good! I don't want a minor, secondary justice, a poor man's justice! I want no part of a justice that escapes me, diminishes me and makes a mockery out of mine! Justice is here for men and women—I therefore want it to be human, or let Him keep it!

Sam: You want to reduce God's justice to yours? Why not elevate yours to His?

[Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, tr. Marion Wiesel (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 123.]

according to Job's understanding of justice. His suffering and his friends' defences of it in terms of divine retribution have caused Job to forget his true fear of God. Focusing on his own dilemma has narrowed his view of God down to one that fits within his understanding. When God does appear, he overwhelms Job and reasserts the difference between divine and human wisdom.

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1). The whirlwind is not a small disturbance in front of Job, like Moses' burning bush. It is a furious storm (סַעֲרָה) the likes of which can lift Elijah to heaven (2 Kgs 2:11) or sink Jonah's ship (סַעֲרָה, Jonah 1:4). Elihu has just finished speaking of God's strength using storm metaphors over twenty-seven times (Job 36-37), but now the metaphor is gone and the reality is present before Job. But God's appearance in the storm is more than just a display of strength. Job has always understood that God's power is beyond him (e.g. 9:5-10). But he also thought that God would use his power to destroy him. In this encounter, Job learns concretely that God *can* destroy him, but he also learns that God *does not* destroy him. Job was wrong to conclude that God's aim was his destruction. It is critical that Job encounter God in presence and not only in word. Words alone might imply that Job need only come to a correct understanding and all will be well. But human wisdom does not come from understanding God and His ways. It comes only through being in right relationship to a present and real God.

Though Job's friends had argued that Job lacked knowledge of his own sinfulness, God's speech does not seek to inform Job. Instead of giving Job more knowledge, God focuses on showing Job how uninformed he truly is! God teaches Job that he lacks insight into divine matters. As He assaults Job with the storm of his strength and a barrage of questions, Job is forced to re-learn that he cannot attain divine knowledge. With each question God challenges Job

to “Instruct Me!” (38:3). Though Job sought to curse God’s creation (3:3), God asserts that at creation “the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy” (38:7). If Job has such a great understanding of justice and an ability to enact it, God challenges him to “Look on everyone who is proud, and humble him; And tread down the wicked where they stand. ... Then I will also confess to you, That your own right hand can save you” (40:12,14). At the end of the divine speeches, Job has regained a grasp on the fact that he is not a god. He had stepped beyond his domain and God has put him back in his place.

Commentators are often frustrated by God’s apparent non-answer to Job’s demand for an explanation of his suffering. In light of the difference between divine and human wisdom, the missing explanation is exactly God’s point. Divine wisdom is to have explanations. Human wisdom is to live within limitations while being in right relationship with God.

A masterful aspect of the book of Job is the way the reader is taught the same lesson that Job learns. Many readers of Job are unsatisfied by the prologue and epilogue. Why does God entertain the satan’s accusation? Why is the resolution to the heavenly conflict not described in the epilogue? What higher goal has been achieved through Job’s innocent suffering? These details seem to be intentionally left out of the story. The reader is given exactly enough information to know that Job is correct in maintaining his innocence and to see that God is doing something, however mysterious, through allowing/causing Job’s suffering. The rest of the details are missing. The reader is prevented from making the mistake of seeking divine wisdom. In our indefatigable quest for understanding, we read the book of Job seeking the missing piece, the key to divine wisdom, the answer to suffering, yet we do not find it there. This is the point: to think that we can understand God’s ways is foolishness. It is folly to think of oneself so highly as to presume to grasp divine wisdom.

Though God corrected Job through His stern questioning, He still affirms that Job had spoken well of Him (42:7-8). Though he overstepped his domain of knowledge by presuming to understand God's purposes and ends, Job has been a faithful "miner". Metaphorically, he has swung "to and fro far from men" (28:4) and "overturn[ed] the mountains at the base" (28:9) in search of understanding. He would have denied his humanity if he had simply resigned and said, "God understands. I can't understand." He began by simplistically reciting, "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed by the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21), but the glory and honour that God had bestowed on him as a man would not allow his quest to end there. He fought and struggled with the things he knew and with all of the fear of God that lived in his heart, living at a point just "a little lower than God" (Ps 8:5). For living out his true humanity, God rewards him with the statement that he has spoken well of Him and with His own presence and correction. Mysteriously, and (again) without explanation, God also restores his earthly goods (42:10). It is an almost comic stroke that after proving He is not bound to a human view of justice, God gives Job what he deserves. Who can plumb the mysteries of God?

Life in Ambiguity

How are we to live as creatures of God who have been granted glory and majesty? Our place as creatures only "a little lower than God" puts us at great risk of asserting ourselves as independent of God. The reality is that we cannot find true wisdom, true understanding. That is the domain of God alone. Our place is to fear Him and to turn from evil. We are to follow the example of Job. If we turn from God in our seeming independence, we die. But if we cease striving to understand, cease digging for jewels in the farthest reaches of the earth, we lose the dignity that God has given us. It is significant that the people of God are not called "Abraham" or "Isaac" or "Jacob", but "Israel", the name given to Jacob after he wrestled with God all night

(Gen 32:28). God's people on the earth neither ignore God nor lie forever prostrate before Him. We recognise Him as the centre of everything and the One who is willing to be present with us even in His ungraspable mystery. We then cry to Him along with Jacob and Job, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen 32:26).

As we encountered Job and the Downtown Eastside in this class, I sought answers to the problems and the pain. There are problems in the book of Job. There are problems in the Downtown Eastside. And there are problems in my own life and the lives around me. There are many ways to go wrong when considering these problems. Job's counsellors found one when they asserted that Job deserved what he got. Many go wrong by shrugging their shoulders and asserting that God must be doing something good through it all. Some seem to go wrong by imagining that they are more capable than God in the situation, applying their own strength and wisdom where His seems to be lacking, and reaping anger and disappointment in the ensuing fallout. But the way of responding that the book of Job endorses is a full embracing of our humanity. We can, and should, move mountains like the miner to accomplish what seems right to us, with full vigour and passion. But the other side of our humanity is that God alone is the all-powerful and all-wise king, and we must continue wrestling with Him when our understanding fails us. As we do both of these, as Job did, God will be mysteriously present and mysteriously faithful to us.

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