



Job - Chapter Twenty

II Job 3:1-42:6 - Dialogue: Job, His Suffering, and His Standing before God (continues)

II.b Job 4:1-25:6 - The Friends and Job: Can Job be Right Before God? (continues)

II.b.ii Job 15:1-21:34 - The Second Cycle (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty

In his second response, Zophar opens with a brief expression of frustration (vv.2-3), presumably in response to Job's insistence that God has brought about his circumstances and Job's belief that God will yet vindicate him. The remainder of the response is one long description of the short and insufferable life of the wicked, by which Zophar intends to implicate and rebuke Job (vv.4-29).

II.b.ii.5 Job 20:1-29 - Zophar Speaks: Wickedness Receives Just Retribution

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Then Zophar the Naamathite answered:

² 'Pay attention! My thoughts urge me to answer,
because of the agitation within me.

³ I hear censure that insults me,
and a spirit beyond my understanding answers me.

Job 20:1-3

My thoughts urge me to answer, because of the agitation within me. Zophar insisted that Job's striking defence in the previous chapters made him anxious and caused turmoil within him. Job's speech upset him. Zophar speaks with dignity, but dignity is not an indication of discernment. Zophar has listened to Job's words but not to the spirit of them; he is ashamed of the attitude that his former friend has taken.

Other biblical writers speak out in their agitation and distress of what they have seen and heard but perhaps more righteously, such as the psalmist: <<*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God*>> (Psalm 42:5-6a), and Jeremiah: <<*See, O Lord, how distressed I am; my stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious. In the street the sword bereaves; in the house it is like death*>> (Lamentations 1:20).

I hear censure that insults me. Zophar may be referring to Job's response to his last speech, in which Job sarcastically criticised his friends and claimed that he was not their inferior: <<*No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?*>> (Job 12:2-3).

A spirit beyond my understanding answers me. Although wounded by Job's tough response, Zophar claimed he would answer Job with understanding. Zophar therefore assumes his old ground and retracts nothing of what he had said. Like many of his own complexion in the present day, he was determined to believe that his judgement was infallible and that he could not be wrong.

The spiritual understanding of Zophar's answer can be rightly questioned but he certainly spoke with an understanding of poetry and literature. The poem must be read with full attention given to the use of figurative language, parallelism, and strophic structure, all basic elements of Hebrew poetry. Strophic form is the term applied to songs in which all verses or stanzas of the text are sung to the same music. Despite the error of Zophar's application, the poem itself ought to be appreciated as a masterly piece of literature.

- 4 Do you not know this from of old,
ever since mortals were placed on earth,
5 that the exulting of the wicked is short,
and the joy of the godless is but for a moment?
6 Even though they mount up high as the heavens,
and their head reaches to the clouds,

- 7 they will perish for ever like their own dung;
those who have seen them will say, “Where are they?”
- 8 They will fly away like a dream, and not be found;
they will be chased away like a vision of the night.
- 9 The eye that saw them will see them no more,
nor will their place behold them any longer.
- 10 Their children will seek the favour of the poor,
and their hands will give back their wealth.
- 11 Their bodies, once full of youth,
will lie down in the dust with them.

Job 20:4-11

Do you not know this from of old. Zophar here did what he and his friends had done on previous occasions; he made a claim to authority simply by saying, “We all know these things to be true” without providing evidence to prove the claim. Zophar had a strong conceit that Job was but a hypocrite, one that was wicked before God in heart, notwithstanding his fair pretences and professions of piety.

Scripture often calls upon people to remember what God has done in the past and to learn from historic examples, as Moses puts it: <<*For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of?*>> (Deuteronomy 4:32).

The exulting of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless is but for a moment. In effect Zophar is saying, “Job, we all know this - that whatever good or triumph the wicked seem to enjoy, it is all quickly passing. It is only for a moment, and the wicked man will perish for ever like their own dung.” Zophar here hints his disbelief in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body to which Job had so solemnly asserted in the preceding chapter.

Even though they mount up high as the heavens. Zophar warns Job that whatever height a wicked man may have achieved will not change the fact that, when his end comes, it will be quick and complete.

Zophar is rightly pointing out the problems that come with human pride, as do later prophets: <<*You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the*

heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High'>> (Isaiah 14:13-14), and: <<Your proud heart has deceived you, you that live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is in the heights. You say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?' Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, says the Lord>> (Obadiah 3-4).

Where are they? Zophar may be recasting the question Job had asked earlier: <<*But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they?*>> (Job 14:10), as what could well be ironically and justifiably spoken about Job if he does not pull back from his insistence that he is innocent.

Their children will seek the favour of the poor, and their hands will give back their wealth. The children of once rich people will be impoverished and will need to seek the favour of their fellow poor in order to be accepted as being among them. It also speaks of coming into the service of the poor as did the descendants of Noah's son for his transgression: <<*Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers*>> (Genesis 9:25). There are cases where the poor actually serve the poor; and this is the lowest or most abject state of poverty. They are forced to return the wealth that they had acquired either by force, through misappropriation, or perhaps because their own transgression had brought upon them the 'curse of Canaan.'

Their bodies, once full of youth, will lie down in the dust with them. This verse has been translated in many different ways but it seems that the meaning is that the vigour of youth fades away to the infirmities of old age due to their secret vices and multiple transgressions.

- 12 'Though wickedness is sweet in their mouth,
though they hide it under their tongues,
13 though they are loath to let it go,
and hold it in their mouths,
14 yet their food is turned in their stomachs;
it is the venom of asps within them.
15 They swallow down riches and vomit them up again;
God casts them out of their bellies.
16 They will suck the poison of asps;
the tongue of a viper will kill them.
17 They will not look on the rivers,

the streams flowing with honey and curds.

- 18 They will give back the fruit of their toil,
and will not swallow it down;
from the profit of their trading
they will get no enjoyment.
- 19 For they have crushed and abandoned the poor,
they have seized a house that they did not build.

Job 20:12-19

Though wickedness is sweet in their mouth. Zophar argues that neither the wicked man (vv.12-19) nor his offspring (v.10) will enjoy the benefits of what he has acquired because he has gained it through the oppression of others (vv.19-21). Instead, his children will be forced to beg from the poor (v.10), who were some of the very people their father oppressed to gain his wealth (v.19). The description also includes several images that describe the way of the wicked as something like gluttony: their hunger for evil is unrestrained and insatiable (v.12, v.13, v.20 and v.21), which leads to whatever has been gained instead rotting them from the inside out (vv.14-16).

Their food is turned in their stomachs; it is the venom of asps within them. Zophar argued that although the wicked man might enjoy things for a while, God surely brings his judgement against him for all to see. That which is sweet today for the wicked man will soon become sour. Here, he implied a painful and aggressive application. He would insist that Job was this wicked man and his previous blessing and prosperity in life was only the sweet taste that has now turned sour: <<***Bread gained by deceit is sweet, but afterwards the mouth will be full of gravel***>> (Proverbs 20:17), and: <<***Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom; how bitter it is! It has reached your very heart***>> (Jeremiah 4:18).

For they have crushed and abandoned the poor, they have seized a house that they did not build. Here Zophar described what he thought was the sinful conduct of the wicked man and why he deserved to be frustrated in life. Clearly, he implied that this was Job.

Oppressing the poor is a sin directed at God: <<***Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him***>> (Proverbs 14:31), and: <<***Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false***>>

balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’ The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?>> (Amos 8:4-8).

- 20 ‘They knew no quiet in their bellies;
in their greed they let nothing escape.
- 21 There was nothing left after they had eaten;
therefore their prosperity will not endure.
- 22 In full sufficiency they will be in distress;
all the force of misery will come upon them.
- 23 To fill their belly to the full
God will send his fierce anger into them,
and rain it upon them as their food.
- 24 They will flee from an iron weapon;
a bronze arrow will strike them through.
- 25 It is drawn forth and comes out of their body,
and the glittering point comes out of their gall;
terrors come upon them.
- 26 Utter darkness is laid up for their treasures;
a fire fanned by no one will devour them;
what is left in their tent will be consumed.
- 27 The heavens will reveal their iniquity,
and the earth will rise up against them.
- 28 The possessions of their house will be carried away,
dragged off on the day of God’s wrath.
- 29 This is the portion of the wicked from God,
the heritage decreed for them by God.’

Job 20:20-29

In full sufficiency they will be in distress. Zophar thought that the reason Job was in such agony and distress was because of his own self-sufficiency; this explained his great misery.

To fill their belly to the full God will send his fierce anger into them. Although Job had referred to his circumstances as equivalent to God attacking and breaking him open: *<<I was at ease, and he broke me in two; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he set me up as his target; his archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy; he pours out my gall on the ground. He bursts upon me again and again; he rushes at me like a warrior>>* (Job 16:12-14), Zophar uses similar imagery of sword and arrow to assert that it is God who will indeed strike the wicked with the wrath of his judgement. Zophar is likely hinting that Job ought to take his own description of feeling ‘broken open’ as an indication of God’s impending judgement rather than of any injustice from God.

It is drawn forth and comes out of their body. Here Zophar saw the wicked man pierced by the arrows of God’s judgement. He took the complaint of Job of being pierced by God’s arrows in Job 6:4 and 7:20 and turned it back upon Job, claiming that Job deserved this as a wicked man. Job’s friends did not seem to regard him as a wicked man when they first came to him; refer to Job 2:11-13. One might say that Job virtually provoked this judgement from them in that they simply tried to help Job see that he was a sinner who needed to repent. When Job absolutely refused to agree with them, they came to regard him as a stubborn and wicked man. Once they regarded him in this way, they quickly hardened in their estimation of Job.

The heavens will reveal their iniquity, and the earth will rise up against them. Although it is not his purpose, Zophar hints here at the central tension of the book: what is the relationship between what is true before God and what takes place on earth? The friends wrongly assume that Job’s circumstances on earth are a transparent indicator of his guilt before God in heaven. Job has governed his life by a belief that God is indeed just and his lament reflects his desire that God’s justice would be manifested more than it is in his present life on earth. In the end, Zophar will realise that what the heavens will reveal is his own error, not Job’s iniquity: *<<After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: ‘My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt-offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.’ So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them; and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer>>* (Job 42:7-9).

The phrase 'the possessions of their house will be carried away' is revealing, showing that Zophar focused almost entirely on the material aspect of Job's troubles, virtually ignoring the spiritual dynamic. He sees the carrying off of possessions as a judgement. The loss of fellowship with God, in this life or after it, does not strike him as a far worse fate. Yet it is precisely this loss that fills Job's mind with horror and this need that arouses his most desperate longings.

This is the portion of the wicked from God, the heritage decreed for them by God. This was Zophar's firm conclusion and he speaks no more in the Book of Job. He made the clear connection between the wrath that the wicked man reaps and Job's own situation. Significantly, Zophar was mostly correct. It is true that there is a moral order to the universe and that wickedness is inherently unprofitable; it is cursed and will be judged by God. In a passage thrilling with passion, he described the instability of evil gains. There is triumph, but it is short. There is a mounting up, but it is succeeded by swift removal. There is a sense of youth, but it becomes dust. There is a sweetness, but it becomes remorse; a swallowing down which ends in vomiting; and a receiving without rejoicing. Yet that true general principle did not apply to Job's specific situation.

Zophar - as with the rest of Job's friends - also left little room for grace. It is worth pointing out, as a sign of the narrowness of Zophar's beliefs, that his speech contains no hint that the wicked might repent, make amends, and regain the favour of God. Zophar has no compassion and his god has no mercy.