



Job - Chapter Twenty Six

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

Summary of Chapter Twenty Six

Job criticises his friends for what is likely an unintentional but still unacceptable consequence of their approach (vv.1-4). He questions their absolute conviction by alluding to how much is hidden from human perspective simply in the existence and divine government of the created world (vv.5-14).

II.c Job 26:1-31:40 - Job: the Power of God, Place of Wisdom, and Path of Integrity

The dialogue between Job and his three friends has a pattern in which each speech by Job is followed by responses from the friends in a particular order: Eliphaz, Bildad, and then Zophar. After two full cycles of the dialogue, it appears that Job is tired of the repetitive and relentless nature of his friends' responses. He signals the end of the dialogue by cutting Bildad's third response short, i.e. it is only six verses long, and precluding any third speech from Zophar. Job concludes with a lengthy monologue in which he takes up several subjects related particularly to the theme of what is hidden and what is revealed.

The friends' presumed knowledge does not necessarily promote justice nor take into consideration the extent of the mystery of God's ways (vv.1-14). Job cannot agree that his suffering reveals wickedness, and he wishes that those who oppose him would be like the wicked when they are finally cut off (Chapter 27). Job describes the value, mystery, and place of wisdom (Chapter 28). Job also longs for the past (Chapter 29), laments the present (Chapter 30), and finishes with a plea that the character of his life would be revealed for what it is and judged accordingly (Chapter 31).

Given the perceived tensions with Job's earlier statements on the wicked in Chapter 27 and the apparently independent status of the wisdom 'hymn' in Chapter 28, some argue that voices other than Job's should be heard speaking these passages. On the other hand, it is possible to follow the text as it is. After all, Job 31:40b says: <<***The words of Job are ended***>>, which seems to clearly attribute these speeches to Job. These questions are taken up in context.

II.c.i Job 26:1-14 - Job Replies: God's Majesty Is Unsearchable

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Then Job answered:

² 'How you have helped one who has no power!

How you have assisted the arm that has no strength!

³ How you have counselled one who has no wisdom,
and given much good advice!

Job 26:1-3

How you have helped; assisted; counselled. With these three statements Job is suggesting that the presumed theological orthodoxy of Bildad and the other two friends rings hollow due to its lack of any actual protection for him or reflection on the justice they pronounce. In their defence of God, the friends have neither actively helped the poor and needy since all they have done is wrongly accuse Job who has been their protector, nor have they bothered to discern the potentially disastrous consequences of their approach by judging the circumstance of those in need to be the result of their own sin.

Then Job answered. This begins a long discourse of Job, which first answered the brief speech of Bildad in Chapter 25 and then became a speech on wisdom and a final defence, ending in Job Chapter 31. The pronouns are singular; Job is addressing one person, presumably Bildad.

How you have helped one who has no power! Job considered all the wisdom from Bildad and his two friends Eliphaz and Zophar, and wondered where the help or strength was in any of it. At the end of it all, Job's friends got to the point where they were so concerned about being right that they forgot to be concerned about helping Job in his time of trial and despair.

How you have counselled one who has no wisdom. Job made these statements broad enough to include not only himself but also anyone else that Bildad and his friends failed to help.

- 4 With whose help have you uttered words,
and whose spirit has come forth from you?

Job 26:4

With whose help have you uttered words. Job wondered who else had been damaged by the insensitivity and misapplied wisdom of his friends.

In light of the implied negative answer to the statements of vv.2-3, Job asks his friends to examine whose help and whose spirit or **breath** has been behind their words, lest they assume resolutely but wrongly that they have spoken on God's behalf. In the very first speech of Job's friends in Chapter 4, Eliphaz said that a mysterious spirit and revealed to him his principles. The message from the shadowy spirit began: <<*Can mortals be righteous before God?*>> (Job 4:17a). Bildad then repeated the same idea to Job in Job 25:4, as well as other recycled arguments in that brief chapter. Therefore, Job wanted to know from Bildad: <<*Whose spirit has come forth from you?*>>. Or, as the New International Version has it: <<*Whose spirit spoke from your mouth?*>>.

Introduction to Job 26:5-14

Job alludes to some obvious areas of knowledge that are open before God but concealed from human perspective in order to warn his friends against their continued presumption that they know God's purposes in Job's disastrous circumstances.

- 5 The shades below tremble,
the waters and their inhabitants.
- 6 Sheol is naked before God,
and Abaddon has no covering.
- 7 He stretches out Zaphon over the void,
and hangs the earth upon nothing.
- 8 He binds up the waters in his thick clouds,
and the cloud is not torn open by them.
- 9 He covers the face of the full moon,
and spreads over it his cloud.
- 10 He has described a circle on the face of the waters,
at the boundary between light and darkness.

Job 26:5-10

The shades below tremble. Job uses the repeated vocabulary of this section to emphasise things that are clearly known to God but are hidden from human cognisance. The state or realm of the dead is not visible to humanity, i.e. under the waters, Sheol, and Abaddon, but it is naked and has no covering before God.

Many suggestions have been offered for the identity of these 'watery dead.' Some think that Job believed that Sheol was a watery abyss, connecting it with an idea suggested in: <<*For the waves of death encompassed me, the torrents of perdition assailed me*>> (2 Samuel 22:5). Others think it is just a poetical way of describing those who are buried in the lowest pit, in the depths: <<*You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep*>> (Psalm 88:6). Some even believe those inhabiting the waters are actually fishes and sea creatures. It seems best to regard it as a poetic and non-technical description of the uncertainty, darkness and gloom of the world beyond. Job used similar imagery earlier: <<*Are not the days of my life few? Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort before I go, never to return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is like darkness*>> (Job 10:20-22). Yet, the point in context should not be missed. Job's idea is that there is no place hidden from God; everything, including the realm of the dead and the depths of the sea, is naked before him.

Likewise, the description of the creation or existence of the natural world implies that other things may be hidden: the heavens appear perched over the void, and the earth appears to hang on nothing; a cloud often binds up, covers, and spreads over another element of the heavens and itself is not torn open; and it is God who has set the limits for all of these divine artefacts. Job remarkably understood this. In contrast to ancient mythologies that said the earth was held up on the backs of elephants or giant turtles, Job knew that God hangs the earth upon nothing. Zaphon may mean north.

It is interesting to compare the understanding from the ancient times of Job to modern scientific understanding of the cosmos, where dark matter and dark energy, both of which are invisible and undetectable, make up about 95% of the entire universe.

The Hebrew word for full moon, also used in Psalm 81:3, is a homonym, a word with the same sound and spelling but different meaning with the word for throne. If either the latter sense is intended or the author is employing intentional ambiguity in using the word then the image may refer to the heavens as concealing God in the place of his rule.

He has described a circle on the face of the waters, at the boundary between light and darkness. Job also understood the principles of the curvature of the

earth and the curved nature of the horizon; even though it would be at least a further millennium before the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) argued in his writings that the earth was spherical.

- 11 The pillars of heaven tremble,
and are astounded at his rebuke.
- 12 By his power he stilled the Sea;
by his understanding he struck down Rahab.
- 13 By his wind the heavens were made fair;
his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.
- 14 These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways;
and how small a whisper do we hear of him!
But the thunder of his power who can understand?’

Job 26:11-14

The images in these verses all focus on God’s power and echo a similar description in Job’s first response to Bildad in Job 9:5-13. The created world reveals not only that some things are hidden (vv.5-10) but also the vast implications of God’s power as the one who created and governs everything.

By his power he stilled the Sea. Job knew the mighty energy displayed in storms that stirred up the sea, and he knew that this was from the power of God. He also realised that the power of God can just as easily still the great storms as was practically demonstrated by Jesus: *<<And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A gale arose on the lake, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you of little faith?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’>> (Matthew 8:23-27), and: <<When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the lake. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’ Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased>> (Mark 6:48-51a).*

Rahab and the fleeing serpent refer to the same being and make the point that God is and will be sovereign over any powerful figure opposed to him (note that in Isaiah, God uses 'Rahab' as another name for Egypt, e.g. in Isaiah 30:7).

This is another obscure reference to an ancient serpent defeated by God. Isaiah 51:9 and Psalm 89:8-10 also speak of a serpent associated with the sea that God defeated as a demonstration of his great strength and identifies this serpent with the name Rahab, meaning proud one. Ancient rabbinic mythologies suggest that an evil serpent was in the primeval sea resisting creation and that God killed the serpent and brought order to the world: <<*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*>> (Genesis 1:1-2).

Satan is often represented as a dragon or a serpent, as in Genesis Chapter 3 and Revelation Chapters 12-13, and the sea is thought of as a dangerous or threatening place in the Jewish mind: <<*But the wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud*>> (Isaiah 57:20). Therefore, Leviathan may be another serpent-like manifestation of Satan, who was the original Rahab or proud one.

If it is by God's power and understanding that he rules creation, Job concludes the chapter by asking how it is that, as one who merely hears the thunder of his power, any person could presume to understand it.