

The Book of Job

Session 16: Dialogues Cycle 3, Job 22-27

By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 16, Dialogues Cycle 3, Job 22-27.

Introduction to Dialogue Cycle 3 [00:26-00:46]

Now we're ready to get into Cycle 3 of the dialogues. Cycle 3 is much briefer as most of the arguments are sort of running out. In this cycle, Zophar does not speak at all, and Bildad has a very short speech. So, we have less content in the dialogue itself.

Difficult Verses: Job 22:2-3 [00:46-6:32]

We do, however, have a couple of very difficult verses to deal with and so we're going to work with the technical things first and try to sort those out before we move on to the summaries. The first one is in chapter 22, verses 2 and 3. Here we're at the very beginning of this last speech of Eliphaz. The NIV translates, "Can a man be of benefit to God? Can even a wise man benefit him? What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous? What would he gain if your ways were blameless?"

I'll look at the various translations and the commentators, which show a wide divergence of translation. So, a few examples, Norman Habel says, "Can a hero endanger El? Or a sage, endanger the Ancient One? Is it a favor to Shaddai if you are righteous, or is it his gain if you perfect your ways? Hartley translates, "Can a man benefit to God that a wise man should be in harmony with him? What asset is it to Shaddai that you are innocent or gain that you claim your ways are blameless? Cline's translates. "Can a human be profitable to God? Can even a sage benefit him? Is it an asset to the Almighty if you are righteous? Does he gain if your conduct is blameless?" You can see just between those that there's a wide variation.

Based on a couple of other examples of the same kind of syntax in the Book of Job. There's a very complex syntax in these verses. And based on the syntax from other verses that start exactly the same way and it's set up the structure the same way.

I have a different suggestion to make. The three verses where the same structure occurs: Job 13:7, Job 21:22, and this one Job 22:2, I would render it: "Can a wise mediator do any good for a human being serving on behalf of God?" That is a wise mediator serving on behalf of God. "Can such a mediator bring a human any benefit? Will God respond favorably when you justify yourself? Will there be gain when you give a full account of your ways?" Then you can see that it's a little bit different. Job 34:9 shows that the word "*gever*," which most of these are translated as "man" although Habel translated it as "hero," Job 34:9 shows that it must be the object rather than the subject, and that's really one of the main differences between my rendering and others. I put "wise mediator" as the subject of the first sentence, the translation of the Hebrew word, *maskil*, which both in the Hebrew text and in most translations occurs in the second line. But again, these other verses that I pointed to show reason to apply that even as the subject to the first line. I've rendered the verb *sakan* "do any good." "Can it do any good?" And I've not said God is a direct or indirect object, such as benefit to God. I've removed him grammatically one step further from the action that is "on behalf of God." And again, there's reason to do that based on the other verses that I mentioned. The decision based on the other two occurrences helps us to render this verse in line with how we find syntax set up in other places in the Book of Job.

Contrary to the other translations that rendered the verb in the first line in verse 3, simply as "be righteous" or "be innocent," I've rendered it "justify yourself" on the evidence of Job 40 verse 8, where Job was accused by God of justifying himself. The qal form of the verb *sadak* is furthermore used for vindication numerous times in the book of Job. For instance, 11.2 and 13.8. Finally, the last verb in 22.3, the Hiphil form of the roots to *tamam* is quite challenging. The translations above treat it variably as an adjective expressed as fact "to be blameless," or as "a claim of blamelessness," or even as

a verb "to perfect your ways." It's a verbal form in the Hiphil that occurs only eight times. My translation of "give a full account of your ways" is based on the observation that in many of the other contexts, it roughly concerns paying off or rendering an account of something. Note, especially 2 Kings 22:4. So again, based on all of those grammatical and syntactical situations, I've rendered it, "Can a wise mediator do any good." Let me do that again, "Can a wise mediator serving on behalf of God do any good for a human being? Can such a mediator bring any human benefit? Will God respond favorably when you justify yourself? Will there be a gain when you give a full account of your ways?" This makes a lot of sense in the context of the arguments that have been made in the book and again, with the kind of syntax and vocabulary use that we see in other places.

Difficult Verses: Job 26:7 [6:32-13:36]

The verse that I want to give attention to is Job 26:7; the NIV translates it, "He spreads out the northern skies over empty space, he suspends the earth over nothing." It's worth paying attention to because some leaders have looked at that last phrase, "suspending the earth over nothing," and have drawn the conclusion that somehow in the Book of Job, they know about the earth, just kind of hanging in orbit, held by gravity and centripetal force and all of those things, which I think is a very unreasonable thought that the book assumes that or anticipates that. It really doesn't accord with the word. So, let's take a quick look at it.

In the first part of the line, "he spreads out the northern skies." The word for north is *zaphon*. It's a fairly normal Hebrew word for north. But it also refers to Mount Zaphon, the Canaanite mountain where the gods dwelt. Its significance, therefore, lies not in its orientation with the points of the compass but in its use as a reference to the sacred mountain that's known in the literature outside of Israel. Even in Israel, some of the Psalms do that as well. So, Zaphon is more than just a direction here. If we understand it as referring to the cosmic mountain, the cosmic mountain has its foundations in the netherworld and its heights in the heavens, and the divine council meets at its heights. It's

the meeting place of heaven and earth and the convening place for the assembly of the gods and thus their dwelling place--heaven. So, I'm taking Zaphon then as that sort of reference. The verb "he spreads out Zaphon. "Spreads out" is *noteh*, a Hebrew word that suggests that he's talking about the heavens since this verb usually takes heaven as its object in biblical cosmology texts.

Now, he's spreading out something heavenly, Zaphon, over empty space. The word "empty space" is *tohu*. It's known from Genesis 1:2 *tohu vabohu* "formless and void," and both in Genesis 2 and in the other 30-plus occurrences that we find of the word, it refers to that which is non-existent in the sense that it's non-ordered non-functional. And so, this is the non-ordered world. So, the idea that God spreads out the heavenly Zaphon over *tohu*, over that which is non-existent. What's usually referred to as non-existent is the cosmic waters. I know we think that existence has to do with material, but they didn't in the ancient world. They believed that existence had to do with function and order. So, something material that we judge material could also be non-existent. They considered the oceans non-existent; they considered the deserts non-existent because they were not ordered into the human realm and functioning for them. So here, the idea that Zaphon is spread out over a *tohu* is an indication of the cosmic waters above in non-existent, non-functional, non-ordered cosmic waters above over which the heavens were indeed stretched, cf. Psalm 104:2, 3.

Tohu in the first line parallels the unique phrase *velema* in the second line. That's the word that, again, the NIV translates as "nothing." This is the only place this word occurs, and of course, that makes it a very difficult situation for us. We usually determine the meaning of words by their usage. If we don't have other examples of usage, we are hampered in trying to understand the meaning of the word. The idea that its matterless space, which is where the earth is suspended would be anachronistic. Nobody in the ancient world or the Hebrew Bible knows anything about such things. Again, with the Egyptian sense of the non-existent, it refers to that which lacks function or order. The verb in this second clause is the verb *talah* which means "to suspend." It often refers to a

form of execution, to hang someone. It's better translated to suspended on, as they would hang someone on a picket or something of that sort or a tree. It is better translated "suspended on" not "over."

Even the word "earth" in this sentence is not straightforward. We would think that would be an easy one. But in a few instances, both in the Hebrew Bible and from the ancient Near East cognate languages, it also referred to the nether world. So here I think *eretz* should be a reference not to the earth itself but to the nether world. So we have both *tohu* in the first line and *belema* in the second that describe the non-existence, which is the cosmic waters, which we know we have cosmic waters above and cosmic waters below.

We have Zaphon, which talks about the realm above. And we have *eretz*, which talks about the realm below. Therefore, my rendering would be "heaven is stretched out over cosmic non-existence, the earth is suspended on the non-existent." So, you get the waters above and the waters below.

These two verses that we've talked about are just examples of the difficulties that we face in the Book of Job. When we open up an English translation, we often have this idea that somehow everything's been worked out and that the text is understood. But especially in Hebrew Bible, that's not necessarily the case. There are still lots of words that pose problems to us, or whose meanings are unknown, or maybe whose meanings are generally known, but the full nuances are difficult to capture in English words. We encounter syntax difficulties, especially in poetic texts. And so, we face a lot of problems; translators do the best they can, commentators try to shed light on it all. You know, everyone's working together to try to come to the best understanding of the text possible. The Book of Job, as I've mentioned, is particularly difficult. And so, we find these problems such as the two that we've just mentioned.

Rhetorical Strategy of Cycle 3 [13:36-13:53]

So, fortunately, at another level of understanding, we can look at the rhetorical strategy and the general sense of the cycle, the cycle of the dialogue, and get a good idea of what's going on even though a couple of the verses are still giving us trouble.

Cycle 3: Eliphaz and Job's Response [13:53-16:33]

So, let's summarize the arguments of cycle three. Eliphaz, of course, is the main speaker for the friends. He basically has the idea of all of your talk of a mediator; remember, Job has brought this up before, a mediator, advocate, *goel*, redeemer, all your talk of a mediator and a hearing is hollow. It's a smoke screen. God obviously knows your wicked deeds of injustice. You've got what you deserve. And I, for one, am glad of it. Your best course of action is to start listening, and stop arguing. When you do, just imagine all the benefits and favor you will again enjoy. Now notice Eliphaz's common focus on getting your stuff back. Here, it's hard to still consider him a friend. These are very harsh words. He's no longer being gentle; if he ever was, he's no longer being gentle with Job. So, Eliphaz is going deeper and deeper, in his accusations.

Job hardly even gives a thought to Eliphaz to summarize his statement: If only I could find God, I fantasize about what that would be like, but it's hopeless. I'm innocent, and he knows it. What a terrifying position to be in. Why doesn't God do something about this mess? Oppressive people do whatever they want without any accountability. Poor people trying to scrape out a living suffer under their unchecked tyranny. Criminals go about their business unrestrained, but I'm still convinced that there is no future for such people. Their wickedness will catch up with them eventually.

See that Job is still holding on to the retribution principle, and he's still trying to make the world make sense with the retribution principle, but he recognizes that his own circumstances, his own experiences, aren't really supporting that principle very well. So Eliphaz's advice, repent, be restored, and go on the lecture circuit. I say that a bit facetiously because he basically presents the idea: Then you can tell everybody else how God has worked in your life. So, go on the lecture circuit. Job's reply: Look around you.

Who can think about self when the world is so out of sync? So, that's how the Eliphaz and Job exchange goes.

Cycle 3: Bildad and Job's Response [16:33-18:04]

Now, Bildad jumps in just for a few verses and basically remember wisdom of the ages; that's Bildad. God is unimaginably great. Humans are intrinsically flawed and don't ultimately matter anyway. Thanks, Bildad.

Job's response to Bildad: Your position is preposterous and totally unpersuasive. You've referred to God establishing order, but you haven't begun to grasp the immensity of God's work. Yet for all of the order that he has established in the cosmos, this is where verse 26 comes in; he's brought nothing but disorder into my life. Nevertheless, I will follow the advice that all of you have offered. I'm sorry; let me get that right. Nevertheless, I will never follow the advice that all of you have offered. My righteousness is all I have. I will cling to it until the end. You have become my enemies and, therefore, God's enemies. So, we all know what's in store for you.

So, synthesizing Bildad's advice: face the facts the tradition knows best. Job's reply: God's immense power has brought order to the cosmos but not to my life. I am God's victim, and you will be too. Here I stand with only my righteousness to cling to. The philosophical focus and the resolution of this series of speeches hinge on whether or not Job will admit to sin. That's what the entire dialogue cycle has been about. Eliphaz explicates his accusations, which Job resolutely denies.

Return to the Challenger's Accusation [18:04-19:24]

Remember that from the beginning of the book, the challenge on the table was that Job would curse God to his face? It's the question of whether there is disinterested righteousness. We've talked about the idea that Job needs to maintain his integrity, no matter what else he gets right or wrong about God or about the world, or about his perception of his own situation or how he evaluates his experiences, no matter how any of that goes, as long as he maintains his integrity, that his righteousness is about righteousness, not about benefits then the Challenger's accusation will be turned away.

The friends and the wife remember representing that position, drawing Job to value his stuff rather than his righteousness. Job has resolutely denied that way of thinking.

Conclusion of the Dialogue Section [19:24-21:02]

That means that we really come to a major conclusion in chapter 27:1 through 6. These are in Job's final words, and I just summarized it, but let's read it because it really is important for how the dialogue section ends. I'm actually going to start in 27:2 "As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made my life bitter, as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils, my lips will not say anything wicked, and my tongue will not utter lies." Pause for a moment; what lies is he talking about? The lies he's talking about would be found if he were to agree that he had sinned, if he was to confess sin that he didn't believe he had committed.

So, I will not utter lies. "I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity." Again, what's this integrity we're talking about? Next verse. "I will maintain my innocence and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live." Job's holding on to his innocence, that is, that he has not done anything to deserve this, that he is righteous, and that's what it's all about, not the stuff. That's his integrity.

Challenger's Case is Done: Job Maintained his Innocence [21:02-21:43]

This speech, then, this final peg in the dialogue section, brings the treatment of the Challenger's contention to a conclusion. At this point, the Challenger's case is done, and he's been proven wrong. Job has maintained his innocence under the fiercest of attack, and he has maintained his righteousness, even though he's exhibited a lot of wrong thinking along the way; remember, Job is not right. He's not giving the right perspectives on God, but he does maintain his integrity.

Parts ways with Friends [21:43-22:17]

He rejects his friend's advice. He refuses to seek the restoration of his prosperity by just accepting any suggestion that he has sinned. So, at this point, we've reached an important juncture in the book. The dialogue cycle is over the Challenger's contention is set aside. The friends are done. They really aren't involved in the second part of the book till the very end, where they're mentioned again.

Transition to Discourse Section [22:17-22:49]

This is where we move into a transition to the discourse section, where it's Job's accusation that's going to be taken up. Is it a good policy for righteous people to suffer? But before we get to that, we're going to have the transition found in the hymn to wisdom in chapter 28, and we'll pick up with that in the next segment.

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