

The Book of Job

Session 16: Dialogues Cycle 3, Job 22-27

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton analyzes the third and final cycle of dialogues in Job chapters 22 through 27, where the arguments of Job's friends begin to dwindle. He resolves technical translation challenges in Job 22:2-3 and Job 26:7, redefining key Hebrew terms to offer more contextually accurate readings regarding divine mediators and ancient cosmology. Walton details the final exchanges with Eliphaz and Bildad, illustrating how Job rejects their transactional advice to repent solely for material restoration. Ultimately, he demonstrates how Job's resolute defense of his innocence in chapter 27 marks the defeat of the Challenger's accusation, proving that Job's righteousness is truly disinterested.

Outline

I. Introduction to Dialogue Cycle 3 (Job 22-27)

A. Structure and Characteristics of Cycle 3

1. Briefer than previous cycles as arguments run out.
2. Zophar does not speak at all in this cycle.
3. Bildad delivers an exceptionally short speech.

II. Technical Translation of Difficult Verses

A. Analysis of Job 22:2-3 (Eliphaz's last speech)

1. Review of traditional translations (NIV, Habel, Hartley, Cline) focusing on human benefit to God.
2. Syntax comparison with similar structures starting with identical introductory forms in Job 13:7 and 21:22.
3. Identification of 'maskil' as the subject ('wise mediator') and 'sakan' as 'do any good'.

4. Rendering 'sadak' (Qal) as 'justify yourself' and 'tamam' (Hiphil) as 'give a full account of your ways'.

5. Walton's Translation: '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?'

B. Analysis of Job 26:7 (Earth suspended over nothing)

1. Deconstruction of modern gravity/orbit misinterpretations, which are anachronistic to ancient Near Eastern cosmology.

2. Identification of 'zaphon' as Mount Zaphon, the cosmic mountain/dwelling place of the gods, rather than a mere point on a compass.

3. Defining 'noteh' (spreads out/stretching skyward) and 'tohu' (non-ordered, non-functional cosmic waters) in ancient creation contexts.

4. Translating 'belema' (hapax legomenon) as 'non-existent' and 'talach' as 'suspend on' (rather than 'over').

5. Interpreting 'eretz' (earth) as a reference to the nether world rather than the physical globe.

6. Walton's Translation: 'heaven is stretched out over cosmic non-existence, the earth is suspended on the non-existent' (representing waters above and below).

III. Rhetorical Summary of Dialogue Cycle 3

A. Eliphaz's Accusations and Job's Response

1. Eliphaz's argument: Your talk of a mediator is a hollow smoke screen; God obviously knows your wicked deeds; repent to get your 'stuff' back.

2. Job's response: Finding God is hopeless, yet I am innocent and He knows it; oppressive people go unchecked on earth, but their wickedness will eventually catch up with them.

3. Summary of exchange: Eliphaz advises Job to repent, be restored, and tell others; Job laments a world out of sync while clinging to the retribution principle.

B. Bildad's Argument and Job's Response

1. Bildad's argument: God is unimaginably great, and humans are intrinsically flawed and ultimately insignificant.

2. Job's response: Your traditional position is preposterous and unpersuasive; God established cosmic order but has brought nothing but disorder to my life.

3. Summary of exchange: Bildad appeals to the wisdom of the ages; Job asserts he is God's victim but will never follow their advice, clinging solely to his righteousness.

IV. Resolution of the Challenger's Accusation

A. Purity of Motivation and Disinterested Righteousness

1. The core challenge: Will Job curse God to His face once his material benefits are removed?
2. Job maintains his integrity by proving his righteousness is about righteousness itself, not about the 'stuff'.
3. The friends and Job's wife represent the transactional view, urging Job to compromise his integrity for material restoration.

B. Job's Final Words in the Dialogue (Job 27:1-6)

1. Job swears by the living God that his lips will not say anything wicked and his tongue will not utter lies.
2. Explains that 'lies' refer to confessing to sins he did not believe he committed just to please his friends or secure restoration.
3. Job vows: 'Till I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my innocence and never let go of it.'

C. Defeat of the Challenger's Case

1. Job's stubborn refusal to fake repentance for material gain proves his righteousness is disinterested.
2. The dialogue cycle is over, and the Challenger's contention is officially set aside and proven wrong.
3. The friends are done and disappear from the narrative until the very end of the book.

V. Transition to the Discourse Section

A. Shifting Focus to Job's Accusation

1. The book transitions from testing Job's motives to examining his accusation: Is it a good policy for righteous people to suffer?
2. Chapter 28 (Hymn to Wisdom) serves as the literary bridge and transition to the monologues and divine speeches.