## On Reading Job 22 – 28

For the first half of Job, the narrative follows a path that is easy to follow. The narrator sets the scene by means of two chapters that are largely narrative but that incorporate short statements from Job and other people. It then follows an arc in which the narrator continues to provide the framework but lets the narrative be dominated by a series of much more substantial statements by Job and by three ‘friends’ which the narrator introduces. Statements by Job interweave with statements by each friend; the narrator takes us through the sequence twice.

Half way through the book, however, things become puzzling. After the end of the second sequence, initially the speeches of Eliphaz and Job in Job 22 – 24 do not raise any questions. They are respectively thirty and forty-three lines (I take 24.14-15 as three lines and 24.20 as two lines), and they thus fit the parameters of the preceding cycles: in Job 3 – 5 Job’s first speech was twenty-five lines, Eliphaz’s forty-eight. We get the impression that we are beginning a third round of statements (though it is moot whether Job 21 is the beginning of this third sequence rather than the close of the second). The content of Job 24 does raise questions, however, particularly verses 17-24. These are not the kind of statement that Job usually makes; they are more the kind of statement he questions. Scholars thus commonly reallocate them to one of the friends.

In terms of length, Bildad’s third address in Job 25 is the first oddity; at five lines, it is far shorter than any other address so far. Scholars thus commonly lengthen it by reallocating material from one of Job’s addresses. In turn, the material in Job 26.1-4 is at home on Job’s lips, but 26.5-14 also read strangely there.

Job 27 begins, *wayyōsep ’iyyȏb śĕ’ēt mĕšālȏ wayyōmer*, which one might render ‘Job again took up his discourse and said’ (NRSV; cf. NJPS) or ‘And Job continued his discourse’ (TNIV). If the whole of Job 26 is Job’s speech, it is odd that this introduction appears here. While a similar phrase will be used to introduce the last chapter of Elihu’s address (36.1), other long speeches by Job proceed without such resumptive introductions. Further, some of Job’s statements in 27.7-23 might seem surprising when coming from Job. Finally, it is widely sensed that Job 28 also reads oddly on Job’s lips; and after this chapter, Job 29 begins with the same introduction as begins Job 27.

I am not averse to the idea that the third cycle of speeches in Job is no longer in its original form, but I am discouraged by the fact that ‘there are very many views of how these speeches should be rearranged,’[[1]](#footnote-1) none of which carries conviction in the scholarly world; neither does the view that the whole of chapters 26 – 31 belongs to Job carry conviction.[[2]](#footnote-2) What happens if we try once more to make sense of the chapters as they appear in the book as we have it, without making the latter assumption? This possibility is more feasible than is sometimes allowed when yielding to the impulse to look behind the existent text to develop hypotheses about its development.

My suggestion regarding the received text is that in 27.1 and 29.1 the words *wayyōsep ’iyyȏb śĕ’ēt mĕšālȏ wayyō’mar* do what NRSV’s translation (perhaps unintentionally) suggests they do. They indicate that Job has not been speaking, and now resumes doing so. This understanding confirms the sense that Job 28 does not come from Job’s lips. It also confirms the view that is only slightly less common, that Job 26.5-14 do not come from Job’s lips.

Who then speaks in Job 26.5-14 and Job 28? It will be the same person as speaks the other material outside the addresses in the book (by Job, the three friends, Elihu, and God, along with the short statements by the people who speak in Job 1 – 2), the person I have called the narrator, the implied author. Job 26.5-14 and 28.1-28 in fact link with other material belonging to the narrator and with the way the book as a whole is developing. On the other hand, the lack of any transition marker in connection with 27.7-23 implies that these verses are indeed part of Job’s address. Their use of the first-person singular does not suggest they are the narrator’s words, and understanding them as Job’s can work quite well.

The chapters then follow each other in this way:

22.1-30 Eliphaz’s address, introduced by the narrator

23.1 – 24.23 Job’s address, introduced by the narrator

25.1-6 Bildad’s address, introduced by the narrator

26.1-4 Job’s address, introduced by the narrator

26.5-14 The narrator’s reflection

27.1-23 Job’s address, introduced by the narrator

28.1-28 The narrator’s reflection

29.1 – 31.40 Job’s final address, introduced and concluded by the narrator

Understood thus, the rhetoric of the chapters works in an effective way. After chapters 22 – 24, which give the impression that a third cycle of speeches is to follow, this third cycle does not correspond to the first two but takes the rhetoric in a new direction. The brevity of Bildad’s speech in chapter 25, and then Zophar’s failure to speak at all, have the effect of conveying how the friends are running out of steam, running out of things to say, running out into the dust. Job’s response to Bildad at the beginning of chapter 26 is thus appropriately also very short; the debate itself is running out of steam.

After those lines by Job, 26.5-14 comprise a declaration of God’s greatness by the narrator, a declaration of a kind that will be prominent in the remainder of the book. It begins by adding something to Bildad’s words about God’s sovereignty in relation to supernatural forces. God is also sovereign with regard to the realm of death; death is not a realm where you can escape from God. Thus the dead writhe in fear if confronted by the frightening power of God. The poem goes on to speak of the heights of the heavens and to describe the process whereby God brought them into being. On the earth, then, we are surrounded by a circular horizon, which suggests an image for another aspect of God’s work. It is all very impressive, but it is only the fringes of God’s ways; that is, the impressiveness of the physical world gives us only the slightest impression of God’s actual acts and power. Even more significant in the context of the book of Job is that the word or message that we hear is only a whisper of the dimensions of the real truth about God. We understand only the fringes of such truths. The problem with the friends (the narrator implies) is that they misconceive the fringe for the whole, the whisper for the full voice. The problem with Job is that he thinks we should be able to understand the full voice. As the debate draws towards its end, the narrator trailers a point that God will elaborate, and thus starts getting us to think in the way we will need to think in light of the story as a whole. The whisper is important, but we have to remember it is but a whisper.

In Job 27, Job picks up the microphone again and starts with an assertion concerning his personal integrity, a stronger such assertion than any he has made so far. Paradoxically, in the same lines as he calls down God’s curse, Job is indicating that God is his problem. God has turned his case aside, which is just what you are not supposed to do if you are someone with the authority to make decisions about disputes in the community. God has refused to make a decision for Job. That neglect has added to Job’s torment. God had begun by tormenting him with the losses described in the opening of the story, but here the observation about tormenting follows the comment on turning his case aside. It is God’s second torment of Job.

Against that background, Job goes on to declare his wish that his enemy or the person who arises against him should experience the fate of the faithless person, the wrongdoer, or the impious man. Job has not previously spoken of having an enemy or of someone rising up against him (his ‘friends’ are plural, and for all the force of his argument with them, he does not refer to them as his enemies). He is referring to any enemy he might have at some time, and the point of the wish is what it presupposes about the fate of the faithless, the wrongdoer, or the impious, because this is what the friends accuse Job of being, and what God’s treatment of him implies that Job is. In effect he says, ‘Suppose I have an enemy, then I want him to be treated like a faithless person, a wrongdoer, or an impious man. And you know what that treatment is, don’t you?’ In case you have forgotten, Job reminds you. Such a person has no hope. He gets cut down by God. God doesn’t listen to his prayers. He doesn’t get the chance to enjoy a relationship with God. He doesn’t get to call on God.

Job is affirming that this is how life works, or at least how it is supposed to work. But the background to his affirmation is that the friends view him as an example of a wrongdoer. So if they are right, Job is affirming what should be his own fate. By implication, this is implausible. The irony in Job’s address is that he is implicitly declaring that God is treating him as an enemy. Job can’t believe that God is doing wrong and wants God to affirm that Job sees things the right way, but something must be incorrect, or Job’s situation would be different. So, Job continues, I can give you a lecture about how the hand of God operates. In this context, the hand of God is something that comes down heavy on people. It comes down heavy on the wrongdoer, and it has come down heavy on Job who is not a wrongdoer. The friends know both these activities of God’s hand. Their own teaching emphasizes the first, and they have witnessed the second in Job’s life. Of course they think that Job’s experience is also an example of the first, but his very willingness to affirm what happens to wrongdoers ought to make them rethink their position. Yet it does not have that effect. Although they have witnessed Job’s life, Job’s experience, and Job’s affirmation, they talk as if they have not done so, as if their old theory works perfectly well. They talk a lot, but their talk is empty triviality. It makes no sense. It does not fit the facts.

In the second half of the chapter, Job goes on to underline what happens to the man who is faithless to God and ruthless in relation to other people, the two aspects of integrity. His children lose their lives or lose their livelihood, or will be buried by Death (as it were) – for instance, they will be taken in battle and deprived of proper burial, so that their widows cannot mourn them properly. Their accumulations of wealth and clothes go to others. Their houses turn out to be as flimsy as a bird’s nest or a watchman’s bivouac. All these calamities may happen with a suddenness that their victims could never have anticipated.

Job has declared on previous occasions that human life can work out in this way, but there he has been concerned to argue that the process is random and arbitrary. Here his point is different. For the sake of argument, at least, he affirms the orthodox teaching that life works out justly for wrongdoers, and his point once more is that if he is prepared to affirm this truth, it is hardly plausible to claim that he belongs to the same category of people. His logic parallels that of Psalm 139.[[3]](#footnote-3) Declaring that one repudiates people who repudiate God is not possible if one belongs to the group who repudiate God. The earlier part of Psalm 139 affirms the impossibility of going anywhere that God cannot reach, which fits with that fact; it means you are bound to get caught. Job’s opening curse on himself if he abandons his claim to integrity would likewise apply to himself if he is actually a wrongdoer. He too would be aware that it is a dangerous curse, because God can indeed reach him anywhere. His speech as a whole anticipates the one he will give in chapters 29 – 31.

Meanwhile, following on Job’s words in chapter 27, the reflective nature of the narrator’s poem in chapter 28 stands in contrast with Job’s urgency and passion. Like 26.5-14 it stands back from the debate and implicitly critiques everyone who has been taking part. Chapter 26 noted that we see only the fringes of God’s ways. So how can we get the insight about which chapter 28 speaks? At the beginning, the reader wonders how the chapter will relate to the debate at all. What is the point of this description of the procedures of mining? The chapter recalls the way prophets sometimes win their listeners’ attention by talking about something that has nothing to do with what one might think a prophet would be concerned with; the love song about a vineyard in Isaiah 5 is an example. But the account of mining or the vineyard song is not simply a homely illustration or a story that wins attention but has little to do with the preacher’s eventual point. Ultimately it will relate closely to that point. Yes, there are places to find gold, silver, and other precious metals, and people put in impressive effort to do so. But what about finding insight?

Job 28.12-19 makes two comparisons and contrasts with what precedes. One is that whereas superhuman effort can be rewarded by the discovery of precious metals, superhuman effort does not establish the location of insight. To make things worse, the other comparison and contrast is that insight is actually much more valuable than the precious metal for which miners invest so much effort. You cannot use them to buy insight. Job 28.20-28 begins by repeating the chapter’s opening question and reprising the point about insight’s inaccessibility. It thus builds suspense. Are we ever going to get an answer to that question whose importance the chapter has established? When we are told that God knows the way to it, this comment may not seem encouraging. Indeed, it might seem an obvious fact; the question is whether God is going to keep the information to himself. The poem continues to heighten suspense in describing God’s sovereignty in relation to insight, and we wonder all the more if we are ever going to get any insight on the way to insight. Perhaps the fringes of God’s ways are all we get. The poem turns our thinking upside down with the last line, and does so in a way that presents us with a decisive challenge. The answer to the question is of a different kind than we thought. The key to acquiring insight is not huge physical or intellectual effort. Lo and behold, it is the qualities that the very beginning of the story told us that Job has, submission to God and turning from evil.

The implication is, Job is a man of insight! Does this imply that Job’s repeated questions and challenges are expressions of insight, not of foolishness or ignorance (as the friends have implied)? Or does it rather suggest the opposite, that Job has the insight that counts, but that the insight that counts is not the one that has the answers to all the questions that Job’s experience raises? Either way, in a fashion typical of how the story works, Job 28, too, trailers a theme that will be more explicit later. While God will rebuke Job for his questioning, God will also comment on the fact that he has been telling the truth in a way that the friends have not.

The poem in Job 28 is not addressed to anyone within the book; like the main story it is addressed to the book’s readers. In addressing them, it challenges them to see that if they are people who want to gain insight, what is needed is to focus on submission to God and departing from evil. People may come to study Job because they hope to find the answer to the problem of suffering, but it transpires that the ‘answer’ the story offers is of a different kind from the one we thought.

Whether or not they are the earliest form of the text, Job 22 – 28 make sense as they stand.

1. David J. A. Clines, *Job 21 – 37* (Word Biblical Commentary 18a; Nashville: Nelson, 2006), p. 643. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a recent advocacy of this position, see Alison Ko, *Job 28 as Rhetoric* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 97; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Wolfers notes also parallels between Job 27 and Psalm 73 (‘The Speech-cycles in the Book of Job,’ *VT* 43 [1993], pp. 385-402 [pp. 398-99). Wolfers, too, argues that the whole of Job 26 belongs properly to Job; he does not consider the significance of the two resumptive introductions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)