Job 28:20-28

The Book of Job is a cohesive whole with Job 28 as a poetic and theological hinge. I came to this conclusion by asking a series of questions about the Hebrew version in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* during my exegesis of Job 28:20-28. In the answers I discovered my position: The book of Job is a unified whole that is intended to reflect the primal condition of earthly humanity pre-Israel and pre-Torah; the book is a “what-if” story that is not a fantasy, reading it actually assists us in recognizing the absoluteness of God’s sovereignty while allowing us to validate the very real existence of unjust suffering.

The questions I explored to come to this conclusion are as follows:

1. Initial approach: Who or what is wisdom?
2. Who is speaking the “Wisdom Hymn,” Job 28? And Who is Job?
3. What themes are present in this self-contained hymn and are they repeated elsewhere?
4. How do the confusingly translated verbs in verse 27 relate to the rest of the book?
5. How does what is said in Job 28 (the midpoint) relate to a Hollywood style breakdown of the story’s structure: the inciting incident (the Satan’s question: Does Job fear God for nothing?), the crises moment (God’s appearance in the Whirlwind), the climax (Job’s confession in 42:1-6), the resolution of the major subplot (Intercession for the Friends 42:7-9), and the dénouement (Job’s restitution 42:10-17). How does this relate to the meaning of the book?

**Initial Exegesis Approach: Who or what is Wisdom?**

I initially chose to focus on Job 28:20-28 for more detailed examination because it is a clear undisputed pericope within chapter 28 that includes the conclusion of the chapter. Commentators[[1]](#footnote-1) divide this chapter into three periscopes plus a conclusion: 1-11 is a demonstration of human endeavors to extract value from creation in the form of mining; 12-19 begins with the question “But where shall wisdom be found?”[[2]](#footnote-2) followed by discussion of where wisdom is not found; 20-27 repeats and expounds further on the question of verse 12 by including God’s perspective and the chapter concludes with an answer in verse 28: ““Hear! Fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to turn aside from evil, understanding.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

I had initially hoped to examine what, who, or where is *Wisdom,* which clearly is the topic of the pericope. The pericope begins with a question about wisdom, v 20 says: So where does wisdom חָכְמָה come from, where then is a place of understanding בִּינָה?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Parallelism, a common feature of Hebrew poetry, implies in this line that wisdom חָכְמָה and understanding בִּינָה have a relationship. Looking first at חָכְמָה in BDB we find it is a feminine noun and Job 28:20 is cited under definition **5**:

“*wisdom*”, ethical and religious: **a**. of God, as a divine attribute or energy; his wisdom is in the skies Job 38:36; by it he numbers the clouds Job 38:37; founded the earth Prov. 3:19; and made all things Jer 10:12=51:15, Ps 104:24; it is with him Job 12:13; not to be found by the most persevering human search Job 28:12, 20; he alone knows it Job 28:23; gives it Prov 2:6; and shews its secrets Job 11:6. [[5]](#footnote-5)

What can be learned by looking at the text passages cited above in BDB, which states that the wisdom spoken of here is specifically “God’s wisdom,” as opposed to that cited by BDB under **b**. “the divine wisdom personified” or **c**. (wisdom) “of man”?

The first citation is Job 38:36-37, a speech of the Lord from the whirlwind: “Who put wisdom in the hidden parts? Who gave understanding to the mind?”[[6]](#footnote-6) From this we see God’s design at work, which is hidden from all; this passage is also reinforcement of the unknowable nature (to humans) of wisdom. Proverbs 3:19 reads: “The Lord founded the earth by wisdom; He established the heavens by understanding.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Jeremiah 10:12 and 51:15 read: “He made the earth by His might, established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the skies.”[[8]](#footnote-8) These passages are all addressing how things are created and also couple *understanding* with *wisdom,* but this is consistently but not always the case of the passages cited since Psalm 104:24 makes no mention of understanding, it says: “How many are the things You have made, O Lord; You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of Your creations.”[[9]](#footnote-9) This psalm is a comprehensive address of God’s greatness, which is demonstrated in what God does *for* (all of them look to You to give them their food, Ps 104:27)[[10]](#footnote-10) and *in* creation (make the winds his messengers for example, Ps 104:4)[[11]](#footnote-11) as well as God’s powerful relationship with and over creation (he looks at the earth and it trembles, Ps 104:32)[[12]](#footnote-12).

Psalm 104:29 makes a further point about the relationship of creation with God: “hide Your face, they are terrified; take away their breath, they perish and turn again into dust; send back Your breath, they are created, and You renew the face of the earth.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Job 12:7-10 deals with what the hand of the Lord can do, 10 says: “With Him are wisdom and courage; His are counsel and understanding.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The rest of Job 12 has Job himself contrasting human wisdom and God’s wisdom, and he clearly outlines the power differential. Proverbs 2:6 states: “For the Lord grants wisdom; knowledge and (understanding) are by His decree.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

These passages support BDB’s assertion that between God’s wisdom and human wisdom, Job 28:20 is addressing *God’s* wisdom. Reviewing this group of passages the following features of God’s wisdom stand out: it is synonymous with God’s design for creation, its power over creation is vast. I also discovered from reading Job 12 that it is clear that Job himself is well aware of the *power* behind God’s wisdom.

Even though not cited for the book of Job, looking at BDB’s citation **b**. “divine wisdom is personified” was also instructive. A number of sayings in Proverbs (8:22-31 for example) state that wisdom is God’s architect (designer) and there are similar sayings in Job 28 and Proverbs 8. For example, Prov 8:10-11 “Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.”[[16]](#footnote-16) is very similar to Job 28:15 “It cannot be gotten for gold, and silver cannot be weighed out as its price” and 17: “Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.”[[17]](#footnote-17) It may be that the author of Job knew Proverbs, or even that it is implied (by Proverbs familiarity to the audience) that Job might have learned his wisdom from knowing Proverbs. In any case Job’s pursuit of the wisdom he practices is not working for him. David Allen Hubbard points out that: “Proverbs says, ‘These are the rules for life. Try them and you will find that they work.’ Job and Ecclesiastes say, ‘We did, and they don’t.’ ”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Now turning to a word study of widsom’s frequently quoted parallel: בִּינָה or “understanding” we find BDB states about this feminine noun as follows:

“understanding” **3.** *The object* of knowledge Dt 4:6; 1 Ch 22:12; Job 28:12,20,28;

Job 34:16, 38:36; 39:17; Proverbs 9:6,10, 23:23; Is 11:2, 29:14; and **4.** personified Proverbs 2:8, 7:4; 8:14.

This set of BDB citations includes Dt 4:6: “Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and (understanding) to other peoples…” 1 Ch 22:12: “Only let God give you sense and understanding…(about the building of the temple by Solomon) Proverbs 9:6: “Give up simpleness and live, walk in the way of understanding (a plea to come to Wisdom’s table) Prov 9:10 The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (echoed in Job 28:28). These passages relate to “doing something”. They reflect traditional Jewish thought which would dictate that “knowledge” means someone must actually implement what they “know” in order for knowing to be a valid claim; to say you understand something is to say you back it up in your actions. Personifying wisdom makes an even stronger statement about the relationship between understanding and action: Prov 7:4 states: “Say to Wisdom, ‘you are my sister’, and call Understanding a kinswoman.” Prov 8:14 (Wisdom personified is speaking): “Mine are counsel and resourcefulness; I am understanding; courage is mine.”[[19]](#footnote-19)In light of this, and in light of the suffering of Job, the questions in Job 28:20 seem to be asking: where can it be found that God has implemented a design? The second question could even be: Where is the evidence that God’s great knowledge (understanding) has been implemented?

The following passages from BDB’s article on “understanding” echo what is said in Job 28, but with a twist. In Prov 23:23, “Buy truth and never sell it, and wisdom, discipline, and understanding.” The opposite is being said in Job 28- “you can’t buy wisdom” is the message. Is 11:14 says: “Truly, I shall further baffle that people, with bafflement upon bafflement; and the wisdom of its wise shall fail, and the (understanding) of its prudent shall vanish.” Job is definitely baffled about what is happening to him, but his understanding doesn’t seem to have vanished.

I realized after carefully examining the passages cited in BDB and reading the commentaries that while wisdom’s definition is a fascinating subject in the Old Testament, particularly in Proverbs, there was nothing to indicate that wisdom’s *definition* was the primary purpose for the Hymn to Wisdom to be inserted as chapter 28. Von Rad even makes the case that wisdom and understanding being used in synonymous parallelism is evidence that there is no interest in an exact definition of terms. “Obviously what is meant is already known to the reader or listener.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This led to looking at the structure of the Book of Job as a whole and wondering further about the orator of Job 28.

**Who is speaking? Who is Job?**

Is Job, having lost everything of earthly value, reaffirming as the orator what he already knows to be true about Wisdom? Or is some other character making this ironic declaration which mimics and possibly mocks Job’s purported acquaintance with Wisdom? Based on the location of Chapter 28 in the book of Job, which is almost as disputed as the location of wisdom herself[[21]](#footnote-21), this issue is left unresolved by scholars for the exegete to contemplate. Is it one of the friends? Is it the young intruder Elihu’s conclusion? (as per Clines)[[22]](#footnote-22) Is it the poet-narrator making a bridge (Hartley)? From looking at the structure, introductory hints, and the reasons for including this Hymn to Wisdom in the book, I came to the conclusion the speaker is an omniscient narrator.

Only an abbreviated outline of the Book of Job is needed to demonstrate support for an omniscient narrator:

Job 28 Outline[[23]](#footnote-23)

1. Prologue (1:1-2:13)
2. Job’s Lament (3:1-26)
3. The Dialogue Cycles (4:1-27:23)
4. Hymn to Wisdom (28:1-28)
5. Job’s Avowal of Innocence (29:1-31:40)
6. The Elihu Speeches (32:1-37:24)
7. The Yahweh Speeches (38:1-42:6)
8. Job’s Realization/Answer to Yahweh (42:1-6)
9. Epilogue (42:7-17)

First I looked at how speakers are introduced throughout the book and found a change of speaker was clearly announced each time (for example: “Job said” in 3:2, “Eliphaz answered” in 4:1) with the exceptionof parts assigned to the narrator (the Prologue 1:1-2:13, and Epilogue 42:7-17). Because Job is announced at the speaker for chapter 27, and again for chapter 29, it’s implied the speaker changed in chapter 28 but no new orator is named. It could be deduced that it is the only other unnamed orator, the omniscient narrator who recaps Job’s life history and is present at the heavenly council. The weakness in this theory is that the narrator’s other parts are narrative, not poem, but this could be countered with the idea that the author uses both forms, so why shouldn’t the narrator, particularly in the midst of other poetry. Habel points out that the form of chapter 28 is self-contained and radically stands out from chapters 27 and 29, implying a different orator.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Next I examined the reasons this self-contained poem was included in the book. The *plot* reason I think Job 28:20-28 is included in the book is to absolutely establish Job’s character as wise and without fault; the placement of this passage reminds the audience that it need not doubt Job’s character, even in light of his friend’s doubts and inquiries to the contrary in the just previous Dialogue Cycles. The participants in the dialogues of chapters 4-27 have exhausted (and repeated) themselves at this point, they sputter to a stop.[[25]](#footnote-25) I think the author may have been concerned that the audience was left wondering who was right and because Job’s righteousness is key to the meaning of the book, the author returns the audience to 1:1 by including a reminder of God’s perspective on Job’s character (1:8 and 2:3): “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” This is echoed in 28:28 and Job is established as both wise and understanding by the definitions offered there.

This led me to look deeper at: **Who is Job?** The answer in 1:1 (reinforced by 28:28) is that he is one who was blameless and upright. This screams good guy, superhero, Chirst-like figure, in short: fiction. And yet, every heart on earth is burdened by someone we know who is innocent and suffering unjustly; Job is still with us. He is an archetype, the innocent victim, and in this archetype is a fundamental question about how our world works and most important: What is God’s role with regard to innocent suffering? In order to address this question in pure form, without the veil of human sin, it must be asked of a character like Job.

From the setting of the book (which I believe is intentional because of the meaning it supports) we also know that Job is a pagan. There are no telling citations of external biblical or historical events to help us get our bearings in time. Because of what is not mentioned, we are clear Job is pre-Torah; and certainly pre-Christ; and possibly pre-patriarch (even pre-Noah?) making him a pre-Israelite primordial-covenant human. We are not told how he knew to sacrifice or where he or the friends or Elihu got their theology or other notions[[26]](#footnote-26) about how the world works. This tells us that the “answer” in the book of Job to our question regarding God’s role is this case is not one of the following (found elsewhere in the Bible): God gives humans definition in nations, or God appears among us as the person of Jesus, or God gives us a set of rules to live by, or God establishes a theology of wisdom or retribution, or God saves us from our suffering.

I concluded that if historically expository events or institutions were not included the story, they were not important; my exegetical method now focuses on what *is* included. The book through the dialogues is focused on complaints. It is not asking what is wrong because of human actions, but what seems to be wrong with the results; God’s design is not working from the human viewpoint. To find the meaning of the book it was now necessary to look at the themes found in Job 28. Gutierrez gives a superb description that leads us into the purpose of the poem at this juncture, after the Dialogue Cycle:

Fresh air is needed, and a radical change in perspective…The author a poetic genius, will see to it that our legitimate longing for an answer to the questions formulated does not itself remain rudimentary and unmediated. … The question we face here is not one that can be handled by what Blaise Pascal calls the *esprit geometrique*, or mathematical mind, which reasons in an orderly way from definitions and principles. What is needed is rather the *esprit de finesse*, or intuitive mind, which is capable of a penetrating, comprehensive vision of reality accessible to all. The poet helps us develop this vision by giving us now a beautiful poem on wisdom. And putting us in the presence (as though in an interval of waiting between the preceding debate and the last and more important speeches of the book) of the greatness of God and the hidden understanding of God’s intentions for the human race…at the same time, he also shows in a subtle way that something new is needed if we are to share in the knowledge of God. Ch 28 thus serves as a poetic hinge, so to speak in the development of the book.”

**What themes are present?**

The nature of creation is used heavily. Jean Daneilou points out that because Job is a pagan and would therefore know nothing of the history of Israel, this book can only locate God via the power manifested by God’s actions in the cosmos.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Smick[[28]](#footnote-28) cites a Ricoeurian case for claiming Job is about “the impotence of religion and philosophy”, which give way to an existential I-Thou relationship exhibited in the divine speeches, where both parties are affected by events *lived* in common. He supports main point as being Job in process from ‘religion’ to intimate relationship (covenant) with that God whose name is YHWH. Smick also cites Lacocque who sees a new ontology of God arising with Yahweh Speeches. In this new relationship and understanding Job moves to being “the suffering servant” as in Isaiah 53. In any case a paradigm shift from theological and religious discussions in the Dialogue Cycles begins at the hinge of Job 28. After Job reasserts his innocence, we have the Elihu Speeches which introduce a Hebrew voice (which maybe alludes to a new covenantal relationship), introduce a respite before the Yahweh speeches, but also bring story images that reinforce the theme of the cosmic sovereignty of God which is clear in Job 28.

The *meaning* reason I think Job 28:20-28 is included in the book is to emphasize God’s sovereignty in the context of God’s creation. It is meant to reinforce an omniscient viewpoint (28:24); a perspective that humans (28:4), birds (28:7), beasts (28:8), rocks (28:10), rivers (28:11), and dark monsters (28:22) don’t have; in fact nothing in creation can actually see it (28:21a) because we have to *live* it (28:28). The theme of “seeing” contrasts what creation (from living thing’s eyes כָל־חָי מֵעֵינֵי) can’t see in verse 21 and in verse 24 what God can see יִרְאֶה , God is the only one who looks יֵבּׅיט to the ends of the earth.

**How do the confusingly translated verbs in verse 27 relate to the rest of the book?**

I found the verbs in verse 27 difficult to understand at first. Verses 20-23 seem to clearly relate to God’s wisdom, which is somehow concealed from creation. Verses 25 and 26 are about “what God makes” from the root עשׂה, to make, they could be translated: “in his making” or “when he made” or “with regard to his making.” Then in verse 27 we have four verbs (הּרָאָ to see to search חֲקָרָהּ and to establish יְסַפְּרָהּ count to הֱכִינָה) which seem at first to apply to wisdom (the topic of the pericope) but don’t quite make sense with regard to something which is not a concrete “thing”. The answer I believe is correct comes from Harris:

One naturally expects that a third person singular feminine suffix would indicate a third person singular feminine object as in the case of Job 28:27. But there are cases where such a construction refers to the verbal content of the preceding sentence as a whole (GK §135 p). As a result the content of the preceding sentence can be referred to as ‘it’. [[29]](#footnote-29)

If this is the case for verse 27, the “it” referred to is creation itself, which is what God was just “making” in verses 25 and 26. The point theologically (coupled with God being the only one who can “see” to the ends of the earth in verse 23) is that God the creator is the only one who can do what these four verbs describe: see, count, establish, and search through creation (Yahweh rhetorically asks Job in 38:37 if he can “count the clouds”). In a number of places questions concerning God’s uniqueness, supremacy, incomparableness, faithfulness, and the like, were answered by appealing to what he has done in creation. Harris states that in a number of places in the Old Testament these same verbs appear (Prov 3:19 for example) with no object and clearly in regard to God’s special role in creation, but in no case do they occur like this where wisdom is the object, indicating we can safely rule out the possibility that the message of verse 27 might apply to wisdom.

**Conclusion**

This analysis supports the idea that God’s attributes go far beyond our human ones, which is reinforced by the Yahweh speeches. Our human complaint about how God has designed things, which includes the suffering of an innocent victim, is overshadowed by the sovereignty of God. We the current readers know (possibly the earlier readers knew of some) of God’s actions (forming Israel, giving the Torah, sending Jesus) since the time of Job’s. In the greater context we can see how God’s providence is being worked out. However Job also saw “I repent as dust and ashes (mere human).” He had a shift of viewpoint, hinged for us at Job 28.

The questions of the book of Job come from the human viewpoint, while the answer comes from God’s viewpoint. God’s sovereignty is the truth, we can feel it with Job.

JOB 28

There is a mine for silver,

And a place where gold is refined,

Iron is taken out of the earth,

And copper smelted from rock.

He sets bounds for darkness;

To every limit man probes,

To rocks in deepest darkness.

They open up a shaft far from where men live,

[In places] forgotten by wayfarers,

Destitute of men, far removed.

Earth, out of which food grows,

Is changed below as if into fire.

Its rocks are a source of sapphires;

It contains gold dust too.

No bird of prey knows the path to it;

The falcon’s eye has not gazed upon it.

The proud beasts have not reached it;

The lion has not crossed it.

Man sets his hand against the flinty rock

And overturns mountains by the roots.

He carves out channels through rock;

His eyes behold every precious thing.

He dams up the sources of the streams

So that hidden things may be brought to light.

But where can wisdom be found;

Where is the source of understanding?

No man can set a value on it;

It cannot be found in the land of the living.

The deep says, “It is not in me”;

The sea says, “I do not have it.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

It will not be given instead of fine gold,

Nor will silver weigh its price.

It will not be balanced by gold of Ophir,

Nor by precious onyx nor sapphire.

Neither gold nor pure glass compares,

Nor is it exchanged for vessels of pure gold.

Coral and crystal do not reflect it,

Nor is wisdom drawn up out of rubies.

It is not comparable to topaz of Cush

Nor is weighed in pure gold.

So where does wisdom come from,

Where then is a place of understanding?

It is concealed from all the living’s eyes and concealed from flying creatures of the heavens.

Destruction and Death, they say:

“In our ears we surely hear it!”

God understands her way;

And knows her place.

Because he looks upon the ends of the earth,

Beneath all of heaven he will see.

With regard to his making a weight for wind and meted out water’s measure,

In his making decrees for rain

And paths for thunderstorms,

Then he saw it and counted it

And established it and also sought it.

And God said to Adam,

“Hear! Fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;

And to turn aside from evil, understanding.[[31]](#footnote-31)

1. Including Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: William B Eeardmans Publishing Co, 1988) p 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. My translation [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My translation [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. BDB= F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Boston: Hendrickson, 1906, this printing Dec 1996), p 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), p 1718-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh,*  p 1603. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh,*  p1034. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh,*  p1542. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh,*  p1542. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh,*  p1540. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh,*  p1542. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh,*  p1542. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh,*  p1675. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh,*  p1601, I have changed “discernment” to “understanding” for וּחְבוּנָה [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. D. A. Hubbard, “The Wisdom Movement and Israel’s Covenant Faith,” Tyndale Bulletin 17 (1966): p 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *JPS* *Hebrew-English Tanakh is used for all the citations in this paragraph.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Gerard Von Rad, Wisdom in Israel (London:SCM Press Ltd., 1970) p 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I will use female pronouns when referring to Wisdom to reflect the feminine Hebrew noun חכמה [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. David J. A. Clines, Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 18A, Job 21-37 (Nashville:Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006) p. 907. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Adapted and abbreviated from outline in Harley, *The Book of Job*, p 50-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (London:SCM Press, 1985) p 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Butler, class lecture 4/25/2011, OT 507 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Earlier in the paper I discuss a possible connection with Proverbs. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Jean Danielou, *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, Inc. 1958) p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Smick, “Semiological Interpretation of the Book of Job”, Westminster Theological Journal 48 (1986) 135-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Scott Harris, “Wisdom or Creation? A New Interpretation of Job 28, Vetus Testamentum XXXIII, 4 (1983) 419-427. p 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The previous lines have been copied from the *JPS Hebrew- English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and The New JPS Translation- Second Edition*

    (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This page is my translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)