

WHO IS THE “MINER”? A BRIEF EXEGESIS OF JOB 28:4

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Abstract

There is a long tradition of researching the book of Job and the meaning behind the imagery presented. Job 28:4, is not without its own imagery especially the image of the “miner” and “foreigner.” Unpacking the meaning behind the “miner” and its use in the Old Testament, is quite interesting. Addressing the image of the “miner” within the context of the book of Job and other books in the Old Testament shows the complex meaning of the search for wisdom. The analysis of the text provides evidence for the meaning of the image of the “miner” as well as the overall search for wisdom. What is verse 4 telling its readers? How does it fit into the larger work of the book of Job? This work will address these questions and show that the 4th verse in the book of Job does indeed fit into wisdom literature.

Keywords: Job 28:4, Exegesis, Old Testament, Miner, Foreigner

Introduction

The book of Job, according to Gregory W. Parson, “is universally admired as a literary masterpiece in world literature.”²⁶ The book of Job examines one of the oldest questions that humanity has struggled with, why do good people or righteous people suffer? Job addresses this question as well as what God²⁷ has to say about what it means to be wise and what

²⁶ Gregory W. Parsons, “The structure and Purpose of the Book of Job,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138, 550 (Apr. 1981): 139.

²⁷ Out of respect for the Deity and the persons of the Trinity (when referred to), I capitalize all references to God and members of the Trinity including pronouns. These are not typos. When they are not capitalized, it is only because I quote directly from texts and leave the words as they have been printed. Additionally, for a number of reasons, but mainly readability and convenience, I use the masculine pronouns to refer to God. This is not done to offend any readers who may prefer gender-neutral or gender inclusive language. I will also be using BCE to denote Before Common Era. Also all biblical citations, unless otherwise noted, come from the New American Bible. Other translations of the Bible,

wisdom is and means. This work will be an exegetical paper on the book of Job, especially chapter 28, and will address several issues in reference to Job. One of the issues that it will address is a closer examination of chapter 28 and the image of mining and the meaning behind it. This work will first examine the macro structure of the book of Job before moving into the microstructure of chapter 28 and its subsequent passages. It will then explain what is going on in the micro level passages before addressing issues, which relate to wisdom and other topics.

I.

The book of Job belongs to the wisdom literature of Israel as well as to the third division of the Hebrew Bible.²⁸ The book takes its name from the main character of the poem/story, Job. The story revolves around the question of why righteous people suffer and how their suffering can be reconciled with the goodness of God. To answer this question, Job addresses and speaks to three of his friends, who all give him similar answers.²⁹ They all tell him that he is being punished, or that he is incurring God's wrath, because he has sinned in some way against God.

Job steadfastly maintains his innocence to his three friends and almost accuses God of being unjust until he regains his trust in God's goodness and belief that he will be vindicated. It is then that Elihu gives Job a divine message that states that suffering is a way to show or to prove that one is righteous just like a father does to his children when he chastises them.³⁰ God makes His presence known and speaks to Job, humbling him and making him realize that he is to hate himself before God and His presence.³¹ This is what Job needs to do before God will restore his fortunes.³²

which will be used in this work, will be The New Jerusalem Bible, The New King James Bible, as well as The New Jewish Publication Society translation of the Tanakh. When they are used, the following abbreviations will be used: NJB – New Jerusalem Bible, NKJB – New King James Bible, NJPS – New Jewish Publication Society.

²⁸ Christl Maier and Silvia Schroer, "Job: Questioning the book of the righteous Sufferer," in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, eds. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 221-222. As well as:

R. A. F. MacKenzie, S.J., "Job," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. (Edgewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1968), 511.

²⁹ Please see Job chapters 3-31.

³⁰ Please see Job chapters 32-37.

³¹ Please see Job 42: 1-6.

³² See also Job 42: 7-17.

According to the Ungers Bible Dictionary and the Oxford companion to the Bible³³, the book of Job can be broken into three parts, each with distinct sections. It first begins with the testing of Job in the prologue before the first part of the book actually takes place. Part one is distinguished by the false accusations of Job by his friends. This can then be broken into three more sections, one for each of the friends that accuse Job. The first cycle of speeches,³⁴ all of Job's speeches, are answered by each one of the three friends.

The second cycle of speeches³⁵ is again seen with a back and forth from Job and his three friends. The third cycle of speeches³⁶ find Eliphaz and Bildad speaking until Job answers them. This leads into the second part of the book, which are the speeches of Elihu.³⁷ These can again be broken down into four speeches, which deal with why affliction takes place, God being vindicated, why it is best to be pious, and why God is great and Job is ignorant. This then leads into the third part of the text, which are God's speeches. There are two speeches; the first declares God's power through creation as well as Job's conversion and the second shows how humans are weak, God's power, and Job showing his humility. This then leads into the epilogue where Job's fortunes are restored.³⁸

The book of Job can thus be analyzed more easily as a narrative framework, which surrounds a core of poetry.³⁹ It is a complex literary work that has been mixed with several literary genres.⁴⁰ The book can be dated to somewhere between the seventh and second centuries and more likely than not, it dates from the Solomonic era. This is because there is a lot of evidence in the work that show it to be similar to parts of proverbs as well as to wisdom literature.⁴¹ Susan Schreiner points out that the shape of Job took place gradually, moving into four phases. The first phase was from the pre-Israelite era, second – a pre-exilic version dating from the 8th to 9th centuries

³³ David J. A. Clines, "The book of Job," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 368-369. And also:

Merrill F. Unger, "Book of Job," in *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), 593-594.

³⁴ Ibid., see chapters' 3-14 according to the Unger's Bible Dictionary or 3-11 according to the Oxford Companion to the Bible. Each depends on which version or translation of the Bible one is using but are all similar in structure.

³⁵ Ibid., see chapters 15-21.

³⁶ Ibid., see chapters 22-31.

³⁷ Ibid., see chapters 32-37.

³⁸ Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 594.

³⁹ Clines, "The book of Job," 368.

⁴⁰ Parsons, "The structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," 139.

⁴¹ Clines, "The book of Job," 368-370 & Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 594.

BCE, third – an exilic version from the 9th century BCE where dueteronomistic phraseology was added, and fourth – a post-exilic version in which the figure of Satan and elements of wisdom teaching were incorporated.⁴² This essay will delve deeper into the area of Job, which is closer to the wisdom literature as well as proverbs; this of course will be an exegesis of Job 28.

Job 28 is a more controversial part of the book of Job, not for its message but for what it is doing in the book itself. It seems to be out of place, or as Parson points out, “Chapter 28, a wisdom hymn, may be a kind of interlude which mars the transition between two major parts of the poetic body - - the q previous dialogue between Job and his friends, and the forthcoming long discourses by Job (chaps. 29-31), Elihu (chaps. 32-37), and God (chaps. 38-41) which are almost monologues.”⁴³ Driver and Gray also conclude that it is a poem, independent of the book of Job about wisdom, which uses more divine names than the dialogue and forms no part of the original work.⁴⁴

Some scholars have referred to the passage as an interlude in the book of Job.⁴⁵ It is hard to place the chapter in a part of the book for it to make sense as a whole. It does not make references to who is actually speaking or to the speeches that have preceded it. It also lacks any real connections to any of the issues raised by the previous speeches.⁴⁶ It can therefore be said that chapter 28 of Job can be seen as an interlude to the entire book of Job focusing on a background theme, which is divine wisdom and how it is inaccessible to humanity.⁴⁷ MacKenzie makes the point that the text could have existed on its own at one point in history, but that it may have been written by the same author of Job since there are some similarities in language that is used in the book and there are some who believe that it may have been the work of a single author but completed over a lifetime.⁴⁸ Despite this, one can see that the text is rather disordered and it is unknown as to what the original order may have been. One thing that can be deduced is that there are four main ideas that can be seen as being developed in the text.

⁴² Susan E. Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be Found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval to Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 157.

⁴³ Parsons, “The structure and Purpose of the Book of Job,” 141.

⁴⁴ Samuel Roller Driver and George Buchanan Gray, *The International Critical Commentary: A critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job together with a new translation*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), xxxviii.

⁴⁵ MacKenzie, S.J., “Job,” 526.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. and Alison Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric: An Analysis of Job 28 in the context of Job 22-31* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 26-28.

The four main ideas are that 1.) Man explores the earth, like he does for silver or order to find wisdom and cannot. 2.) Creatures cannot help man find wisdom. 3.) Man cannot buy wisdom with earthly treasures and 4.) God is the only one who can have wisdom. This can further be constructed in an outline of the text or in the manner in which I will show.⁴⁹ Some of the key themes in the 28th chapter of Job can be seen as A. “Place”, B. “Discovery”, C. “Way”, and D. Counter-point. These themes are developed in different passages found in the chapter.

For instance, the theme of “place” in the chapter can be developed in the beginning of the chapter in verses 1-2 where the author speaks about how precious metals have an assigned place in the earth. In verses 5-6, one can again see the theme of “place” where the passages speak of the earth having specific regions or appointed places for where precious stones are to be found. Verse 12 can also be viewed as the theme of “place” for in the refrain asking where wisdom can be found it also asks where the place of discernment is to be found. Verses 20-22 also repeat the refrain from verse 12 where the place of wisdom is hidden not only from the eyes of man but from animals and even death. The final place where the theme of “place” can be seen is in verses 23-27 where only God knows the place where wisdom is.

Even though “place” is seen several times in Job 28, it can also be seen in different parts of the Bible. “Place” can be seen in several passages, for example all rocks have a place on the earth (Job 14:18 & 18:4) as well as the earth having its special place in the cosmos (Job 9:6). The east winds have a place in the heavens (Job 27: 23) just like the dawn and darkness are assigned their places (Job 38:12, 19). Another passage states the status and place of mortals on earth (Job 7:10, 8:18, 27:21 and Ps. 103:16). With the places that “place” is mentioned in Job, it can be deduced that when mentioned in Job, it normally refers to an appointed position in the divine design of the universe (Ps. 104:8). The author, by showing that all rare things have some sort of place, is also preparing to ask about the position of wisdom, which is the most precious find of all (verse 12).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The outline of the 28th chapter of the book of Job, which I am putting into paragraph form, separates the chapter into three areas, which are seen in different parts of the chapter. The final verse, verse 28, is, in a way, an anomaly in the sense that it seems to have been added after the chapter was written, i.e. 1-27. It seems as if from verses 1-27 seem to show that man cannot find wisdom and then in verse 28 man can for it is in fearing the Lord. For more on this, one can see: Carol A. Newsom, “Re-considering Job,” *Currents in Biblical Research*, 5 (2007): 163.

⁵⁰ Norman C. Habel, *The book of Job: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 395.

The second theme of the 28th chapter of Job is that of discovery and can also be seen mixed in between several verses in the book. It is first seen in verses 3-4 where it makes known that humans probe the earth in order to discover precious metals. The theme can also be seen in verses 9-11 where humans perform godlike feats in order to discover where the precious metals are hidden from view. Verses 15-19 also show the theme of discovery taking place in the text. This can be seen where the text speaks of humans not being able to discover wisdom like they can with precious metals. The final place where the theme of discovery is seen is in the verses of 23-27 where only God can see wisdom and find it.

The third theme is that of the “way or access.” This can also be seen throughout the different passages, as well as intertwined between the other passages. The first place that it can be seen is in verses 7-8 where the way to wisdom cannot be seen by the eye of a falcon or any other wild beasts. Another place the theme of “way” can be found is in verse 13, where the way of wisdom is not made among the living on earth or in the ground below. Finally, it is seen in verses 23-27 where only God discerns the way to wisdom.

The final theme is that of the “counter-point.” This, as I have written earlier, can be seen as a later addition to the text. It is found in verse 28 of Job 28 where wisdom only comes from fear of the Lord. So the themes can be seen as structured in A-Place (verses 1-2, 5-6, 12, 20-22, and 23-27), B-Discovery (verses 3-4, 9-11, 15-19, and 23-27), C-Way (verses 7-8, 13, and 23-27), and D-Counter-point (verse 28).⁵¹ But what can be seen in this breakdown of the text? One thing that quickly stands out is the knowledge that the writer has about methods of mining at the time. Could this be a way of finding out the meaning or purpose of Job 28? What does that say about wisdom in general? Why was that used as a metaphor for understanding wisdom?

What is seen in Job 28 can be found on two levels. On the one level, one can see a sort of realism or a sort of real world example, perhaps based on the audience, which brings a new meaning to the text. Scott C. Jones points out that the language in Job 28 is loaded with significance. On the one hand, as I have written earlier, one can see the detail knowledge of mining which gives a realistic account as to how precious metals and jewels are found and mined, and on the other hand one can see the metaphors and associations that are made.⁵² This, however, does lead to a problem with this text.

⁵¹ Habel, *The book of Job: A Commentary*, 394-395.

⁵² Scott C. Jones, *Rumors of Wisdom: Job 28 as Poetry* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co., 2009), 30.

One of the problems that the text faces is its lack of words that it associates for mining and mining practices. One of the issues is that there is no word associated with what we would call a miner today. For instance, when examining Job 28 verse 4, The New Jerusalem Bible uses has this passage: “*Foreigners bore into ravines in unfrequented places, swinging suspended far from human beings.*” The same passage in the Jewish Publication Society’s translation of the Tanakh is as follows: “*They open up a shaft far from where men live, [in places] forgotten by wayfarers, Destitute of men, far removed.*”⁵³ How can the same passage be translated into two different meanings? In the New Jerusalem Bible translation, if one is to assume that is what the author is writing about, why are miners equated with being foreigners?

In order to address the discrepancies between the two translated texts, I propose to first look into what can be deduced from examining a Biblical concordance as well as scholarly sources on the topic and what that can say about wisdom literature in general. Firstly, while examining different commentaries regarding the passage, it was made clear that the text is or has some unclear meanings behind it. Driver and Grey, in their commentary on Job, point out that verse 4 is “another verse obscure in detail: probably it refers to man’s skill in driving shafts into the earth, possibly also to his audacity in descending into the mine in cages that tremble on the rope.”⁵⁴ This can also be seen in another commentary where MacKenzie shows, “These verses, although tantalizingly obscure, give an interesting glimpse of ancient mining techniques.”⁵⁵

When examining a concordance to the Bible and searching the word “mine,”⁵⁶ there is no reference to any texts in the Bible, which refer to digging for items but only mine as in the personal possessive pronoun. So what is one to do? Leroy Waterman wrote a piece on Job 28 verse 4 and how to address the issue of the passage in regards to the language used or not used therein. This leads to how one can solve the problem of the passage. One needs to examine the texts from a historical-critical lens, trying to examine the text from how it would have made sense in the period it was written in.

⁵³ I do find it important to note that in the Jewish Publication Society’s translation of the text they note that the translation of the verse has words that are unknown in Hebrew or that the meaning of the Hebrew word is uncertain.

⁵⁴ Driver and Gray, *The International Critical Commentary: A critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job together with a new translation*, 238.

⁵⁵ MacKenzie, S.J., “Job,” 526.

⁵⁶ Alexander Cruden, *Cruden’s Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testaments*, eds. A. D. Adams, C. H. Irwin, and S. A. Waters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 433. Also note: s.v. “mine” and under the word there is no mention of anything related to mining.

Waterman points out that in Job 28: 4 there is no word for miner and the equipment that a miner would use during that time. He claims, “This is all the more noticeable inasmuch as in v. 3 he is at particular pains to emphasize the fact that some one who is not named “puts an end to darkness.” Most English translations go wrong at this point and obscure the issue by inserting the word “man,” which is not in the text. Furthermore it is perfectly evident that the writer is not speaking of man in general, but only of the particular man who works in the mine, and he goes on to say that “he searches out to the farthest bound the precious stones that are found only in the thick darkness and black gloom” of the mine.”⁵⁷ He goes on to explain that the passage must be referring to shaft mining since it was already common in Egypt by the 3rd millennium BCE.⁵⁸ Driver also makes note of this in his work “Problems in Job” where he examines the Hebrew words to conclude that the passages make reference to disused excavations, which are the only reminders of miners whom have been long forgotten. In his translation, he replaces the words “they” and “foreigners” (as seen in the translations I have used and included previously) with “a strange people.”⁵⁹

Waterman explains the different techniques used in mining at the time but comes to show that there are several issues with the passage and the language used which could show that there was a mistranslation in a word that would have made it known that the person that is referred to in the passage was someone who used a lamp in a shaft or a mine. He also writes that by changing a letter in the translation, one could come up with people of the lamp but he also shows that there was no attempt anywhere to show that miners were ever called people of the lamp.⁶⁰ One thing that is interesting, however, from his finding is that he makes the point that in ancient times the work done by miners or mining in general was done by forced labour, criminals, or prisoner slaves.⁶¹ This could account for why the translation of the word in the New Jerusalem Bible referred to foreigners⁶².

There is, however, another argument regarding the language used in the passage. This argument moves away from the focus of mining and deals more with the poetic nature of the passage. Steven T. Byington has studied

⁵⁷ Leroy Waterman, “Note on Job 28:4,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 71, no. 3 (1952): 167.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

⁵⁹ G. R. Driver, “Problems in Job,” in *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, vol. 52, no. 3 (1936): 163.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² As a note: The word “foreigner” is mentioned several times in the Bible. (Ex. 12:45, Deut. 15:3, Ob. 11, and Eph. 2:19) Alexander Cruden, *Cruden’s Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testaments*, eds. A. D. Adams, C. H. Irwin, and S. A. Waters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 230.

Job 28 and come to the conclusion, about verse 4, that “less of this passage is about excavating of the rock than the work of prospecting, which is both more picturesque for the poet and more relevant to the topic of the chapter than excavating.”⁶³ He goes on to describe the Hebrew words that are associated with his arguments and where they are placed in the texts. What he finds is that the verses could be translated into saying that the men are not digging or mining but exploring sources of rivers to bring the hidden things to light. To justify this, he uses the example of Herodotus and exploration of the Nile as well as several sources that show that that practice was common during the time frame that the story is dated to have been written in. He concludes that it makes perfect sense that the exploration of a river would be the basis of the story and not mining for the imagery of searching out sources in a river and the success that man can have is more in line with the story of Job 28.⁶⁴

So how can understanding what the author meant in Job 28:4 and the language used, come to help someone understand the meaning of the text or its relation to wisdom literature? William Irwin made an interesting point in “Where shall Wisdom be found.” In this work, while examining Proverbs 8, he concluded that it is not easy to choose the best wording but it is important to show what the words can mean. This is a problem with the translator and the words chosen reflect something deeper. Wisdom has been an attribute of God and wisdom has found joy in creation and as a result Wisdom is the total of values of the human spirit.⁶⁵

Habel also has an interesting interpretation of the meaning behind the 4th verse in Job 28. He pays particular focus on the use of the word “limit” and the development of that word and motif in the verse. He claims that there are two meanings for the use of the word, the first being that it shows the quest and drive of humans to reach the limit of any natural phenomenon in searching for precious metals and stones. The second comes from the dangers that humans face in trying to find rare items in the extremes of the earth, which will take people far from civilizations and possibly into perilous situations. He sees the use or image of the miner as a good one. Miners, as he puts it, “risk all as they probe dark and mysterious rocks deep in the earth (v.3) or hang suspended precariously down the shaft of a distant mine (v.4).”⁶⁶

⁶³ Steven T. Byington, “Hebrew Marginalia II: Job 28,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 61, no. 3 (1942), 205.

⁶⁴ Byington, “Hebrew Marginalia II: Job 28,” 207.

⁶⁵ William A. Irwin, “Where shall Wisdom be found,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 80, no. 2 (1961): 142.

⁶⁶ Habel, *The book of Job: A Commentary*, 396.

He also points out that there may have been more meaning to simply showing the image of the dangers humanity takes in its searches. He points out that earlier in the book of Job, Zophar challenges Job in 11:7 asking if he can find the mystery of Eloah and find the limit of Shaddai? He claims that in using the word “limit” in the passage, the author anticipates that humans will search deeper for wisdom as seen in verse 12. He also shows that the act of “penetrating and probing” points to the wisdom that only God can “probe” in verse 27. So he concludes that the use of mining is a paradigm for probing a mystery in the natural world, i.e. wisdom. Additionally he finds that the terminology that is used to describe the darkness that the miners descend into has overtones of the underworld (cf. 10:21-22) and where the miners are like the people digging into Sheol (cf. Amos 9:2) exploring the mysteries of the deep. This, he writes, then make the passage of Zophar make sense in 11:8 where he says that the limits of God’s wisdom is far deeper than Sheol and deeper than where any miner can reach.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Wisdom can be found in the book of Job chapter 28. For what is the purpose of Wisdom and wisdom literature? It is a quest to answer the question of how to live rightly according to God and Job 28 shows that. Using imagery it shows a quest for the search for wisdom.⁶⁸ This is affirmed in Proverbs, where living rightly according to God leads to life, while recklessness leads to death.⁶⁹ In Ecclesiastes, however, it asks what happens to wisdom when one dies? If everything is cancelled out at death, except for wisdom, then life cannot be meaningful if everything that one gains is lost at death.⁷⁰ This is where the book of Job comes in and makes a new meaning out of what is seen in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Job challenges what is seen in Proverbs and in a way, turns it on its head. He is righteous yet he suffers. He is punished like any wrongdoer in the eyes of God; exactly what Proverbs predicts will happen. But what the book of Job does, particularly chapter 28 is that it establishes whether people are actually pious or not based on the moral quality of their lives and not by accidental circumstances of their material existence.⁷¹

The use of the image of the miner and the discrepancies of the language don’t detract from the message in Job 28. Job 28 does not

⁶⁷ Ibid., 395-396.

⁶⁸ Roland E. Murphy, *The tree of life: an exploration of biblical wisdom literature*, 2nd. Ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 1996), 55.

⁶⁹ Clines, “The book of Job,”370. see also Proverbs 1:32, 3:1-2, 13-18, and 8:36.

⁷⁰ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament wisdom: and Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 118-121. And Clines, “The book of Job,”370.

⁷¹ Clines, “The book of Job,”370.

necessarily praise wisdom, as seen in other texts, but it shows the search for a transcendent wisdom, which we all struggle with and struggle to understand. What it shows is how people came to understand the search for wisdom given the time they were asking the questions. This chapter not only shows the search for wisdom, but it opens a window into the experience and understanding of the worldview of the author. It also shows that God has given humanity the skills to search out things of value but wisdom is something that cannot be found. He has given us the opportunity to learn all that we can in order to live righteously and well since only God knows wisdom. We will never know everything, and this is evident in the problems of language and translation in verse 4. One thing that humanity can know is that turning from evil and fearing God is the wisdom that God imparts on humanity.

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