

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

EXEGETICAL STUDY OF JOB 28:12-28

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DR. LUKE SAKER
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BY
ALEXANDER MICHAEL PECK

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Exegetical Study of Job 28:12-28**Introduction**

Suffering can come unexpectedly to the righteous.¹ In the midst of the book's dilemma with theodicy, Job 28 is a wisdom poem that asks and answers the question, "Where can wisdom be found?" (v. 12; see also v. 20).² This paper presents an exegetical study of Job 28:12-28.

General Contextual Observations for Job 28:12-28

In this section, general points that apply to the whole passage are treated. Touched on are textual, historical, literary, and theological analyses.

Within the context of wisdom literature, the book of Job is generally dated later than Proverbs (between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C) and therefore reflects a period when the straightforward answers of earlier wisdom writers no longer worked, especially for those experiencing intense suffering.³ Job realized that the law of retribution – good things come to the wise and punishment to the wicked – is not that simple.⁴ As Smick

¹ Katherine Dell, "Wisdom", in *The Biblical World*, vol. 1, ed. John Barton (London: Routledge, 2002), 113.

² *The NIV Study Bible: News International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 970.

³ Dell, "Wisdom", 112-113.

⁴ Dell, "Wisdom", 113.

states, “Job was frustrated and unable to find a wisdom solution to the mystery behind his suffering. The counsellors had been only a hindrance”.⁵

Five parts comprise the book of Job as follows: (1) the prologue (1:1-2:13); (2) the dialogue-dispute (3:1-27:23); (3) interlude on wisdom (28:1-28); (4) the monologues (29:1-42:6); and (5) the epilogue (42:7-17).⁶

For the interlude on wisdom (Job 28), Murphy states that “the poem functions as an indicator of the futility of human probing into the divine mystery; neither Job nor the three friends can fathom the divine ways”.⁷ Specifically, when it comes to wisdom, it belongs to God, who alone knows where it is. “Mortals do not know the way to it [wisdom], and it is not found in the land of the living” (28:13; see also v. 20). By contrast, “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place” (28:23). In short, the poem of Job 28 – with its theme “Where can you find wisdom?”⁸ – shows the elusiveness of wisdom and concludes with an admonition that wisdom may be attained only through submission to God.⁹

Specifically, the wisdom poem of Job 28 consists of three parts: (1) precious metals and stones are found in deepest mines (vv. 1-11); (2) wisdom is not found in mines, nor can it be purchased with precious metals or stones (vv. 12-19); and (3) wisdom is found only in God and in the fear of him (vv. 20-28).¹⁰ The first stanza concentrates on the inquisitive nature and technological ability of humans that enables them to find the riches

⁵ Elmer B. Smick, “Job”, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 975.

⁶ Smick, “Job”, 876-877.

⁷ Roland E. Murphy, “Lady Wisdom”, in *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 135.

⁸ Smick, “Job”, 975.

⁹ Smick, “Job”, 975.

¹⁰ *The NIV Study Bible*, 970.

of the earth.¹¹ The second stanza focuses on the value of wisdom and its scarcity, while the third addresses the question asked in the two refrains (vv. 12-14 and vv. 20-22) – wisdom has a source, but only God knows the way to it; however, humans can find it when they fear and honour God (v. 28).¹²

The literary structure of the poem can be shown in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1. Literary Structure of the Wisdom Interlude in Job 28

Introduction	The Source of All Treasure	vv. 1-2
I. First Stanza	The Discovery of Treasure	vv. 3-11
<i>Refrain and Response</i>	<i>Wisdom Elusive</i>	vv. 12-14
II. Second Stanza	Wisdom as Treasure	vv. 15-19
<i>Refrain and Response</i>	<i>Wisdom Elusive</i>	vv. 20-22
III. Third Stanza	God and Wisdom	vv. 23-27
Conclusion	The Source of Wisdom	v. 28

Source: Smick, Elmer B. "Job". In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 841-1060. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988.

¹¹ Smick, "Job", 975.

¹² Smick, "Job", 975.

The wisdom poem of Job 28 is inserted as an apex between the dialogue in chapters 3-27 (three rounds corresponding to the three counsellors) and the monologue format in chapters 29-41 (three speeches based on three characters) and represents a complete change in literary genre.¹³ The author of the book identifies no speaker at the beginning of the poem, and the tone is so irenic that one does not assume Job is speaking.¹⁴ When Job speaks again in chapter 29, he is still in the middle of his struggle – and so the poem contrasts as a calm reflection when compared with Job’s heated words.¹⁵

The purpose of the poem is unclear, and many have viewed it as extraneous and not seen how it could be integrated with the rest of the book.¹⁶ It has been suggested, however, that the poem expresses a judgment on the previous chapters.¹⁷ Smick writes that “since the dialogue has reached an impasse, the author now makes his own comment on the powerlessness of man’s efforts to penetrate secrets that belong only to God”.¹⁸

The poem addresses the subject of wisdom, which in Job 28 is elusive. When viewed in the wider context of wisdom literature, one sees a development in understanding the identity of wisdom. This may be illustrated as follows in Table 2:

¹³ Smick, “Job”, 974.

¹⁴ Smick, “Job”, 974.

¹⁵ Smick, “Job”, 974.

¹⁶ Smick, “Job”, 974.

¹⁷ Smick, “Job”, 974.

¹⁸ Smick, “Job”, 974.

Table 2. Identity of Wisdom

<u>Passage</u>	<u>Job 28</u>	<u>Proverbs 8</u>	<u>Sirach 24</u>	<u>Baruch 3:9-4:4</u>	<u>Wisdom 7-9</u>
Summary	A mysterious figure of a personified Wisdom makes its initial appearance.	This is the basic text for the mysterious, and yet broad, identity of Lady Wisdom.	Wisdom is narrowed down and identified directly with the Torah.	Wisdom is the Torah.	There is a spirit of Wisdom (<i>pneuma sophias</i>)
Comments	<p>a. The hidden abode of wisdom – somewhere in creation because God put it there.</p> <p>b. Wisdom belongs to God, who alone knows where it is.</p>	<p>a. The divine origin of Wisdom <i>before</i> creation is affirmed.</p> <p>b. The functions of Lady Wisdom are manifold.</p>	<p>a. Deut 4:6-9 describes observance of the Law as evidence of wisdom to the nations.</p> <p>b. Wisdom receives the divine command to dwell in Jerusalem.</p>	<p>a. Israel had abandoned the Torah, their wisdom.</p> <p>b. The Torah is the way to Wisdom.</p>	<p>a. Wisdom is parallel to “your holy spirit” (9:17).</p> <p>b. One has to pray for wisdom (7:7) – unique in the wisdom literature.</p>
Reflections	<p>a. Wisdom is present in God’s creation.</p> <p>b. Is this the glory of the Lord that fills the earth (Isa 6:3)?</p>	<p>a. Wisdom is somehow identified with the Lord, but not Yahweh himself.</p> <p>b. The revelation of creation is the revelation of God – God speaks through creation/wisdom.</p>	<p>a. Wisdom will always be present.</p> <p>b. Obeying wisdom secures one against evil.</p>	<p>a. Wisdom offers life – the same as obeying the Torah.</p> <p>b. Lady Wisdom is definitively located as the Torah.</p>	<p>a. 21 traits show the spiritual nature of Wisdom</p> <p>b. Wisdom’s breathtaking intimacy with the divine is noted in 7:25-26.</p>

Source: Murphy, Roland E. “Lady Wisdom”. In *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.

Theologically, the redactor(s) may have desired to impart a number of purposes for their audience to understand. The first is that wisdom is not found in profound science or in the endeavours of humans.¹⁹ Secondly, true wisdom is found only in the fear of the Lord – that is, in proper recognition of God, and submission to him in humility, respect, adoration, and faith.²⁰ Finally, reverence (“fear of the Lord”) and rectitude (“to depart from evil”) are the two great requirements of God, and echo Micah who spoke of these two traits as humility before God, as well as justice and mercy toward others.²¹ In short, wisdom is having God’s perspective on life.²²

Closer Analysis of 28:12-28

The passage of Job 28:12-28 will now be examined more closely, giving interpretation of verses, supported with evidence where appropriate.

In verses 12-14, the refrain states the theme which is followed by a response.²³ The theme is expressed as two questions in verse 12: (1) “Where shall wisdom be found?” and (2) “Where is the place of understanding?” In other words, wisdom is elusive. Based on textual analysis, the response in verse 13 is clearer when the Hebrew translated “know its price” is rendered as “know its abode” – and this also better fits the idea that vv. 12-14 and vv. 20-22 are refrain units that parallel each other.²⁴

¹⁹ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 572.

²⁰ Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, 573.

²¹ Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, 573.

²² *Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Iowa Falls, Iowa: World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1989), 845.

²³ Smick, “Job”, 976.

²⁴ Smick, “Job”, 976-978.

In verses 15-19, to illustrate how rare and costly wisdom is, the author uses four different Hebrew terms for gold (in vv. 15, 16, 17, 19), and lists seven kinds of precious jewels (in vv. 16-19) – onyx, sapphire, glass, coral, crystal, pearls, and chrysolite.²⁵ No gold of any kind can purchase wisdom.²⁶ In short, wisdom is a unique treasure.

The refrain in verses 20-22 is parallel in form and meaning with vv. 12-14.²⁷ Verse 21 shows nature’s blindness to wisdom, while v. 13 emphasizes man’s ignorance of wisdom.²⁸ Again, wisdom is elusive.

In verses 23-27, the poem reaches a high point – God alone knows where wisdom is (v. 23), and when he brought order out of primeval chaos (vv. 25-26), he used wisdom to do it.²⁹ Smick states that “wisdom is the summary of the genius God used to fashion the universe”.³⁰ In sum, God and wisdom are presented in this section.

Finally, in verse 28, the two questions asked in verses 12 and 20 are answered: (1) “The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom” and (2) “To depart from evil is understanding”.³¹ This is the conclusion toward which the chapter has been progressing. A vast difference exists between being intelligent and being wise – only God can show humans where to find wisdom, because *he* is the source of wisdom.³² To sum up, the last verse of the poem gives the Source of wisdom.

²⁵ Smick, “Job”, 977.

²⁶ Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, 572.

²⁷ Smick, “Job”, 977.

²⁸ Smick, “Job”, 977.

²⁹ Smick, “Job”, 977.

³⁰ Smick, “Job”, 977.

³¹ *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 644.

³² *Life Application Bible*, 845.

Conclusion

Having addressed each verse, this section gives a brief summary of what the whole passage means. Included are comments about the significance of the passage for today.

The passage of Job 28:12-28 does not present the female character of Wisdom as is found other wisdom literature (for example, Prov 8, Sir 24, Bar 3:9-4:4, and Wis 7-9).³³ Rather, wisdom may be interpreted as a divine attribute (as in Prov 3:19), but the passage suggests that it is more than that.³⁴ Murphy aptly concludes in the context of wisdom literature that “one may say that a mysterious figure of a personified Wisdom has made her initial appearance [in Job 28]”.³⁵

Even with intelligence, determination, and wealth, humans cannot find or purchase wisdom when left to themselves.³⁶ However, the poem in Job 28 shows that God is the source of wisdom, and therefore people must look to God for wisdom.³⁷ Humans may find this elusive Wisdom when they rightly fear and honour God as God (v. 28) – after all, as Smick states, “God alone has the answer, or better *is* the answer, to the mystery Job and his friends have sought to fathom”.³⁸

Finally, in the spirit of Job 28, the apostle Paul in Romans 11:33 refers to “the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” and “how unsearchable are his

³³ Murphy, “Lady Wisdom”, 134.

³⁴ Murphy, “Lady Wisdom”, 134.

³⁵ Murphy, “Lady Wisdom”, 135.

³⁶ Smick, “Job”, 977.

³⁷ Smick, “Job”, 977.

³⁸ Smick, “Job”, 975.

judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”³⁹ He then reassures readers of “Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2-3) and “that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known” (Eph 3:8-10).⁴⁰

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The NIV Study Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985.

³⁹ Smick, “Job”, 977.

⁴⁰ *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 270, 260.

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İİİİµáç—İ,İ±İ.Á Job 28:12 - á¼İ İ'á½² İfİçİİ±á½İ± İ€á½İ,İµİ½ İµá½İá½İİ. İ€İáçç—İçİ, İ'á½² İ,á½İ€İçİ, á¼İfİ,á½İµİ½ İ,áçİ,
á¼İ€İİfİ,á½µİ¼İ. Job 28:13. Job 28:13 - İçá½İ³ İçá¼İİµİ½ İİİçİ,á½İ, á½İ'á½İ½ İ±á½İ,áçİ, İçá½İ'á½² İ¼á½' İµá½İµİáçç
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