

Ancient Truth: Wisdom Literature

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Introduction to the Wisdom Literature

This volume includes Job, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. By tradition, the Wisdom Literature of the Bible includes Psalms and Proverbs. However, those two each warrant a separate volume in this series.

Scripture refers to two kinds of wisdom, that of mere men and that which comes from God. The latter is moral wisdom, a faculty for discerning God's character, particularly as woven into Creation. In the Hebrew mind, this was a clear view of reality itself, the way things really were in this world. Such wisdom permitted one to act appropriately in any context. Not merely because it was one's duty, but this wisdom was precious gift from God to make life here worth living. It simply didn't get any better than that.

Introduction to Job

This is Hebrew poetry at its finest. Unfortunately, we are forced to read it in a very different language, bathed in a completely alien intellectual tradition. Here it is enough to note that Hebrew focuses on the interplay of thoughts on multiple levels of consideration. Each thin page of Hebrew verse can be several meters thick with meaning.

Of primary note here is parallelism. There is a first line asserting some thought; the second line may echo the same thought in different words, or it may offer a contrast, perhaps the same idea reversed. In some cases, the lines following a statement will carry off the thought into implications that vary. Linear thought is almost absent; multiple branches and less-than-obvious connections are often given. In terms of this being a long-winded debate, a great many responses are not direct to our Western thinking. Instead, the answer to an assertion may come around from behind and answer from a different perspective. Sometimes it's necessary to back up and rip out the underlying assumption. Western logic is feeble by comparison, left in the dust trying to grasp such broad thinking.

Job is likely a descendant of Abraham and the setting seems around the time Israel lived in Egypt. The description fits several locations, but most scholars prefer the notion he's living somewhere between Damascus and Edom. Everyone in the narrative believes in the God of Israel, but from a time well before the Covenant of Moses. It would be reasonable that Job's story was known to Jethro who would have shared it with Moses. The entire drama of conversation could have taken place in a single day with time to spare. The book is typically ascribed to Moses as editor.

Job is described to us as a powerful and wealthy sheikh. The man is quite pleasing to God but is nevertheless smitten with great tragedy. We are permitted to know why, but Job is never told. Rather, Job is beset with shallow-minded and legalistic men who assert he must have sinned. Job knows better but slips into blaming God on the basis of human justice. The answer offered by Elihu and confirmed by God is that we may never really understand why embracing God's justice doesn't always bring worldly justice. This is the great unanswered question: Why do the

innocent suffer?

In typical Hebrew fashion, the real answer isn't directly stated, but implied: In a sense, no one is innocent. At our best, every human remains a sinner. Our fallen nature fully deserves every bad thing this existence can offer. Suffering is the default. In the face of God's holiness, only His mercy keeps us from damnation on every level. Suffering is not about buying a good place in Heaven; the most it can do is make us despair of this life. After suffering, the only thing left standing is the otherworldly viewpoint, that this life isn't that important in the first place. God's person defines justice; the scales of justice are not in this world. Job lacks a fully developed view of the afterlife, as is common with folks having only a Mesopotamian outlook. The bracketing narrative was added by someone at least as late as Moses with a far more advanced understanding.

Job 1

Job is introduced as one who exemplifies the highest moral standing possible for humans. His possessions and standing made him famous, easily the most blessed of men in the land. At every feast and festival, Job would ritually atone for possible accidental sins of his children. In other words, he wasn't satisfied with his own purity, but intervened with God on behalf of his entire household. It's hard to image anyone more concerned with pleasing his God.

The term "sons of God" in this context is simply a word picture of spiritual beings – angels. In the Ancient Near Eastern way of thinking, Satan was God's jailer. This is a very highly privileged position, rather like a prince not in the line of succession. The moral implication is that people who disappoint the ruler will be consigned to the jailer's domain. Wishing to make the most of an unpleasant job, Satan accuses anyone who might fail to obey the royal decrees. Thus, Satan is also chief prosecutor, seeking to enlarge his share of the domain of souls. It's only natural he would be patrolling the earth rather like a policeman of souls; that's where his work is.

Then surely Satan had encountered Job. He was untouchable for Satan, and someone who makes his Master boast. Satan alleges that Job is hardly so pure of heart. He's only faithful because God pays off like a slot-machine for which Job can only hit jackpots. God said he had enough confidence in Job to let him be tested in terms of property.

Satan was granted authority to afflict his possessions. All in one day, the messengers came in sequence, each with horrific news. The Sabaeans (today's Yemenites) raided and took all his plowing oxen and killed the servants. The next said lightning fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and shepherds. Chaldeans from Mesopotamia raided his camel herds and took them all, killing the servants. Then a windstorm struck the house of the eldest son where Job's adult children were feasting, killing them all when the structure collapsed.

Job was the model of moral composure. He assumed the normal ritual posture and declared the truth that anything he had was a gift from God in the first place. God can take it all back when He likes, and it changes nothing. The Lord's name was still sacred to him.

Job 2

The same scenario in the Spirit Realm comes around again, where God holds court with His angelic servants. Satan appears faithfully, but without faith. He suggests Job's words of praise were a cheap attempt to bargain with God for nothing worse. The Hebrew words of Job's praise include a reference to naked skin, and Satan uses a related term to mock him. We cannot identify in modern medical terms what malady struck Job, but it is clear the ancients considered it incurable. We get the picture of a man with a loathsome skin disease that weeps and wastes away while itching like fire. In later chapters we learn he has trouble eating and sleeping, and it seems to affect his joints, as well. Sitting in ashes is symbolic of social isolation. He is probably well away from human habitations, most likely sitting under a lone tree or a small tent awning on some higher point of ground.

It would be just as well he was alone, because there is little comfort from others. His wife displays a serious moral weakness, suggesting Job just die and get it over with. She seemed to think cursing God would be fatal, which is a silly legalism. Job carefully answered without cursing her, saying only that she sounded like someone morally depraved. Job has no idea why God would allow all this suffering without a prophetic warning of sin but accepts any suffering as God's prerogative. We have a hard time comprehending the Ancient Near Eastern ethic of embracing joyfully the most severe whims of one's feudal master, but this was proper protocol on Job's part.

We are introduced to three peers of Job. Each man in his own right was a sheikh like Job. Eliphaz was from Teman, a place near Edom renowned for her sages. Bildad was descended from Shuah, Abraham's son by Keturah. Zophar's affiliation is lost to us; we guess it was another ancient East Bank community. The three would have been regarded as sage princes among their people. Upon sighting Job from a distance, they knew it was him, but not from his appearance. The visual change was shocking. Sitting quietly near him for seven days and nights was rather like holding a wake for the dead. For all their culture and wisdom, they knew there were no words of consolation possible.

Job 3

It's too easy to summarize the meaning of Job's speech: He's depressed. There is nothing to suggest moral failure. Some folks have come to visit Job in his distress and he's about as entertaining as he can be, with truly grand imagery taken from the best of literary expression in his culture. This is what the reader needs to see. It's nothing more than a very beautiful way of saying how bad he feels, and it's entirely appropriate.

The first ten verses have him wishing he had not been born if this awful condition was his fate. The subtlety is rich. He wants to forget his birthday, particularly because the rejoicing was over such a healthy baby boy. He wished even God could forget that day. He calls for shadows and darkness to hide it from anyone else's memory, too. Job personifies the day, hoping some horrific dark event would frighten it from showing its face. Let it be erased from the calendar. In the typical reckoning of a day consisting of first the night, then the day, he calls for the previous night to give no birth to the following daylight. Let the mythical great sea monster, Leviathan,

be called up to devour the day before it can get started. More, let the day itself feel the same sense of doom and disappointment, passed over for its time in the sun; don't even let it see its own morning stars. He's angry that the day didn't deny him his own birth.

For nine more verses Job wishes he had been stillborn, using rhetorical questions. Instead of suffering through consciousness, he could be asleep in the grave, the most common image of afterlife in that culture. He could share the grave with mighty kings who built great palaces, eager princes who amassed great wealth, as well as children born dead. There he would be among human predators who were unable to cause any more trouble, where their victims were also at rest. Both slave and master end up the same there. All of these are fairly common references used in daily conversation as a somber recognition of human limits.

The final verses are more rhetorical questions about God as mysterious and impossible to fathom at times. He doesn't actually name God but implies it with the divine "He". Job first wonders aloud why God keeps him alive. We note Job respectfully waits for God's permission to die. Just having the relief of the grave would be worth more than Job could express. His food is replaced with sighing, and he drinks in the sound of his own groaning all day long. He couldn't imagine things being any worse. He can't even escape into normal sleep.

So far, there is nothing improper here. Human sorrow is not a sin, and Job never indicates God is unjust. It's a little long and windy, but not uncommon for talented speakers. It's not yet a pity party in the social context of Job's life.

Job 4

As we dig into the comments of Job's friends, we need to keep one thing in mind: They are passing judgment on Job's words, as if a private complaint among friends is tantamount to defaming God. Meanwhile, they ignore his sorrows, adding to them instead. An underlying theme here was hinted at in the error of Job's wife, and one of the oldest heresies still plaguing believers today – the mythology of Words of Power. It's one thing to recognize that something you said could defame God's name, but it's altogether different from the wild imagination that every word falling from the lips is some kind of incantation. The Spirit Realm does not work that way. Human words cannot conjure anything more than human imagination. What makes a difference is genuine divine authority by divine commission.

During their time of silence, Job's comforters were waiting for him to repent of something. Instead of empathy, they were already judging him. This is a subtle arrogance from a misplaced sense of self-importance. Eliphaz is the eldest and by custom speaks first. He jumps immediately into telling Job he needs to take his own medicine. Had not Job often told others how to receive or recover God's favor? Was it not always a matter of repentance? Then Eliphaz states the false premise, as if to imply God would never confuse people by letting them suffer for no good reason. He builds his theology from observation and cultural mythology, not from revelation. Eliphaz recognizes that Job is generally righteous but assumes loudly that Job must have done something wrong.

The banter about lions seems aimed at dismissing Job's complaints, that Job's suffering isn't nearly so bad as he claims. We are treated to a very dramatic image Eliphaz uses to reinforce his

claim to speak for God by special revelation. In essence he says Job has proposed a logical impossibility. Eliphaz holds up a false dichotomy: Either Job has sinned and earned this sorrow, or he sins by falsely accusing God of injustice. Eliphaz cannot imagine how God can do things that men aren't allowed to understand, even as he roars about God's ineffable greatness. He rattles on about how angels suffer for sin, and that men are surely lesser than angels.

Even long before encountering the Greek philosophers, we see there has always been a thread in Eastern wisdom that God must be reasonable on a human level.

Job 5

Eliphaz continues to manifest an inflated ego. He is utterly certain that his contentions are self-evident, and that God could never do anything perplexing to humans.

He advises Job to choose anyone he likes as judge, because they would say the same thing Eliphaz does: People perish by their own anger and folly. So closely does Eliphaz claim to watch for the first hint of sin that he immediately curses the household of those lacking moral sense. He goes on to assure anyone listening that such a curse is not idle; God executes judgment on fools without delay.

He reiterates his assertion that there is no such thing as unexplained suffering. It simply does not sprout voluntarily from the soil without being planted and nourished by some fool. Since mankind is already troubled by default, he suggests Job repent from whatever is his secret sin. Eliphaz rattles off all the ways in which we cannot second guess God. He certainly takes care of those who are righteous in His sight, regardless of how rough their lives may be. Surely, He would not fail to prosper the righteous! This implies Job must have done something evil. On and on he drones about how God will take care of His own.

Finally, he says Job is just being hard-headed. Get over yourself and repent, Job!

Job 6

Job addresses his friends together as if they had all agreed with the words of Eliphaz. What kind of arrogance is it that dismisses the suffering of another simply because one feels no pain? Job begins by reasserting that this is no minor discomfort as Eliphaz suggests. Job's words seemed a little extravagant in his sorrow because he actually couldn't begin to tell how bad it was. To our Western minds it seems Job is accusing God of targeting him unfairly, but that's the wrong emphasis. The point is how severe and relentless is the suffering because it's not something cooked up in this world, but clearly the result of events outside this world. This is truly deep suffering.

Animals don't complain when they have everything they need. They don't make a lot of noise for no reason. So distracting is this whole experience that Job can hardly eat. The finest cuisine seems tasteless to him. What would be the point if all food is uniformly unpleasant? Even that simple joy is denied him.

Job would be glad to embrace the mortality of which Eliphaz spoke. Dying would be a relief, at

least. It's a puzzle why God prolongs Job's life with all this sorrow. If he simply knew death was coming in due time, he would be able to rejoice in the midst of pain. But because he knows he has not defied God's revelation, Job worries that death will remain far from him. How does a man bear such things? Job admits he's whining because it hurts so much.

But adding insult to injury, his friends pick at him as if it was all his own fault. Not a single tear was shed. It was like a wandering caravan coming to look for a stream bed that was dryer than the surrounding hills. It's hard to picture the sense of disappointment having come so far out of their way to a place where they should have surely found some relief. Job has none from his dearest friends, either. Were they afraid God would do the same to them if they showed any sympathy for Job? Has he requested anything from them that would compromise their own sense of safety? Was their own righteousness so very fragile? Job knows he's in sorrow, but he's not in trouble with God. Nor is God the silly kind of tyrant who demands everyone join in politically correct condemnation of people on the basis of goofy legalism.

Yet for their sharpness of tongue, they could produce no evidence that Job had sinned. Their logical arguments were empty and missing the facts of the case. Their pitiful theology had huge holes in it. All they've done is pick at his words, not beginning to address reality. That sort of cheap moral reasoning would lead them to casting lots to divvy up homeless orphans because there's no one to protect them, or auction off your friends to slavery because of a small debt. This is not the argument of someone who actually cares about people; it's a lifeless legalism.

Had they paid any attention at all how he must have felt? Had they given a moment's real consideration to what was happening before their very eyes? This was Job the Righteous they were discussing with such glib dismissal.

Job 7

The problem with most Western readers is that, lacking an education in Ancient Near Eastern thought, they tend to agree fundamentally with Job's friends. When Job turns to address himself to God, Westerners see him making false accusations, as if this could not be the loving and kind Father of Jesus. Yet in those ancient times, God revealed Himself as a grand Sheikh of Heaven. As such, the inscrutable God acting in ways sometimes appearing capricious is simply making note of how God revealed Himself. From our distance as modern readers, we see the cause of Job's sorrows without understanding that Satan was actually God's faithful servant, albeit no friend of mankind. Thus, for Job to suggest his sorrows were from God is not a sin. To suggest they were impossible to account for on a human level is not a sin. For Job to be perplexed and plaintive is also not a sin. The text itself says Job did not sin.

The lot of fallen mankind is hard. It compares well with an ordinary peasant hired by some important figure for seasonal work. It was from earliest light until dusk, and by custom this was day labor, paid daily. He lived day to day. This is common ancient wisdom about life itself, and echoes in Solomon's comments about human vanity in Ecclesiastes. This life isn't something we hold as great treasure; other things are far more important. Job feels every bit the fallen man of futility. Instead of the sweet sleep of the laborer, his nights are restless. He is denied even this one refuge from sorrow.

We need not take his description literally, but he is not in good physical shape. His skin is festering with sores. The hours of life are meaningless when every part of you hurts. Having thus lived this long, he has little hope of recovery before he dies. His condition was hopeless. People can see him today if they want, but perhaps not tomorrow. Soon enough these medical problems would be fatal. Job speaks in terms of the limited view of the afterlife common in those days. Just thinking about him would be to visit an empty house.

With apparently so little time left, it's only right that Job be allowed his last words. In this case, he insists he be allowed to complain that things are not going well for him. Who would deprive a man of his final emotional release, since words are all he has? Even God has no problem with that. So, Job asks rhetorically what danger he represents. Is he like the restless sea, or the legendary chaos monster that would destroy the world? Was he such a threat that God needed to set boundaries for him? Job can't even sleep for the nightmares. He would prefer to die and get it over with. He begs God to let him expire.

Why would the Sheikh of Heaven even notice someone as insignificant as Job? The question about swallowing his own saliva is an Eastern figure of speech equivalent to catching one's breath. Can Job get a break? How has he sinned against God? He confesses freely that he is a sinner by nature. Can there be no pardon? If God intends to do Job any last bit of good, let it be soon before it's too late. Again, nothing here is amiss. These are common figures of speech and rhetorical devices one would expect of someone in sorrow. It's a normal part of the grieving process for those people. Job has not sinned because he offers no insult to God from within these cultural traditions.

Job 8

Now it's Bildad's turn to get it wrong. He continues pressing the false dichotomy and worse.

Bildad begins with less courtesy than Eliphaz, suggesting Job is a windbag. His rhetorical question misses the point. This is not a matter of justice in God's sight, but God's ineffable ways with mankind. There is much we can never hope to know on this side of eternity. For Job to insist his conscience is clear is anathema to these silly legalists. So Bildad insists that if Job confesses and repents of his secret sins, God will immediately make things nice again.

Bildad has the nerve to suggest Job's children must have been truly awful sinners or they would not have died so young. He blathers on about how God could make Job's finish considerably greater than his past. He bases his appeal on human tradition. While it's true that the life span of individuals is too short to accumulate a depth of wisdom, that which accrues over generations is not necessarily trustworthy if it departs from revelation. It never occurs to Bildad that human tradition might miss the point.

So, he launches into a nice parable about papyrus reeds symbolizing people. They grow only where it's swampy; so it is with humans and righteousness. If people forget God, it would be like the water drying up. He also compares people who don't trust God with spiders, whose webs are quite fragile compared to the majority of living creatures big enough to ignore such webs and rip them down without awareness. He continues to mix the symbols around.

He finally surmises that Job must be lying about his clear conscience. Whatever happened to Job can only be explained as God's rejection of sin. Finally, he assures Job all would be well if he would just repent.

Job 9

Most Western commentators and readers fail to grasp how thoroughly correct Job is in what he says. The primary disconnection is the Western value system that insists life is precious. The people of the Ancient Near East lived in a tradition going back into prehistory that accepts mortality as a simple fact. They also accept the sheer unquestionable authority of even a great many earthly rulers to take the life of a subject on a whim, and it not be counted as sin. So, for Job to suggest God might do things that weren't just by human standards is not an accusation, but a simple acknowledgment of the truth. God's standards are far above our own; He is not accountable to us, but we to Him. The Western cultural arrogance in rejecting the Ancient Near Eastern value system is frankly a rejection of the Bible's value system, and God's revealed value system.

Job launches into yet another attempt to show his visitors their fundamental error. It was an error common to those poorly educated, but men with a proper background had no excuse. We can only surmise that Job's buddies were ignorant. He strives to educate them. His argument is subtle; God does not need a particular cause to destroy any human life, nor any other portion of His Creation. These men are the blasphemers, insisting that God's justice must make sense on a human level. They simply do not understand the fundamental truth of the Fall and how it created such an impenetrable barrier between us and God's divine realm above. God is not rooted in this universe and is not subject to the limitations confining human existence.

Job begins by sarcastically agreeing with Bildad, and then asks just what it is they are talking about. How do we address the question of God's justice among men? It cannot be a question of justice on God's terms. God is the Creator, and no part of this universe can stand His Presence because it is all under the Fall. Nothing on this level of existence could hope to restrain His wrath against sin, since it is all under the judgment of sin, all set for eventual disposal.

So, while Job stands as pure as the driven snow in human terms according to the revealed Laws of God (up to that point), it really does not remove him from the fate of this universe. And short of that final end, God can do what He pleases without fearing what men might think of His brand of justice. There is no sin in pointing out that God is the author of Job's misery because it's not the same as saying He caused it. No human can hold God accountable. Standing before God, Job's blameless behavior will not keep his own mouth from confessing there is no suffering imaginable that is not merely what fallen men deserve.

Job says that it's all the same – life and death are not significantly different on this plane of existence. Our expiration is not necessarily tied to our observance of God's revelation, nor is our suffering along the way to that expiration. He says that God mocks our sense of tragedy simply because we refuse to understand, because clinging to this life is tantamount to rejecting His divine truth. God has His own agenda, one that He seldom bothers to explain. Should we suppose evil men rule nations without His permit? That would be stupidity. Thus, Job upbraids

his friends for their shallow and legalistic thinking.

Job notes that his life is of no significance in the grand scheme of God's plans for this earth. It's little more than the faint swishing of a reed boat on the river. He could pretend his life was all happy and fun, but even if that were true, mindless celebration would be irreverent. It would be a needless provocation against God's justice with horrific results. No human effort can remove the full weight of the Fall. No one can stand truly just before God so as to have authority to argue with Him. Job refuses to blaspheme by pretending God is required to operate by the mythology of human justice. He also notes that there is at this point no Savior to intercede before God on his behalf.

Job 10

By default, fallen mankind justly owns the wrath of God. We deserve a short miserable life, a long and painful death and eternity in Hell. That's the starting place. Anything short of that is a blessing or mercy. So, the worst that can happen is our just due, and if this life is particularly difficult for some, that is merely breaking even. God pointedly warned He would not explain why some have it comfortable and some do not. While there is some correlation between those living according to His Laws and some measure of earthly blessing, His Laws remain our duty regardless of reward. Obedience is its own reward; God's glory is all the glory we need in this life. Until we understand that critical truth, nothing in this world can ever make sense to us.

Job understands this. He's had it good, and when God took it all away, he still had his own resolve to live justly. His resolve came from outside himself, a divine power not his own. His morally upright standing was a gift in itself. It was his deepest desire to stand up for the truth. He understood that God could not be offended by mere human words spoken in private sorrow. What the three friends utterly failed to understand is that God's glory was not defiled by Job's words here, because words have no power. Job begins with a clarification: The only relief he had was in his complaint. He wasn't putting any blame on God as he might any earthly authority but was keeping it on himself. There was no need for restraint because it could hardly make things any worse. All that was left was death; even that would come as a relief.

Further, Job had nowhere else to turn but to God. No one else was going to help him; no one could. Certainly no one in present company truly understood his sorrow. So, his questions are rhetorical, an appeal to God to answer if He would, but clearly prepared for divine reticence. Is it possible that God is somehow pleased to bring suffering on those who serve Him, while evil people received good things? Sometimes it seems to come out that way, but we can never really know. That is precisely the point. It's not as if God were a mere human ruler who would have to torture Job to get a full confession. Could anyone suggest God was unjust? He is the definition of Justice. Whatever it is, this is not a question of justice, because God already knew Job was about as righteous as men could be.

Since God made him, there was nothing Job could hide from Him. If God determined he should suffer, Job would suffer, indeed. If God chose to keep the reasons to Himself, there was nothing Job could do. All the more so could he do nothing if Job were actually guilty of any particular sin. Thus, Job asks for the final release, to die like all the rest of humanity. Can he get a break,

maybe just a few moments of relief before he dies?

The notion that God would get angry with such words could only come from a very poor understanding of His revelation.

Job 11

The starting point of moral wisdom is recognizing that our minds are not equal to the task. When we understand the fullness of our fallen condition, we realize we cannot know the nature of things nor all the factors in any given context. Even if we did know all those things, we still could not reason our way to a blameless response. The birthplace of moral failure is the arrogance of human reason. Job's friends have already shown their adherence to a false orthodoxy, a concept of sin and wrath that is contrary to revelation. It was the same failed orthodoxy of Hellenized Judaism and is a critical element in the heresy of Prosperity Gospel. To assume a simplified binary logic regarding human suffering is a rejection of God's revelation. God punishes sin, of a certainty, but not necessarily in ways we expect and not on our scale of timing and justice. The presence of suffering is not simply a failure of faith and righteousness. If you can't understand that God can bring suffering upon righteousness, then you are not paying attention.

Zophar is downright hateful with Job. He opens by calling Job a windbag, and then misquotes him and creates a serious Straw Man fallacy. Job did not say his doctrine was pure, nor did he arrogantly accuse God of doing wrong. Zophar is convinced that if God did speak, He would openly condemn Job and reveal that secret sin he must surely be hiding by his empty words.

While Zophar correctly speaks of God's transcendence, it is his own arrogance of human reason that bears the rebuke here. He insists Job can only be falsely accusing God of injustice, since God cannot in Zophar's feeble logic bring sorrow for mysterious reasons. In his mind, God can take only one path to judge sin, and that His wrath must of necessity be easily understood by man. So, he refers to the untamed wild nature of fallen mankind as if that applies to Job, while rejecting the notion a man can sin with his thoughts. The rejection of ineffable truth beyond human reason, the assurance that there is so much that man could never know, even in theory, is the primary reason so many refuse revelation. This is a tacit rejection of the Fall.

Once again, Zophar affirms the empty promise that if Job repents, God cannot help but restore all that Job lost. For Zophar, the words of prophecy make God out to be a vending machine – pay your dues, push the right buttons and it always works. He rejects the notion that life is experienced more like a slot machine, that you never know what's coming because God and His ways cannot be contained in human understanding. Thus, the three visitors of Job reduce God's glory to mere mechanics.

Job 12

Even in his anger, Job is nobler than his friends. Where they scold, he answers with sarcastic wit. Surely, these three men represent the pinnacle of human wisdom! When they die, humanity would be plunged into darkness. Job reminds them that he also has a brain equal to theirs. In

fact, their great wisdom is no greater than any common man.

What happened to their long friendship? How did these three come to the place that they could act so dismissively to someone they knew so well? Instead of interceding with God on Job's behalf, they ganged up and kicked him while he was down. To Job they are like cowardly yes-men whose virtues depended on what they perceived were the whims of their superiors. Never mind their words; they acted like God was the least noble of all Lords. At the same time, they were living proof that sometimes God is far more complex and inscrutable, living proof that He doesn't immediately strike down a sinner. They came to rob Job of what little sanity he had left, and God was not stopping them, any more than He did not always stop men who respected only weapons such as they carried in their hands.

God created all things. His divine character is reflected in the whole of Creation, but most of humanity chooses not to see. Had they inquired, Job's friends would have found the truth God had woven into His universe. Did they have no discernment? What was the whole point of living to a ripe old age? Was it not to have leisure to consider the folly of mere human wisdom against the timeless ineffable wisdom of God? God alone understands His creation and He has not been silent, so why do men run from His revelation? Why do they insist on clinging to mere human intellect?

Job goes on to describe how God has clearly not honored what his friends consider the truth of God. Most people miss what Job says starting in verse 14. In each case, God overturns the natural wisdom of men, in which his friends trusted so completely. God does not make sense on the human level. What He does frequently defies the best of human reason. God turns the world upside down every day, and yet men persist in trying to figure Him out by mere intellect. God does this, as often as not, simply to prove He is beyond human ken. It's too easy to arrogantly assume you have it all figured out and these are just anomalies. So it is these three great men of wisdom wander about in utter darkness, doggedly pursuing their human wisdom and eschewing the obvious truth that God often does things no one understands.

Job 13

Job reminds his friends that they aren't addressing an inferior, someone lacking a good solid education. Nothing they've said is new. For seven days they sat in proper silence until they decided to judge Job. Had they not opened their mouths, no one would have heard how silly they were. Job is addressing God, if they don't mind. God is not like earthly rulers who might tolerate or even favor slavish lackeys who jockey for position by creative flattery. It's not as if God's favor is so fickle that He would smile on someone only so long as they fill the air before Him with silly superlatives. God pays far more attention to a man's heart than to his mouth.

Here we see Job pointing out something for which his ancient tongue possessed no phrases: They had made their abstract logic into a god of sorts. They felt God was bound to their theories of justice. The Pharisees confronted Jesus with the same folly, made worse by their adoption of Hellenized reasoning, but it was hardly a new sin. The arrogance of man's intellect is beyond measure.

Job is fully confident from the depths of his soul that if he stood before God, he would suffer

less than he does at the hand of his friends. How could he do better than to face God? He asks his friends to pay close attention and stop judging with such shallow thinking. Would God strike him down? If God were judging so, then all men would be marked for death. Otherwise, Job knows from within his spirit that he is acceptable in the sight of God, for simply coming into the Presence is possible only for the upright. Thus, with confidence he would approach the Divine Throne and seek mercy. He would ask God for a break from this suffering.

Unlike Adam and many other men who faced God's holiness, Job was wide open to learn of his sins. He had no impulse to run and hide. He would ask God to explain, were He willing, why this time of terror and sorrow. What was there to gain from tormenting someone so insignificant? What had he done? He was ready to repent before he even knew why.

Job 14

Job and his friends held an entirely different understanding of time and lived a different pace of life from us today. For Job and his friends to make long speeches was entirely normal and even expected. Men would patiently hear the full outpouring of an anguished heart, so what we have here is surprising rudeness from Job's friends. Meanwhile, a long and rambling speech imploring God for some sense of relief is wholly within protocol. Should a lord bid his servant speak, it would be for the lord to choose when he'd heard enough. His silence and lack of response would be taken as a sign to keep talking. For the trio to interrupt Job's long appeal to God was nearly unforgivable.

Most Westerners fail to understand how men spoke in ancient times in the Near East. It seems to us wandering and changing sentiments. This is false. Job is entirely consistent with his emotional outpouring. The attitudes of a wise man in his social setting are more complex and nuanced than would be imaginable in our late Western times. A primary element of protocol is for Job to speak of God's anger, but it hardly means the same as it does in our culture. He does not claim to know God's feelings or motives but refers to what he experiences at God's hands.

So, this chapter begins with a full confession that man deserves whatever sorrow God hands down. He is Creator; who would question His actions? Man is just a troublesome infestation on God's hobby. Man isn't worthy of God's attention. Subtly here Job suggests it's probably easier for those people whom God ignores as not part of His central plans. Job is held by an overpowering sense of divine calling and his flesh would be glad just for a short vacation from it. He asks that God at least grant him a sense of having fulfilled his mission before what seems his certain death soon.

It's poetry to weave together the images of a tree that recovers at the merest hint of water before moisture actually comes to revive its roots. Even cut down, aged roots will send forth shoots. But man is more like the water in an arid country such as where Job sat. When struck down, men do not recover, but drain away and are forgotten.

The ancient Mesopotamian view of the afterlife was incomplete. Most knew there was another realm of existence they might see, something far beyond words. However, few had a clear understanding of what Jesus called "Paradise." Even among those who did understand, Sheol remained a figure of speech for going down into the place of the dead somewhere in the bowels

of the earth. While it seems Job might still cling to this old view, he also knows that God can resuscitate or resurrect the dead. He clearly expects there will be a day when the Lord will call up the dead and judge them. So, Job prays that God let him pass until some later date when wrath is complete, and then call him back, because even the dead will hear the call of their Creator. Job is fully aware of his Lord's favor and expects to see Him some day.

But for now, Job's life is full of sorrow. God has limited the days of his life. Job was confident God would cover his sins, but human hope for better days had been worn away to nothing. There's nothing any man could do to counter God's omnipotence. When a man dies, he's not there to see how his hopes and dreams turned out, good or bad. Nor can his survivors know his sorrow after he's gone. Job would be the only one to know his pain.

Job 15

Eliphaz gets downright rude with Job. He says Job is a blustery fool, referring to his defense as the harsh hot wind from the eastern deserts. He accuses Job of encouraging blasphemy from irreverent folks. Eliphaz feels Job's sin is self-evident from the way he talks.

Eliphaz gives us the impression that he is older than Job's parents. To him, Job is insulting his elders. Discounting entirely the possibility of revelation, Eliphaz insists Job is just a mouthy punk. He alleges Job is all worked up and angry with God, but nothing Job says implies anger. This is the whole point. Eliphaz clings so tightly to his broken orthodoxy that he has to make stuff up to maintain his position. He offers the same tired mythology, half truths that miss the point.

Once again Eliphaz asserts that his many years of observation plus human tradition outweigh revelation. Everyone knows, he insists, that only the evil suffer misfortune. It's the same old dark visions of a guilty conscience that busybodies simply assume must be there. In the process of weaving this image, he hints that Job is boldly defiant against God. He simply cannot imagine how God could let anyone wicked prosper, nor anyone righteous suffer. However, the whole way through, he is led by the same failed logic assumed by most of humanity. People who are happy and prosperous simply must be living right, and folks who suffer must be evil. If God doesn't make sense, why, He simply can't be God!

It never occurs to these men that God is beyond their pitiful logic. All three of them can quote the words of revelation accurately, but completely fail to grasp the parabolic nature of revelation in human language. They insist the words must be literally applied.

Job 16

Do we tire yet of the endless back and forth between Job and his foolish comforters? We should tire even more quickly of Western theologians. They consistently fail to understand Job and, despite lip service to the contrary, end up echoing the sentiments Job's accusers. Job states the facts: God is sovereign and is also incomprehensible to fallen human reasoning. God can stop the suffering of Job. Whatever is at work here, it is not punishment for specific sins; Job's spirit is at peace with God. Job does not accuse God of injustice. He cries out to God for some hope of

relief.

Job says his friends offer nothing wiser than the common failure of wisdom he sees all the time. When they were silent, they were as much comfort as anyone could be in such a situation. Were he visiting them in a time of sorrow, he could do the same and make pointless demands for repentance from sins he might imagine. But he wouldn't do that. Instead, he would offer just a few words of hope.

What difference would it make if Job voiced his sorrows or remained silent? It would not change the situation. In that cultural context, to speak of God's anger does not reflect the same concept as it would for us. It marks here a reverse pleasure; God's pleasure is for Job to suffer. That would be inexcusable in a Western ruler, but Ancient Near Eastern morality is wholly different. We cannot evaluate this text from our late Western prejudices. Even were Job speaking of a human sheikh, this would be wholly proper. It surely lies in God's authority to end the suffering, but He chooses not. The reasons are not revealed, and this is also within His prerogative. God remains holy and just. It need not be seen merely as punishment and Job insists such is not the case. Further, the same inscrutable divine authority has placed these false comforters with Job to inflict even greater sorrow.

Job calls for Creation itself to witness to his right standing before God. Is there not some advocate somewhere in Heaven to plead his case? Job assumes there must be. Whatever the case, Job knew he wouldn't live that much longer in this state.

Job 17

Job's visitors demand that he tell a lie against God. They have no objective evidence at all that Job has sinned such that his situation is punishment for some specific error. Instead, they have only their pitiful reasoning. What they cannot absorb is that Job's conscience is clear, and that, without some sense of conviction for sin, Job cannot repent. He can only echo the basic truth that all men are fallen, and that human sorrow is simply the default for all mankind. No mere human logic can hope to explain the things God does by His power.

In highly poetic imagery, Job describes himself as shattered; the graves call out to him. He's forced to sit through this mockery, as if his own very real troubles weren't enough. It would be socially unacceptable for Job to ignore them, so he wonders if God would take his eyes as a bond for his release from suffering, since these guests show no interest in helping him pray for relief. It's obvious to Job that God has closed their hearts from the truth, and he won't have to endure their presence in Heaven, at least. He implies that each rails at him like someone who sells out a friend for a small bribe, and it will come back to haunt their families.

It comes from the lower culture of superstitious peasants to spit at the sight of someone who has suffered misfortune, because the peasants fear the bad luck will rub off on them. Such are Job's friends here. It's an odd Hebrew parallelism in which he describes how his own vision fails under the onslaught of the illness, but that these others suffer morally darkened vision. Were they upright, they would be too astonished for words. Still, Job is not shaken in his faith.

He then castigates the trio directly, saying not a one of them possessed wisdom from God.

While Job's life has been destroyed, his hopes and dreams forgotten, these men think they can with silly words turn a black hole into a sunny day. The legalistic logic cannot roll back the darkness of the grave. Death is close and Job welcomes every part of it, because it will be relief to escape the three sanctimonious windbags. Then he can escape their empty cheery assurances things would be okay. That kind of hope will not survive passage through the gates of death.

Job 18

We begin to understand that Job's visitors do not grasp what parables are, and do not comprehend symbolic language. God has always preferred parable as the means to communicate to mankind because it winnows out the spiritually dead. Only those with a spiritual awareness can receive the parabolic message. Jesus was not doing anything new when He explained to His disciples that parables were the proper means to teach truth that is beyond the human intellect. This merely confirms Job's assessment that this trio of visitors had no spiritual awareness but had only their human reason to rely on. It wasn't enough.

Bildad is palpably angry at the insulting implication that he and his friends are not equipped to grasp reality. He warns Job to mind his manners before his elders or keep his mouth shut. Bildad asks just who the senseless wild beast is here. Is it they, as Job seems to suggest, or is it Job who wildly tears at himself in frustration? Does Job expect the created order of things to be changed just for him?

Then Bildad launches into a litany of parables, figures of speech about what happens to the wicked. He seems to take them rather literally and uses the dire picture to try scaring Job into repenting. The whole thing is rather nice, but wholly irrelevant to the case before him. This is false reciprocation logic: He assumes that because God does not favor the wicked, only the wicked are without His worldly blessings. It doesn't work the same both directions. Even in modern times we see how this turns logic on its head. The wicked do indeed suffer as he describes, but all too often not literally, not in this life. Instead, the righteous often suffer for no just cause. Perhaps that has happened all too often under Bildad's own leadership as an elder, and it would embarrass him to admit it.

Either way, we note that Bildad makes the common false assumption that bad things in this world happen only to bad people. That has never been true.

Job 19

For once, Job comes close to a direct answer to their accusations. Yet, because he uses reverse wording, most Western commentators miss the point. Again, Job does not accuse God of injustice. Rather, he warns his visitors that if they are correct, *that* would make God unjust.

Job begins by asking rhetorically how long the trio would torment him. In the common Hebrew turn of phrase, he says "ten times" to indicate they have reproached him repeatedly. They are shameless in their ignorance. However, let's pretend for a moment they are correct. If Job had sinned, they could not possibly know about it. Indeed, nothing in his alleged secret sin would affect them at all. It's none of their business! These men are acting as busybodies who have

nothing better to do than self-righteously mock someone whose situation they refuse to understand.

He mocks Bildad's question in 8:3 – "Does God pervert justice?" The correct answer is that God *defines* justice; whatever He does is justice because He did it. Only lesser creatures can pervert justice. To assume God would never bring suffering on the righteous is a perverted concept of justice, a perverted notion of God. Were God as the trio described Him, then it would indeed be evil if God have brought this sorrow on Job, because Job remains morally upright. It's not that Job has slipped here, but that he is skillfully mocking their shallow reasoning.

What follows is his counter argument. Job cries out that he has been wronged. There is no rescue. The justice they have promised does not come. Job has been robbed of everything that men value. God is against him, and all his worldly friends and family have deserted him. He goes on at length in that vein, and then asks the trio why they insist on making things worse than they have to be?

Job wishes that someone would transcribe his words so that everyone could see what he actually said instead of reading their impatient thoughts into his words. Still, Job is philosophical. That is, he knows that even if he dies, the One with the power to redeem him will some day return to this earth and pass judgment. Job knows that long after he has died, his flesh will reconstitute, and he will stand before that Judge. Job won't have to find a proxy; he'll be there to see with his own eyes. The unspoken implication is that Job has no consciousness at all of anything for which he should be ashamed. His convictions tell him he will stand before God without fear.

For now, his heart grows faint as his flesh slowly and painfully expires. He doesn't have that much time left, but he knows how these three think. They are plotting how they can hound him all the way into the grave. But they should fear the Hound of Heaven, for in that Judgment Day they will be deeply ashamed.

Job 20

Zophar is rather angry at the insult he perceives. Unfortunately, the real insult sails right over his head. As with his two friends, he is angry only that Job rejects their simplistic logic.

Zophar's emphasis is that the wicked are typically struck down in judgment at the pinnacle of their power. Were this not rich in imagery, we could have skipped a lot of this blather and jumped to the end of the book. What he says reflects the truth as far as it goes.

As with the others, Zophar parrots parabolic truth from a literal mind. Truly, it matters not what any human achieves unjustly, God can bring them down with the merest twitch of His thoughts. That's not to say it always happens that way, or that it has anything to do with Job. Zophar goes on at length about recompense and balancing the scales with ill-gotten gains returned to the victims who lost them. He characterizes all the evil things such men might do, things he surely knows Job has not done.

With such resounding poetic justice we agree, but not if Zophar takes it all literally. Sometimes it happens as he describes, but by no means consistently as men measure such things. That is,

God has inscrutable plans that may call for some wicked men to live long and prosper in their sin. Thus, Zophar misses the point of such pious chatter on account of his literal mind, but even worse, it has no bearing on the case at hand.

Job 21

Job finally gets around to a direct contradiction of the trio, while at the same time pointing out the subtle blasphemy of their words.

The first few verses are surprisingly terse. He begins by asking that they console him by listening, because their long-winded accusations weren't much comfort. They'll get their chance to mock him again soon enough. If Job were lamenting bad treatment from mere men, he might expect some politicking sympathy. But this is God Almighty roughing him up, so what place does politicking have? Why would they pretend to curry God's favor as if He were a mere human ruler? God needs no defense among men; He is the Creator and Lord of all. Job's impatience with their silly posturing is wholly justified. Meanwhile, they should take a fresh look at what horrors are upon Job. This is no small discomfort, but the mighty hand of God ripping a man's life apart. They should be silent and reverent out of fear they might be next. Job still quivers in fear of God's hand.

Then he turns to his main argument. Have these men never seen how sometimes wicked men rise to power and wealth, grow old and die in comfort? Evil men have been known to go through life without any apparent misfortune. All the way to the end, they shake their fist at God, but He doesn't seem to notice. Could the trio be so ignorant of human history that they haven't seen God allow such things? Yet for all this, Job would not trade places with any of them. He remains faithful to God and upright despite the apparent mismatch in consequences.

Forget the rumors and stories. How often have they actually seen the wicked receive apparent justice on the terms they have described? Were they blind to the very real examples Job could cite? Anticipating their objection that God might visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, Job says that would clearly violate the false morality of their pious assertions. If their version of moral justice holds any water, then let a man receive his own punishment while he lives. Amen to that, Job says. Are they going to teach that standard to God? Because it's not at all how God does things.

Life on this plane of existence is inherently futile. Regardless of what men enjoy or suffer, death levels them all. What's the point in walking justly before God? Whatever it gains a man to be righteous, it has little to do with the shallow blessings most men pursue. Job isn't stupid to their pretense. Even if they have never personally seen the wicked prosper, they have no excuse, since they live right there on one of main trade routes in that part of the world. Were they silly enough to avoid interviewing travelers to hear their stories? Does every traveler lie about such things? The world is full of wicked men who gain noble treatment and great mourning by thousands at their funerals. But righteous Job can't even get his friends to listen while he yet lives.

What kind of comfort is it when a man's own friends are so utterly self-deceived?

Job 22

The debate sinks to the level of absurdity. Eliphaz commits intellectual dishonesty to defend his untenable position.

From the very start of this whole story, Eliphaz and his pals have perverted truth by pulling things out of context. Human language cannot describe how God operates; it can only characterize and indicate. That is the very nature of the symbolic languages of the ancient Semites. The three have been engaging in a very low grade of literalism that abuses the fundamental nature of the tongue these men spoke. This is what you expect from illiterate bumpkins, not community leaders.

Eliphaz asserts, in so many words, that men cannot bless God. God has no friends, he alleges, and no favorites among men. If things go bad for a man, there can only be one cause, and that is sin. He then pointedly and rudely asserts Job is evil.

He goes on to allege that Job's former greatness came at the expense of moral failure, and it finally caught up with him. Eliphaz rattles off a list of sins he knows for a fact Job did not commit. Having painted himself into this ridiculous logical corner, he flatly asserts what all humanity in that region knows to be a lie. Were Job anything like this, his reputation would have been awful, and they would never have been his friends.

Eliphaz even goes on to insist that Job was like those drowned by the Flood, openly rejecting God's Laws. Obviously, Job was so morally blinded that he deserved the same fate. Then he insults Job once more with formulaic calls for repentance that reduce God to a mere mechanism. This is precisely the same reasoning of the Pharisees in Jesus' day, who insisted one could only be wealthy because of God's favor, and that one was poor only because they were accursed. Perhaps Eliphaz would have been as shocked as the Twelve: If the rich weren't going to Heaven, who was?

Eliphaz is forced to deny the reality before his own eyes to defend his goofy theology.

Job 23

You would almost think that Job simply ignores Eliphaz. Rather, he refuses to dignify such stupidity with a direct answer. Instead, Job rips the foundation out from under the lies.

Job reexamines the facts. He asserts his suffering is great, hinting that it is more than any one the trio could bear. It's not as if Job could appeal directly to God in person. Could he do so, this whole thing would be ended in minutes. God is not known for answering just any random appeal for explanations; mere human need is not a valid basis for seeking God's face. You have to approach Him on behalf of His own glory.

Nor would God reject Job. God is not deaf even now to Job's cries, but there has to be a reason beyond human ken. Such is God's nature. You cannot chase Him down as you would anyone living on the earth. God is not confined to human space. So, while Job cannot touch God, God can touch Job any time He likes. And God knows Job has pure motives, a clean heart wholly committed to Him alone.

God is the ultimate mystery and ultimate sovereign. He does whatever He wants with Job until it pleases Him to change the situation. This is what causes Job to tremble. It's not because Job has some fear in his heart, or moral blind spots. Job sees as clearly as daylight that the whole question turns on God's sovereign whims and nothing else.

Job 24

God is not like mere men. It's not as if you should expect Him to come around like a circuit riding judge with a seasonal schedule of visitation.

So, there are people out there who get away with moving survey markers in order to encroach on someone else's land. They seize someone else's domestic animals for their own herds. They deprive orphans of their only means of support and create a pretext for taking some poor widow's only possession. They won't let beggars take up a post on any place near town but drive them out into the wilderness. Whatever these miserable poor can scratch from the barren open lands is all they can get. Maybe they pick the rotting little grapes from a cleaned-out vineyard.

Job says he can take them to show people who sleep in the rough without so much as a thin cloak against the cold night. When it rains, they get wet, unless they can hide behind a large stone when the wind blows. Fatherless children are seized from their mothers and children are taken as a pledge against their own starvation. Maybe someone hires the poor, but somehow forgets to pay them their share of the harvest. Think of it: rich crops picked by those not allowed to enjoy any part of it.

Those who suffer great injustice are weeping aloud and yet God does not judge the perpetrators with anything resembling our human sense of justice. There are always plenty of people who reject the light of truth. Day and night the just suffer injustice. Adulterous people sneak around at night. The only time they see the daylight is to stake out the next house they will sneak into when it's dark.

Job then mocks their pious ranting about how quickly and surely justice falls on the wicked of the earth. They liken evil men to mere sea foam, easily dispatched. Does the trio actually believe poor people would refuse to work a wicked man's harvest? They aren't going to wait on God's judgment to take that man away; they need to eat today. Nor should anyone expect the wicked to melt away like snow on a warm day. Justice does not grow on trees. The evil still prey on the weak and Job's friends are just so certain God will drag them away any minute now.

Sure, God is watching; He watches all mankind. But the wicked often do not die quicker than anyone else. When death comes, it apparently does not distinguish between the good and evil. Job demands they show actual proof that he is wrong. This world is fallen, and God has never promised to fix everything.

Job 25

For once, Bildad reveals what he actually knows, not what he merely thinks. In this very short chapter, he states two inarguable truths. First, God is ineffable; His position and power are

beyond telling. Second, at the same time, mankind is in no position to argue with God. Gone are the accusations against Job and the feeble direct logic. He says nothing more.

Job 26

Most Western readers will not understand what happens here. Eastern philosophers typically skip over a great deal of explanation that they would consider obvious. Bildad's short speech was true as far as it went. The problem is that he carries it too far. If no man is right in God's sight, what would be the point of clinging to an upright life? And how could any man, least of all Bildad, have standing to castigate another man for sin? We have to recognize the difference between parabolic statement and something entirely too literal.

Job's response implies this without stating it bluntly. First, he blasts Bildad with sarcasm. Bildad would have been utterly useless helping someone who actually didn't understand God's revelation. He was a moral bumpkin in a world where moral education was almost mandatory for existence in that Ancient Near Eastern culture. Not just ignorant of moral truth, Bildad and his friends were militant in their rejection of it, even as they abused and perverted common expressions of that truth.

Job hammers home his point by restating Bildad's argument in superior terms. That is, using the full reach of parabolic expression, he declares how God is beyond comparison. It is critical that readers understand this, as it would seem his words at face value aren't very accurate theology. That's the whole point: God is beyond human intellect and every attempt to confine Him to formulas, regardless how carefully worded, will always fall short. Thus, Job makes Bildad look silly, both in using better symbols and in clearly stating that they cannot be taken literally. Job can say it better than Bildad, but it's still just parable and poetry.

Job 27

We could wish for better translations of Job into English. The underlying sarcasm and wit are not easily translated across the centuries, miles and cultural distance. Having been pushed relentlessly by the idiotic arguments of his erstwhile friends, having bounced his facts off the stony heads and hearts of this trio, Job sometimes pushes into hyperbole. We recall that the prologue says Job does not sin in his words, but he does overstate his case as it becomes obvious here. He vows to the God who has denied him justice that he will never admit to their accusations. Job asserts that would be a blasphemous lie against God.

It takes a very hardened heart to imagine that Job recants his previous contentions here. He is mocking the three elders. Yes, it would be great if God's judgment on unjust behavior was so obvious. Would that God put Job's suffering on them! But would the wicked in such a state call out to God and sing His praises as Job had done? They have watched Job from the first day of his mourning. How could they accuse him of evil when he clearly and potently stands with God?

To prove this subtle point, Job repeats some of the assertions they made. When those assertions about God come from the mouths of comfortable men addressing someone in sorrow, it says

one thing. When the same characterizations come from the mouth of the one who suffers the literal symptoms of that litany of wrath against sin, it means something else entirely. Job confesses God's justice in condemning the wicked. But as Job has contended from the start, those characterizations of how God judges sin cannot be taken with such bald literalism. Job's recitation is quite obviously parabolic, loaded with symbolism, not literal description. Much of what he describes as the fate of the wicked is what Job himself has endured.

Job 28

Job's friends had clearly failed to take advantage of revelation. Instead, they relied on their own reasoning as to how things worked, resulting in a miserable failure. Job continues his speech by explaining how wisdom is not within human reach but requires full submission to God.

Job leads off with descriptions of primitive mining. The most valuable material things among men required digging into the earth. He describes vertical shaft mining in remote places to set the tone of how much trouble it is to harvest mineral treasures. Miners try to bring daylight to the deepest reaches of the earth. No other creature invests so much effort in something that cannot be eaten. Given the technological advances, Job supposed mankind had probably found just about everything of value from such extreme efforts.

But the one thing man needs most in this world is not found in mines. More, what men can dig up from such extravagant searches for material wealth cannot buy that one thing we all need. No matter what you can find, make or pile up in terms of things men pursue, none of it – all of it together – cannot purchase wisdom. Could we find a way to search the bottom of the sea, or visit the abode of the dead, we would not find it. Human treasures cannot be weighed in terms of wisdom because the slightest glimmer of wisdom tips the scales against the combined wealth and power of all humanity.

So where do men get wisdom? If you charmed every other living creature, none of them would be able to lead you to it. If you could ask the spirit beings in charge of God's wrath – Abaddon and Death – the best you could get is a report that it could be found, but they haven't actually seen it themselves. God alone knows the path to wisdom. When He began Creation, He wove wisdom into it. Against the vast reaches of our universe, He alone understands how this reality works. Then He declared to all men that the entry to the path of wisdom is embracing His revelation.

Subtle it may be, but Job drives home the point that human effort cannot discover the moral fabric of the universe. They can receive it only from above. Job implies all the blather from the trio was merely the echoes of their own limited understanding, their own reasoning, and bore no connection to what God had revealed up that point.

Job 29

Universal truth is simply not within reach of the human mind, because truth is nothing less than the Person of God Himself. Rather, any knowledge of God is inherently contextual, and we dare not assume anyone else is obliged to accept our ideas. This was the primary sin of Job's trio

of friends. It is also the primary fault of our postmodern age to arrogantly assume that our understanding of God is universal, and that people who experience Him differently, or simply express it differently, are wrong. It comes dangerously close to blasphemy to suggest that the alien culture of Job, far away and long before, was somehow inferior, that God was only practicing until we came along.

It also helps to notice that Job is no longer actually talking to his friends. He recognizes that they are present, but he now regards himself as standing in the Court of Divine Justice. The implication is that Job recognizes what wonderful things God had done for him in the past. The choice to address God in the Royal Third Person is a recognized protocol even today. This and the next two chapters form a unit, a complaint he files with the court.

Job is not promoting himself as the model of human goodness in this chapter. Rather, he laments the loss of a very good life. Most of this qualifies as common figures of speech from his world, expressions you can find elsewhere in Scripture and in other ancient literature of that time and place. The vast majority of this whole book falls into that category. Job notes how other people treated him with respect. We should read it as hyperbole, entirely normal and acceptable in its own context. The whole chapter could be summed up in our modern expression: "What a lucky man he was!"

Job 30

In contrast to Job's previous state at the top of society, he is now below the bottom. The first few verses artistically blend the image of social outcasts with jackals. He starts by suggesting the best of such folks are not qualified to serve as sheepdogs. The phrases are euphemisms for both jackals and lowlife scum. However, it is not simply that these people consider him a joke, and his name a byword for "has-been," but even the kids from this bunch are rude to him. We have a very difficult time imagining how radical this statement is, since our modern entertainment actively encourages youthful sauciness. In Job's world, high birth did not excuse youth from the social duty of respect for any adult male. Job suffers the taunts of those he could have legally killed without anyone so much as raising an eyebrow.

Their treatment of him is a proxy for God's apparent regard. Again, this is parabolic speech, by no means literal. God has removed from Job every last vestige of protection. It's open season and Job finds himself in the free fire zone. It's not just a loss of social standing, but diseases and poverty have taken from him everything that any man would value. How could anyone argue that he's not suffering? He describes what it's like in terms of being tied over the saddle to ride the most violent storms. God ignores his cries for mercy.

Yet Job himself never treated anyone that way. He insists he was always full of compassion for others. When people suffered it so disturbed Job that it felt he suffered with them. We should imagine he contrasts that with how the trio has been with him in his sorrows. He stood ready to claim as his brothers those very jackals that he described at the beginning of the chapter. He ends by remarking that he was more familiar with dirges than dance music because he could not bear to watch others suffer alone.

Job 31

Let's recall how the early chapters state that Job did not sin against God in his words. That doesn't mean he was without error in the sense of how his words affected others. We recognize that the elder trio provoked him beyond measure, and he should have sent them packing, but instead he endured their taunts and bad doctrine. He made the mistake of letting them get to him, encumbering his witness with their folly. So, his words here don't defame God, but he goes too far in defending his honor instead of allowing God to handle it.

These are not Hebrew people; Job and company were under the Covenant of Noah. There are indications for a good bit of oral lore attached to this, lore that was left out of Scripture because it was largely impertinent. Yet we see Job's understanding of it, which does reflect somewhat the same underlying concept of divine justice more intricately laid out in Moses. A primary concern of all the Law Covenants was social stability.

The first few verses (1-12) refer to the social stability that arises from marital fidelity. Straying from the marriage covenant is inherently destabilizing in a tribal society. Job protests that he can't remember so much as coveting another woman, virgin or married. He reaffirms the curse attached to infidelity that his own marriage would come apart. He's not wishing evil on his wife but describing how much of a loss it would be to him. Not simply losing her exclusive companionship, but it entails a scandalous situation so severe that we hardly comprehend it in our modern times. He would be the laughingstock of everyone; it would follow him wherever he went in this world. Not just making him a nobody, it would render him a has-been of the worst sort.

The second paragraph (13-23) covers the wider social obligation of charity. In that time and place, a social outcast was lucky to survive. Consider the curse on Cain. So, treating others with kindness and seeking to offer at least a little of what made life possible was almost an obligation to prevent being ostracized. Job indicates he went well beyond the mere minimum expectations; he was the model of compassion to which others aspired. Again, he reaffirms the justice of the curse associated with selfish meanness to others.

The third section (24-34) has to do with various forms of idolatry. There was no sin in being respectful of the religious devotions of pagans, but this refers to the basest sort of religious treason. There are provocative acts that would make God out to be little more than a powerful man, who couldn't read Job's heart, but would have to rely on human tattling or direct observation to catch Job being disloyal. The last part of this section reveals various expressions of blasphemy by not trusting in the vast provision of God. While it echoes the previous section regarding compassion and charity, in this instance it points to a different cause for such sin.

In the final verses of this chapter, Job affirms his eagerness to face the judgment of God but can't seem to get a fair hearing. There is a note of humility, completely willing to confess publicly any sins revealed. He is fully confident that God would receive him. Then, one last time Job embraces the penalty for moral failure. He repeats one of the curses he would face for moral injustice as a symbol of his desire for divine justice on all the earth. We are told Job speaks no more.

Job 32

People in the Ancient Near East would recognize that most moral questions can be answered differently on different levels. They were untroubled by apparent paradoxes and reversals of good and evil when viewing the exact same issue from different contexts. Sin was seldom black and white in their world, and seldom all that simple in Scripture. Western absolutism and simplistic moral understanding are closer to what the trio thought than it is to what God said in His Word.

Here's a fellow who arose from the Tribe of Buz, living on the border of Edom. Elihu observed proper protocol and waited his turn, which was last in line because he was the youngest. The narrative tells us he was angry with the three men for being such idiots, but angry with Job for partly missing the whole point. When Job allowed the trio to provoke him, his answer went off course. Job felt compelled to defend himself when he should have set that question aside and focused on their false ideas about God.

We note this younger man is careful to clear the path for his bellyful of impatience. Then he again reminds all who listen that he is not taking sides with any human, but with God, as he sees it.

Job 33

Elihu begins by noting he claims no special privilege or revelation. He appeals to Job as a fellow creature of God and does not accuse him of sin any worse than his own. Would Job listen to the words and see if they reflect his own understanding of God's revelation? Elihu has neither means nor desire to offer any kind of threat, only a little help.

He notes that Job has overstated his case. He let the trio get to him and answered the wrong question, offered the wrong argument. It sounds too much like Job said God was unjust, and that simply wasn't right.

What Job held forth is a challenge that God would not answer. It was the wrong approach. Surely Job was aware that God speaks in more ways than any man could receive. You have to include the whole range before you claim God refuses to speak. Could God not speak to Job in the suffering, too? Was not this at the very least a message to drive Job into the Creator's Presence? God takes no joy in human sorrow, but hardly keeps them from it, either. All of God's work among men is aimed at driving them back into His moral truth. Circumstances may bring us under the shadow of death, but so long as our life serves any use to Him, He will surely save it. When it was all over, Job would have a testimony of salvation.

Elihu reminded Job of God's mercy and persistence. He reminded Job of the complex interplay between life here and eternity, and how our focus should be the latter even while we are here wrapped up in the former. Now would be a good time for Job to stop testing God and repent from allowing the three men to distract him. Elihu had no intention of tearing Job down, but to build him back up. He begged Job to come back to the right side of this issue.

Job 34

Elihu endeavors to use the same linguistic manners as Job and his friends. So, he offers words on their level and invites them to assess carefully in a wider context whether the things they have said make any sense. Elihu suggests that all four of them got all twisted up around esoteric arguments that never went anywhere. He uses the image of tasting words in the sense of waiting until the palate has been cleansed. Let's start afresh.

In the standard hyperbole of Ancient Near Eastern expressions, Elihu satirizes Job's arguments. Carry them to their obvious conclusion, Job. Did you really mean to say that God was unjust? He quotes Job accurately enough, though. Job said he could not lie about his own righteousness, but he nearly left out the wider context of essential humility. Elihu said Job was swilling large gulps of near-blasphemy and giving support to those who did evil. Picking up where Job left off with the trio, one could make the case that there was no point in keeping loyalty to God.

This is all wrong, Elihu says. God is the definition of justice. He most certainly does pour out His wrath on sin, whether or not anyone else sees it. And to whom is God accountable? Who made Him God? The implication is that it wouldn't matter, because we are not accountable to whomever that might be, but to the God who made us. If God decided to withdraw His active Spirit from all flesh, every human would die immediately.

Who could imagine that God does not hold accountable even the highest of human rulers? God does not judge as humans do, so don't be confused by what your senses and reason tell you. Nothing is hidden from Him. He seldom calls men to account directly, but sends His wrath upon His own timing, in His own measure. You never know when you'll awaken with a different human ruler over you. God didn't reveal His laws out of amusement, but He also has no obligation to make them work as you wish. He is the final judge, and His revelation is pretty clear on what He expects.

So Elihu asks the question here: Has any of you spoken a note of repentance? When was repentance ever a mistake? Notice that Elihu has already hammered both Job and the trio for their mistakes. So, should God not punish them? They have to decide because they are ones who have sinned, not Elihu. But he is particularly annoyed at how Job departed from lofty wisdom and groveled in the silliness of a debate that was beneath him. In so doing, he said things that could lead others to blasphemy.

Job 35

The moral reasoning of Job's culture operated on multiple levels simultaneously. There simply is nothing to parallel this in Western Civilization. Job and the trio were guilty of contextual confusion in their debates. To be more precise, Job's friends were highly confused about the contextual boundaries and Job should have known better but allowed them to pull him off course. Job was right in what he said but put things in the wrong context.

Elihu points this out. It's one thing to address God as Lord, but you cannot take literally the symbolism of His lordship, as if He were some earthly potentate. Human protocols only go so far; God is God. His Person is rooted outside this universe. Job said he stood blameless before

God. In the context of what the trio argued, this much was true. Job had not sinned in the way they insisted he must have. But then Job carried this across into another context by suggesting that God was somehow supposed to answer his complaint.

Thus, Job's complaint intimated that there was no point in such righteousness. It was as if God owed him something. Elihu wants to know if Job is talking about the same God, the one who resides in another dimension of existence altogether. There is a sense in which our sins and our righteousness have no effect on Him. Elihu does not suggest God ignores us or that we cannot touch His heart, but that we cannot affect His divine being. You cannot leverage anything against God either way where He resides in Heaven.

On the other hand, you can sin on a human level, and it will most certainly affect other humans. So does righteousness also affect others, as do words that are appropriate or inappropriate to the context.

Lots of people complain loudly about human injustice. Oppression is the scourge of human existence in this fallen world. What's new? Do we see people crying out to God simply because He is God? No, we see them crying out to Him so they can leverage His action on behalf of a better life. That misses the whole point of knowing about God, which is the unspeakable joy of knowing God Himself. The one moral capacity of mankind not granted to any other creatures is richly celebrated in the poetic phrase: "My Creator who gives me songs in the night."

Most people have no clue; they just call on God for themselves. Such noise does not rise to God's throne. Surely, He is aware of it, but entertains none of it in His divine authority. How much less would He pay attention to Job's demand for a hearing in the flesh? Worst of all, Job suggests that his suffering serves no purpose at all. That's just too obviously wrong.

Job 36

Context is everything. To our Western eyes trained to read literally, this chapter could seem no different from what the trio said. However, Elihu has established already that he is not on their path. Thus, the same words in the mouths of the trio do not carry the same meaning as they do in Elihu's mouth. The emphasis here is not on what God does among men so much as it indicates something of God's character.

In the first few verses, Elihu asserts with confidence that he speaks for God. Not so much in the vein of a prophet bearing specific authority, but one whose words should be convincing simply because they reflect the ultimate truth. God plows His own path in the human heart, so Elihu need not worry about establishing his credentials; the truth should be self-evident. He does not claim perfection in himself, but a perfection in the truth he speaks.

Unlike the trio and their literalism, Elihu offers a symbolic frame of reference. Insofar as the trio used words to ascribe to God various attributes, such speech was accurate. Yes, we know that God is self-consistent and certainly powerful enough to do His own will. He does not sponsor wickedness and His revelation is meant to bring justice to those robbed of His promises. In His own realm He regards the righteous as the true royalty of humanity. It is the righteous who receive His attention, so that they live with boundaries that the wicked may never notice. The

child who is undisciplined is unloved. So, it is the righteous who seem to receive more discipline from God than do sinners. He doesn't waste that much time on people who would never listen in the first place.

Thus, it is also the righteous who may well be the first to die for failure to repent. The wicked don't get the message, so they would hardly cry out to God if He disciplined them. They are already dead in that sense, before adulthood. They are irresponsible in the most perverse ways. Elihu uses the image of cult prostitution where the more degrading the acts, the more sacred to the filthy heathen gods – this is the logical conclusion of their thinking. The wicked are inherently perverse regardless of how they actually behave in society.

Then Elihu says quite bluntly that the righteous are delivered by suffering. Suffering serves a divine purpose, driving us into the arms of God. The path to God is paved with suffering. We cultivate a conscious awareness that life isn't supposed to be like this, but the only escape is to suffer through this life for the sake of something better. We get the logic backwards and blame God for not giving us relief, but we seek the wrong kind of relief. It's not as if we can't have a good life here, but it requires we first obey Him from the heart, not merely in rote conduct. A preoccupation with dodging suffering guarantees that we will suffer needlessly. It is the work of demons to bribe us into wickedness by offering worldly ease and comfort. What they offer cannot follow us into eternity.

So Elihu, using the image of the night of soul, warns Job that it is improper to long for death. Don't get lost on the path to recovery. Who is there with sufficient standing to tell God that He can't afflict the righteous more than the wicked? Suffering calls forth praise for His name. Then Elihu provides an example by praising God for His ineffable wisdom and power over His own creation. The lyrical expression is richer than any translation can show. As the thunder shakes the earth, so His greatness makes sensible men quiver because they understand His wrath and recognize that it is also His blessing.

Job 37

The literary purpose of Elihu's final words here is to open the door to what God intends to say when He finally speaks. To see the whole point of all this, we take a moment to review how we got here. Was Job such a terrible man among men that his sin called for such a brutal experience? That is the wrong question. Elihu has already showed us that God speaks loudest to those most likely to listen. In the paradox of divine logic, those most pure receive the greatest suffering because they should already understand this life is at best shadow and deception. The righteous are the only ones who profit from sorrow. God brings sorrow not to punish, but to purify. The wrath that falls on evil souls begins with making it seem so completely random, but for the righteous it always has a clear purpose that they could know if they would climb out of the cesspool. Moral purity is also moral clarity of vision; the two are inseparable.

From the beginning we are told that Job did not sin in his words. His error was tactical, not strategic. The mistake didn't change the outcome; it simply made things harder for Job. It is entirely human to become absorbed in suffering when it visits. It brings a sense of confinement, characterized by our awareness of time and space constraints. These are critical elements of the

Fall, and Job wallowed in them. The other issue was slipping into the mistake of taking his own parable too literally. Talking about having a meeting with God should be parabolic, and the symbolism of taking one's complaint before God is rather obvious. Job made the mistake of pressing the symbol too hard, so that anyone listening would be unsure it was mere parable. It had the effect of giving listeners an excuse to blaspheme because Job allowed the trio to pull him off his high moral ground.

The final remedy offered by Elihu is the reminder of just who it is we are talking about: Our Creator. And quite literally, we see Elihu referring to an approaching storm system sweeping across the land. It makes his heart leap to think that the gathering rumble is like the voice of God. By His merest whim, whole weather patterns and seasons shift completely outside of our expectations, disrupting human plans. Take a break, folks, while God shows you something about real work. Whatever God wants to make of it, so it will be.

Could Job even get involved in such work? Job can't even cool off his own clothing should a faint breeze blow up the heat from the south, so how could he pretend to assist in placing the storm clouds? The lyric poetry here shames Job's attempt to speak too much as if God would even pay attention to a legal case humans brought before Him. Who would dare complain at how God did His business? Certainly, someone like Job would not complain, who should know better. What God decides to do is not up for any human review. Of all people on the earth, the righteous should know better than to suggest anything God does to them might be in any way unjust.

Job 38

The storm arrives. Whether literal or not, it surely must have felt all too real for Job. We can't pretend to know how God speaks to others, so one reader's imagination is as good as the next. Job got a message only God could send. In any language, the imagery here is too rich for mere minds, but strikes to some part of the soul much deeper than mere intellect.

Like a cheap perfume in the presence of sweet flowers, commentary on the text is almost embarrassing. We note that here and in the next chapter God's message does follow the same order as Creation. There is first the mention of light and darkness, with the same moral implications for which darkness and light represent falsehood and truth. God's moral character is infused throughout Creation. The heavens as the place earth hangs are followed by separation of sea and land. God dwells on the issue of climate and weather as utterly beyond human control, completely in His hands. He mentions vegetation, the luminaries in the skies and animal life.

What we notice most at this point is that God asks the question: To what could we compare Him with any hope of understanding? We could fancy that today we understand some of the mechanics of our world, but we cannot possibly nail down with any significant accuracy what will happen before it comes. God goes on to note that we cannot reach out into space and adjust the movements of the stars. Can we create sentience? We cannot pretend to know which animals should be fed by what means and which should die from various causes. Even when we try, we only make things worse by meddling.

God is the Creator, and none of us is Him.

Job 39

Is it so hard to imagine that God would speak to a man in his own language? And is it so hard to imagine God would use a man's own cultural images? Some cultures and languages do lend themselves much better to the way God has always communicated to mankind in the fallen context, and here is the quintessence, the pinnacle of how God wants man to understand His revelation.

The images here are wild animals Job might have encountered in his place in history and geography. Each is cast in terms of Job's cultural norms. Domestic goats are dependent and know it; wild goats owe no such allegiance to people. The latter probably do not eat so well and have to guard their own safety, but few can even catch sight of them at the best of times. It was a common saying that no one had ever seen a wild goat give birth, a figure of speech indicating that some totally natural things were out of human reach. One might say similar things of wild deer. And catching sight of their young is a rare treat.

The term "wild donkey" refers to onagers, an uncommon term in the West. Before horses were domesticated in human history, onagers could be harnessed to primitive wagons, just barely. Riding on their backs was considered impossible. By Job's time, other animals had taken their place in human use, so harnessing them had become quite rare, a dim memory of legend. They were among the fastest animals alive in that land, free and extremely troublesome to handle. Could Job, or any other man, change their habits and choice of habitat? God made them for that. Did anyone imagine onagers would prefer pulling under some driver's command?

Perhaps more dangerous were wild oxen. Getting one of them to tolerate human presence was hard to imagine. God suggested that He could get anything He wanted from a wild ox. Could Job even get near one, much less make it do his work?

An ostrich was too stupid to care for its own eggs and hatchlings, yet it outran a horse and rider easily. And that horse – could Job craft anything as beautiful as a horse's mane? Do war horses fear humans? A trained chariot team actually looked forward to charging into battle formations. If only human soldiers could be made so eager for battle, but against cavalry most conscripts would scatter. Rare was the infantry army trained and able to face chariots.

Yet above them all soar the birds of prey and carrion eaters. They wait their turn to clean up the battlefield. Yet when men lived, they could hardly chase those birds down. Far lesser creatures, birds were a frequent image of what happens when too many people are slaughtered in battle. A favorite taunt was to say how your enemy would be bird food. God made those birds that way. What did Job make?

Job 40

Again, we must renew our awareness that the text says Job did not sin, but that he went too far in his use of parabolic expression. He is not condemned here but corrected. Job got too wrapped up in answering the trio's charge that he had sinned and was seduced into verbally suggesting

that he could win a dispute with God. While such a blasphemous notion is heartily affirmed in some other ancient texts of perverted teaching, God slaps that down quickly.

God asks just who it was that dared contend with Him. Job immediately denied having any standing to do so. He confessed regret at opening his mouth previously. What Job had said was that if God called him to account, he would stand innocent. God warned that this left open the dangerous idea that any human might be fit to question divine justice. God challenged Job to correct Him. The measure of Job's righteousness was sufficient for God to hear his cry for mercy, but just barely. To stand and call God to account was ludicrous. Job's righteousness was a robe granted by God, not Job's by right. It would not be sufficient to judge any other man.

Then the Lord launches into a poetic description of Behemoth, a term that could mean almost any large dangerous animal. In Job's world, it would have been most likely a reference to the water buffalo. These could be found in the Lower Jordan Valley and were undisturbed by the likes of seasonal flooding when other animals and people avoided the surging flow. Those rushing waters would hardly have swept away water buffalo, and humans were unable to capture them without serious risk to life and limb. Could Job tame one, much less create such a beast?

Job 41

If we haggled too much over what creature is marked by the nickname Leviathan, we would miss the point entirely here. Should we need something approaching a literal animal, a crocodile or any of the larger sea creatures seen from time to time would suffice. In the minds of Job and his people, there need be no particular distinction between them. Leviathan is partly legendary by necessity for a desert-dwelling folk.

We have noted already that God would not hesitate to use whatever tool is needed to get His point across. It simply is not possible for any human language to express directly what God is, much less what He thinks. Parabolic expression is the only way for God to speak, for it is our Creator addressing human mortality. Not only do we not reach outside our time-space prison, but we are fallen within it. The human mind cannot comprehend anything about God, so all discussion of Him can only be indicative, using symbolic logic.

Thus, the creature called Leviathan seems a bit fantastic for a pedantic literal reading. But the implication is obvious: There is much inside our time-space bubble that we cannot comprehend, never mind handling it directly. How could we pretend to operate on God's level where He stands outside that bubble? We would be more successful wrestling a fire-breathing monster with impenetrable armor than to argue with God. At least we could physically approach Leviathan, in theory at least, but God is rooted outside our realm of existence. And even with today's unspeakable weaponry, we still could not create such beasts from our limited understanding of what can and cannot live in this fallen realm of existence. That's because we do not comprehend the fundamental moral fabric woven into all of Creation in the first place, the moral character of God Himself.

Leviathan is a parable of divine revelation, of parable itself.

Job 42

Job confesses that God is beyond limits as He is the One who created boundaries. God's divine justice cannot be thwarted by anything or anyone within Creation. Then Job answers the two direct questions God asked of him, in recognition that he is the one accountable here. He confesses that his mouth outran his human understanding. Then he notes that, while previously his only knowledge of God was the oral traditions of revelation, now he has met God face to face, insofar as such a thing could be. The one thing Job had sought had arrived, and it was nothing as he had expected. At the meeting with God, the only thing in his mind was the overwhelming sense of mortality and his immeasurable need to repent.

The answer to Job's suffering is a simple matter of perspective. Fallen man is quite fortunate when he does *not* suffer, because no degree of moral righteousness is sufficient to cover his fallen nature.

The epilogue returns us to the same prose as the prologue. God instructed the trio to repent and present their offerings before Job as God's chosen representative, His priest for the occasion. The offerings were substantial according to the customs of their social rank. God scolded them as lying against Himself when they lied about Job's moral purity. Job wanted answers and was ready to learn; these men refused any answer that was not small enough to fit inside their human reasoning. We are thus left doubting they learned much from this encounter, and the symbolism reminds us that there will ever be people who will need the ministry of a precious few who do have clear spiritual insight.

When Job performed his ritual duties for them, the Lord then restored Job's fortunes. He moved the hearts of others to enrich Job and he ended up with twice what he had before this all started. It was not because Job was such a worthy fellow, but because the message of God and His glory would be hindered otherwise. That's the whole reason for anything, be it pleasant or unpleasant in our lives pursuing moral purity. God's divine justice is its own reward.

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

The sarcasm and mocking Solomon offers here could easily be aimed at the large number of Western Christians who don't get Hebrew wisdom literature. The underlying premise of the book is portraying the vanity of trying to understand life, the universe and everything from a merely human point of view. Is there anything man can devise or do on his own that would give meaning to our human existence? The wisest man in human history could not come up with a good answer, try as he might all the ways men seek to conquer this existence.

That much is obvious. The difficulty is that very few in Western Christianity have a clue about the fundamental human approach Solomon uses here. This book is easily the pinnacle of Hebrew mysticism. That is, there is nothing here truly spiritual, in the sense that this book is wholly a matter of God's moral laws for fallen mankind. This is moral wisdom on an earthly level for an earthly existence. It does point to spiritual depth, but never mentions it directly, as is the case with published Law Covenants. As non-Western literature, there is nothing here of questioning the nature of existence, nor defining the meaning of things from a rational position.

That's the wrong question here. The question is how to make the most of human existence after the Fall, how best to obtain the very most life here can offer.

That question is played out while pretending to avoid references to revelation. Solomon experiments with all the ways men pursue the different approaches, and he does so with vastly superior native ability. He does make reference to mere logic in the rational mold, but dismisses it, too. In the end, he answers with the assertion that, taking the very best of all the various philosophical approaches to the basic question of how to make the most of our human existence, and using the very deepest and wisest mind with access to as much human knowledge as existed at that time, you still can't come up with anything better than a pretty simple grasp of God's Laws.

Solomon didn't have to put pen to parchment here; he had numerous scribes working in the palace. It's possible this was published after his death. However, you can't take seriously scholars who assert it comes from Post-Exilic times, because by then, only a tiny handful of Hebrew scribes could possibly understand what Solomon meant. They would have written up an entirely different book from his notes. By the time the Exile was over, Hebrew Mysticism was virtually forgotten, and this book is very firmly the product of classical Hebrew Mysticism before the Exile. Rather, this book follows in the great ancient traditions of building a curriculum of wisdom training for servants in the ruling court. This was Solomon's handbook for young men hired onto the royal staff. In that tradition the ruler was truly the smartest man in the room, while mere figureheads were despicable. Solomon is the ultimate Teacher of his own recruits.

Ecclesiastes 1

There is no ambiguity in the author's identity: Solomon, heir of King David to the throne in Jerusalem. He calls himself "the one who assembles," a Hebrew pun describing one who assembles words of truth, then assembles people to teach the truth.

The first thing he tells us is to not take this world too seriously. Ambition is sheer folly. It doesn't matter what you bring to the task, you can't make much of it by yourself. No matter what you accomplish by any scale of human measure, it won't make any difference for very long. You can't change the rotation of the earth, the movement of wind currents or the hydrological cycle. The better you understand things, the more it drives you nuts. The one thing you most want to change is hardest of all – human nature. It ever reaches for things it cannot and should not have. What little improvement there could be requires paying attention to human history, but even if someone records it, mankind still repeats some variation of the same old efforts.

Again, the issue is not whether we can change our world physically. We should know better than that, Solomon says. The one thing that affects us all the most is fallen human nature. If there is one thing we could fix, and should try to fix, the one thing which is the key to all our problems, it would be human nature. Thus, the whole point of verse 15, for example, is a description of human nature itself – irreparably bent and broken.

Solomon informs his readers that he has examined the issue fully. Human talent, wisdom and creativity simply cannot change anything that matters. No matter what some brilliant mind

dreams up to give life meaning, it's already been tried. Here he sits, the wisest human on earth so far, downright legendary for his grasp of things. With all that he gained in the wisdom department, he still can't change anything. God has revoked human access to the Garden of Eden, so man must work simply to stay alive, and it is work guaranteed to do little more than keep him alive. Should he somehow amass the resources for leisure, he ends up wanting more of something else. It is unspeakable misery to realize nothing can be done to nudge humanity back where it could be.

The greatest peace fallen men can have is engaging the task itself of staying alive and minding your own business. Sure, give expression to your soul's longings but never take yourself seriously. Once you begin to imagine that you have some advantage over others, you cannot avoid creating trouble for yourself and others. You will only make things worse. Royal staff should aim first and foremost to be faithful to their assigned task, as if it were the only thing that mattered.

Ecclesiastes 2

The question remains: Can a human of his own reasoning come up with better answers about life in this world? Surely becoming king is worth something, no? Solomon describes how he kept a part of his awareness objective in testing everything. This isn't plunging wantonly into mere physical pleasure but includes that idea as a small part of a much bigger picture. Solomon tested the limits of what his position offered.

As the legendary King of Wisdom, Solomon entertained an endless stream of royal guests, the greatest artisans, the widest range of scholarship, exposing himself to everything a man could know about the world and the people in it. This did not satisfy his quest. At the same time, he indulged himself in the widest range of culinary experiences, using the shorthand term of wine-tasting. The whole time, he reserved a portion of his awareness for gauging whether any of it seemed to make life worthwhile of itself. Was partying with the greatest minds of this world going to bring some lasting sense of satisfaction? It would not.

Next, Solomon threw himself into the work of amassing material possessions. He explains how he built structures for every use man could imagine. Nor was this in any way frivolous. Not just water parks and gardens for himself, but he included genuine works of civil engineering that helped others. We know Solomon was a prodigious builder and architect in his own right, a genius at engineering. He gathered a vast army of slaves, piles of treasures from all over the world and the most rare and beautiful specimens any collector could desire. He had musicians running out his ears and more women in his harem than a single man could get to know even as a passing acquaintance. None of these things filled the void in the soul.

What about the eternal question of wisdom versus folly? Of course, it's better to be wise and intelligent. A fool has no idea what he's doing or where his life is going. Such folks might never understand how they got where they are. A wise man, even with no power whatsoever, can at least see where things are going, what the results will be of things he does or does not do. Then again, the final end of both is about the same, since all die and return to dust. The one really bad side-effect of Solomon's vast wisdom is that he clearly understood even wisdom was futile in

that sense.

Worse, he clearly saw how everything he had gained would be passed onto his sons, regardless of whether they were foolish or wise. They would probably be deprived of the experience of rising up on their own accomplishments, because there would be little left for them to do, since their father had done it all. What was the point of all this work? The work itself was probably the best thing and that's something that can't be passed on to his sons.

Wisdom and native talent drive you relentlessly in the daylight. When you try to sleep, you always rehash everything you did and failed to do. So, while it's good in general for a man to work and enjoy the fruit of his own labor, the mere act of enjoyment is a gift of God's mercy. God can easily take away the fruits of honest labor, but just as easily take away the joy itself. Everything men might imagine they could want comes from God. Some folks God has favored with moral wisdom, but fools only know about how they want something they don't have. And once they get all they can, God gives it to the wise. You can't fight God.

Ecclesiastes 3

What can we know from the human level? In Hebrew, context is everything. Thus, contextual awareness was common sense to folks in Solomon's time but was included by God's design. No one should strive to be the same in all contexts, as if he could think of only one thing to do. That would be stupid, an obvious moral wrong. The Hebrew culture viewed time in terms of ripeness, and the idea of measuring and metering time with schedules was almost alien. Yes, we know God will bring the seasons around in their course so long as the earth stands, but He retains the prerogative of mixing things up. Thus, we should always wait to see what God brings to us.

Depending on the context, the same person could righteously gestate and give birth or allow things to die. By parallelism, it could be a time to sow or plow things up, to wound or cure, to destroy or build. We all experience moments when it's appropriate to weep or celebrate, to break down the walls or to build up the barriers for protection, or a time to build community and a time to isolate. There are moments in our lives when ambition serves a purpose and when it's pointless. There's a time to rip your garments in the sorrow of great loss and a time to repair when grief is spent. It would seem there are many more times for keeping your peace than there are times to speak out, as there would be circumstances favoring friendship and love against times for distrust and even forceful correction. So much we should be able to understand, because no single thread of conduct fits all occasions.

The same train of thought continues. What's the point of fighting and struggling against things? When could you be sure from your human level that it's appropriate to challenge the apparent fate of the day? How can you tell when God will give you success and when He will crush your dreams? And when should you continue in spite of the results? We are assured He has a beautiful plan, but you can't discern it from your human wisdom alone. God will not be confined to such reasoning.

If all you can do is focus on the end product, you'll never understand anything. There is a way of joy, and it's not wrapped up in the stuff we can understand. It's the joy of communion with

God, in the give and take of His mercy and revealed truth. Work without His guidance is always pointless, even if you get all the things your human soul desires. God alone gives joy. Once you understand His revelation, it all makes sense. God's creation remains fully in His hands, and He controls the results of human activity to suit Himself. He's the only One who really understands what He has done. You cannot change any of it.

To Solomon, it was painfully obvious that God was the final judge of what men did on the earth, but that people were naturally inclined to get things backward. There is a place in God's plans for everything men could do. People need to see that, without God's guidance, they are just smart animals. From the earthly standpoint, there was no particular advantage because all life ends on this plane. Every living thing returns to dust. Man cannot reason his way to recognition of what comes after this life. You cannot prove on the human level that people go to face God and animals fade into oblivion. About the only hope such a man has is to enjoy his life and work, because that's the whole story of what he is if we have only what men can understand from their human abilities.

Ecclesiastes 4

Solomon continues his theme that human wisdom without revelation is confusion and madness. He next points out that, as bad as life is without the Word of God, it can only get worse when you consider how humans interact or refuse to interact.

Look at how oppression is so common. Solomon refers here to personal oppression, human meanness, not simply the casual disregard of others. What can you do when someone has the power over you and delights in your suffering? Without revelation offering a purpose for bearing up under such things, it would be better to lie down and die. Indeed, it's better we don't let other humans be born in such a horrible world.

Why do we see so many people struggling for things out of simple envy? It's a moving target; you'll never arrive at satisfaction. What a rotten way to live. It's as bad as doing nothing and expecting others to carry you. Eat your own flesh, lazy man. Still, with only human wisdom, you'll never find reason for producing more than you can use. You'll never care to save up enough to share because it seems so pointless.

Then again, when your life is consumed with greed, how do you live? You isolate yourself; you can't trust anyone at all. You withdraw from family and friends because you don't want to share. What happens when you need something your wealth can't buy? Who is going to care when you fall, or you feel cold and lonely? Who will defend you when someone stronger comes to take your stuff? Human wisdom doesn't understand the parable of the triple stranded rope, a hint that God didn't make us to live alone. Again, without revelation to guide your understanding of reality, you'll never come up with anything that works.

Solomon draws on sarcasm, mocking himself. Better is someone who is ambitious and hungry, because he will listen to advice from those who have succeeded. The man who has lived long and thinks he has arrived at the top won't listen to anyone. The king is prisoner of his own status, while the peasant lad has nothing to lose, and is free to explore everything in the kingdom. No matter who you are, someone is going to take your place. Despite all the social

rituals and monuments of past rulers, how can anyone love the man himself, since they can't actually know him?

If all you have is human wisdom, all of this is pointless.

Ecclesiastes 5

Solomon begins here to confront directly the folly of attachment to this realm of existence. Only a fool takes this world's concerns too seriously.

If you think of God as a Western king, you'll never understand the Bible. He portrays Himself as an Eastern sheikh; there is no law or logic outside His Person. He defines reality and is in no way constrained by it. People who dream of solving the world's problems are fools; they are morally blind and cannot grasp reality. It's not a sin to want the best God offers under His Laws, but it's downright evil to assume your human logic can conceive of a better world and make it happen. Even if all you care about is your own comfort, you cannot possibly build your life on your dreams. Such talk is empty and leads only to sorrow, unless it reflects directly what God has promised.

We've all had to endure dreamy big talkers. If only they could get this or that advantage, they would change reality itself. As King of Israel, Solomon had his fill of such idiocy, people asking for this or that authority and how wonderful it would be if they could just get what they needed so they could act on their grand dreams. God must have it even worse. What must it be like to have people traipsing into the Temple and making all sorts of silly bargains with God? It would be a whole lot wiser to go to the Temple and listen to what God has to say. Try your best to understand what God said is and must be, and confine yourself to that reality. What will you tell Him when you promise to do this or that, and He decides to grant your request, but you are unable to carry out your grand promises?

You want grand piles of material wealth? That translates to grand taxes. You think your local lord is greedy? Someone higher taxes him, and someone higher yet taxes them both. They all get a piece of the pie, so the best produce of your garden plot ends up on the king's table. That's the reality of this world. The only way to avoid taxation is to have nothing productive to tax. (Tithing and taxation only applied to those who produced things, primarily agricultural products.) And what the tax collector leaves behind, your relatives will consume. You get to own it just long enough to look upon it with pride before it's confiscated by someone else. Stop investing so much emotional energy in what you can pretend you'll have tomorrow, because you cannot predict what God will do. Just enjoy what you have today, because people who are owned by their property never rest.

But if you liquidate your wealth into silver and gold, what good is that? Sure, you get to keep it all, but you can't eat it and it won't grow anything by itself. You'll just spend it until it's all gone. So, you invest it and try to make more, right? That's the life! That is, it's a good life until some business deal goes sour, and you lose your investment. If you own no real property, you have nothing to bequeath to your children. Isn't that a great way to build loving memories? Getting wrapped up in the cares of this life is like eating in darkness; it's worse than ordinary blindness because your very own soul is the cause of darkness, filled with constant disappointment.

The notion that you can really accomplish anything of lasting importance in this world is stupid. Yesterday is gone and you don't have tomorrow with any kind of certainty. Don't focus on tomorrow, but on eternity. Take what comes; play the role in which you find yourself right now. Trust what God says in His Laws about providing the needs of those who are faithful to Him. If He gives you lots of stuff, He also gives you the skill to handle it for His glory. If He gives you almost nothing, be glad you have no cares to burden your days. Focus your concerns on what He puts in front of you, and you won't have room for worry.

This is not, "Eat, drink and be merry." This is, "Find joy in obeying the Lord." The Hebrew legacy of revelation was a gift from God, not an impediment to human greatness.

Ecclesiastes 6

Solomon warns others that his position as the wealthiest man in the history of Israel is not enviable. He had surely run across a great many people to whom God had granted great material wealth, but no ability to enjoy it. There are all kinds of reasons why they don't enjoy it, but all of it hinges on getting too wrapped up in this world. Materialism is a curse.

So maybe the fellow with great wealth and honor in his society dies too young. What a pity, no? Someone else gets it all. Okay, so maybe he has a huge family and lives seemingly forever. Does that make it any better? Not as long as the man is worldly minded. It would be just as well that he died at birth, unknown and never conscious, if the only consciousness he has is what comes from man's intellect. Stillborns rest peacefully, never knowing human sorrow. If a man lives millennia, so long as his heart remains in this world, he will never have the wisdom to understand what material blessings mean. He'll never understand what they are for, never understand how God meant them to be used. He eventually dies unhappy.

The basic curse of the Fall is the necessity of work to feed our faces, but the stomach keeps processing the food and gets empty again. So it is with many souls; get what you strive for, and you find yourself feeling unfulfilled. Human wisdom cannot save you from death. A sharp minded pauper will survive, but for what? Stop and consider what you could see if you stop thinking all the time of what your flesh desires. Don't listen to your human longings; they are false.

Human wisdom will not permit you to understand the few limited things God has put in your hands. Your logic will lead you to question God and fight things He has always reserved as His prerogatives. The more time you spend fighting God's decrees, the less you gain. You waste what little time you have in this world running past the great opportunities God has place before you. Without revelation, you cannot comprehend the things God has given to mankind to do. People who ignore revelation are blind; they expect to change reality itself. They don't listen to any warnings about moral inevitabilities.

Ecclesiastes 7

In Hebrew culture, the ultimate symbol of manhood was the shepherd. It was lonely work and required a quiet and watchful temperament. You learned not to expect much from sheep. While

there is a place for the artistic exploration and wandering of the soul, that is for rebuilding the commitment of the shepherd to face the ugly reality of this fallen world. The greatest danger is the foolish young man clinging to his childhood and silly dreams of what might be. Grow up; it's time to see clearly what is and understand it fully. Solomon was hoping to quiet the boisterous folly of young men in royal service by shooting holes in their boyhood games.

More than mere Hebrew parallelism, the first four verses here wander around a common theme. The first line sounds almost cute in Hebrew, as the words reverse similar sounds. The symbolism is very complex: a good reputation versus expensive perfumed ointment. Both have multiple associations that can be contrasted. Being considered wise and decent is better than being rich. The former is actually much harder to get and keep than the latter. If you die with friends who miss you, it's worth more than an expensive funeral. More than echoing the sentiments of the previous chapter – that it's a blessing to die at birth compared to living on this cursed fallen plane of existence – the symbols of birth versus death fill out the meaning of having a good name. People who live through adversity with endurance get a good reputation, while simple worldly possessions have no reflection on your moral qualities. Newborns, wealthy or poor, aren't remarkable for anything yet, despite the social ritual of talking nice about babies.

Children need a lot of careful education. Boredom is the mark of an empty soul. Frequent boredom indicates someone who is so empty that they are utterly dependent on others even for their emotions. Cultivate a sense of contemplation, of paying attention and always seeking improvement. If you waste too much time seeking relief for boredom, you are no better than the silly fools who waste their lives in moral depravity. Don't hang out with people like that. Don't be consumed with ambition, because it is a symptom of moral depravity; at best it is a little boy building sandcastles in his mind. Avoid developing the habit of oppressing others or taking bribes. Wait your turn, lest your foolish mouth offer the hardest lessons of life. Don't fantasize about the old days that never were.

The best inheritance is moral wisdom. It allows you to shepherd those who don't have so much. Money might protect your hide, but wisdom protects your soul. It allows you to make the most of both wealth and poverty. You can't change what God has established in this world, so stop trying. Learn to deal with what this world throws at you, because your plans mean nothing against God's. Sure, wisdom may not give a long life and plenty of evil folks live way too long. Long life by itself means nothing. Don't pick too hard over the external details of orthodoxy and ritual purity. At the same time, don't act like the Law means nothing. Don't place too much emphasis on mere conduct or your life will be pointless, and your death will come unexpectedly. Avoid the extremes. Focus on understanding your calling from God, not trying to organize reality for Him.

You can't trust yourself, so don't expect too much from even the highest ranking in the kingdom. Righteousness is a very elusive quality among humans. Let people vent; pay more attention to what they do than what they say. You've said plenty of things yourself that you couldn't back up. Do you think God honors every blessing or curse that falls from human lips? Even with all his vast wisdom, Solomon could not understand this world completely. Some things will always be out of our reach.

Solomon was rather surprised to discover that among royalty and nobles you are likely to see more of the worst than much of the best of humanity. While good men were seemingly rarer in the upper stratus of society than among the peasants, it was well nigh impossible to find a good woman in high society. Plenty were crafty and dangerous, grasping at power and luxury like demons. In his massive harem Solomon found not a single good woman. It was almost enough to make him abdicate.

God made us for better things, but we waste no time in chasing down the worst.

Ecclesiastes 8

The Hebrew language did not lend itself easily to blunt or direct literal statements. Good Hebrew was loaded with imagery and parabolic expressions. Here, Solomon paints a scene of serving in his courts. Who wants to be a wise servant of the king? Solomon builds an ethic by hints that indicate something far larger, something difficult to render in English.

Wisdom makes you the preferred company, while ambition makes you enemies. You've already committed yourself to obey the king, to be a loyal servant with no hidden agendas. God is watching your heart, so try to make the most of it. In Ancient Eastern courts, one never betrayed a distaste for the king's personal presence, and silly fear only got you into trouble. Just relax and do your job. Few people can keep up a pretense long enough to get away with plotting against something the king really wants. Cynicism is no sin in carrying out his orders, but you should never doubt his ability to keep an eye on you. Acquaint yourself with his ways and what pleases him; develop a sense of timing that makes him smile. A king with a thousand concerns has no time for you to get your act together. You probably cannot imagine the creativity of a king who intends to punish disobedience, though.

But even a king cannot know the future. He can't even restrain the wind, so how could he hold back the hand of death? Once you are deep in the middle of things, you can't bail out. In the heat of battle, your commander isn't going to dismiss you from your place in the ranks. Stand your ground; uphold moral honesty. If immorality owns you, it will always betray you to your enemies. With all his grand wisdom in the flesh, Solomon could not understand how it was that some people were given power over others. No matter how wise the king, somebody is going to be crushed by his most benign choices. No man can change that, so get used to the idea that you can't pick your kings or your superior officers.

That's not the worst of it. In every sector of life there are bad people who gain fame and fortune. The text in this portion varies wildly among the various manuscripts, so don't get hung up on the precise wording of your favorite translation. What the manuscripts have in common is the image of someone who rejects all moral standards and God doesn't strike them dead, even if they come into the Temple itself. We fallen humans are very temporal creatures; when justice doesn't fall in what seems to us a timely manner, we think justice has failed. Solomon warns this is something we all must fight against. Human wisdom cannot unravel the mystery of God's work, His inscrutable choice that seems to violate His own revealed Law. You cannot know who will be hurt when you let that mystery hinder your own holiness.

Don't get lost in such mysteries. Rid yourself of the instinct to correct everything you see, to

demand action from some human agency, or worse, as if you could correct God by calling Him on the carpet for offending your grand logic. Find your role in the scheme of all those things you can't possibly control and be faithful with what lies in your power. Don't worry about things you can't fix. Enjoy the simple good things God brings your way and trust Him. Solomon had already gone the route of trying to figure it all out, worrying about all the things that affected him but that he couldn't do anything to alter. Could he have stayed awake endless days, there wasn't time enough in a human life to figure it all out. Don't believe anyone who claims to have it all worked out on the level of human intelligence. Some things will never make sense.

Ecclesiastes 9

Most translations get this first verse wrong because the translators come at it with Western assumptions. Thus, you'll find a lot of "implied" verbiage added that misses the point: The most important possession any man could ever have on this earth is a sense of peace with God. From human wisdom alone, you cannot discern whether God favors someone because you cannot measure their sense of peace. Yet the person who has it never seems to care much about anything else.

Then Solomon goes on to explain what human wisdom alone concludes. Whether you are perceptibly righteous or evil doesn't seem to affect the human end. Everyone dies sooner or later. Most of us understand from broad observation that there aren't very many good people on the earth. But for what it's worth, the manner and timing of death seems unconnected to righteousness. There is no way to account for this on the human level. Life seems so precious to those who cannot see beyond this realm of existence.

But even then, you at least understand that about the best anyone can hope for is finding peace with their lot in life. Solomon affirms that seeking a clear conscience is best, regardless of where you find yourself. Once you die, all your chances for seeking a clear conscience are gone. He repeats the mythology about the grave that was so common in that part of the world, using it to emphasize the best of human wisdom. Virtually all Ancient Near Eastern cultures believed in an afterlife, but there was no way to say anything about it because it was outside this universe. Instead, they spoke in vague terms of how death leveled all humanity.

Solomon goes on to point out that human wisdom cannot account for any connection between virtue or talent with results of using them, because of what seems clearly a random element of chance. He rattles off popular epigrams that point out virtuosity is no guarantee of success from a human standpoint. All the more so when we consider death.

Then again, wisdom can see well beyond such shallow concerns. Solomon tells the story of a city under attack that ignored wise counsel because that counsel was offered by someone who didn't care enough to scramble for human success. He was poor, so people ignored his wisdom. That makes no sense, either. That's because the truly wise don't waste their time with impressing other people. They'll answer your questions gravely and quietly, not announcing it in the king's court. He hints that political power is seldom matched with real talent for ruling, because wise people aren't ambitious. Wise people aren't looking for the same thing everyone

else wants. But the ambitions of a fool can really ruin things for an awful lot of people.

Ecclesiastes 10

This chapter begins with Solomon restating the end of the previous chapter. A modern equivalent of his comment would be to say one rotten apple spoils the whole barrel. A lot of work and investment can be blown away by one idiot who slipped through the vetting and manifests his folly late in the game. The point is that, in every endeavor, be ready for something to go wrong. Don't be blinded by the brilliance of the plan or the enthusiasm of the team.

So, what happens if your king or supervisor is the fly in the ointment? It's not as if worldly wisdom is no good at all. God's revelation doesn't ignore the very real need for it. Wisdom improves your chances of doing the right thing. Solomon uses a figure of speech about the power and finesse of the figurative sword hand in battle, and how folly gets things backward. People will eventually betray their folly in some of the smallest things, such as walking down the road.

It's fine to be all noble and offer to resign if you manage to disappoint your king, but both you and he will benefit if you simply show poise and patience. Be cynical, because many a king was impressed with some huckster who played to his ego, while the truly noble bore with dignity their lesser assignments. It's better to be the latter in the long run.

Next, Solomon cites a list of common proverbs showing that wisdom does reduce human misery. Think about what you are doing; don't blunder along in life. Don't dig a pit where you travel often; you'll forget and fall into it. Don't break through barriers like a big he-man, when you have no idea what danger lurks on the other side. A quarryman knows better than to stand below active stone cutting, especially his own. Woodcutters know better than to cut off the limb on which they sit. A blunt edge makes for hard chopping. You get the picture; common wisdom usually saves time and lives. Charm the snake before it bites, which subtly implies how you handle people in authority. If the advice is to think about what you are doing before you act, then perhaps you should try charm as your default approach to people.

Wise people tend to speak a lot less, while fools brag about all sorts of things they could never do. Fools pretend to know about things they have never seen, but when caught, they try to talk their way out of it. They don't know when to shut up. Have you ever watched a fool lead the way to a place he's never seen? He'll wear himself out and end up farther away and lost.

It's a pretty sad thing when some idiot inherits the throne. A primary symptom is when the royal household gets drunk before mid-morning. If the king's family tends to be more circumspect, there's hope. Don't confuse caution with laziness. The latter fails to get even the simplest tasks done, leading to disaster later. It doesn't require a stack of wise counselors in long consultation to decide to fix a roof leak. It's pretty rough serving where the powerful know more about partying than actually ruling, and who think money is the solution to everything. Still, don't get frustrated with it. Take it in stride; criticism serves no purpose. Don't even trust your own self with such thoughts. You never know when someone of no significance would seek to curry favor by betraying your confidence.

Ecclesiastes 11

Human wisdom works best when properly informed by revelation. Solomon proposes some lessons not obvious to human reasoning, but obviously useful when examined.

It's difficult to say whether Solomon suggests in this first verse that we should be charitable or make wise investments. Likely it's both, since the whole point is that you have to invest yourself and your resources into this life with a long-term view. Whether you hope to reap a trade profit or a moral reward, you dare not allow yourself to worry about what you give up on the front side. That's how life really works: He who refuses to invest can't make any profit. The second verse advises a diverse portfolio, as well. The obvious point is that bean counters always know what they have but never gain anything. It's the wrong mentality.

Accept your lot in life; seek your divine calling where you are. If you wait for the perfect conditions, you'll miss God's blessings. There is plenty He won't reveal to you; it's not necessary to control all the factors involved to reap the benefits of His blessings. Start early and be faithful until you can't do any more. Invest yourself fully in the moment regardless what your human wisdom may try to tell you about missing out on alternative opportunities. Just because you can imagine a better situation doesn't mean it's in your best interest. God is not constrained by what you can understand when He decides to bless you.

Stop every now and then to see how good life is. We all possess the instinct for this. Celebrate the little things because joy is waiting hidden in the insignificant as well as the things we consider great. Count your blessings; learn from your sorrows. Life is empty to those who are morally blind and think only in terms of human wisdom.

Don't wait until you are older to embrace the peace of moral goodness. Most youthful diversions are harmless enough, but don't let them run away with your soul. Don't take things too seriously, getting worked up over trifles and silly disappointments. Don't plot revenge. Put your own youth in perspective. Every generation before you remembers things from their youth they wish they could forget; listen when they explain why because you are not any smarter than they were. The likelihood that you will see life the same even a few months from now is remote.

Ecclesiastes 12

Continuing where the previous chapter left off, Solomon reasserts the warning to his younger employees that they are accountable first and foremost to their Creator.

If you wait until you are older, the youthful habits of folly will blind you to the truth. We get the feeling Solomon is rather old when he writes this, as he describes old age with such poetic imagery. The grinders are molars older people lose too soon. Faces in the windows represent more than merely your eyes; it's keeping them open and paying attention. The doors to the outer world are the ears. Even when nearly deaf, it is still too easy for the slightest sound to awaken you and lose sleep at night, and hard to stay awake in the day. The hair is white like almond blossoms and old men drag their limbs like injured grasshoppers. Near the end he describes the hanging lamp that falls from its fixture and goes out, then the well of wisdom what dries up or becomes inaccessible. In the end, the body returns to dust.

But this is more than the gripes of aging. Solomon knew all too well of missed opportunities for God's glory. He gave himself to just about everything else but knew he had missed out on what really mattered. You can't go back and demand a second chance to do it right. People who embrace their God early find life worth living, aging just a minor insignificance, and death a mere circumstance. They aren't wrapped up in the futile things of this world.

Solomon reminds his young employees that he has done so very much with human wisdom, writing books, collecting and cataloging proverbs. He has accomplished just about everything he started, and this current training manual is just one more. But in the next breath, he warns it is very easy to waste time on knowledge and miss out on serving God. Don't let knowledge and wisdom become your god. There is a God in Israel, and your first duty is to know what He made you for, what He demands from you. All things must be evaluated through His eyes and if you are going to study anything at all, study His Word. If you miss His justice, nothing else you have will matter. If you are walking in His justice, nothing else matters.

Indeed, there is no wisdom outside understanding God's justice.

Introduction to Song of Solomon

Among King Solomon's many talents we can include poet and playwright. This book is pure fiction. To the degree it might resemble the real-life experience of any particular individual, it would not be Solomon himself, but someone he knew. However, it's only natural that the lead male role is a king, if only as a symbolic figure. In modern terms, it is a musical stage play. There are a handful of roles and scholars have worked out who said what, which saves us a lot of confusion.

We know too little of Hebrew culture. Unlike most biblical literature, this is more about presenting the ideal without any pointed correction of known problems. We cannot guess how much of this drama addresses issues of Solomon's day, but we can easily discern how it varies greatly from our Western social mythology. This book is a presentation of romance done right. The primary reason it is included in the Scripture canon is because Hebrew moral wisdom addresses the whole of human existence, and romance is too important to be left to chance and mythology.

Consistent with what would be the pinnacle of Hebrew art and literature, this work is loaded with parabolic symbolism. The imagery represents devices easily recognized by anyone who watched the original performance. That we are often greeted in modern Western commentary with silly nonsense about it being some kind of allegory between Christ and His Bride, the Church, is typical of the corrupt Western moral view. The Hebrew people would snicker at our vestigial Victorian foolishness about human sexuality, preferring their own no-nonsense, matter-of-fact Eastern approach. Those who follow Christ should be quick to discard their own twisted and perverted world to discover the rich heritage of God's revealed moral perspective. This play reveals how God intended people to build a lasting romantic love, the foundation of social stability.

As with all better Ancient Near Eastern literature, we are easily lost between the various layers of moral reasoning, a host of meanings that anyone lacking a mystical background would miss. Some of it is meant to touch the soul of the individual, offering no particular uniform orthodoxy. The reader is meant to find himself or herself in the merciful healing eye of God's moral character, not the didactic glare of some human teacher. Fundamental to Hebrew narrative is the use of characterization, typically symbolic images with well established associations. Not so much precise meanings, but we should find in it a means to bring the moment to life. Thus, a particular character may seem to our sensibilities a shapeshifter. This is normal, because we should not seek hard descriptions. Offered here in this study is simply one of many possible interpretations, hoping to correct the worst of modern moral failures.

Song of Solomon 1

The primary characters are a king and his bride. She is of noble birth, but presented here as a country girl, familiar with the urban scene, but previously not at home in it. A recurring role is the choir of city girls, not yet married. They often represent the attitudes the bride faces among such women as she enters royal society in the capital city. These are the girls who have hung around the palace environs since birth.

The chapter opens with the rapturous celebration of the bride, likely a short time after learning she is the chosen. She is wholly enamored with her man, and eager to assume the role. She is not in the least bothered that all the other gals are swooning over him; she's just awfully glad he chose her over any of them. She's all too happy to offer herself fully to this man. The girls' chorus agrees that she's a good choice and celebrate with her. A final line has the royal groom affirming that all this rejoicing is fully justified.

In a sort of apology, the bride compares herself to the black goat's hair tents of the Arabic tribes in northern Arabia, people known then as Kedar, along with a similar tribe known as Salmah in the vicinity of Petra. Tanning was not in vogue. Unlike the city girls who hide from the sun to keep their skin milky white, the bride has worked outdoors most of her life. There's a pun here about the burning of the sun compared to the burning anger of her brothers. We aren't told why they were angry, but it was common enough to find rural nobles demanding that the household females earn their keep. In more literal terms, she would have been out there supervising peasants and servants keeping the vineyard. She's no less attractive for it, but notes her own property suffered from neglect because of it. This is another subtle bit of humor; she was forced to neglect all that urban girly stuff and developed a no-nonsense management persona.

Guys, don't be a sucker for mere appearances. Think about how she will contribute to your calling and mission. A gal with strong capabilities can still make you tingle in the bedroom. Ladies, don't rely on mere femininity as your sole contribution to a man's life, even if it is primary. The best queen for a king suffers no inflated sense of entitlement but brings a lot to the altar.

Hebrew culture universally despised whiners. Fresh in everyone's mind when Solomon wrote this was the image of David, a king who earned his crown as a man who never shrank from getting his hands dirty with work or war. David was the shepherd king and anyone so much as

pretending to noble status would be physically present, at least part of the time, when their servants worked in the fields. He fit right into the basic image of the ideal king as shepherding his people. This bride is fully invested in her man's mission. It's not a question of keeping an eye on a wayward skirt-chaser, but a powerful interest in what makes him tick. She wants to be involved. His answer is that he won't be hard to find if she really cares.

Then the groom bursts out in celebration at what a fine lady he chose. Nothing else a man wants could possibly compare. Because she is so very committed to him, he's willing to give her all the things any woman could want. Her response is to focus on the treasure of his love. In a very public setting where his reputation is everything, she allows her exotic and expensive perfume to symbolize her adoration of him. Let them see her in near worship of him because they don't know the half of what she enjoys about being his wife. Provoke their envy, if possible. Among such august company, she has eyes only for him. The chapter closes with another back and forth between them, each reaffirming their devotion to the other in terms wholly consistent with common gender types.

Song of Solomon 2

The bride and groom tell the whole world of their devotion to each other. The treasure here is the collection of images in the unique Hebrew context.

The woman opens with a measure of self-denigration. She's nothing but a common flower of the meadow. We make too much of the early English translators' choice of "rose" when the Hebrew word meant something more common with no noticeable fragrance. The effect is to deny that she is anything special. The man responds that, if so, she happens to be that flower growing among thorns by comparison to other women. It's not that thorns didn't come with flowers, but that picking them would be risky. He has no interest in high-risk romance. He prefers the simple beauty of someone who won't complicate his life with unnecessary drama.

She returns in kind. Apple trees were wholly exotic in Palestine, an imported species requiring a great deal of trouble and care to get any fruit. To find such a thing growing randomly in the forest is a miraculous discovery. She paints the image of embracing him as her covering protection, her relief from a difficult world. His love is more than simply sustaining, but a rare delight. She could never get enough.

In dreamy anticipation, she then paints an image of celebration, the fundamental meaning of sex. That this party hall with sweet wine and exotic food is all about making love should be obvious. Hardly a duty, she's looking forward to it with indescribable passion. The image of how he holds her with one hand and caresses with the other is meant to titillate. The Hebrews were uninhibited and had no discomfort with frank discussion of human sexuality. By the same token, they avoided any hint of bawdiness. It's hard for Westerners to envision a world view without Victorian prissiness.

The lady then turns to warn the other maidens about jumping the gun. The imagery of stags, does, and similar creatures are quite ancient symbols of sexual vigor. She calls them to promise themselves they won't settle for the first thing that comes along and stirs the hormones. Give it time; wait for the right man. We note in passing this would be easier for a rural girl to observe

than a city girl, so she's bringing her country wisdom to bear. Then she conjures the image of patient restraint because God's choice for husband can appear suddenly with little advance notice. So, she encourages them to open their hearts to sensing things not easily noticed in the hustle and bustle of the city. Get out away from all of that and experience the quiet solitude of waiting for something worth the wait. You never know where he'll appear, but you'll know it when you see him because he will be paying attention to you without demanding anything.

Instead, he'll wait for the right moment to win your heart. His appeal will leave you totally free to reject him and his honorable intent will be obvious. He doesn't demand too much too soon. Instead, all he asks is to be near her, to revel in the joy of her simple presence.

Typical of Ancient Near Eastern literature, the Hebrew people used the image of the fox as negative, a destructive influence in romance. The vineyard is generally the symbol of pleasure in marriage, a life of happiness in building a family, having children. In response to the man's call to her, she asks him to invest himself in removing hindrances that would spoil their love. Does he really mean it? Will he reduce his attention to other gals? Don't play games, boy; show me.

Finally, she notes how true love is peaceful, rather like an animal quietly grazing in the meadow where those little flowers grow. She calls to him as the figure of a virile buck to turn aside from the distractions of other social opportunities and stay with her until it's clear as the morning light that he is committed to her. Let the whole world know and he can rut wildly with her.

Song of Solomon 3

Western scholars heavily favor the notion that the first section here is a dream sequence. That would almost be missing the point, as the whole work is a dramatic parable. It is enough to recognize the symbols.

On the night before the wedding, the bride can't sleep, so great is her anticipation. She dozes at best and awakens to find herself feeling around in the bed for her man. She can't rest until she is in his arms. So, she arises from bed and wanders the city where she awaits him. The image of searching and finding is woven lyrically; she does not find him but is found instead by the night guards. The situation itself is rather crazy, which is precisely what a bride ought to feel at such a moment. She's safe, but not where she wants to be. Ancient tribal people would have been careful to post guard over a noble bride as the marriage arrangements became more certain. It was the basis for political alliances that easily outlived the people involved. Far more than a simple covenant between husband and wife, there is much more at stake here.

Because these watchmen stand on the walls, they would have a much better view of the surrounding territory. The bride queries whether there was yet any sign of his entourage approaching. He would come with a large ceremonial escort, so it's not as if they would miss it. The wording indicates she keeps wandering below the walls, asking all the guards at their various lookout points. This whole scene follows elaborate social customs in the Ancient Near East. The bride would wait at the finest house among her kinfolk, and the groom would show up at some random hour, typically during darkness. It's part of the game to sneak up and surprise everyone, to keep them in suspense. Thus, she no sooner queries the guards when her

groom shows up.

She clings to him and won't let go. She drags him to the bedchamber in which she was conceived, a symbol of completing the circle of life. We have no evidence, but it would seem this was also a custom, at least during Solomon's reign. What we dare not miss is the image of "Take me now!" She repeats the previous refrain that suggests a genuine love is worth waiting for, but it now has an added meaning. Anyone wishing to greet the honored guest will simply have to wait until they have their conjugal moment.

The role of Narrator is introduced to us, rather like a royal crier. Here is the picture of the king returning with his queen, riding in splendor back to his palace city. Granted, Solomon inserts himself into the story here. However, had he actually observed this ancient ritual for every one of his weddings, he would have had time for little else during his reign. It would have gotten boring, and the spirit of celebration would have been forced. We aren't supposed to notice such things, and this is part of what makes the entire drama fictional. However, a more typical king with less profligate habits is what we are supposed to see here. It would hardly be such a wonderful thing for any bride to be just one of several hundred who seldom saw her husband. So, we pretend this was a singular event with all the attendant excitement.

Perhaps we are meant to see this as somewhat sarcastic, poking fun at his notorious extravagance. The man who wrote this clearly didn't take himself that seriously, judging by his other writings.

Song of Solomon 4

This is that one day in a woman's life when she is queen of all who gaze upon her, the day of her wedding. This chapter describes the ornate garments and jewelry which bear little resemblance to Western brides. Should we see such a bride, we would still appreciate her splendor, but the elements of her wardrobe would be exotic at the least. The reader is encouraged to ride along with the narrative and not ask too many questions.

If you've ever seen the dark colored Middle Eastern goats, you would recognize the reference to dark waves rippling down the hillsides of Gilead, the perfect terrain for such creatures. Of this image her long wavy hair reminds him, with all the vast wealth they represent.

An adult woman with flawless dentistry was quite rare in that culture. It represents her high noble status, rather like the obsessive reaction Western men have to gorgeous celebrities of our day. She's almost too much for him. The wedding veil cannot really hide her stunning beauty. The image of a pomegranate is the food of the wealthy, who can afford to dawdle over it, picking at the juicy red pearls. We don't know much about the Tower of David, but in Solomon's time we know that it was regarded as the finest in Eastern architecture, a grand landmark visible from afar. It was decorated with rows of polished shields, conjuring the image of imposing power and wealth.

What man does not celebrate an indescribable thrill at fondling a lover's breasts? Solomon luxuriates here with common images of justified lust, including references to the most expensive heady perfumes. Finally, he runs out of superlatives. Unwrapping the ultimate

wedding gift is too much for words.

The cultural image of coming down into Palestine from Lebanon is difficult to translate. In ancient times, Lebanon was a famous tourist destination for those seeking natural beauty. It's not too shabby today, but it was even grander in ancient times. So, you pass through the most refreshing sights and days of sweet-smelling trees and a sense of very ancient spiritual richness. Coming down from this lofty garden of the Creator, you enter this rich land where some of the finest agricultural production was offered to the rest of the world, a land flowing with milk and honey. It pulls in at least two well-known stories of exotic brides brought back for leading men of Israel, Isaac's Rebekah and Jacob's Rachel. It includes a far wider range of rich imagery about all the wonderful, good things God gave to His servants, traveling down from the heights of Lebanon.

So, in his mind this bride is his private garden, reserved for him alone. Again, it's a cultural image hard to fully appreciate from this great distance of time and space. The literal meaning is obvious: She disrobes for no other man. Exclusive access to such a fine specimen of human flesh for a righteous pleasure is indescribable.

So, the bride agrees, calling on God's creation to witness to the moral uprightness of all of this, and to bless this wedding night with the full power of God's divine character.

Song of Solomon 5

Blunt lesson here: Once you have surrendered to your man, you are no longer your own. As he is yours, you are his. That's how God sees it. The chapter begins with the groom declaring he is making love to his bride. After a few lines, the narrator tells them both to have a great time. This is good and right in God's eyes.

Next comes a cautionary tale. The bride falls asleep after lovemaking and dreams a warning from God. The symbolism is obvious within the Hebrew culture. She is slow to respond when her husband calls to her, perhaps at the worst time of the night for her. It represents little more than an inconvenience. Finally, she gets up and comes to find him no longer there. In this case, the symbolism is her lack of eagerness disappoints him. He loses interest. Too late she tries to hunt him down and win back his interest.

The concept of guardians is ambivalent, shifting in emphasis with the context. In this case, the wandering guards are angelic. They punish her and take away her covering before the Lord. Ladies, whatever it is God adds to your life in marriage depends on that moral covering. It's more than mere sex but starts with that. If you lose your eagerness for your husband, you lose God's moral protection.

But God always leaves a path of repentance. The bride calls on her support network to help her repair the damage. When the maidens ask what difference it makes to her, she waxes lyrical about what she has lost. She describes him as the man of men.

Song of Solomon 6

The bride continues conferring with her support network. The maidens ask if the bride knows where her man went. The question refers more to the kind of place, rather than some specific location. The bride answers that he is downright picky and would have only the best of everything. In her mind, this high standard is justified, and her previous reluctance was not. Then she renews her commitment to him, and we note there is some significance now to reversing the previous similar statement. She puts first the most important fact about her existence: She belongs to him.

So, the groom returns to the scene and announces that there is no one lovelier to him than his bride. Here is why we might suppose this is not Solomon writing about himself, but someone in his court council. It was horrible bad politics to play favorites with the harem, since most of them were political marriages. But for an official of the court to suggest his bride is better to him than the king's whole harem is altogether appropriate. He praises her beauty as overwhelming, like a mighty army or a dazzling and unassailable fortress. It wouldn't matter how many of the finest feminine treasures the king might have, they don't compare with his one bride.

Thus, despite whatever flaws she might be hiding, she was still more valuable and delightful than any other human pleasure in this world. He uses the imagery of a vineyard to indicate building a family and all the joyful anticipation it brings. The good times have just begun.

She responds with two lines. There are some ambiguities in how they should be translated. Since we know of no town or village named Shulam, it would appear more useful to take the meaning of the word itself as someone who is so perfect as to be untouchable. And we aren't quite sure whether it is two lines of dancers, or two armies camped against each other, but the whole point is rather obvious: Don't just stand there slobbering like a fool! Grab me and let's make love.

Song of Solomon 7

Sometimes it's all a matter of taste. This chapter is by far the most risqué language in the Bible, but it's obscured by euphemisms and symbolic references.

The groom describes his bride, starting from her feet. Some of the references are less than obvious to us these many centuries and miles removed. Peasants typically went barefoot, so the mere presence of sandals is more characteristic of nobility. It kept feet from appearing dirty and calloused; she's refined and high-class despite her rural background. Her legs are very well formed by his standards. Then he offers a euphemism for her vagina and refers to the delights of cunnilingus as lapping up wine. While it's true that the feminine ideal among ancient Hebrews was a bit less slender than today, the image of her abdomen as a wheat mound has more to do with satisfying him sexually – feeding his hunger – than anything else.

The reference to breasts is obvious to us today; men have always obsessed over them. He describes them in terms of graceful animals associated with sex. A long, elegant neck would be opposed to something short and muscular, as seen on men. The whole point is radiant femininity. He refers to an architectural wonder unknown today except for this reference alone.

The City of Heshbon was the gateway to conquest of the Promised Land. The commonly accepted archaeological site does feature the remains of deep fish pools, but we have no other evidence of a tower of ivory at the gates. Still, that would be quite a sight. The Tower of Lebanon is widely considered a reference to Mount Hermon, a truly majestic height that does allow one to see almost forever. This would be an aristocratic nose much favored in that part of the world.

Her luxurious, wavy hair was likened to royal tapestries, the extravagant hand-woven wall hangings in Solomon's palace. Even the king could get lost in hair like that. Having described her from the bottom up, he then speaks of the joy of making that climb with his own hands. It would be hard to make a more obvious reference to sex.

The bride is, of course, delighted with his delight in her. Any sane wife revels in her husband's attention. She offers her own mix of images and euphemisms for sex, romping in the open country where she's from, in hedged and private vineyards, and so forth. The reference to mandrakes notes the very ancient idea that these plants had aphrodisiac qualities. In essence, she's been saving herself for him alone.

Song of Solomon 8

In Hebrew culture, public displays of affection were permitted only between children. In the typical tribal social structure, children at play were presumed some relation to each other, whereas adults engaging in such behavior would be scandalous. It was too likely such affection between adults held an entirely different meaning, something that should be private. The bride is thus offering a vain wish in the intensity of her desire, scarcely able to keep her hands off of her man, even in public.

As she continues in this vein, the imagery is uncomfortable for Westerners. It's not that Hebrew people were loose about incest, but that the imagery was not taboo. For them, the whole scene flows smoothly as the bride exults in the symbol previously mentioned of sex in her mother's bed. The business of offering refreshments is more of the sexual euphemisms we've seen throughout this play. The third verse is even more blunt.

She then cautions the other maidens about messing with her man. It's not combative or defensive, but almost humorous in tone. The maidens respond with singing the bride's praises. Doesn't she look glamorous in his company?

The bride returns to the image of the apple tree, an exotic and rare treat in Ancient Palestine. Her man was all of that from birth. She calls out to him, seeking to be his one and only. When love works as it should, it outlasts human existence itself. The whole world is not enough to purchase what only the heart can give. While on this theme, the bride's family speak up about her childhood. Unspoken is the implication she bore the capacity for deep and lasting love even as a child.

Back then, they wondered how they would ensure she could qualify for the marriage she so richly deserved. As with any girl growing up, she had few feminine charms. This is all in the vein of anyone who sees a developing child and wonders what will become of them. They were

determined to protect her chastity but didn't want her to be too aloof. If she was cold like a stone wall, they would decorate her with jewelry, but if she was too social, they would guard her closely. She then notes that she was more like the wall with little interest in guys. However, her charms caught the attention of the one real man who saw past her facade.

She goes on to describe how Solomon's harem is loaded with more sex toys (that is, women) than he could possibly use, offering the image of a vast commercial vineyard. This is not meant to insult the king about using his harem for prostitution, but how his wealth in everything, including women, was off the scale. Did he even know one wife from the next? (Solomon pokes fun at himself for being so extravagant.) She describes herself as a small private vineyard producing just enough of the very best wine for a man who was content with her alone. She had no interest in being part of some fancy harem.

The whole drama ends with the final affirmations using common romantic imagery. The groom asks that she pay no attention to anyone else but him. She responds by telling him to waste no time in taking her.