

Equivocally Normative
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Job 5:13

(BHS)

לִכְדּוֹת חֲכָמִים בְּעָרְמָם
וְעֵצָת נַפְתָּלִים נִמְהָרָה:

(NLT)

He traps the wise in their own cleverness
so their cunning schemes are thwarted.

The two lines are pretty linear with English. See how many English words are needed to represent 6 Hebrew words; the brevity of Hebrew poetry. The last word means “to hasten;” their schemes are short-lived (thus, “thwarted”). This verse was spoken by Eliphaz (4:1).

I wrote a paper treating Creation Week. (Email me for it. Parts will soon be published in Zondervan’s *Dictionary of Christianity and Science*.) There I discuss the “firmament,” citing Job 37:18, which describes the sky as metallically hard. One undergrad noted that God condemned Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar for what they had been asserting, “You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7). Thus, he completely spurned this witness from Scripture (although God doesn’t censor Job 37, spoken by Elihu).

If the student is right, then what good are all those long chapters in Job? The three friends were discredited, Elihu was ignored, and Job repented of his words. So why can’t we just read the first 2 chapters then skip to the end for the unequivocal, pure truth of God? Our verse is part of Eliphaz’ attempt to frame the issue for Job. But is what he says *true*? Did God mean to fault every single point that Eliphaz made? Or just the overall tenor or application of those arguments?

Take a look at 1 Cor 3:19. Paul quotes Scripture authoritatively there. Without qualification, treating Eliphaz' words as he would any other inspired text, Paul says, "For it is written, 'He captures the wise in their craftiness.'" Paul did not disparage the words of Eliphaz like the undergrad did, but treated them like they were normative.

Consider Bildad. Using the words "your beginning" and "your ending," he predicted that Job's end will be very good (8:7). Go ahead and compare his language with 42:12 (in Hebrew of course!). Bildad's particular word choices are used to describe Job's final condition. His prediction came true. So Job 42 invokes Bildad's words as truth and Paul quotes Eliphaz as Scripture. But Yahweh said that they weren't speaking correctly! So what gives?

Wisdom literature is designed to make you think critically. It does not feature the magisterial, black-and-white imperatives of "Thus saith the Lord." It deals with the fact that navigating through the grey areas of real life requires sapience. Prov 26:4 – 5 says to answer—and not to answer—fools. It takes sensitivity to discern which maxim applies in a given situation. When is mirth a good thing (Eccl 5:18), and when is it foolish (Eccl 7:3 – 6)? How is the beloved's head like Mount Carmel (Song 7:5)? When is wealth protective (Prov 10:15), and when is it foolish to think so (18:11)?

One must read wisdom literature slowly. The genre wants to engage your intellect. You are supposed to reason it out. It deals with knowing the times, being sensitive to situation, charting a course between competing principles (Ecclesiastes 3). You must cogitate.

So the book of Job wants us to ponder what is wrong with the three friends' words that warranted God's threat. There is not a simple formulaic answer. It calls for discernment. The challenge is for you to figure it out.

In a similar manner, Jesus spoke in parables. They are designed to get you thinking. You are supposed to puzzle over how the kingdom is like a net that gathers fishes (Matt 13:47). Who are the birds nesting in the branches of the kingdom (Mark 4:32)? What is the leaven that the kingdom is like, and is there a reason for 3 measures of flour in particular (Luke 13:21)? Jesus' parables are his wisdom book. They demonstrate that he is wiser than Solomon (Matt 12:42 – 13:54).

So the upshot of all this is that some biblical texts—including some words of Jesus—require more time and thought than we are used to giving. We need to slow down and read carefully, resisting easy solutions. Ready-made, canned arguments are the sort of thing the wisdom books eschew. Remember Mencken's quote, "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong."

How satisfied are we with prepackaged answers? Hashing through the grey areas takes the ability to critically think, and an open mind. You have to actually listen to the other side. (This especially when a non-essential is at issue.) How much easier it would be to live in a world of hard-and-fast categories that fit every situation! But that is the fundamentalist philosophy of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

Is it yours?