

Addressing the Question of Innocent Suffering of Christians in the Light of Wisdom in Job 28

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Abstract

Modern day Christians describe prosperity as a sign of being blessed by God and suffering as a sign of being cursed by God. Many contemporary Christians emphasize more the preaching of material prosperity as a means of determining who is righteous. In other words, suffering is being equated with sin. It is against this backdrop that this paper evaluated the suffering of the innocent in the light of Job 28. The work discovered that ultimate wisdom lies with God because God is a mystery and many times cannot be understood. The study adopted hermeneutical method of biblical interpretation. It is the conclusion of this work that faithful submission to God's providential dealings in conditions of understandable inveterate pain and suffering, just like the Old Testament Job, is the prototypical Christian living.

Keywords: Job 28, Innocent Suffering, Wisdom, Christians

Introduction

Many Christians of our time always question the justice of God in the face of some unexplainable sufferings. Many Christian churches in recent times are centering more on the preaching of material prosperity as a means of determining who is blessed by God and as a way of interpreting divine mysteries of existence. In Job 28, wisdom is inaccessible to humans, because man does not know the way to wisdom. This lovely chapter of Job is built around the question voiced in both verses 12 and 20: But where can wisdom be found? Where is the place of understanding? Job 28:28 tells us that wisdom is the fear of God and to depart from evil is understanding. Wisdom is personified in Job 28 which teaches us the way to God and how to approach the issues of human existence.

According to Qeresko (2001), "The book of Job, one of the great works of world literature, represents the more speculative and questioning current in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern wisdom" (p. 383). The book discusses a series of questions and issues in a creative and provocative way. Central to a number of questions and issues is the problem of the innocent suffering of which Job himself is obviously a prime example. Although, there was no clear-cut cause for Job's suffering, his three friends, Zophar, Eliphaz and Bildad all concluded that sin reproduces suffering. They accused Job of wickedness. For Schmidt (2008), "According to the law of 'act-consequence', misfortune should not come to Job" (p. 384). If calamity were to strike him, the frame-narrative asks, would he return his faith? But in the dialogue it is hard for the friends of Job to see the point. The problem that calls for a response is not that of suffering in general but of the suffering of a devout and upright person.

The problem of this study is the fact that many contemporary Christians describe prosperity as a sign of being blessed by God and suffering as a kind of curse. Can prosperity in totality be signs of God's blessings, and all sufferings signs of curses? This study is aimed at attempting to show how wisdom exists in Job 28 and how humans can discover it and use it in their interpersonal lives and in relationship with God. The significance of the study is that it will help students of the Scriptures and contemporary Christians to have more insight in the understanding of the mechanism of wisdom in the Old Testament and in Job 28, and also how it can help in human interaction today. The work made use of hermeneutical method of the Old Testament interpretation which facilitated the application of the narrative message of Job 28 to the contemporary Christians.

The Concept of Wisdom

Wisdom has been defined variously by scholars. Hornby (2000) defines wisdom as "the ability to make sensible decisions and give good advice because of the experience and knowledge that you have" (p. 1370). In the words of Fohrer (1984): Wisdom is careful, deliberate, experienced, and adept in action, by means of which a person can fit into the existing order of the universe so as to make himself master of it, solve the problem presented by life, and finally master life itself. (p. 305).

Here wisdom is the man's capacity to carefully analyze experience of things and events in the world in order to become the master of the universe. For Crenshaw (1982), it is the ability to achieve mastery over the universe. It is the ability to dominate the environment of man. Here one can say that wisdom (חָכְמָה) differs from the law (תּוֹרָה) and the prophets (נְבִיאִים) in its acquisition of knowledge.

The revelation in the law is very direct from Yahweh (cf Deut. 34:10) and Yahweh communicated with Moses face to face. In the prophets the prophets did not see God face to face but Yahweh inspired their oracles. For instance, Jeremiah 1:19 tells us that Yahweh stretched out his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth, and he said to him that he has put his words into his mouth. In the case of wisdom it is also revelation but of some sort. Fohrer (1984) further explains that it is:

The ability of a craftsman (Ex 31:3), the art of government (Jer 50:35; Isa 10:13), the art of magic and divination (Gen 41:8. Isa 44:25) and deceitful cunning (II Sam 13:3; Job). On the other hand, the knowledge that it presupposes is not concerned with theoretical mastery of the problems of life and the universe but with solutions of a practical nature to the problems confronting God or man. (p. 305).

It was within such understanding of wisdom that Job 28 emerged in Jewish history.

It has often been said that the Old Testament Wisdom was influenced by the Wisdom tradition of the ancient Near East like Mesopotamia, Egypt and other nations. Towards the end of 19th Century, some archeologists discovered from the archives of Mesopotamia and Egypt books that are similar to Old Testament Wisdom Literature.

In Mesopotamia, there is however, no expression that is analogous to the Hebrew notion חכמה. Fohrer (1984) says that there existed an extensive wisdom writing preserved in Akkadian recession that goes back in a great extent to Sumerian tradition. And most of these extant Sumerian texts have a large number of proverb collection, which were, arranged as school texts and according to the sign with which proverb begins. Fohrer further tells us that later texts treat ethical issues and give practical suggestions on how to live in harmony with the universe and be successful. The texts also examine the problem of this order of the universe so that some of them have been viewed as forerunners of the book of Job. Even some Mesopotamia fables, disputations, debates and other texts whose literal genre is often difficult to determine are traditionally placed with wisdom literature.

The Question of Innocent Suffering of Job

Everyone suffers and almost everyone raises the question 'Why?' at one point or another. The question becomes especially acute in cases of innocent suffering when individuals undergo suffering for no apparent reason. Such was the situation of the Biblical Job. He suffered despite his righteousness. Attempts to wrestle with the question of innocent suffering occur among the earliest of wisdom writings of the ancient world, to which the sapiential book of Job belongs.

The book of Job represents an example of biblical wisdom literature. Wisdom reflection takes its starting point from experience, and perhaps no other experience is more universal or has provoked more questions and anguished searching than suffering (Ceresko, 2005). The questions the book of Job raises and the assertions it makes arise out of experience, Job's own personal experience of innocent suffering. Job's friends, Bildad and Eliphaz, ground their remarks on received tradition (Job 8:8-10) or even on revelation (Job 4:13-16).

In such a situation of suffering which Job finds himself, the question of God's justice and the meaning of innocent suffering arise with all the concreteness and urgency of a real life situation. The individual who has acted in accord with the requirements of his religious traditions and shown himself courageous in his integrity, his uprightness of life, and his devotion to God suffers disaster and loss. He and his family are thrown out into the street and humiliated and are forced to beg for bread to feed their hungry bellies and to search for clothing and shelter to protect themselves.

Such is Job's 'reward' for his virtue. Yet his fellow Jew, who follows the logic of the 'bottom line' and cunningly exploits the difficult circumstance of his countrymen to his own advantage, prospers and grows richer and takes a place of honour in the high councils of the community. Where is the justice of God in such circumstances, and why must Job experience such humiliation and disaster? These are complete moral questions that naturally arise. These questions, so clearly framed, became the occasions for addressing the problem of innocent suffering and other related issues.

Job 28 makes accessible the wealth of wisdom and presents the example of the pious sufferer who emerges from his ordeal with renewed hope. In the person of Job, this chapter offers pious Jews as well as pious Christians a new understanding. They are brought to appreciate the love and compassion of this mysterious one who accompanies the suffering and oppressed in their journey through the darkness and sustains their hope with his promises of life and liberation. Rahner (1983), in connecting the mystery of suffering with the mystery of God, says that the incomprehensibility of suffering is part of the incomprehensibility of God. Thus, the question of innocent suffering is a mystery, just as God is a mystery; it cannot be easily explained (Ezenweke and Kanu, 2010).

Delimitation and Interpretation of Job 28

Job 28 otherwise referred to as excursus or poem in praise of wisdom is located in the first section of the poetic part of the book (Job 3-31). The opening sentences of the book are fundamental to both major parts of the book. They describe Job as an upright and prosperous man (Job 1:1-5). So, according to tradition, Job should not suffer. Hence Job 28 points at the futility of man's probing into divine mysteries. According to MacKenzie and Murphy (1995), "It (Job 28) can be seen as another contribution to the issue raised by the book: humans do not know the answer to the problem; the best they can do is fear the Lord" (p. 481). Job 28 begins by describing the search for valuable minerals. Its theme is the transcendence of divine wisdom and its inaccessibility. Humans can explore and find treasures, but wisdom, most precious of all, is beyond their reach.

Job 28:1-11 tells us where all the precious metals of the earth (silver, gold, iron and copper) can be found. Man shows great skill and perseverance in digging for precious metals and jewels. Here in the first section of Job 28, human cleverness (seen in mining) has been unable to find wisdom. Man has investigated every nook and cranny of the earth in search of anything precious. Bergant (1982) puts it this way:

The first section of the poem (Job 28:1-6) highlights two extraordinary characteristics of the human spirit, the insatiable desire to search out treasures and the extremes to which people can go in order to procure them. Silver, gold, iron and copper as well as precious stones have been prized... in their search to discover more and more of the secrets of the world and its riches. Humans have uncovered the hidden places where in these treasures are to be found and have devised technique for extracting them (p. 139).

This man's capacity to probe the subterranean world is very astonishing. But in spite of this human ingenuity, he cannot discover wisdom.

Job 28:12 puts forward the first question: Where does wisdom come from? Commenting on verses 13-14, Wharton (1999) says that the curiosity driving human is not capable of finding the place where wisdom and understanding are to be found. Even the deep and the sea must declare that wisdom is not to be found within them. In Job 28:15-19, Bourke (1963) says that the poet speaks of the priceless nature of wisdom. Wisdom can never be bought or sold. Verse 20 is the second question and it repeats that of verse 12: "Where does wisdom come from?" Job 28:21-22 tell us the closest man has come to discover wisdom. Verses 23-27 tell us that God alone knows the way to wisdom. According to Westermarn (1981), the text is a riddle consisting of a problem and a solution. Verse 28 which is the final verse associates wisdom with fear of the Lord. This means that we cannot relate with God without wisdom which is the fear of God. Here, according to MacKenzie and Murphy (1995), four main ideas are developed, thus: (i) Humans explore the interior of the earth but find no 'vein' of wisdom; (ii) the most far-sighted or distant creatures cannot tell where to look for it; (iii) the most precious treasures cannot tell where to look for it; (iv) God alone knows and possesses it.

The Implications of Wisdom in Job 28 for Contemporary Christians

The implication of wisdom in Job 28 is that it stands out as a school mistress teaching humans the way to wisdom and the futility of man's probing into divine mysteries. The way to wisdom is hidden to man who does not know the fear of God. Job 28 is a radical combating of the traditional wisdom which equates suffering with sin. The suffering of Job as a righteous man is an indication that God's wisdom is hidden from humans who are still in need of wisdom in order to understand God's way. Throughout history, men have on many occasions sought wisdom among material things of the world. The way to wisdom is totally different from the way to material things of the world.

We are to understand always that God is a mystery that many times cannot be understood. Like the people of Job's time we expect all the workings of divine providence to be clear to us. Ugwueye and Agbo (2009) are of the view that in forcing the fact of suffering to agree with our understanding of retributive justice or sin-punishment-construct, we fall victim to the occupational hazard of the theologian who expects to analyze, predict and understand God in an explicit and mathematical fashion. God's role in inflicting suffering is sometimes mysterious and very hard to understand. MacDonald (1995) remarks that "This chapter (Job 28) seems to imply that we should submit to God's providential dealings even if we do not always understand them" (p. 531).

As earlier stated, many contemporary Christians describe prosperity as a sign of being blessed by God and suffering as a sign of being cursed by God. This has gone to such an extent that many Christian Churches and prayer houses today centre more on the preaching of material prosperity as a means of determining who is righteous. This goes with the saying that suffering is the resultant effect of sin. This is the situation in Nigeria where many Christian denominations attach more importance to material things such as money than their eternal life in heaven. This ugly trend continues affecting the innocent Christians who suffer material hardship. Aweda (2009) declares that, "The interpretation and the implication of teaching that no Christian should be poor is that those people who claim to be Christians but are struggling to make ends meet are only making false claims to

being Christians” (p. 16). Job 28 addresses this problem by poetically saying that the quest for wisdom is totally different from the quest for material things of this world. Contemporary Nigerian Christians ought to therefore be cautious in equating material prosperity with God’s blessing, and human suffering with sin and curse.

In contemporary society of Nigeria, some people acquired their wealth through evil means: fraud, money ritual, robbery and murder among others. In human eyes, these people are prosperous and happy, while the righteous, some of whom are Christians suffer in poverty. This becomes an enigma to an average Christian. It would seem that sufferings and benefits are not distributed to mankind by an even-handed justice. The wicked prosper, the righteous suffer. Evil is not always punished in proportion to guilt; good is not always rewarded in proportion to merit. The case of Job precipitates the test of faith in its severest form - the supremely righteous man who sustains the most extreme calamities. How can he, or anyone, continue to believe that God is right and fair in what he sometimes does to people. There can be doubt that it is God, only God, who is responsible for all that happened to Job. Anderson (1976) rightly says that:

... outward appearances might not give a true picture of what was happening between a man and God. The material prosperity of the wicked is not an index of his happiness, and its permission is not an oversight on the part of God. (p. 67).

If the wealth of the rich is ill-gotten, their conscience is always in dread of a day of reckoning. By contrast the inward joy of the righteous cannot be destroyed by outward misfortunes, for his communion with God is safe from any change due to circumstances.

Men seek an explanation of suffering in cause and effect. They look backwards for a connection between prior sin and present suffering. Job 28 looks toward in hope and seeks explanations, not so much in origins as in fear of God. The purpose of suffering is seen, not in its cause, but in its result. In the New Testament, the man was born blind so that the works of God could be displayed in him (Jn. 9:3). Many find God’s seeming slowness irksome. They lose heart, and often lose faith. Job 28 commends God’s self-restraint. It is easier to see the hand of God in spectacular and immediate acts and the sinner who is not instantly corrected is likely to despise God’s delay in executing justice as a sign that he is indifferent or even absent. We have to be as patient as God himself to see the end result or to go on living in faith without seeing it. In due season, we shall reap if we do not fail.

Job 28 also presents a lesson for us that suffering is not always punishment on the part of the sufferer. It can be instructive when one has a direct and personal experience of God where pain and suffering pale into insignificance. This is one of the highest level to which the Old Testament has risen in solving the problem of the innocent suffering. The New Testament theologically solves this problem by confronting us with the paradox of the cross, which is the passion and death of the sinless one, Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for the salvation of sinners. In Jesus Christ the greatest evils, the betrayal and crucifixion of the Son of God, became the greatest good for all mankind. Job 28 sees part of the answer by teaching that when the experience is over, the sufferer will appreciate it in a new way because of what he has learnt.

The enduring faith of the innocent sufferer, Job, as reflected in the concept of wisdom in Job 28 implies that suffering can also serve a probative purpose, to test the genuineness of one’s character and motivation (Umeanolue, 2010). The character of Job provides a model of faith and fidelity and serves as a beacon of hope for contemporary Christians.

The flaunting of wealth by many men and women of God and the encouragement by them that wealth or prosperity is the essential fruit of God’s blessing is an aberration. Madu and Oraegbunam (2007) see it as a difficult task merging authentic religion with capitalist spirit as it appears. It does not tally with the personified wisdom of Job 28 and it is an aberration to the teaching of the innocent sufferer per excellence, Jesus Christ. In ancient Israel and other Ancient Near Eastern nations, wisdom was relevant in directing human life in ways that would help him cope well with life and with his relationship with God. Job 28 emphasizes that we should not be equating prosperity with blessing and suffering with curse. The most important thing as a creature of God is to try to be just in life and also struggle to conquer the world through hard work. If prosperity or suffering comes, man should accept them with open mind and when he has no power over them he should see them as part of God’s plan in his life. Wisdom cannot be discovered among the material things of this world. To find wisdom, one must move away from the material wealth of the world.

The implications of Job 28 stand out as an indicator of the futility of human probing into the divine mystery. Westermann (1981) calls it a revolutionary thesis. The poem is directed against some kind of certainty with which humans think they know about God’s dealing in human affairs. It is radical combating of the traditional theology which equates sin with suffering. By telling us that the suffering of Job is a mystery known to God alone foreshadows, in a sense, the righteous sufferer par excellence, the incarnate Wisdom; Jesus Christ, who was open

to God's plan in his life. He never made a necessary connection between prosperity and God's blessing and between suffering and course or sin. The personified wisdom in Job 28 is a kind of caveat to people's conception of God's dealing in human affairs. Prosperity or suffering should not constitute the substance of man's religious life.

Though it is noble for people to work hard, Job 28 has made us understand that wisdom is not to be found in the same place where we can find precious metals like silver and gold. The way to wisdom, as Job 28 has shown us, is different from the way to material acquisition of the world.

Conclusion

The implication of the concept of wisdom in Job 28 is that wisdom is the ability to be open to God's plan in human life which should always guide interpersonal life with fellow human beings. In Job 28, wisdom is inaccessible to humans because man does not know the way to wisdom. He searches it with the domain of other precious metals of the earth. But it is God alone who knows the ways to wisdom. Job 28:28 tells us that wisdom is the fear of God and to depart from evil is understanding. The description of true and undefiled religion is to fear the Lord and depart from evil, which agrees with the character of Job. This fear of God is the ability to be open to God's will in human life. Since Job was just but suffered, Job 28 is telling us that suffering cannot be equated with curse. There is no necessary connection between them. Humans should always work hard in order to conquer the world, but all hard work should be guided by wisdom which is the fear of God. God alone knows the way to wisdom. We should submit to God's providential dealings in our lives even if we do not always understand them. Thus, ultimate wisdom lies with God. He alone can give answer to all man's existential problems.

Finally, in Hebrew thought generally, all events or happenings are directly in the hands of God, the First Cause (Ugwueye, 2002). For God to grant Satan permission to close in on Job shows this. Hence, it can be said that God gives prosperity and suffering without really denying man's freedom and responsibility (Jer 4:10; 1 Kgs 22:19-23; Ez 14:19). For humans prosperity is God's good gift while suffering is referred to either God's punishment for sin or the work of the evil one. Job in his ultimate wisdom appropriately realizes that both are gifts from God and he even inspirationally and transcendently recognizes the gifts to be the same with the giver. This accounts for his steadiness in confidence and faithfulness to God throughout the time of prosperity and the whole time of suffering. This is what makes him the quintessential 'Christian'.

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