

Job 24 — Why the Wicked Go Unpunished — The Landmarks Removed, the Poor Who Hide Together, the Night-Criminals, and a Justice That Is Certain but Deferred

Job 24: Job answers Zophar and the friends a second time (paired with chapter 21), pressing the hardest fact their theology cannot hold — that the violent and the oppressor often prosper unpunished while their victims groan. He catalogues social injustice from the victims' side, exposes the murderer, adulterer, and thief who work under cover of darkness, and holds the honest tension that 'God layeth not folly to them' — before turning at the end to insist that judgment, though real, is deferred: the wicked are 'exalted for a little while, but are gone and brought low.' The patriarchal era, land of Uz; scriptural setting c. 2000–1800 BC.

Job has just endured a second round from his friends, and chapter 24 is the sustained answer he could not finish in chapter 21. There he made the scandalous observation out loud — "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power?" (Job 21:7) — and watched his comforters recoil from it. Now he presses the same nerve harder, and this time his eye moves off the prosperity of the wicked and onto the faces of their victims. That is the moral genius of this chapter: Job will not let the argument stay abstract. He makes us watch the ass driven away from a fatherless child, the widow's only ox seized for a debt, the naked laborer shivering all night against a rock because the man he works for kept his cloak.

Hebrew Word Studies

almanah (H490) / yathowm (H3490) (אַלְמָנָה / יָתוּמָה) — **widow / fatherless one, orphan vv. 3, 9.** These two words travel together through scripture as a single social category — the covenant's shorthand for everyone who has lost the protector a patriarchal world assumed every person needed. *Almanah*, the widow, is a woman without a husband to plead her case at the city gate; *yathowm*, the fatherless, is a child with no father to defend his inheritance. Job names them twice — the widow's ox taken (v. 3), the fatherless plucked from the breast (v. 9) — and he names them deliberately, because these are the exact people God repeatedly claims as his own personal concern: "A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation" (Ps. 68:5); "the LORD... doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow" (Deut. 10:18). The whole scandal of chapter 24 lives in that gap. God calls himself their defender, yet Job watches them robbed in broad daylight and sees no rescue arrive. Job is not accusing God of not caring; he is laying the unbearable fact — that the God who cares has not yet acted — on the table where his friends refuse to look. And the New Testament will make this the very definition of true religion: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27). The people Job weeps over here are the people the gospel will command us to seek out.

'elowah (H433) (אֱלֹהִים) — **God — the singular of Elohim v. 12.** This is the word to catch at the heart of the chapter's hardest line: "yet God layeth not folly to them." *'Elowah* is the singular of the more familiar plural *Elohim*, and it is a word Job's book loves — it appears more here than anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Its concentration in Job is telling: this is the book that presses God hardest, and it reaches for the singular, almost intimate, name of the one being it is wrestling with. The sting of verse 12 is that Job does not say "the gods do nothing" or "the heavens are silent." He names *'Elowah* — the personal God, the one he still addresses, still trusts, still expects justice from — and says that this God, for now, "layeth not folly to them," does not lay the charge, does not act. Only someone who believes God is real and just and watching could find this fact so agonizing. An atheist has no problem here; unpunished evil is exactly what he expects. It is the believer, the one who knows *'Elowah* by name, for whom the delay is a wound. Job's complaint is not the collapse of his faith — it is the pressure his faith puts on the facts. He will not let go of God, and he will not lie about the world, and holding both at once is the whole cost of honest discipleship.

'owr (H216) (אוֹר) — **light — natural daylight, and moral illumination vv. 13, 14, 16.** *'Owr* is the first thing God ever makes — "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3) — and in Hebrew it never fully separates the physical from the moral. Light is daylight; it is also truth, life, exposure, the presence of God. Job leans on that double meaning through this whole passage. The wicked "rebel against the *light*" (v. 13); the murderer works at the edge of "the *light*" (v. 14); and "they know not the *light*" (v. 16) — where the sentence has slid from daylight into something deeper, a willed ignorance of everything light stands for. To rebel against *'owr* is not just to prefer the night shift; it is to declare war on being seen, on being known, on the God whose first act was to make seeing possible. And this is exactly why the same word becomes the Bible's great hope on the other side: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa. 9:2); "the LORD is my light and my salvation" (Ps. 27:1); "I am

the light of the world" (John 8:12). The men in Job 24 have made the darkness their refuge, but the refuge is temporary. Light is coming — a whirlwind's worth of it is coming to Job himself — and when it arrives, the "shadow of death" that hid the wicked will be the very thing that exposes them. The tragedy Job names is that they know not the light. The mercy the whole of scripture answers with is that the light knows them.

me'at (H4592) (מ,ע,א) — a little, a few, a small amount — here, a little while v. 24. The whole deferred-judgment turn of the chapter hangs on this small word. *Me'at* means "a little" — a little in quantity, a little in time, a smallness that scripture uses again and again to shrink what looks enormous down to its true size. "They are exalted for a *little while*" (v. 24): the prosperity of the wicked that so scandalized Job in chapter 21, the injustice he has just catalogued for twenty-two verses, is real — and it is *me'at*, brief, a flicker measured against eternity. This is not Job caving to the friends. It is Job reframing the timescale. The friends said judgment comes *now*; Job says the wicked man's exaltation is what is temporary, and his fall is what is certain. The same word carries one of the tenderest promises in the Old Testament: "For a small moment [*me'at*] have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee" (Isa. 54:7). And the Restoration gives Job's *me'at* its fullest voice, when the Lord answers another righteous sufferer in a jail cell: "thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; and then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high" (D&C 121:7–8). Job did not have that verse. But he had its seed — the conviction that the injustice he could not deny was, in the arithmetic of heaven, only *me'at*, a little while, and that the God who "layeth not folly to them" today has not therefore laid the matter down forever.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```word-study transliteration: me'at (H4592) hebrew: מֵעַתָּה gloss: a little, a few, a small amount — here, a little while verse: v. 24 note: The whole deferred-judgment turn of the chapter hangs on this small word. Me'at means "a little" — a little in quantity, a little in time, a smallness that scripture uses again and again to shrink what looks enormous down to its true size. "They are exalted for a little while" (v. 24): the prosperity of the wicked that so scandalized Job in chapter 21, the injustice he has just catalogued for twenty-two verses, is real — and it is me'at, brief, a flicker measured against eternity. This is not Job caving to the friends. It is Job reframing the timescale. The friends said judgment comes now; Job says the wicked man's exaltation is what is temporary, and his fall is what is certain. The same word carries one of the tenderest promises in the Old Testament: "For a small moment [me'at] have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee" (Isa. 54:7). And the Restoration gives Job's me'at its fullest voice, when the Lord answers another righteous sufferer in a jail cell: "thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; and then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high" (D&C 121:7–8). Job did not have that verse. But he had its seed — the conviction that the injustice he could not deny was, in the arithmetic of heaven, only me'at, a little while, and that the God who "layeth not folly to them" today has not therefore laid the matter down forever. ```