To Write the Books
the World Cannot Contain

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Old Testament Lesson: Job 8.1-10

IN HONOR OF BILDAD THE SHUHITE

Today we celebrate learning. In the dedication of the Cook Center for Theological Research, we sing the praises of investigation and education; of books and teachers; of media for the communication of what has been discovered, and of persons committed to proclaim the gospel that is thus better understood. And in all of this celebrating, we must sing just a little in honor of Bildad the Shuhite.

Bildad, I am sure you will recall, was one of a small group of Job's friends who came to sit with Job after Job's family had been killed, his fortune wiped out, his marriage destroyed, and his health broken. This group came out to the village dump, where Job was sitting in abject despair, not so much to comfort him—or even to cheer him up—but to get Job to come to his theological senses. They came to correct his theology. And of this small group, if you remember the story at all, you will recall that it was Bildad who really had the ability to unsettle Job. Every time Bildad addressed Job he did it in such a fashion that Job responded with force and anger and with the increased determination that he was, perhaps, right after all.

Well this Bildad, this ungentle, slightly uncouth friend of Job, might stand some chance of being selected the patron saint of librarians and information managers (and if ever there was a group that needed a patron saint it is we). Bildad understood something very basic about human existence and about human knowledge. As you and I are confronted by the treasures of learning and the facilities for study which are contained in the building we are tonight dedicating to the glory and service of Almighty God, we need carefully to analyze again Bildad's advice to Job.

I. Bildad Understood

The heart of the truth that Bildad had come rightly to understand is detailed for us in Job 8:8-10:

For inquire, I pray you, of bygone ages,
And consider what even their forebears were able to discover.
For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing,
For our days on earth are a shadow.
Will they not teach you, and tell you,
And utter words out of their understanding?

*Sermon Preached at the Dedication of the Cook Center for Theological Research*
Bildad understood two things. First, he understood that life is too brief for any one of us to learn from scratch all it is that we need to know about God. There was humility in Bildad that ought to be admired in our generation. Bildad understood the magnitude of the issues which overwhelmed Job, and Bildad did not trivialize them by treating Job to large doses of the latest fad solution, or with popular, jargon-loaded, quick-fix cure-all. No band aids would do for Bildad. He understood that to come to real terms with the crucial issues of each age demands that we must know much more than we can experience. We must know the long history of the problem. We must know the experience of God's people. We must understand God's own patient involvement in the process. Therefore we must carefully study the witness of all of God's saints who have walked this way before us. And to do that, that witness must be preserved for us and organized in such a fashion that it makes sense to us. And if that begins to sound like a library I am sure that Bildad would approve. Bildad was sure that when we collect and hear the sayings and thoughts of the departed faithful—when we are faced with their witness to God's interaction with his people—then and then only will we know what is necessary for the doing of the right.

That brings us to the second thing which Bildad understood. All of the knowledge that has been treasured up within the covenant community is for the ordering of our lives according to the will of God. The sheer mass of things to be learned causes us to understand our insignificance and suggests the difficulty which Job himself later verbalized; "How can a person be just before God?" (9.2). But Bildad is sure that the previous generations, on whose bases Bildad has built his own case against Job, can help Job find the way: "Will they not teach you...?" The response to life's crises would, for Bildad, become rather automatic. When a situation arose, one should turn to the faithful witness of previous generations and determine what it was that they would have done in a similar situation.

Bildad can conceive of no way in which Job's situation is any different from that of Abraham or Isaac or Jacob. That presupposition made it very difficult for Bildad to get at all close to the pain in Job's heart. This begins to suggest that there were some things which Bildad did not understand.

II. Bildad did not Understand

Theology, in the book of Job, is arranged in such a fashion that we must constantly be sorting out what it is that persons properly understood and what they didn't understand at all. And Bildad didn't understand at least two important facts about the role of learning in the covenant community. First, he failed to understand that whatever we are able to learn from the witness of the saints of old is intended to be for the comfort of others. Bildad was at last silenced when he could not answer Job's question: "How does all this comfort me?" How does it help in the living of life's disasters to be well-armed with orthodoxy's best truths?

The gospel is good news and to study and study and study God's Word and the history and theology of his church for years and years only to share the truths we have gained in such a fashion that the persons to whom we speak are faced with increased pain and greater guilt is to turn that gospel into something less than the Word of God. We
must admit in beginning that we don't know all there is to know about God, and that
some of what we think we know may be wrong. Then we must use what we know in such
a fashion that our mistakes stand the least chance of hurting others. We all have heard the
story of the pastor—who hopefully never really existed—whose manuscript for a sermon
was marked “Weak point—Shout loud!” Job tried to help Bildad to understand that no
one's theological understanding is without weaknesses and problems and that it doesn't
help anyone for us to state the case repeatedly, or more forcefully. Only when we have
come to the situation with the determination to bring real comfort to the person involved,
can we begin to proclaim real "gospel."

The second thing that Bildad did not understand was that knowledge from the past is
never totally sufficient to face the present. Knowledge from the past must be developed
and enlarged by hard patient research in the present. With his friends, Bildad was ulti-
mately confronted with God's judgment for the way in which he had used his inherited
knowledge about God. “My wrath is kindled against you...for you have not spoken of
me what is right, as my servant Job has done” (42.7). Bildad was like the servant in the
parable who was given one talent and promptly went out and buried it in the ground. He
recognized that he had received a trust from previous generations; that he was the benefi-
ciary of their “searching out”—their research—the result of their investigations and expe-
riences. But he saw no responsibility for emulating their example and doing research of
his own. He did not understand the obligation which each member of the covenant com-
munity has of adding new knowledge, new understandings of God's goodness, new
accounts of his gracious care, to the fund which was inherited.

For Bildad, the great acts of God were in the past. “Today”—the present generation
—did not have its own significance. “We are,” he said, “but of yesterday.” Our experience
is ephemeral, reflective, and insignificant. For Bildad the quotation marks of yesterday
spoke far more loudly than the question marks of tomorrow. He sensed no call of God,
no pious obligation to learn more than that which they could tell him—these quoted
saints from yesteryear. He did not see the death pall which his attitude placed upon the
process of Christian experience. He did not care to notice how it cheated future genera-
tions if he failed to fill in the blanks that were distributed for his own time.

There goes Bildad's chance to be our patron saint. For while his quotations are
accurately cited, and all of the ancient learning that he knew was so precisely rehearsed
that even Kate Turabian would rejoice, Bildad did not pass the course. Instead, it was Job
who got the nod from God. Job asked real questions of the past and of his own expe-
rience. He didn't have all of the answers. He asked questions. He argued with what he
knew, with what he had been told, with all he had received, until at last it was possible for
him to confess to his Redeemer: “I had heard of you with the hearing of the ear but now
my eye sees you” (42.5).

Job would have found real kinship with the author of the Fourth Gospel, who as he
concluded his task of writing sat back and appraised his work this way:

But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of
them to be written I suppose the world itself could not contain the books
that would be written (21.25).
For whatever trouble these words may cause Greek grammarians and New Testament scholars, here at last is the stuff from which librarians take fresh courage and renewed hope. What John has written, he says forthrightly, is but part of the story. Those who have read what he has to say in witness to the Christ must now take up the task of discovering new data in the inexhaustible fulness of his gospel. On us is laid the responsibility, with Job and those who follow in his tradition, of continuing to ask the hard, piercing, painful questions—of continuing to write the books of the glorious graciousness of our Lord Jesus Christ—until, at last, that day shall come when “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2.14).