

## The Wisdom Fest

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**Abstract:**

Solomon was declared to be the wisest man in all the East. How did people know? What kind of contests were held in ancient times to judge wisdom and to foster the development of widespread Wisdom Literature? Here the author compares wisdom literature from many ancient cultures in an imaginary contest in the settlement of Job. Although the article is phrased somewhat whimsically, the setting still appears plausible, and it seriously displays similar literary structures of Biblical and extra-Biblical poetry.

Have you ever heard of a Wisdom Fest? The Bible hints at a contest for wise men in the cultures of the Ancient Near East. Study the cultures of the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians & Hittites along with that of the people of Israel, and you may find that such a gala competition could have been commonplace in the two or three millennia preceding Christ. Biblical names and places come alive when you put them in their regional context, and the Scriptures begin to sound like they are filled with real people instead of holy ghosts of once-upon-a-time.

The Biblical books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon are known as "wisdom literature." Actually, wisdom was a common genre of literature in all of the ancient cultures, and people seemed to enjoy collecting songs and proverbs and wise stories. We assume Biblical wisdom to have an inspired quality that the others lack, but Scripture writers shared the human art form with the language of other mortals.

Remember Solomon, the king renowned for his proverbial wisdom? The Israelite monarch discerned the real mother of a dead baby boy when he threatened to split the surviving baby in two. A remarkable solution indeed. But he was more than a wise judge. A careful look at I Kings, chapter four, suggests that Solomon must have possessed flamboyant oratory ability to accompany his clever discerning tactics:

*God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore.<sup>1</sup>*

Impressive! We know the story. God was very pleased when Solomon asked for wisdom instead of riches. But read on:

*Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East...*

That's right, the men of the East. Remember the wise men from the East that followed the star to Bethlehem? They were apparently astronomers steeped in the contemporary wisdom of the stars. That's what this is talking about. Solomon is being compared to 'We Three Kings'!

*...and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt."*

Even centuries before Solomon's time, arithmetic calculations enabled the ancient Egyptians to build great cities and pyramids, and they developed an accurate calendar based on the rising of the star Sirius (Egyptian *spdt*). But early on (about 3000 BC) the Sumerians excelled mathematically with a combination of a decimal system (based on 10) and a sexagesimal system (based on 60). They were able to perform complicated functions such as square roots, cube roots, and ratios. Their civil engineering feats are known to the world today.<sup>2</sup>

Mesopotamians also gave considerable thought to medicinal practices and science. There were many superstitions during the centuries before Solomon.

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<sup>1</sup> I Kings 4:29

<sup>2</sup> H.W.F. Sagg: *Civilization Before Greece and Rome*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 220-231. 1989.

*If [a sick man] sees goat's hair, the hand of a ghost has seized him;  
his sickness will be long. If he sees a dead man, the patient will recover.*<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, from the Prescription Texts of the 3rd Millennium B.C. we see a rational, not superstitious, treatment of a particular malady:

*Having ground up the roots of [various specified plants] with dried  
river bitumen, and having poured beer over it, and having massaged  
(the affected area), you shall put (the preparation) on as a poultice.*<sup>4</sup>

It is doubtful that the ancient cultures changed as rapidly as our culture today mutates. Some of the same customs of Solomon's time were operating several hundred years previous to his kingdom, and there were many similarities between cultures, such as their love for "wisdom literature."

But how did the ancient peoples and cultures know who was the greatest in wisdom? How could anyone have compared Solomon with all the Oriental magi and the princes of Egypt? How did they discern that he was greater? Back to I Kings, chapter four.

*He was wiser than any other man... Really?  
...including Ethan the Ezrahite, Oh! Sounds impressive.  
...wiser than Heman, Caled, and Darda, the sons of Mahol.*

Talk about wise! Those Mahol boys had a reputation! The writer of I Kings was comparing Solomon with the best, and the author knew that his contemporary readers would have recognized those competitors and would have been dazzled by the Mahol mental giants. Possibly they had displayed such acumen as the Akkadian counsels:

*Do not set out to stand around in the assembly.  
Do not loiter where there is a dispute,  
For in the dispute they will have you as an observer.  
Then you will be made a witness for them, and  
they will involve you in a lawsuit to affirm something that does not concern you.*<sup>5</sup>

But you have to ask, "By what means did they find out who was the wisest?" There must have been an objective technique, or at least a subjective method, to compare all the final contestants for Wisest Man Alive.

It seems as if all the wise men of the time may have participated in Wise-Guy contests to help them choose. Else how did everyone know who was the wisest? The Bible says "his (Solomon's) fame spread to all the nations." International gold medalist, he was.

How about a Wisdom Fest? Think of it. These boys were imprinted in one of those societies where every night the grandfather tells stories and waxes wise to the youngsters of the tribe. They love it. They cut their teeth on pearls of wisdom, and they grow up with an expectation of becoming wise. They think that's normal and cool. Where there is no TV, wisdom reigns.

On weekends the men, young and old, gather to compare proverbs, to philosophize, and practice debating. Once a year the best of the tribe could go as delegates to the annual conference of wise-men, each bringing his entourage of fellow wisdom-seekers and would-be philosophers. They're awestruck by deep sayings, and electrified by the practical wit they encounter there.

Solomon of Israel, the pharaoh's advisers from Egypt, the tribal princes for Sheba, Persian magi, Hittite counselors, men from all over the East might have made their way to a pre-arranged camp for several weeks of comparing proverbs and reporting on their studies in zoology, botany, sociology, or medicine. How did they decide who was the greatest? By voting, or by applause meters? Surely not by

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<sup>3</sup> IBID, p. 257.

<sup>4</sup> IBID, p. 264.

<sup>5</sup> Akkadian Counsels of Wisdom. (post-2000 B.C.), translated by Robert D. Biggs. in: The Ancient Near East Vol. II. ed. James B. Pritchard. Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, p. 146. 1975.

casting lots, but who knows? We only know they did somehow choose. The international winner was clear to them.

Anyway, by 970 B.C., Solomon, the king of Israel, was judged greater and wiser than all others from the nations, including the triple mental Olympians, the Mahol family.

Care to run with these references and speculate a bit further? Think of Job, a few centuries before Solomon, possibly in the year 1890 B.C., give or take a few hundred years.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps Job was this year's host for the annual Wisdom Fest; he was to entertain the world's greatest at Uz this spring. Probably descendents of the famous Seir of the desert, Job and his family prepared for the conference—they had made hundreds of skins of smooth yogurt and dozens of the finest date cakes. Fatted calves were ready for slaughter, and they looked forward to seeing friends from Teman, Kish, Thebes, and Hamath. There would be, there in Arabia, solemn debate and proverbs, prose, and poetry during the mornings. Perhaps the afternoons and evenings were given to study and preparation for the next rebuttal.

Last year the Assyrian contestants, agriculturalists, philosophized,

*An alien ox eats the grass; one's own ox lies down in the pasture.*<sup>7</sup>

A later Aramean moralized:

*More than all watchfulness watch thy mouth, and over what thou hearest harden thy heart. For a word is a bird: once released no man can capture it.*<sup>8</sup>

The Egyptian brought tears to their eyes with his love song,

*Seven days to yesterday I have not seen the sister,  
And a sickness has invaded me.  
My body has become heavy,  
Forgetful of my own self.*

*...More beneficial to me is the sister than any remedies;  
She is more to me than the collected writings.  
...When I embrace her, she drives evil away from me--  
But she has gone forth from me for seven days!*<sup>9</sup>

What would they come up with this year? Would the Moabites send a representative? The Hittites? They would have to travel for weeks to get to Arabia. Intellectual excitement and expectation ran high.

But what about the attendants of the wise men? Family members, scribes, and camel drivers came along for the entertainment, as well as for the wisdom contest. To while away their evenings they were ready for merrymaking at night—maybe singing and dancing around the fire. It would be a good chance for the young men to discuss a matrimonial sister exchange or to hear about the spice trade. They would certainly catch up on news of the seasonal military exploits of tribal kings near and far. Unquestionably, Job's sons and daughters knew how to throw a good party, so nothing would be lacking. Mrs. Job no doubt would oversee the festivity; the servants were keenly aware of her perceptive eye and ready to react to her commanding presence—she could certainly spoil the fun if they didn't!

Stop a minute. Could we imagine contemporary equivalents of the Ancient Near East Wisdom Fest? Intellectual sparring and reward for eloquence has been common in many cultures throughout history. In First Century Athens the latest philosophy tickled the ears of men gathered on Mars Hill. In the Middle

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<sup>6</sup> The Bible Time Line. Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing Company. 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Osborne, (c. 1800 B.C.) "Wisdom Applied" Pasadena, CA: Career Foundations Course, Lesson 38. 1993.

<sup>8</sup> The Words of Ahiqar, (5<sup>th</sup> C. B.C.) translated by H.L. Ginsberg. in: The Ancient Near East, Vol I. ed. James B. Pritchard, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, p. 246. 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Egyptian Love Song: 7th Stanza, 1300-1100 B.C. Translated by John A. Wilson. in: The Ancient Near East, Vol. I, ed. James B. Pritchard, Princeton University Press, p. 257. 1958.

Ages the likes of Martin Luther would nail his best wisdom to the door of the church for all to see. Twentieth Century youth who thought themselves wiser than all the rest staged sit-ins and peace rallies.

Nowadays in Seattle we hear folks talking in muted tones at Starbucks or Barnes and Noble. Current hot topics and debates pepper their local University campuses, and poets can publish their latest effort in the underground newspaper. Chat Rooms and professional conferences abound; there's something for everyone wise.

We could find serious Filipino young men playing chess at the outdoor malls of Manila while African boys compare proverbs and apply them to family and village matters.

*If you marry a log, you die with it.  
The thief will always beat the guard.<sup>10</sup>*

But back to our dramatic speculation: Wise men from all over the East are putting last-minute touches on their poetry and their proverbs and clever songs. The Mesopotamian sage wonders which of his brilliant quips might take the prize:

*The life of the day before yesterday is that of any day.  
Do you strike the face of a walking ox with a strap?  
The strong man is fed through the price of his hire,  
the weak man through the wages of his child.<sup>11</sup>*

And his Babylonian rival hopes for the best accolade with his own common sense:

*Into an open mouth a fly will enter.  
The dog understands, "Take it!" He does not understand "Put it down!"<sup>12</sup>*

Abraham's relative from Aram will offer his personal experience to the judges:

*I have lifted sand, and I have carried salt; but there is nothing which  
is heavier than grief. I have lifted bruised straw, and I have taken up bran,  
but there is naught which is lighter than a sojourner.<sup>13</sup>*

Akkadian worshippers of Ishtar might sing an original hymn to their idol:

*Praise the goddess, the most awesome of the goddesses.  
Let one revere the mistress of the peoples, the greatest of the Igigi...  
She is clothed with pleasure and love.  
She is laden with vitality, charm, and voluptuousness...*

*Who—to her greatness who can be equal?  
Strong, exalted, splendid are her decrees.  
She is sought after among the gods; extraordinary is her station.  
Respected is her word; it is supreme over them.<sup>14</sup>*

A godly man like Job may have even prepared a hymn to the God he knows, the Creator and loving Father who accepts his sacrifices:

*To God belong wisdom and power;*

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<sup>10</sup> Bill Osborne, from modern-day Tunisia, in "Wisdom Applied" Pasadena, CA: Career Foundations Course, Lesson 38. 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Mesopotamian proverbs, (c. 1600? B.C.) translated by Robert H. Pfeiffer in: The Ancient Near East, Vol I. ed. James F. Pfeiffer, p. 244. 1958.

<sup>12</sup> Old Babylonian proverbs (c. 1800 B.C.), translated by Edmund L. Gordon, in: The Ancient Near East, Vol I., ed. James F. Pfeiffer, p. 245. 1958.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Osborne, (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> C. B.C.) "Wisdom Applied" Pasadena, CA: Career Foundations Course, Lesson 38. 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Hymn to Istar (1600 B.C.) translated by Ferris J. Stephens in: The Ancient Near East, Vol. I., ed. James F Pfeiffer, p. 232. 1958.

*Counsel and understanding are his.  
What he tears down cannot be rebuilt;  
The man he imprisons cannot be released  
If he holds back the waters, there is drought;  
If he lets them loose, they devastate the land.  
To Him belong strength and victory;  
Both deceived and deceiver are his.<sup>15</sup>*

The season is fast approaching when Job's life becomes the stage for a heavenly contest. God's wisdom is being challenged by His diabolical rival, but nobody, even the wise nobodies, knows it. The Fest is just around the corner, and all is prepared, but suddenly Job's best laid plans go terribly awry. His flocks and herds, his houses and possessions, and even his beautiful and fun-loving sons and daughters are destroyed in a series of horrible catastrophes.

Onto this stage the wise men arrive for their annual program, only to find Job, the sage of Arabian Uz, engulfed in grief.

Apparently Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, elders of their tribes, when they heard of Job's disaster, left early for his camp. They may have been the first of many to arrive, days before the Fest, for that happens in societies where time cannot be scheduled precisely and instant communication is never expected. Or the wise friends come to offer their condolences may have been the only specially invited participants to a regional conference. At any rate, on arrival the contestant-friends were completely taken aback at the devastation they found in Job's encampment. There was nothing to say—all their carefully planned speeches and their clever proverbs could wait. Nothing was appropriate—nothing bar nothing.

For seven days the guests sat, appropriately silent, allowing their host to weep his tears and sob out his misery. Having collected his thoughts, at last Job uttered something—it would be the plenary address at this conference. As his comrades witnessed his bitterness outpoured, Job's situation betrayed to them the obvious: God's deep displeasure at their friend.

Probably the great, great, great grandson of Isaac through Esau, Eliphaz responded first. For the occasion Eliphaz had traveled two weeks to get to Uz from Teman, just south of the Dead Sea.<sup>16</sup>

Did he reply quickly to Job? Or did he take a day or two to prepare his rejoinder? One didn't need to hurry at a Wisdom Fest. Whenever it was, he spoke his piece as eloquently as a wise man should. In time Zophar and Bildad took their turns, all uttering philosophy worthy of magi.

These were not foolish friends berating a fallen companion—these were elders, truly wise men, each one able to structure his thoughts perfectly in fashionable synonymous parallelism, and each individual worthy of the coveted title "Wisest Man of the East." Like the tale of Sinuhe of Egypt of his encounters with the Asiatic people in the desert, their compositions were marked by hard thought, elegant prose, and fresh poetry.<sup>17</sup>

No doubt the scribes were ready. If the wise men had not taken sufficient time to write their speeches, the penmen would have taken short-hand dictation. They would compare with each other later to make sure every word was right, and compile and translate a complete document in the Midian language, or in Edomite, or in Hebrew...

The slaves' much-hoped-for evening of revelry was missing, perhaps replaced by baleful mourning, perhaps by desert silence; hence the Conference Proceedings could have been ready before they even left Uz. Copies of the contestants' wise speeches would eventually be circulated to all of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syria.

So the wise men spoke, and Job responded, and the friends gave thoughtful rebuttal. Their words revealed insight gained over decades of life observances. Even Elihu, the youngest intern, entered into this contest-turned-Reality-Forum. Such a match was never so intense or full of eternal interest or consequence as this one. Job's life and eternity seemed to hang in the balance, and none but wise men could give adequate guidance.

Wiser than others because they had learned from Elohim, the complex God of creation, Job's godly friends had nevertheless absorbed literary and poetic form from their ancient Akkadian counsels of

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<sup>15</sup> Job 12:13-16.

<sup>16</sup> See Genesis 36:10-12.

<sup>17</sup> Sinuhe (c. 1950 B.C.) The Biblical World. ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, p. 536. 1966.

wisdom, those who worshiped and feared the god Shamash: They exhibited, too, the mentality of appeasing the gods.

*Do not speak ill, speak only good.  
Do not say evil things, speak well of people.  
He who speaks ill and says evil--  
People will waylay him because of his debt to Shamash.*

*Have a freewill offering for your god,  
For this is proper toward a god.  
Prayer, supplication, and prostration  
Offer him daily, then your prayer will be granted  
And you will be in harmony with your god.<sup>18</sup>*

Ancient Sumerian mourning took the form of parallel verse:

*You have doled out to me suffering ever anew:*

*I entered the house, heavy in the spirit,  
I, the young man, went out to the street, oppressed in the heart,  
With me, the valiant, my righteous shepherd has become angry,  
has looked upon me inimically,*

*My herdsman has sought out evil forces against me  
who am not his enemy,*

*My companion says not a true word to me,  
My friend gives the lie to my righteous word.*

*The man of deceit has conspired against me,*

*And you, my god, do not thwart him,  
You carry off my understanding.*

*The wicked has conspired against me, angered you,  
stormed about, planned evil.*

*I, the wise, why am I bound to the ignorant youths?  
I, the discerning, why am I counted among the ignorant?*

*Food is all about, yet my food is hunger,  
On the day shares were allotted to all, my allotted share was suffering.<sup>19</sup>*

Ancient sages had been some of Job's teachers, and although Job knew God, he too poured out his soul in culturally expected words similar to Sumerian reflections of mourners:

*Surely, O God, you have worn me out;*

*You have devastated my entire household.  
You have bound me—*

<sup>18</sup> Akkadian Counsels of Wisdom, (c. 2000 B.C.) translated by Robert D. Biggs. in: The Ancient Near East, Vol. II, ed. James B. Pritchard, p. 147. 1958.

<sup>19</sup> Sumerian Wisdom Text, (pre-2000 B.C.) translated by S.N. Kramer. in: The Ancient Near East, Vol. II, ed. James B. Pritchard, p. 138. 1958.

*And it has become a witness  
My gauntness rises up and testifies against me.*

*God assails me and tears me in his anger  
And gnashes his teeth at me;*

*My opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes.  
Men open their mouths to jeer at me;*

*They strike my cheek in scorn  
And unite together against me.*

*God has turned me over to evil men  
And thrown me into the clutches of the wicked.*

*All was well with me, but he shattered me;  
He seized me by the neck and crushed me.<sup>20</sup>*

This was not just a contest of rhetoric. The match had become serious, and the men no longer were vying for acclaim, but for truth. Their focus had turned to Job's personal integrity, and all of the contestants showed a dead seriousness in their speeches.

Job's friends had indeed absorbed integrity and a measure of wisdom. In his accusations of Job, Bildad spoke of general principles that Solomon might someday use as a model:

*The lamp of the wicked is snuffed out;  
the flame of his fire stops burning  
The light in his tent becomes dark;  
the lamp beside him goes out.  
The vigor of his step is weakened;  
his own schemes throw him down.  
His feet thrust him into a net  
and he wanders into its mesh...  
Terrors startle him on every side  
and dog his every step.  
Calamity is hungry for him,  
disaster is ready for him when he falls.<sup>21</sup>*

Parenthetically, eight or nine centuries later, Solomon also wrote much about the wicked, but he chose another common literary form, the contrastive couplet, because it was important to him to point out how a righteous person would live in spite of the presence of the wicked:

*The prospect of the righteous is joy,  
But the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.*

*The way of the Lord is a refuge for the righteous,  
But it is the ruin of those who do evil.*

*The righteous will never be uprooted,  
But the wicked will not remain in the land.<sup>22</sup>*

But his father, David, the inspired psalmist, had used the same parallel forms of ancient Mesopotamian literature to voice his prayers about the wicked:

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<sup>20</sup> Job 16:7-12.

<sup>21</sup> Job 18:5-12.

<sup>22</sup> Proverbs 10:28-30

*Rescue me, O Lord, from evil men;  
Protect me from men of violence,*

*Who devise evil plans in their hearts  
And stir up war every day.*

*They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's;  
The poison of vipers is on their lips.<sup>23</sup>*

Job was wiser than most of the erudite of the day. He had an edge on all the sages of the East, because he knew and understood the Elohim. He had sacrificed and prayed and listened and experienced God in his life and family. In addition to contemplating how God demanded righteousness and punished evil, he had observed natural disasters like widespread snow and ice, and he had pondered the actual circumstances of the wicked. As he thought out loud, he encased his ruminations in verse:

*Why do the wicked live on,  
growing old and increasing in power?  
They see their children established around them  
their offspring before their eyes.  
Their homes are safe and free from fear;  
the rod of God is not upon them.<sup>24</sup>*

Although he was no longer thinking of the contest, Job, with such thought-provoking truth-telling, and still in all his misery, remained a likely winner of this year's Wisest Man Alive.

However, to the astonishment of the erudite and the foolish alike, the Contest was suddenly aborted. God Himself broke in to give the final address, blowing away all ancient sagacity with divine rhetorical questions. Every one of the astute contenders, the best from their tribes, sat motionless and dumbfounded before the Wisest one in all the East, yes, the Wisest One in all the Universe, as He spoke of His Own purposes and acts of wisdom. Not to anyone's surprise at that match, God used the same kind of poetry and literary forms that all the sages used to voice His divine message:

*Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand.*

*Who marked off its dimensions?  
Who stretched a measuring line across it? Surely you know!*

*On what were its footings set,  
Or who laid its cornerstone—  
While the morning stars sang together  
And all the angels shouted for joy?...*

*Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this.<sup>25</sup>*

*Unleash the fury of your wrath,  
Look at every proud man and bring him low,...  
Look at every proud man and humble him,  
Crush the wicked where they stand.  
Bury them all in the dust together  
Shroud their faces in the grave.  
Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you.<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> Psalms 140:1-3.

<sup>24</sup> Job 21:7-9.

<sup>25</sup> Job 38:4, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Job 40:11-14.



In spite of the fact that God was speaking their language, by using their style God's speech was an impossible act to follow. Miserable Job, not to mention his uneasy fellow contestants, could only lay down his wisdom and confess,

*I know that You can do all things;  
No plan of Yours can be thwarted.  
You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?'  
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  
Things too wonderful for me to know.<sup>27</sup>*

The Wisdom Fest was over. The Contest had been interrupted by the appearance of One wiser beyond anyone's imagination.

The Match was unanimously declared finished, and all the cunning ones who had gathered with their clever sayings and orations went home. Defeated? Yes, in a way, but no, that wasn't the point. They knew they were absolutely bettered by an Eternal One with a Universal perspective. They had heard undeniable wisdom that day.

Stunned by Omniscience, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu, and their contemporaries returned to their desert pasturelands, to their red-rock dwellings, to their eastern caravans or fertile valleys with new perception. They had heard more than wisdom that day. They had taken in **Truth**—absolute, objective, eternal Truth couched in a human dilemma and mortal language.

What about the antagonist at the Wisdom Fest? Satan, the spoiler, the extraterrestrial challenger who ruined all the fun? He lost his contest, big-time.

The enemy who had slipped in to sabotage the conference was forced to creep away in defeat. He had heard all the arguments of terrestrial literary prowess and he had been vanquished by Divine Verbal Truth. He had come face-to-face with Eternal Verity and more: Satan had witnessed the Wisdom of God played out in an earthling, in earthling words. The father of foolishness and lies at the Wisdom Fest was routed by truth in the wise man of Uz who recognized his own frailty but retained his faith in his invisible, living Redeemer.

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<sup>27</sup> Job 42:3.