

Job 32: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 32. So these three men ceased to answer Job because he was righteous in his own eyes. Then Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned with anger. He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God. He burned with anger also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong. Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he, and when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, he burned with anger. And Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite, answered and said, I am young in years, and you are aged. Therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you. I said, Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom, but it is the spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand. It is not the old who are wise, nor the aged who understand what is right. Therefore I say, Listen to me, let me also declare my opinion. Behold, I waited for your words, I listened for your wise sayings, while you searched out what to say. I gave you my attention, and behold, there was none among you who refuted Job, or who answered his words. Beware lest you say, We have found wisdom,

God may vanquish him, not a man. He has not directed his words against me, and I will not answer him with your speeches. They are dismayed, they answer no more, they have not a word to say. And shall I wait, because they do not speak, because they stand there and answer no more? I also will answer with my share, I also will declare my opinion. For I am full of words, the spirit within me constrains me.

Behold, my belly is like wine that has no vent, like new wineskins ready to burst. I must speak, that I may find relief. I must open my lips and answer. I will not show partiality to any man, or use flattery toward any person. For I do not know how to flatter, else my maker would soon take me away. In Job chapter 32, the character of Elihu appears out of nowhere, and then disappears once he has finished speaking at the end of chapter 37. Some commentators argue for this reason that he was a later addition to the book. His material is weaker, they claim, and if his speech has dropped out, would have no idea that he was there at all. He's mentioned in neither the prologue nor the epilogue, nor in the speeches of any of the other speaking characters. Indeed, many have argued that his material is a later addition to the book. The voice of some later writer is intruding into the text to reassert some sort of orthodoxy. Troubled by the arguments of Job and the failure of the arguments of the friends, they want to insert a different position. David Clines, although he significantly reorders the material of Elihu's speeches, placing them earlier in the text before Job's concluding speeches, argues against this assessment. He disputes the claim that the material belonging to Elihu is of a lower literary quality. He questions that the supposed intrusion of Elihu's material dissipates the dramatic tension of the text. Indeed, it could well be argued that it increases it. He also notes that if Elihu was added at a later point in the history of the text, the person who added him could also have added him within the prologue and the epilogue, so his absence from those parts doesn't really weigh strongly one way or another. Francis Anderson also argues that such arguments are not compelling. He writes, they misunderstand the role of Elihu as a protagonist rather than as an adjudicator.

He is the first of two who record their impressions of what has been said in chapters 3 to 31. Elihu gives the human estimate. Yahweh gives the divine appraisal. There is no need for the Lord to comment also on Elihu's summing up. His silence on this point is no more a problem than the absence of any final showdown with the Satan at the end. Beyond his place in the structure of the book as a whole, the character of Elihu is one that has divided commentators. Most commentators see him as a pompous character, an opinionated young man who has over-inflated views of his own importance.

John Hartley follows others in referring to him as comic relief to break the tension. Gerald Janssen argues that his position is undermined by virtue of style, framing and content.

[4:11] His voice is subverted because God speaks over his head and gives a different assessment of the situation. He is ignored in the epilogue. He repeats many of the friend's claims. He is verbose and his speeches have a lower literary quality. His account of Job's situation can also be falsified. Some, however, do have more favourable readings of the character of Elihu. Clines observes the way that, of all the people who speak, he is the one who is most sympathetic and generous towards Job.

He really does acknowledge some legitimacy to Job's positions. Eric Robinson makes a far stronger argument in this direction. He writes, Elihu, my God himself, is a young man of greater wisdom than all of the old sages. He shows up just when all hope seems lost, when the dirge pattern threatens to be the final unsatisfying end.

He is perfect in knowledge, as is God, and speaks of himself as a mediator who brings with him a ransom for the one who is about to descend to the pit. He speaks wisdom that prepares the sufferer to be in God's presence, eventually leading to full restoration. Robinson argues that after the cycle of speeches break down and the friends are silenced by Job, the conversation has ended at an unsatisfactory point, and the voice of Elihu is that of a mediator who will take up and move forward the broken down conversation, moving us to the point where God himself speaks into it. There is a drawn out introduction to Elihu and his speech in verses 1 to 5, although the last speech of the friends was back in chapter 25 with Bildad. Verse 1 mentions that the three men cease to answer Job. Elihu is introduced to us with his patronym, his people, and his family. Elihu, Buzz, and Ram are all names that we find elsewhere in scripture used of different people. Elihu is a name that we see of Hebrews in places like 1 Samuel chapter 1. In Genesis chapter 22 verse 21, Buzz is the name of a nephew of Abraham.

In Jeremiah chapter 25 verse 23, we also see the name Buzz in that context associated with people of The giving of these various names alongside those of Elihu maybe suggests that although he was a young man, he had pedigree and status within the society on account of his family. Elihu's response to the whole situation is one of anger. He burns with anger. He burns with anger at Job. He burns with anger at Job's friends. Once again, for a fourth time, we are told that he burned with anger at the situation in verse 5. Norman Harbel argues that anger is the defining characteristic of Elihu. He's a hot-headed young man. He sees a possible indication of this in Elihu's threefold use of an idiomatic Hebrew expression of self-assertion in verses 10 and 17. He writes, the words themselves suggest a hidden rendering of I am anger. Elihu is not happy with the unresolved character of the situation. Job has seemingly been playing a zero-sum game between himself and God. One of the two has to be in the right and since Job is insisting upon his integrity, God must therefore be in the wrong. There is a possibility, as we will see in later parts of Elihu's speech, that he wants to present both God and Job as being in the right, at least in the case of Job in the principal matter. The introduction of Elihu at this point opens our eyes to the fact that there was an audience to the earlier speeches. Job's dialogues with his friends occurred in the presence of at least one other person and probably a larger community. Once again, we should recall that Job's crisis was the whole community's crisis.

Job was one of the chief men of the east, and most of the people around him would have been led by him and dependent upon him in various ways. When Job and his household are struck so catastrophically and signally, it is a crisis for the entire community. A great many people will have lost wives and husbands.

[7 : 54] As Job's wealth was taken from him, all the people that depended upon him would also have been struck. In submission to the social etiquette and the customs of the culture, Elihu has not spoken to this point, as he is the youngest of the company. But by this point he's burning, he needs to speak.

Everyone else has been struck dumb, and so he enters the fray. His speech begins with a lot of throat clearing. Indeed, we don't actually get to the substance until the next chapter. Ascertaining whether this is pomposity or hesitancy on the part of a youth is nowhere near as straightforward as many commentators presume it to be. He begins by explaining why he has not spoken to this point.

He has been respectful of seniority. Wisdom is associated with age, and so those who are older should be especially listened to. However, he pushes back against the association of wisdom with the aged at this point. The source of wisdom is the spirit of man, the breath of God within him, the gift, we might say, of the Holy Spirit. His statement in verse 9 is probably not as categorical as it is rendered within the ESV. Anderson suggests we should read it as, not many old people are wise. The aged don't always have wisdom, and on the other hand, they don't have a corner upon wisdom. There are young people with the spirit of God in them, who can nonetheless speak with wisdom above their elders. We might think of characters like Joseph, or Daniel, or maybe the boy Jesus speaking in the temple. Elihu has done what he ought to have done as a respectful young man. He has heard out his elders, he has listened to, he has paid attention to, he has weighed, and he has considered their arguments, and now he is going to speak. The friends, he sees, have laid down their cases. They have left God to deal with Job. However, they had not effectively answered Job. Job had been speaking to them and addressing their concerns and criticisms, but these don't scratch where Elihu itches. He has his own set of arguments and believes that he can make a case himself. Job has not effectively answered his position yet, and so his speaking at this point would not just be repetitious. He turns to Job in verse 15 and describes the state of the friends. They've been silenced, they have nothing more to say. However, it is time for Elihu to speak his part. He is bursting to speak, like a fresh wineskin filled with new wine. His belly full of words is about to burst open. Hubble sees Elihu's self-description at this point as exposing his true character. He writes,

The full expose of Elihu as a fool who claims to be wise is unveiled in the third unit of his speech in verses 17 to 22. Earlier, Eliphaz had said, in a snide remark to Job, Should a man answer with a mind of wind, and bloat his belly with an east wind? Chapter 15, verse 2.

The prophet with wry humour has Elihu describe his condition in precisely these terms. Elihu declares that he plans to answer with the dictates of his own mind or knowledge because he is bloated with arguments and has a belly bursting with wind. In verses 17 to 18, unwittingly, Elihu characterises himself as a windbag and a constipated fool by appropriating the sarcastic language chosen by Eliphaz to taunt Job.

[10 : 59] David Clines, however, is one who questions this reading. Elihu concludes his description of his qualification to speak by asserting that he is without partiality. He will try and be even-handed, acknowledging with a fair mind what is true and false in the arguments of all the various participants in the conversation. A question to consider. At this point in the text, what arguments do you find most persuasive for determining the character of Elihu?