

JOB 32

B. THE SPEECHES OF ELIHU (32:1-37:24)

At this point in the book the plot has reached a climactic moment. Job's dramatic avowal of innocence has left the friends speechless and brought an end to the debate. Wearied by the inability of the dialogue to solve Job's dilemma the reader, like Job, is ready for God to appear and settle the issue once and for all. But once again, as it has done at nearly every turn, the book surprises us. It is not God who appears to speak but a heretofore unknown character, the "angry, young man" Elihu.

So surprising is this unexpected development in the story that many commentators reject it as "unoriginal" — a distracting and unfortunate addition to the book.¹ Most moderns regard Elihu as an early "reader" of the book of Job and his speeches as its "first commentary."² Others, arguing on literary grounds, have defended the originality of these speeches.³ As with other challenges to the unity of the book it should be remembered that there is absolutely no textual evidence for the existence of any version of Job that omits the Elihu speeches.

If we assume the originality of the speeches, there remains the challenging task of determining their purpose in the overall composition of the book. Here, too, opinions vary. By some Elihu is regarded as a pompous buffoon who provides "comic relief"⁴ to the tension of the plot while, by others, he is assigned the significant role of "forerunner" of Yahweh.⁵ In the text Elihu presents himself as a

¹Cf. discussion of these views in the "Introduction," pp. 30-31.

²Cf., e.g., Andersen, *Job*, p. 50; Zuckerman, *Job the Silent*, p. 153.

³Cf., e.g., the commentaries of Budde, Gordis, Habel, Janzen.

⁴Whedbee, "The Comedy of Job," pp. 18-20.

⁵Gordis, *Book of God and Man*, pp. 115-116.

self-appointed arbiter⁶ of Job's dispute with God and the friends. He criticizes both Job and the friends and rises to defend the just ways of God. Perhaps believing that God will never personally appear to answer Job's charges, he feels compelled to speak on God's behalf. In the process, while falling short of his presumptuous claims, he does, nonetheless, add theological insight⁷ to the debate and prepare the reader for the appearance of Yahweh. Most notably in his final speech he calls Job's attention to an approaching storm as the vehicle of God's "voice," perhaps the very storm from which God will actually speak.⁸

The Elihu section of the book consists of a brief introduction of the speaker (32:1-5) followed by four separate speeches:⁹

Speech One: Elihu's Defense of His Right to Speak (32:6-22);

God Does Speak to Men (33:1-33)

Speech Two: God Is Just (34:1-37)

Speech Three: God Is Not Answerable to Man (35:1-16)

Speech Four: God's Management of His World (36:1-37:24)

The Elihu speeches show a connection both with what has already been said in the debate and with what Yahweh will say in the closing speeches. On the one hand Elihu frequently cites the words of Job and the friends,¹⁰ while on the other hand he anticipates some of the very arguments that Yahweh will offer in his rebuttal of Job and the friends.

⁶The "arbiter" that Job has repeatedly sought (9:33; 16:18-22)?

⁷Cf. Gordis, *Book of God and Man*, pp. 104-116.

⁸Elihu devotes the better part of his third and fourth speeches to interpreting how God works through the "storm" (מַדְבַּח, 'ed, 36:26ff.; סַפְּחָה, *sūphāh*, 37:1ff.). Elihu's final speech contains a description of what appears to be an approaching storm (37:1ff.). The Yahweh-speeches then open with specific reference to "the storm" (הַסַּדְרָה, *hass'ārāh*, 38:1) from which God speaks.

⁹Cf. C. Westermann, *Structure of the Book of Job*, pp. 139-147; Fohrer, "Die Weisheit des Elihu," pp. 83-94. D. Friedman ("The Elihu Speeches in the Book of Job," *HTR* 61 [1968]: 51-59) argues that these four speeches were originally distributed throughout the speech cycles with one at the end of each cycle and the fourth after Job's final speech.

¹⁰The rhetorical technique of quotation in preparation for refutation has already been employed by both Job and the friends in the debate portion of the book.

1. Introduction to the Elihu Speeches (32:1-5)

As is the case with each new development in the book, the appearance of Elihu on the scene is introduced by a brief narrative (cf., e.g., 1:1-3; 2:11-13). In this prose section we meet Elihu and receive an explanation of why we have not heard from him earlier in the debate.

¹So these three men stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. ²But Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. ³He was also angry with the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him.^a ⁴Now Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he. ⁵But when he saw that the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused.

^a3 Masoretic Text; an ancient Hebrew scribal tradition *Job*, and so had condemned God

32:1-5 At this point in the story we learn that the debate is over. Frustrated by Job's "self-righteous"¹¹ attitude, the friends have given up in their attempt to **answer** him. When the author adds that the friends **had found no way to refute Job** and that they **had nothing more to say**, this is his way of telling us that Job has won the debate. The Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible has the author offering a further condemnation of the friends as being unfair to Job by adding the phrase **and yet had condemned him** (Job). As the NIV notes there is another textual tradition that renders this phrase "and so had condemned God" or "made God appear guilty." If we took this reading as original, then the author is accusing the friends of being inadequate defenders of God, an assessment later shared by Yahweh (42:7-8).¹²

Yet another defender of God now takes the stage. **Elihu** ("he is my God") is introduced by the rather lengthy pedigree, **son of**

¹¹LXX reads, "in *their* eyes" for the MT "in his eyes."

¹²The reading of NIV, following MT, is one of the eighteen *Tiqqune sopherim* or "scribal emendations" found in the Hebrew Bible, where the scribes intentionally altered the text to eliminate a reading that they considered offensive or inappropriate.

Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram. This genealogical notice may be important. As the commentators have noticed, Elihu is the only character in the book of Job with an Israelite name.¹³ His ancestry makes him a relative of Abraham.¹⁴ Since to this point the story of Job has been located outside of Israel and its major characters (including Job) have been numbered among the “sons of the East,” this sudden appearance of an Israelite is significant. It is difficult to imagine that a character so critical of the words of “foreigners” and so closely aligned with the words of Yahweh appears “accidentally” at this late and crucial stage of the book. His presence, rather than disrupting the flow of the book, decisively redirects it in a way that adds both drama and insight to its overall meaning and purpose. Elihu’s Jewish pedigree signals the reader that he is being introduced as a representative of Israelite theological tradition and that he will function as the “forerunner of Yahweh.”¹⁵

What Elihu will say he will say with passion. Above all he is driven by **anger**. He is angry first with Job for **justifying himself rather than God**. This phrase can also be translated “made himself more righteous than God.” Such a posture, as Eliphaz has already noted (4:17; 15:14), is impossible for a mortal before God. With this Elihu agrees, and it deeply offends him that Job should dare to make such a claim. Elihu is also angry with the friends for their inability to **refute** Job. Elihu knows what the readers know. The friends have lost the debate. Their attempts to defend God before Job’s irreverent accusations have failed miserably and amounted to nothing more than “defenses of clay” (13:12).

As noted above, commentators differ widely over exactly what to make of Elihu’s anger and, for that matter, his whole persona. It is

¹³Cf. 1 Sam 1:1; 1 Chr 12:21[20]; 26:7; 27:18). The name Elihu (אֱלִיחֻ, *’ēlīhū*) is very similar to the name Elijah (אֵלִיָּהוּ, *’ēliyāhū*, “Yahweh is my God”), and some scholars have argued that is its meaning here (cf. J. Montgomery, “The Hebrew Divine Name and the Personal Pronoun *Hū*,” *JBL* 63 [1944]: 161-163).

¹⁴Buz was the brother of Uz, and a nephew of Abraham (Gen 22:20-21). In Jer 25:23 a Buz is mentioned in connection with Dedan and Tema, located in Edom. Barachel, “Bless, Oh God,” is mentioned only here in the Hebrew Bible. There is a Ram who was an ancestor of David (Ruth 4:19), while another Ram is associated with Jerahmeel (1 Chr 2:9-10,25,27). The Targum of Job identifies Ram (“exalted”) as Abraham.

¹⁵Cf. Hartley, *Job*, p. 429.

possible to see him as a gallant youth driven by righteous wrath to take on the arrogant Job and the incompetent friends – a reluctant yet passionate defender of God. On the other hand it is also possible to label him a hothead and a loquacious fool not unlike the man so universally condemned by the Israelite sages (cf., e.g., Prov 12:15-16; 14:27,29). While God condemns the friends for “speaking wrongly of him” and Job for “accusing God,” he says nothing of Elihu. Given the fact that much of what Elihu says is echoed by Yahweh, himself, the reader should not be too quick to dismiss him as the arrogant buffoon of some interpreters. Whatever his motives and however presumptuous his claims, he does end up setting the stage for Yahweh to appear and speak.

Finally, this introduction of Elihu offers us an explanation of why we have not heard from him earlier. Out of deference to those **older than he**, Elihu has intentionally held his tongue. Only after they **had nothing more to say**, does he choose to vent his pent up **anger**. Such a disposition is typical of the respect accorded the elders in ancient times. It is only after it became clear that the older friends could not adequately refute Job that he decided to speak at all (32:11-16).¹⁶

2. Elihu’s Defense of His Right to Speak (32:6-22)

⁶So Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite said:

“I am young in years, / and you are old; / that is why I was fearful, / not daring to tell you what I know. / ⁷I thought, ‘Age should speak; / advanced years should teach wisdom.’ / ⁸But it is the spirit^a in a man, / the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding. / ⁹It is not only the old^b who are wise, / not only the aged who understand what is right.

¹⁰“Therefore I say: Listen to me; / I too will tell you what I know. / ¹¹I waited while you spoke, / I listened to your reasoning; / while you were searching for words, / ¹²I gave you my full attention. / But

¹⁶MT reads that Elihu had waited “with Job” (עִתִּי עִתֵּי יוֹב, *’eth-’iyôb*) before speaking. While Pope and Tur-Sinai take this as a dittography from the end of v. 3, Gordis argues convincingly that this reading should be preferred. The scene thus depicted is that of both Job and Elihu awaiting a reply from the friends. When none is offered, Elihu decides to break the silence.

not one of you has proved Job wrong; / none of you has answered his arguments. / ¹³Do not say, ‘We have found wisdom; / let God refute him, not man.’ / ¹⁴But Job has not marshaled his words against me, / and I will not answer him with your arguments.

¹⁵“They are dismayed and have no more to say; / words have failed them. / ¹⁶Must I wait, now that they are silent, / now that they stand there with no reply? / ¹⁷I too will have my say; / I too will tell what I know. / ¹⁸For I am full of words, / and the spirit within me compels me; / ¹⁹Inside I am like bottled-up wine, / like new wineskins ready to burst. / ²⁰I must speak and find relief; / I must open my lips and reply. / ²¹I will show partiality to no one, / nor will I flatter any man; / ²²for if I were skilled in flattery, / my Maker would soon take me away.

^a8 Or *Spirit*; also in verse 18 ^b9 Or *many*; or *great*

32:6-10 Elihu’s opening words confirm what the prose introduction has already told us. Elihu has been standing by during the debate carefully observing what each side has had to say. Being **young in years** he feels the need to offer an apology for daring to speak at all.¹⁷ Elihu says he was **fearful**¹⁸ of interrupting those older and wiser than he. Now that they have had their say, he is finally emboldened to speak. He feels qualified to speak because **understanding** does not necessarily come by age but by the **spirit**, the **breath of the Almighty**. While this may be a claim to some kind of special revelation¹⁹ similar to what Eliphaz said he had received (4:12ff), it is more likely Elihu’s way of saying that he possesses the same spirit of wisdom imparted to all humans by God’s life-giving breath (33:4).²⁰ Though not as old or experienced as the friends, Elihu, by virtue of being human, possesses the same spirit that gives them their insight. He, too, is qualified to **understand what is right**. The connection that Elihu makes between wisdom and right (“jus-

¹⁷Cf. the prologue of “The Protests of the Eloquent Peasant” (*ANET*, pp. 407-410) for a similar defense of the right of a lesser to speak in the presence of a superior.

¹⁸זָהָל (*zāhal*) is related to Ug. *dhl*, “fear,” and Aram. *dehal*, “fear, worship,” and appears in its Hebrew form only here in the OT. In its Aramaic form it appears in Dan 2:31; 4:2[5]; 5:19; 6:27[26]; 7:7,19.

¹⁹Cf. Hartley, *Job*, p. 434.

²⁰Cf. Habel, *Job*, pp. 450-451.

tice” or “equity”) is crucial for Job’s great struggle and consistent with the values of Israelite wisdom (cf. Prov 1:3; 2:6-10; 8:20). For Elihu, wisdom that does not result in “justice” and “righteousness” is no wisdom at all.

32:11-16 Elihu’s disappointment with the friends is echoed in two specific charges he makes against them. First, he accuses them of incompetence. Though the friends **searched for words**²¹ and offered their best **reasoning**, they have failed to **prove Job wrong** and been unable to **answer his arguments**.²² It is the unanimous opinion of Job, Elihu, and Yahweh himself (cf. 13:1-12; 42:7,8) that the friends are inadequate defenders of God. Their contention that God governs his world exclusively by retributive justice simply does not stand the test of honest observation of life. This is clearly one of the truths taught by the book of Job.

Not only does Elihu accuse the friends of incompetence, he also charges them with arrogance. He finds them guilty of simply dismissing Job without answering him, claiming to have **found wisdom** without being able to successfully apply it in rebuttal of Job’s charges of divine injustice. By saying, “**Let God refute him**,” they have abdicated their responsibility and tried to cover for their own lack of wisdom with an almost childlike petulance. In verse 14 he further suggests that the friends have been personally threatened by the power of Job’s carefully **marshaled** (פָּרַק, *‘arak*; cf. 13:18) arguments.²³ The inescapable proof of the friends’ incompetence is their **silence**, the fact that they **stand there with no reply**. They have been **dismayed** (lit., “broken and shattered”; חָתַת, *hātat*; cf. Isa 7:8) by Job. Their defeat is complete and humiliating.

32:17-22 Where the friends have failed, however, Elihu is convinced he can succeed. He is confident that Job can be refuted by

²¹חָקַר (hāqar) refers to the discipline of learning. Eliphaz says he had “searched out” his arguments (5:27), and Bildad says the precepts of the fathers likewise had been “searched out” (8:8).

²²On the legal dimensions of this language cf. S. Scholnick, “Lawsuit Drama in the Book of Job,” Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1975, pp. 227-237; Dick, “The Legal Metaphor in Job,” pp. 46-47.

²³Instead of the neg. לֹא (lō), “not” (“Job has *not* marshaled his words against me,” NIV, v. 14) Blommerde (*Northwest Semitic Grammar and Job*, p 117) reads אֲנִי אֶפְרָא (‘ani ‘ē ‘a-‘ārôk), “I will indeed prepare (my defense),” treating the *l* as a first person preformative of the verb.

what [he] knows. Elihu has punctuated his apologia for speaking by calling attention to *his* knowledge (עָנִי, *dē'î*; “what I know,” NIV vv. 6,10,17). To some commentators this self-consciousness suggests that he is possessed by an arrogant sense of self-importance.²⁴ If this is indeed the case, then Elihu is in good company. Throughout the speeches both Job and the friends, in their enthusiasm for their respective positions, have repeatedly indulged in a form of intellectual arrogance. Their speeches have been full of impugning, name-calling, and competing claims to the high moral ground. If Elihu believes he has the “answer,” if he dares to judge others as “wrong,” if he has the audacity to lay claims to the “truth,” then he nicely completes what Job and the friends have begun. This stage is no place for the timid, and timid, Elihu is not.

Above all Elihu is passionate. The **spirit within**²⁵ him **compels** him to speak. His frustration with Job and the friends has been building for some time, and like a **wineskin ready to burst** (cf. Matt 9:17)²⁶ he must **find relief**. As fermenting wine expands, so do the skins that hold it. Elihu’s growing rage must find a way to get out. Though driven by passion to speak, Elihu insists that his pursuit of truth will be dispassionate and free of any **partiality**. Though sensitive to the superior status of Job and the friends, he insists that he will not **flatter** his elders nor defer to them in his pursuit of what is right. The fact that he will now proceed to take on both Job and the friends will show him true to his intention. It is clear that Elihu sees himself as the final arbiter to this dispute. He intends to settle what Job and the friends could not. In all of this Elihu feels bound by a sense of obligation toward God. If his efforts to defend God should ever become disingenuous, then God himself would **take [him] away**.²⁷

²⁴Cf., e.g., Habel, *Job*, pp. 444, 449.

²⁵Lit., “in his belly, his viscera [בִּטְנֵוֹ, *beten*]” or the seat of his emotions. In the OT a person’s passions are said to agitate their viscera and compel them to action (cf. Job 20:9). Cf. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, p. 63; *TDOT*, 2:96-97.

²⁶NIV “wineskins” (בַּיָּיִטִּים, *’obôth*) may mean “wine jars.” Cf. A. Guillaume, “An Archaeological and Philological Note on Job XXXII, 19,” *PEQ* 93 (1961): 147-150.

²⁷The first of many “storm” metaphors in the speeches of Elihu (cf. 27:21).