

Job Chapter 32

Perhaps the most common question you will hear when discussing the book of Job with someone else is: what do you make of Elihu's arguments? Is Elihu speaking truth? Is he preparing the way for what God has to say, like John the Baptizer prepared the way for Jesus? Or should Elihu have just kept his mouth shut? I am very open to different takes on how to interpret these next six chapters, but I currently lean towards the view that Elihu would have done better to keep silent. To be transparent: this view has changed since the start of our study. I will try to point out evidence as to why I believe Elihu was in error as we go. But I think it will make for good discussion if you think Elihu was speaking truth and being profitable with his words.

The first bit of evidence as we begin looking at chapter 32 is how Elihu seems to lay a lot of groundwork to simply justify why he decided to speak up. This could be evidence that it was not appropriate or expected for a person other than Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar to speak. There is no evidence that the debate was an open forum, and Elihu seems to be joining a conversation into which he was not invited. That doesn't prove his words were unprofitable, but it is a red flag.

We should also consider some of Elihu's assumptions upon which his arguments are founded. As we go, I believe we will see that Elihu agrees with Job's friends about Job's character and why these things are happening to him – assumptions which the audience knows to be incorrect. Further, Elihu – like Job and his friends – gets some things right but other things wrong. He makes some interesting arguments, and some that had not yet been explored by Job's friends. However, it seems apparent as we read that Elihu didn't know what God was up to, and he didn't know about the discussion between God and the satan. Yet he implies on several occasions that he is speaking for God, and outright claims to be doing so in Job 36:2-4.

If Elihu's words are not profitable, then why are they included in the text? Why give Elihu the "final word" before God speaks? As one who believes that Elihu is not speaking profitable words, I believe the burden rests on me to give a plausible explanation. So here are some thoughts for your consideration:

- Elihu brings some new perspectives on what may be going on with Job. He brings different ideas for the audience to consider that were not covered by Job's friends.
- Elihu's words may have been included to justify Job's observations that the young no longer respect him, as Job claimed in chapters 29-30. Remember in chapter 29:21: "Men listened to me and waited and kept silence for my counsel." Job was a teacher of teachers. Now, as he claimed, even the young men no longer respected his ideas and had come to believe they were able to teach him. Elihu's argument could be included here to prove that Job was not just exaggerating. Job was speaking truth, as he claimed in chapter 27:4: "my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit."
- If these events really happened – which I believe they did – and then were made into this book of poetry, then the fact that Elihu spoke up and it was a notable event are all that really matters. It was a compelling piece of the narrative.

Now, let's get into the text!

Verses 1-3 are told from the perspective of the narrator. We typically associate the phrase "being right in his own eyes" with a person who has disregarded God and trusts in himself. However, as we have studied, the case of Job is more complex than that. As it pertains to the righteous deeds that Job

recounted, we know they also had God's approval. Job did not perform his acts of righteousness to draw attention to himself at the expense of glorifying God. It wasn't that Job wanted to justify himself rather than God. Rather, pertaining to why he was suffering, Job's commitment to approach the situation objectively (for the sake of his own integrity) – combined with having no knowledge of what was actually happening in heaven – demanded the conclusion that he was right and God was mistaken.

Yet even in this conclusion, Job tried his best to honor God. Chapter 9 comes to mind, as Job argued that nobody is higher than God so as to correct God. As Job reasons: how can man bring God to court and have some other arbitrator decide the matter? This gets back into our discussion from several months ago pertaining to the idea that "might makes right," and how God rather intends to show that he isn't right just because he is more powerful than anyone else, but because he is *intrinsically good*. His might administers to a pure motive. If you were not part of those classes and want to discuss it more, let me know but I won't retread the whole discussion here. The point is Job was dealing with a crisis: what do I do when I know I've done nothing wrong but God doesn't agree? This isn't the same as a prideful person trusting in their own righteousness.

Coming back around to these first three verses, when we read the narrator stating these things about Job, I think it is best understood as the narrator summarizing for the audience the perspectives of Elihu and Job's three friends. I don't think it should be used as evidence to support the validity of Elihu's argument, but rather why Elihu believed he was justified in speaking.

Looking now at verses 4-5, we learn Elihu's primary motivation for speaking: anger. Comparing this to James 1:20: "The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God," I think it is more evidence that Elihu would have done better to keep silent. Elihu's motivation does not prove that he was incapable of speaking truth, but we are warned of speaking and acting on the basis of anger elsewhere in the bible.

I think the fact that anger motivated Elihu to speak is also evidence that Job was correct in believing that by this point, nobody was showing pity to Job. It is another indicator of how far of a regression we have witnessed from the original intention of Job's friends for meeting Job: to comfort him. And by the way, where was Elihu's gesture of support? At least Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar had that: as of primary importance, they mourned for their friend and tried to comfort him before the argument devolved into baseless accusations.

Verses 6-10 begin Elihu's justification for speaking up. As we noted earlier, it seems even he realizes that it is inappropriate for him to speak. As I perceive it, he comes off as somewhat insulting in his justification. His basic point here is: just because someone is old doesn't mean they have wisdom. Of course, just because an old person isn't necessarily wise does not prove a young person is. The way Elihu frames his thought process here seems disingenuous to me. Elihu makes it seem as though he only just now arrived at the conclusion that the old are not necessarily wise as he was listening to Job and his friends speak. However, if he sincerely only now entertained this thought, wouldn't wisdom typically lead someone to give the new thought more consideration before acting on it? It certainly does not seem to be a justifiable excuse to speak one's mind.

In verses 11-14, Elihu expresses his displeasure at Job's friends. Verse 13 reads: "Beware lest you say, 'We have found wisdom; God may vanquish him, not a man.'" I found Barnes' commentary helpful in understanding the meaning of this passage: the idea is that Elihu is saying to Job's friends that God has not given his spirit to them, else they would have prevailed in the debate. The implication is they were

arguing from their own wisdom and not that of God's. By this verse, it is apparent that in the eyes of bystanders, Job had won the debate with his three friends.

In verse 14, the idea is that Job has not directed his words against Elihu, therefore, what Elihu had to say would be impartial. This goes along with verse 21: "I will not show partiality to any man or use flattery toward any person." Elihu also says in verse 14 that he will not use the same arguments that were employed by Job's friends. That makes sense because the arguments of Job's friends were seen to have been defeated already by Job.

In verses 15-22, Elihu continues his justification for why he needs to speak. According to Elihu, he just couldn't help it – he is ready to burst. This is another red flag to me. People who attribute actions and words to "not being able to help themselves" are passively shifting accountability for what has been done or said. We should not follow in the example of claiming we were powerless to prevent our actions or words, even in the case of righteous indignation. Let us rather meditate on James 1:20! Once again, this doesn't prove Elihu was incapable of speaking truth, but this is just another red flag as it pertains to Elihu's motivations.

Elihu will spend more time at the beginning of chapter 33 justifying his speech further. If you agree that Elihu was not correct to speak up, be looking for the irony in what he speaks in this chapter in light of what he has accused Job of.

I am fascinated by these chapters, and I hope to inspire in others a similar fascination! Elihu makes some subtle points that suggest although he was young, he was no amateur thinker. What do you think? Should we act like Elihu when we hear error taught? What can we take from his example and what should we avoid?