

Job Chapter 33

To quickly recap from chapter 32, I currently believe that Elihu may have done better to remain silent. My reasons are covered in more detail in the previous writeup, but here they are quickly:

- Elihu spends a lot of time and effort justifying his right to speak.
- There is no evidence Elihu was invited into the discussion – it didn’t belong to him.
- It is stated repeatedly that Elihu was motivated by anger (verses 1-5).
- There is no evidence of Elihu demonstrating compassion towards Job as of primary importance as did Job’s friends when they agreed to meet him.
- Elihu’s analysis of wisdom’s correlation to age in order to justify his right to speak seems disingenuous (verses 6-10).
- Elihu claims that he cannot resist the urge to speak up (verses 15-22), which is sometimes how people deny accountability for their words and actions.

None of these reasons prove that Elihu is incapable of speaking truth, but they are red flags. It is no small thing to claim to speak for God (Job 36:2-4), and yet I do not find any of the above red flags in God’s responses to Job.

Moving ahead into chapter 33, the first seven verses are similar to verses 15-22 in chapter 32 when Elihu claimed he could not contain his words. This is because Elihu is now claiming to be delivering a message from God. Back in chapter 32, verse 8, Elihu stated “But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand.” In the context of chapter 32, this was meant to rebuke Job’s friends as a way of saying they did not have God’s spirit in them. If they had, then they would have won the debate. Eli contrasts himself with Job’s friends in 33:4: “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.” According to Elihu, God’s spirit was in him. Furthermore, he was not going to allow his own frail human nature to impede the message: “my words declare the uprightness of my heart, and what my lips know they speak sincerely” (verse 3) and “Behold, I am toward God as you are; I too was pinched off from a piece of clay. Behold, no fear of me need terrify you; my pressure will not be heavy upon you” (verses 6-7).

In verses 8-12, Elihu summarizes Job’s arguments. This is evidence that Elihu had been listening for a while – perhaps from the beginning – and this could also be more evidence for how the conversation was public and attended by an audience. To Elihu’s credit, I believe he summarizes Job’s arguments correctly, unlike from what we have seen of Job’s friends (for example, Job 22:13-14). Job did claim each of the things Elihu states in this summary. In verse 12, Elihu again claims to be God’s mouthpiece: “I will answer you, for God is greater than man.”

In the verses that follow, Elihu outlines how God operates when a person has sinned against God. According to Elihu, God begins with sending the man warnings through visions and dreams (verses 14-18). When those do not work, the man is struck with illness and suffering and brought to the brink of death (verses 19-22).

Verses 23-25 speak of “an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him” (ESV). As you can probably imagine, there are many different interpretations over who this angel is and what is going on here. Some interpret the angel to be a man, not unlike Elihu himself, sent to the man to deliver messages from God. Some believe the angel to be a ministering spirit who is in the presence of God, whose apparent job is to intercede for the man and offer a ransom for him. Others

believe this to be a prophecy of sorts pertaining to the Messiah. Still others believe that the meaning of the passage is unclear, as evidenced by other translations. For example, the Septuagint renders verse 23: "Though there should be a thousand messengers of death, not one of them shall wound him: if he should purpose in his heart to turn to the Lord, and declare to man his fault, and shew his folly." In this view, there is no intercessor – only failed accusers should the man humble himself and repent.

Given the options available to us, I lean towards the view that Elihu is speaking of an angel or some spirit being whose job is to intercede for the man and offer some type of ransom. The effect of this act is so that God again hears his prayers and the man no longer endures suffering.

The concept of "guardian angels" is prevalent elsewhere in scripture – for example:

- Matthew 18:10: See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.
- Hebrews 1:13-14: And to which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?" Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

However, before we buy in to what Elihu is saying, let's keep in mind a few things:

- We need not validate Elihu's words against other bible verses if we already suspect – as I do – his words are not entirely accurate. This could just be Elihu's understanding of how God works, and it could be wrong.
- The effects of this angel's efforts are focused on the man's well-being in this physical life. Within the broader context of the book of Job, as we have discussed at length, it is not obvious that any of these characters had as mature of an idea of the afterlife as we do now that God's plan of salvation has been revealed. Within the pages of Job, we read of Sheol as being an equalizer of sorts and the final destination of all men. I will not retread the discussion we had on Sheol several months ago here, but please let me know if you would like to review that discussion again with me.
- As compelling as this restoration process is that Elihu outlines, the audience should know that none of it actually applies to Job. Job is not suffering because God is trying to get him to repent, but rather because God allowed the satan to cause Job to suffer. Even if Elihu is correct about this process, he is wrong about it applying to the case of Job. Combining Elihu's misapplication with the fact that he is claiming to speak for God causes us to question the validity of everything he has to say.

Going back to verses 23-25, Elihu claims the angel has compassion for the man and offers a ransom of some sort to God, after which God again hears the prayers of the man and restores him. Elihu closes the chapter by stating that this whole process, including the part about the mediating angel, is God's plan "to bring his soul back from the pit, that he may be lighted with life" (verse 30). The end of this section of Elihu's argument is intended to refute Job's argument that "God will answer none of man's words" (verse 13). Although Job never specifically states God will not answer – and in fact, Job holds out hope of appealing his case before God – the point is Job describes God as one who is indifferent to his suffering (see specifically chapter 30:20-21). This is very different than the God Elihu describes in chapter 32. Elihu's portrayal of God is one who is invested throughout the entire process, which is intended to restore the man from his sins. According to Elihu, there is a purpose for suffering, and it leads to good. Yet again, the audience should know that even if this is true, it is not applicable to Job. The purpose of Job's suffering was not to get Job to repent of some unaddressed sin.

In verses 26-28, Elihu recounts the disposition of the man whose prayer has been heard and who has been restored. There is joy and singing, accompanied by humility, gratitude, and transparency of character: "He sings before men and says: 'I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me. He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light.'" Remember that Job was more than willing to confess his sin if someone would show him what he had done wrong. So far, Job's friends could not identify the unresolved sin, and neither can Elihu. According to Job, not even God would reveal it to him, so that he might make it right. Remember chapter 6:24-25, when Job implores: "Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone astray. How forceful are upright words! But what does reproof from you reprove?"

Verses 29-30 describe to the cyclical nature of this process of restoration, with the result of the man's countenance being lifted. Again, the main point of this chapter is to refute the idea that God is indifferent to the suffering he brings upon man. Rather, man's suffering and humble state are parts of a failsafe process that ensures the man's restoration. Perhaps it may be said that unless the man suffers, he would not gain the pity of his intercessor and would therefore be a lost cause. If this message is true, then it is in fact a message of hope and comfort as Elihu himself states in verses 31-33: "Pay attention, O Job, listen to me; be silent, and I will speak. If you have any words, answer me; speak, **for I desire to justify you.**"

As I mentioned in the writeup for chapter 32, Elihu is no amateur thinker. This is not easy stuff to interpret. I would love to hear your thoughts!