

Elihu: a young theologian

Job 32:1-9

32:1 So these three men ceased to answer **Job**, because he was righteous in his own eyes. **32:2** Then was kindled the wrath of **Elihu** the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the kindred of Ram: against **Job** was his wrath kindled, because he justified himself rather than God. **32:3** Also against his three friends was his wrath kindled, because they had found no answer, and yet had condemned **Job**. **32:4** Now **Elihu** had waited till **Job** had spoken, because they were elder than he. **32:5** When Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, then his wrath was kindled. **32:6** And **Elihu** the son of Barachel the Buzite answered and said, I am young, and ye are very old; wherefore I was afraid, and durst not shew you mine opinion. **32:7** I said, Days should speak, and multitude of years should teach wisdom. **32:8** But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding. **32:9** Great men are not always wise: neither do the aged understand judgment.

Job 34:1-9

34:1 Furthermore **Elihu** answered and said, **34:2** Hear my words, O ye wise men; and give ear unto me, ye that have knowledge. **34:3** For the ear trieth words, as the mouth tasteth meat. **34:4** Let us choose to us judgment: let us know among ourselves what is good. **34:5** For **Job** hath said, I am righteous: and God hath taken away my judgment. **34:6** Should I lie against my right? my wound is incurable without transgression. **34:7** What man is like **Job**, who drinketh up scorning like water? **34:8** Which goeth in company with the workers of iniquity, and walketh with wicked men. **34:9** For he hath said, It profiteth a man nothing that he should delight himself with God.

Job 36:1-4

36:1 **Elihu** also proceeded, and said, **36:2** Suffer me a little, and I will shew thee that I have yet to speak on God's behalf. **36:3** I will fetch my knowledge from afar, and will ascribe righteousness to my Maker. **36:4** For truly my words shall not be false: he that is perfect in knowledge is with thee.

Job 37:14-18

37:14 Hearken unto this, O **Job**: stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God. **37:15** Dost thou know when God disposed them, and caused the light of his cloud to shine? **37:16** Dost thou know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of him which is perfect in knowledge? **37:17** How thy garments are warm, when he quieteth the earth by the south wind? **37:18** Hast thou with him spread out the sky, which is strong, and as a molten looking glass?

serving as a theologian?

We often do not think of theologians as true servants of the Lord, but if they teach the truth and help people overcome serious problems they certainly are.

Elihu was the fourth 'theologian' to try to help **Job** reconcile his suffering and the justice of God. Three older 'friends' all failed miserably by falsely insisting that **Job** was suffering because of his sin. The Lord rebuked them for their error (42:7-9). Elihu, however, was much more on target, as indicated by the fact that he was not rebuked. Rather than wrongly teaching that **Job** was suffering because of sin, Elihu correctly taught that **Job** was sinning by impatiently questioning the Lord about his suffering (33:12-13, 34:5-7, 37).

negatives

Job's three friends were like three well-known physicians who employed a traditional remedy on a special patient, only to see the patient (Job) get worse rather than better. Repeated applications and variations in the dosage did not provide any relief. So the three experts (12:2) gave up in dismay, having nothing else to try (32:15).

Elihu was like a much younger doctor who spoke up after patiently observing the repeated failures of three older men (32:11-12). Outwardly, he had been far more patient and quiet than Job, but inwardly "Dr. Elihu" was like a new wine-skin that was about to explode (32:19-20).

Like the others, Elihu felt compelled to speak, and he did so for about 165 verses and six chapters resulting in the longest speech in the book. Why did he say so much? In part it was probably because he had waited so long before speaking, but it was also because it is difficult to make convincing points about God or man without the Scriptures.

A detailed comparison of the terminology used by Elihu and the other three reveals four key facts.

- 1.) Elihu addressed Job directly less often.
- 2.) Elihu spoke about man and men more.
- 3.) Elihu had a special focus on inspiration.
- 4.) Elihu seemed to speak more like God.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	<input type="checkbox"/> It was very difficult to do theology in Job's day.
A-1	<input type="checkbox"/> Job lived long before Moses wrote Genesis.
A-2	<input type="checkbox"/> There were no seminaries or theological journals.
A-3	<input type="checkbox"/> Inspiration was not well understood (32:8-9, 36:3-4).
A-4	<input type="checkbox"/> Job shows what theological debate was like before Moses.
A-5	<input type="checkbox"/> Job shows that most theological discussion was a waste of time.
A-6	<input type="checkbox"/> The only certain way to access God's truth was to hear God speak.
B	<input type="checkbox"/> Elihu's teaching is difficult to understand and accept.
B-1	<input type="checkbox"/> He was angry at Job (32:1-3, 33:32, 34:7-9).
B-2	<input type="checkbox"/> He was negative about mankind (32:8-9, 33:12).
B-3	<input type="checkbox"/> He is difficult to follow because he was not concise.
B-4	<input type="checkbox"/> He is difficult to understand because of all the poetry.
B-5	<input type="checkbox"/> He sometimes seemed to contradict himself (36:4, 37:16).
B-6	<input type="checkbox"/> He only focused on one person and problem, Job and suffering.
B-7	<input type="checkbox"/> He opposed Job's friends (32:3) but sounded like them (15:8, 37:18).

positives

The lines in the worksheet below show that Elihu was active in two ways, upholding the name of the Lord (C) and helping Job (D). The order of these two must not be reversed. Elihu put God first. Job's three friends also claimed to do so, but winning the argument with Job was really their top priority.

Job's friends demonstrate the fact that the most dangerous thing in the world for a would-be theologian, counselor, or teacher of any kind is to cling to a firm but false presupposition. They were wrong about what had led to Job's suffering (1:6-2:10, 42:7). So they were unable to help him. Elihu, however, helped Job by speaking about other things.

It is impossible to speak in a blameless manner about God or mankind based on natural revelation and oral tradition alone. Job's friends tried and failed, but Elihu was different. He claimed that his knowledge came from afar (36:3), which may mean from God. Therefore he said that his words were fully correct (36:4).

Was Elihu's bold claim in 36:3-4 (Cf. 37:16.) really true or did he simply try to shock Job and the others into carefully listening to him? This is the BIG question. If Elihu was just using hyperbole, then lines C and D below are suspect. If, however, Elihu's words really were from God as he claimed, then lines C and D are more likely correct.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C () **Elihu honored God more than Job's friends did.**

C-1 () He was angry because God was dishonored (32:2).

C-2 () He said that Job had put himself above God (33:8-13).

C-3 () He said that Job's claims against God were false (34:5-12).

C-4 () Elihu said that God allows suffering for our good (33:19-30).

C-5 () He tried to explain why God often does not answer (35:12-14).

C-6 () Elihu's words in 37:1-24 sound a lot like God's words in 38:1-24.

D () **Elihu helped Job more than Job's friends did.**

D-1 () He had waited (32:4), and he told Job to quietly wait (33:33, 35:14).

D-2 () Job endured a lot (James 5:11) but not silently (34:35, 35:14-16).

D-3 () Elihu rebuked Job (34:7-9) less than the others (19:21-22, 33:6).

D-4 () He (34:35, 35:16) agreed with God (38:2, 42:3) regarding Job.

D-5 () He helped Job focus on God as good and just (36:1-15).

D-6 () He helped Job focus on God's majesty (36:24-37:24).

D-7 () He helped Job repent (37:23-24, 40:1-5, 42:1-6).

worksheet answers

Elihu's largely negative teaching about human nature (B-2) was much broader than about just one man, Job, or one subject, suffering (B-6). Though he was also Job's counselor, Elihu was primarily a practical theologian who tried to honor the Lord (C) and secondarily help Job (D) in all that he said. He knew that Job needed far more than superficial words of comfort. Above all, Job needed to understand the Lord better. Therefore Elihu spoke at length about God's goodness (D-5) and majesty (D-6).

Sadly, some Bible teachers wrongly believe that Elihu was too theoretical and disconnected from the harsh reality that Job faced. Therefore, for instance, his attempt to explain why God does not always answer prayer (35:12-14) is held up as evidence against Elihu (C-5). Other verses like 33:32, however, show that Elihu was not hard hearted. The fact that what Elihu said in chapter 37 is much like what the Lord said in chapter 38 shows this as well (C-6).

Job needed to stop focusing so much on the greatness of his suffering and focus more on the greatness and goodness of God. Elihu tried to help him do so. Ultimately, it was God himself, however, who led Job to repentance. (Line D-7 is only partly correct.) It took God to settle things in the end (38:1-42:16, A-6). Theological debate without Scripture was extremely difficult in Job's day (A, A-5).

So what?

Naturally, there were no formal theological schools or journals in Job's time (A-2), since he lived long before Moses (A-1). However, most people still knew some things about God through general revelation in creation (Rom. 1:19-20) as well as through that which had been handed down orally. (See 22:16 and 31:33.) Many of the so-called scholars (12:2) of the time were probably like Job's friends who had enough knowledge of God to be dangerous. Before Moses, theological debate was very messy (A-4).

Even so, theological discussion was not a waste of time even way back then, because the practical and theological problem of the suffering of the just had to be studied. Job's suffering could not be ignored. Many therefore believe that the Book of Job was in written form before Moses. It may even have been compiled by Elihu, who seemed to claim to have been inspired by God in a special way (32:8-9, 36:3-4). (Line A-5 is either false or only partly correct.)

Probably the key point to grasp about Elihu is that he served by honoring God (C) *and* helping Job (D). In order to do both, he did not cling to a false presupposition and condemn Job based on such like the others did (32:3). Rather he looked to the Lord for guidance regarding the truth (32:8-9), consulted with others to some extent (34:1-4), and spoke more carefully (33:1-7).

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most useful.
