

## THE SUFFERINGS OF JOB

### The Monologues (29-41)

Offsetting the cycles of dialogues between Job and his friends is now a set of monologues. Unlike the previous cycles, these are not argumentative exchanges. Three voices will be heard in these monologues, Job, Elihu and God, which will bring the reader to the denouement of the book.

#### ***Job's Final Appeal (29-31)***

In this lengthy final speech, Job yearns for the happiness he once enjoyed amidst the esteem of his community. Formerly, he was deeply conscious of God's providential care (29:2-3). He was shown deference by young and old, not to mention the city leaders (29:8-10). He ministered to those on their deathbeds and succored widows in their distress (29:13). His life was an exemplary pattern of righteousness and social justice, particularly to those who were disadvantaged (29:14-16). He was a champion against those who preyed upon the weak (29:17). Ironically, all these behaviors were the very things that Eliphaz had accused Job of neglecting (cf. 22:5-9), but Job could hardly have reflected upon them here if they were not true and publicly acknowledged.

In view of his paternal care for those most at risk, Job had assumed he would be rewarded with a long and healthy life (29:18-20). In the aftermath of his downfall, everything was now terribly different. He is mocked by younger men of questionable character whose family pedigree was even lower than dogs (30:1). In all this relentless outpouring of disdain, Job was overwhelmed: his former place of honor had been blown away, and his former well-being had evaporated like a cloud (30:15).

Beyond the humiliation heaped upon him by others, Job still contended with the deterioration and disease in his own body. His bones ached, and he could hardly sleep (30:16-17). Yet in all these horrendous blows, both socially and bodily, God had remained silent (30:20). This, for Job, was the most crushing experience of all.

From the midst of this unanticipated and unexplained suffering, Job voiced his anguished cry for help (30:24). At the end, he concludes by saying, "The words of Job are ended" (31:40), an affirmation that throws the burden of proof upon the court, and in this case, upon God (cf. 31:35a). Job has now said all he can say, and he resigns himself to await an answer from God.

#### **JOB'S OATH-TAKING**

*To understand the climax of Job's final appeal in chapter 31, the reader must appreciate the language of cursing. Curses are a speech-act inviting divine judgment. Job's final expression comes in the form of a negative curse, which is to say, he disowns the accusations against him and invites God's judgment if he is guilty.*

*Job, the accused, stands as it were in court, but his opponent has refused to speak. Hence, Job offers an elaborate series of oaths designed to affirm his innocence. The lengthy series of if-clauses invite upon Job's own head divine repercussions if he has committed any of the crimes he lists (31:5, 7, 9, 13, 16, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 29, 31, 33, 38, 39). The if-clauses come in two forms, a longer one in which he says, "If I have done such and such, may such and such happen to me," and a shorter one, "If I have done such and such..." with the consequences unstated. If no evidence to the contrary was forthcoming, then these oaths stood as assertions of innocence and exoneration (31:1-34).*

The document that Job said he would carry on his shoulder or wear as a crown might seem odd to the modern reader; however, in his era people wore cylinder seals around their necks (cf. Ge. 38:18, 25).

- Cylinder seals were cylindrical shaped stones with engravings to mark ownership.
- Appearing in about 3500 BC, they could be rolled into soft clay, leaving a kind of signature.



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### ***The Speeches of Elihu (32-37)***

Job has now consigned his case to God, praying and hoping that God will speak. Indeed, God will speak, but before he does, the voice of a fourth friend is to be heard, the voice of the young man Elihu ben Barachel. But whence comes this younger man, Elihu, who seems to intrude into the drama, not only unexpectedly, but awkwardly? Though Elihu will

address Job directly, there will be no exchange between him and Job as was the case with the other friends. What Job thought of Elihu's ruminations, we are not told. After he speaks, Elihu will disappear altogether. At the end of the book, God will address the three original friends (42:7-9), but Elihu is left unmentioned.

Not a few scholars have concluded that Elihu belongs to a subsequent stage of the book, a voice not originally part of the drama but added later, either by the author himself, or more likely, by another hand. Not only does the story seem reasonably complete without Elihu, what he has to say, while spoken at great length, seems theologically and poetically feeble compared to what has gone before. At various points he quotes or alludes to the speeches that have preceded him, which presumes he was present and listening (though unmentioned). That Elihu's name is omitted at the end of the book, when God rebukes the original three friends (cf. 42:7-9), is puzzling. Is this the ultimate dismissal—not to name him at all—or does this signify that God tacitly approved of Elihu's theologizing? Or, as many scholars conclude, is this omission of Elihu's name conspicuous because he was not part of the original composition?

A good deal of ink has been spilled in this discussion, and at the end of the day, we can only say that the canonical form of the book has come down to us with Elihu firmly fixed within it. Both the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls contain the Elihu speeches, so the textual tradition, Elihu included, goes back at least a couple of centuries before the time of Christ. The modern reader cannot pierce this historical veil further. Despite unanswered questions (which are not unsubstantial), Elihu must be left intact.

### ***Elihu's First Monologue (32-33)***

Elihu's monologue is divided into four speeches, each demarcated by some variation of the opening phrase, "And Elihu answered and said..." (32:6; 34:1; 35:1; 36:1). His first speech is introduced with a description of his anger,<sup>1</sup> both at Job, who in his view made himself out to be more righteous than God, and at the three friends, who condemned Job but were unable to prove their allegations against him (32:2-3).

<sup>1</sup> The standard idiom for anger is here used twice: **חָרָה אָפוֹ** (= "his nose became hot"), and it will appear again in 32:3 and 32:5.



*The Wrath of Elihu*  
Watercolor by William Blake

Elihu begins rather elaborately and rather pompously. He asks whether or not he should remain silent in the face of the inadequate arguments of Job and his friends (32:15-16). He feels compelled to fill the vacuum with knowledge of a better quality (32:17). Indeed, he says he is ready to burst at the seams with a truly impartial contribution (32:18-21). All this elaborate rhetoric seems overstated, though it may have been better appreciated by an ancient audience more attuned to orality. In any case, the substance of Elihu's lengthy preface in the entirety of chapter 32 can be summed up as simply, "I am about to say something important."

Elihu begins to rebut Job's arguments, first asserting that God is greater than humans (33:12). Such a statement, which will be the basis for his line of reasoning, shows a talent for the obvious but seems intended to suggest that Job's concept of God is inadequate. Elihu takes umbrage at Job's complaint that God remains silent (33:13; cf. 9:3). Against this, he asserts that God does indeed speak, but in different ways and not always directly. Sometimes he reveals himself in dreams or visions (33:14-18), sometimes amidst sickness (33:19-22). The problem is not that God is silent but that humans are not listening (33:14b).

### ***Elihu's Second Monologue (34)***

Turning to other listeners, whom he describes as "wise men," Elihu now solicits their help in dismantling Job's defenses (34:1-4). He asserts that God does not make errors of judgment (34:10). He metes out justice commensurate with human behavior (34:11-12). It is inconceivable that God would govern the universe unjustly or stand under the condemnation of a creature like Job! Elihu insists that God sees all (34:21-22), he is under no obligation to hear individual cases such as Job has desired (cf. 13:3, 18; 23:3-7; 31:35-37), nor does he need to listen to evidence, since he is omniscient (34:23-24). Even if he remains silent, a silence that Job has found deeply troubling (cf. 13:24; 23:3, 8-9; 30:20), the sovereign God is beyond human censure (34:29-30).

### ***Elihu's Third Monologue (35)***

Elihu's next monologue addresses two issues that greatly disturbed him (35:1-3). The first is Job's claim to be "in the right" (cf. 34:5; 13:18). He takes it up with Job directly and includes the others peripherally (35:4). In the second, he addresses the question he put in Job's mouth earlier, "What is the advantage of being good?" (cf. 34:9). Job has not put things in quite such stark terms, but Elihu extrapolates what he believes to be Job's position.

His answer is largely drawn from previous speeches, some from Job's own mouth, and it covers little new ground. He asserts that God is higher than the heavens (35:5; cf. 9:8-10; 11:7-8; 22:12), that God, the impartial Judge, is unmoved by human sin (35:6; cf. 7:20), and that God is equally

unmoved by a righteous life (35:7; cf. 22:3). Elihu's version of God seems to be a divine impassivity (which some theologians have accepted as true). To be impartial, at least for Elihu, also means that God is aloof, and nothing Job could do, good or ill, would affect God.

Continuing, Elihu argues that God does not respond to the pleas of people in distress, because they are filled with pride. Since such cries are self-centered, God will not listen (35:9-13). This, then, sets up Elihu's charge against Job. Working from the general to the specific, he argues that Job's complaint that he cannot see God is nothing more than insolence (35:14; cf. 23:8-9). Job's repeated attempts to present his case before God in court are impertinent, and as he has said previously, God is omniscient. He does not need to hear arguments about evidence (cf. 34:23-24). All this waiting around for God to show himself is entirely misdirected. To the contrary, God is even restraining his anger in Job's case (35:15), so as before, Job's words are just empty talk (35:16; cf. 34:35).

### ***Elihu's Fourth Monologue (36-37)***

The final speech of Elihu falls into two sections, the first dealing with the redemptive character of suffering (36:1-21), the second extolling God as the incomparable teacher (36:22—37:24). Elihu here seems more nuanced and less harsh than in his second and third speeches.

The gist of his argument is that God uses suffering as a means of testing and purification. He employs these hardships as a teaching instrument to lead humans to repentance (36:8-10). If they will listen, he will reverse their calamity (36:11), but if they refuse, they merely sign their own death warrant (36:12). This whole line of reasoning seems to mirror much of what was said earlier by the other friends (cf. 18:5-21; 20:1-29), and of course, it is precisely what Job says is NOT happening in the world (cf. 21:7-18, 29-30; 24:1-12, 21-25)!

If Job is obsessed with justice, Elihu urges him that he should rather be focused on the majesty and power of God as the ultimate teacher (36:22). This greatness of God cannot be fully comprehended by finite humans, of course, for God is not only powerful but also eternal (36:26). Still, from the majesty of the storm and the elemental forces of nature, humans can at least catch a hint of God's greatness (36:27ff.). Elihu then offers an extended description of how God superintends the elements of the natural world, a description that will continue until the end of this fourth monologue.

Obviously, Elihu's final speech prepares the way for God to speak, and the lengthy theme of the divine storm as well as the hint of a divine epiphany offer a transition into the final monologues from God. That being said, the reader must still assess Elihu's contribution to the conversation. As mentioned earlier, his role is more ambiguous than the other friends, since in the end God says nothing about him, either good or bad. It is fair to say that the Elihu speeches are more nuanced and occasionally seem to rise above at least some of the petty assaults of the original three. In several aspects, his reasoning is elevated beyond the crass insinuations of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. His perspective that suffering can be redemptive is to be frankly acknowledged. At the same time, his commitment to the impassivity of God and his assumption that there is a direct relationship between the natural order and the moral order of the universe cannot be sustained. Hence, Elihu remains a somewhat shadowy figure in the book, and the value of his contribution is muted by his occasional pomposity.