

Explore the Bible Series for July 9: Elihu seeks to set things straight concerning Job

June 28, 2006

Posted: 6/28/06

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- Job 32:1-37:24

By James Adair

Baptist University of the Americas, San Antonio

In the 1960s TV show Bewitched, nosy neighbor Gladys Kravitz regularly snooped on the strange goings-on at the house of Darrin and Samantha Stephens. Although warned by her husband not to stick her nose where it didn't belong, she did so anyway, often with comic or even disastrous results.

In the book of Job, the enigmatic figure of Elihu appears suddenly in chapter 32 and also sticks his nose into the discussion. As the first few verses of the chapter tell us several times, Elihu is mad, and he's not going to take it any more.

Who is Elihu, and why does he feel compelled to participate in a discussion in which he previously played no part whatsoever?

Most commentators believe the Elihu speeches of Job 32-37 are a later insertion into the text, perhaps added by a critic of the book who wasn't happy with the conclusion of the cycle of speeches involving Job and his friends. There are a number of characteristics of these chapters that suggest a different, probably later, author.

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First, Elihu appears suddenly in the story, without having been mentioned in the prologue, where all the other characters were introduced. Even more surprisingly, after his speech, he never is mentioned or directly referred to in the speeches of Yahweh (Job 38-41) or in the epilogue (Job 42).

Second, Elihu is the only character in the story with a Hebrew name. His name means "he is my God," and it perhaps suggests that Elihu's words more closely reflect correct divine teaching than those of Job's three friends.

Third, Elihu is the only one of Job's critics who ever mentions Job's name, and he does so frequently.

Fourth, several stylistic differences appear in Elihu's speeches contrary to the normal style of the rest of the book, including different vocabulary and an increased preference for Aramaic rather than Hebrew words.

Job 32:1-5

If the words of Elihu are a later insertion, what does that mean for modern readers of the text? If we adopt a canonical perspective, which reads the biblical text in its present form regardless of its compositional history, we will take the words of Elihu seriously.

The brief prose introduction to Elihu's speeches indicates Elihu was dissatisfied with the three friends' inability to answer Job satisfactorily, and he also was unhappy with Job's self-justifying argument.

Some textual traditions in verse 1 say Job's three friends stopped speaking because Job was righteous in their eyes—that is, Job's arguments had convinced them of his innocence—and thus they declined to speak any further. This reading seems unlikely. It is more probable the friends on the one hand and Job on the other had stated their cases, each without convincing the other.

In verse 3, Elihu is angry with Job's friends because of their inability to refute Job. The Hebrew text says despite their inability to answer Job, they still condemned him. Although this reading is possible, Elihu's anger at the friends seems misplaced. An alternative reading, recording by Jewish scribes, makes more sense: The friends' inability to refute Job effectively resulted in God standing condemned, a good reason for Elihu's anger. If this reading is correct, it accords well with another similar scribal alteration of the text in Job 2:9.

Job 33:8-11; 34:1-37

Elihu has two main problems with Job's arguments. The first is Job believes God is punishing him despite his innocence. Although the speeches of Elihu may be somewhat more nuanced on this point than the speeches of Job's friends, Elihu shares the same basic view of God's relationship with humanity: God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. In other

words, we live in a moral cause-and-effect universe.

Elihu is quite concerned to protect God's righteousness: "God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice" (34:10). Job must have sinned, Elihu says, or else God wouldn't have brought this punishment upon him. Even if Job's former sins were not great, his recent claims that God is unjust certainly qualify as sins worthy of severe punishment (34:34-37).

To prove his point, Elihu even resorts to quoting Job out of context in 34:9 (referring to 21:15), attributing to Job words Job had earlier said were characteristic of the wicked. Perhaps Elihu reasoned, "Well, Job really did say these words, so it's fair to throw them back in his face."

Job 33:13-33

Elihu's second major problem with Job's defense of himself is Job's claim that God refuses to answer him. On the contrary, Elihu argues, God speaks to people all the time, in many different ways, but people don't always perceive it. Sometimes God speaks to people through dreams or visions. Sometimes God's communication comes through pain and suffering. God might even send an angel with a message. All the ways in which God communicates are designed to bring a person back into a proper relationship with God. After all, Elihu says, God does not want to punish the righteous but to restore them after a fall.

Elihu makes a good point: God does speak to people in a variety of ways, but people often are unaware of what God is trying to communicate because their hearts are not attuned to God. Too often, Christians who await a specific word from God are oblivious to the many ways in which God is at work around them.

Having said this, however, I can't agree with Elihu's conclusion that because Job hasn't heard God, Job must not have been listening. Sometimes God's "answer" to our plight is silence. It is entirely possible for a righteous person to seek the presence of God and be answered only by God's apparent absence. God is never truly absent, of course, but God, for reasons which we may never know, may choose to remain silent in certain situations.

Elihu's claim that God constantly is communicating with the righteous ignores the sovereignty of God. God often speaks, yes, and we need to open our ears—and our hearts—to hear what God is saying, but sometimes we have no answer from God, and that is just as God intends.

Discussion questions

- What does Elihu contribute to the conversation about Job and God's justice? Would the message of the book of Job have been significantly different without these speeches?
- Does it offend us when people say things about God that we believe to be false? What about when people make what we consider to be weak arguments in God's favor?
- Do we ever resort to taking another person's words out of context in order to win an argument? Do we approve of politicians and other public figures who do so, as long as they're just arguing with those with whom we happen to disagree?
- In what ways does God communicate with us today? Have you ever experienced a time when you felt God was absent?



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