

The Book of Job
Session 20: Elihu Discourse, Job 32-37
By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 20, Elihu Discourse, Job 32-37.

Introduction to the Elihu Discourse (Job 32-37) [00:24-2:02]

Now we arrive at the newcomer Elihu. He's been viewed as an interloper by interpreters of the book, someone who rather roughly fits in, if at all, into the flow of the book. But I have a different view of that. Certainly, he can be viewed as an interloper, but I believe that his role is very significant to the book and plays an important part as a contribution to the book's logic.

Even his name is interesting. The other friends' names don't really feel like Hebrew names. But Elihu clearly is, and it's meaningful--"He is my God."

Remember when we talked about the triangle? We said Elihu builds his fort in God's corner, and he's defending God. And so, in that sense, Elihu is really doing the theodicy job, defending God's justice. As I mentioned before, Elihu is more right than any other human speaker in the book, but he's still not right. He's still not on target for how the book wants us to think in the end. He presents himself as a youngster in a sense, someone who has been respecting his wise sage-like peers by just keeping silent and observing. But now he's become so full of words to speak that he can't hold them back.

Elihu's Role: Exposing Job's self-righteousness [2:02-2:43]

And so, let's take a look at the role of Elihu's discourse in 32 through 37. Elihu is the only one in the book which offers a specific accusation pertaining to a specific breach in Job's righteous facade. So, where the friends can only suggest things that Job may have done wrong, Job, of course, has made an oath of his innocence in the previous

chapter. Elihu has a specific accusation to make, and it pertains to Job's self-righteousness.

Elihu and Job's Oath of Innocence [2:43-3:53]

By the way, before we go too far into this, we should note that after Job's Oath of Innocence, the suspense is hanging in the air. Job has thrown the gauntlet out toward God by making his oath of innocence. And so, the confrontation with God is drawing to a very sharp conflict, and we're there hanging on the edge of suspense as the narrator introduces another character. It's really an intriguing kind of strategy in the book that while we're holding our breath practically, seeing how Yahweh will respond, we get the rambling speeches of Elihu. And we say, what is going on? Is this a commercial? You know what's happening. It seems disruptive. Again, some of them felt that it actually is disruptive, but I think this is all part of the strategy of the compiler of the book. He's going to let you stew a little bit on whether God is going to respond to Job or not. And so, in the meantime, Elihu has his say.

Elihu Parallels to the Challenger [3:53-4:47]

Elihu's role in the second part of the book parallels, in some ways, the role of the Challenger in the first part of the book because he proposes an alternative way to view Job's righteousness. Challenger suggested that Job's righteousness could be viewed as simply a search for benefits of prosperity. Elihu is not going to go in that direction. He's going to suggest that the alternate way to view Job's righteousness is as self-righteousness. The Challenger questioned Job's motives, Elihu actually questions Job's righteousness. He's the only one in the book that does so, including God.

Elihu's Retooling of the Retribution Principle as Preventative [4:47-6:11]

Even while Elihu defends God from the charge of evil, you can find that several times in chapter 34. He defends God's justice in 36:3 and 37:23. Yet he accepts the rough paradigm of the retribution principle, that's chapters 34:11 and 36:11 and 12. So, God is not charged with evil. God is viewed as carrying out justice. Yet the retribution principle

is true. Now, remember we talked about how Elihu did that when we talked about the triangle? He redefines the retribution principle, not just being remedial for things done in the past that being preventive to anticipate things that are coming up. He agrees with the Challenger about Job's motives, that's in 35:3, and his major point is he accuses Job of the sin of self-righteousness. He considers that sin to be the reason for Job's suffering. You can find that in 34 verses 35 to 37.

Elihu Charges Job with Self-Righteousness [6:11-8:04]

His contention is that Job's self-righteousness in defense of himself itself is serious enough to justify punitive action against him. The Elihu variation is a judgment that may proceed with offense since it can have the purpose of drawing out offensive behavior. So, in that sense, it's almost like the suffering of Job would be baiting him in order to reveal what really is going on behind the scenes. The suffering was necessary in order to reveal the problem; Elihu's emphasis is on righteousness, not only the great symbiosis, though he questions whether God needs human righteousness. Maybe that's not even that important.

He's patently right in his condemnation of Job's self-righteous attitude. We can see that in Job's speeches and in Job's willingness to defend himself at the expense of God. That is a legitimate critique of Job and his thinking. Elihu brings those things out.

But Elihu is wrong about Job's motivations; Elihu despises the great symbiosis attitude and believes that Job is still harboring a desire for benefits. Job has amply demonstrated that prosperity at any cost is not the driving motivation of his life. So, in that way, Elihu is wrong about Job.

Elihu's Defense of God's Justice [8:04-8:41]

Elihu is right about God when he insists that God is not accountable to us and that his justice along with all other aspects of his character is unassailable. We can't question God; we can't do a better job than God. We dare not impugn his governance.

God is not contingent, and we should not think that his actions are subject to our evaluation or correction. In these things, Elihu is right. And again, he gives a very appropriate elevated view of God.

Elihu's Flawed Theodicy [8:41-10:09]

At the same time, he's wrong about the nature of God's policies. He continues to have an inadequate theodicy, and he is attempting theodicy. He does not seem to realize that in attempting theodicy, he is falling prey to the same fault of which he accuses Job. That is, Elihu is overestimating his ability to bring coherence on the basis of justice. Elihu is still working on the triangle. He tries to reshape it to his own use, but he's still working the triangle. He still thinks justice is the foundation of the system. He's still engaged in theodicy. He still thinks coherence comes from justice, and he still thinks that he can work out a simple equation. It's a little more complex equation than Job, and his friends were using because it redefines the retribution principle, but it still expresses the idea that a simple justice equation can bring coherence. On that, he's wrong. And it's going to take Yahweh's speeches to adjust our perspective on those things.

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 20, Elihu's Discourse, Job 32-37. [10:09]