

The Book of Job

Session 20: Elihu Discourse, Job 32-37

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton introduces Elihu, a newcomer who acts as a crucial contributor to the Book of Job's logic by exposing Job's self-righteousness. Walton explains how Elihu's speeches serve a rhetorical purpose, building suspense by delaying Yahweh's response while paralleling the Challenger's role in questioning Job's integrity. While Elihu is right that God's justice is unassailable and God is not accountable to humans, he is ultimately wrong for attempting a flawed, justice-based theodicy that still relies on a reshaped retribution principle.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Elihu Discourse (Job 32-37)

- A. Elihu's Entrance
 - 1. Viewed by some interpreters as an interloper who fits poorly into the flow of the book.
 - 2. Walton argues Elihu plays a highly significant role in the book's logic.
- B. Character and Name
 - 1. Unlike other friends' names, Elihu is clearly Hebrew, meaning 'He is my God.'
 - 2. Represents himself as a younger man who kept silent out of respect for his wise, sage-like peers.
 - 3. Speaks because he is so full of words that he can no longer hold them back.
- C. Alignment on the Triangle of Claims
 - 1. Builds his defense in God's corner, defending God's justice and performing theodicy.
 - 2. Acts more correctly than any other human speaker, but is still not completely on target.

II. Elihu's Rhetorical Role and Suspense

- A. Retaining Suspense
 - 1. Job's Oath of Innocence threw down the gauntlet to God, leaving the audience in suspense.
 - 2. Elihu's rambling speeches serve as a structural delay, letting the reader 'stew' on whether Yahweh will respond.
- B. Parallel to the Challenger

- 1. The Challenger in the first part proposed viewing Job's righteousness as a search for prosperity benefits (questioning motives).
- 2. Elihu proposes viewing Job's righteousness as self-righteousness (questioning Job's actual righteousness).

III. Elihu's Retooling of the Retribution Principle

- A. Defending God
 - 1. Defends God's justice and denies that God can be charged with evil.
 - 2. Retains the basic paradigm of the retribution principle.
- B. Preventative vs. Remedial Retribution
 - 1. Redefines the retribution principle as preventative rather than remedial.
 - 2. Views suffering not as a punishment for past deeds, but as a preventative measure to anticipate and reveal pride or offensive behavior.

IV. Elihu's Accusation of Self-Righteousness

- A. Specific Accusation
 - 1. Elihu is the only character to offer a specific accusation targeting a breach in Job's righteous facade.
 - 2. Condemns Job's self-righteous attitude of defending himself at the expense of God's reputation.
- B. Evaluated Validity
 - 1. Right: Job was indeed willing to defend his own righteousness by impugning God's governance.
 - 2. Wrong: Elihu wrongly assumes Job still desires prosperity benefits; Job has already proved his righteousness is disinterested.

V. The Flaws in Elihu's Theodicy

- A. What Elihu Gets Right About God
 - 1. Insists God is not accountable to humans.
 - 2. Affirms God's character and governance are unassailable and not subject to human evaluation.
- B. What Elihu Gets Wrong About God's Policies
 - 1. Overestimates human ability to bring coherence on the basis of justice.
 - 2. Continues to engage in a flawed theodicy based on the 'Triangle of Claims.'
 - 3. Mistakenly believes that a simple, albeit modified, justice equation can explain human experience.