

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 20, 6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome back, everyone. Today, we're diving straight into a fascinating section of ancient literature that has literally puzzled scholars for centuries. Now, if you've ever read the book of Job, you probably know the general rhythm of the story.

Job suffers this unimaginable loss, his three friends relentlessly argue with him about exactly why it's happening, and Job fiercely, passionately defends his innocence. But then, right at the absolute climax of the narrative, specifically in chapters 32 through 37, a completely new character just bursts onto the scene. A young interloper named Elihu.

It's jarring, it's sudden, and frankly, if it's your first time reading it, it's just completely confusing. Why is he even here? What could he possibly be adding to this epic, agonizing debate? For a lot of readers, Elihu is just incredibly frustrating. You know the feeling, right? You're reading along, the courtroom tension of the text has reached its absolute peak, and then, boom, Elihu shows up completely out of nowhere and just talks for six straight chapters.

It honestly feels like a disruptive commercial break right before the grand finale of your favorite show. Because of this, a lot of interpreters historically viewed him as the sort of awkward addition that barely fits the flow of the book at all. But, as we're going to see today by digging into the research of Dr. John Walton, Elihu isn't just a commercial break.

He is actually a highly significant contributor to the core logic of the entire explainer. And the clues regarding his importance actually start right away with his name. See, unlike Job's other three friends, whose names don't really read like traditional Hebrew, Elihu's name is distinctly, purposefully Hebrew.

It translates directly to, he is my God, which immediately signals his thematic importance to us as the audience. Elihu is planting his flag firmly in God's corner. He's arrived on the scene to play defense.

Specifically, he's here to do the heavy lifting of defending God's justice against Job's bitter complaints. Okay, let's dive into this case file. Our docket today covers five parts: meeting the young interloper, a strategy of suspense, the charge of self-righteousness, redefining retribution, and finally, the flawed theodicy equation.

Section one: Meet the young interloper. So, who exactly is this guy? Well, it turns out Elihu had actually been silently watching the debates the whole time out of strict respect for his elders, but their arguments completely failed to satisfy him, and he finally reaches a boiling point. But notice exactly when he decides to speak up.

In the chapter immediately prior to his arrival, Job throws down the gauntlet. He makes a formal, legally binding oath of innocence. By doing this, Job is directly challenging God to respond to him.

The confrontation is drawing to this razor-sharp, intense conflict, as readers were literally hanging on the edge of our seats, waiting for the judge, Yahweh himself, to finally speak. But exactly at point two, this young surprise witness just bursts through the courtroom doors with a massive interruption. Which brings us to section two, a strategy of suspense.

Now, while his interruption leaves us agonizingly hanging there waiting for God to answer, that is exactly the compiler's calculated strategy. The author is intentionally leveraging Elihu's long speech to just let us stew, stretching that suspense to its absolute limit. But Elihu isn't just taking up time to build tension.

He brings something entirely novel to the table. He introduces the only specific accusation of a breach in Job's righteous facade. Think about it.

For chapters and chapters, Job's three older friends could only throw out these vague guesses and philosophical generalizations about what Job might have done wrong to deserve all this suffering. Elihu is totally different. He is the only speaker in the entire book, and yes, that includes God, who brings a specific, brand new legal accusation against Job.

Section three, the charge of self-righteousness. So Elihu steps up and officially charges Job with the sin of self-righteousness. He essentially argues that in Job's desperate attempt to clear his own name and defend his own innocence, he's doing so at the direct expense of God's reputation.

And this brilliantly illustrates a structural parallel in the book that is honestly so easy to miss. Look back at the very beginning of the story. We have the challenger, right? The challenger questioned Job's motives, claiming Job only acted righteously to get prosperous benefits.

Elihu completely parallels the challenger's role here in the second half of the book, but with a major twist. Elihu doesn't question Job's motives. He questions Job's righteousness.

He proposes that Job isn't inherently righteous at all, but rather dangerously self-righteous, and that is the core problem. Moving on to section four, redefining the retribution principle. To make his accusation actually stick, Elihu has to reconcile Job's terrible suffering with a perfectly just God, all without abandoning the ancient retribution principle.

You know, the one. The idea that good behavior strictly brings blessing and bad behavior strictly brings suffering. He tackles this by ingeniously creating a two-step variation of retribution.

The older friends argued strictly from step one, which is remedial retribution. That just means suffering is always a backward-looking punishment for past committed sins. But Elihu introduces step two, preventative retribution.

He argues that a judgment or a season of suffering might actually happen before an offense. Why? Because suffering can have the proactive purpose of drawing out hidden offensive behavior. In Elihu's view, the suffering was entirely necessary to essentially bait Job to reveal that toxic problem of self-righteousness that was just lurking behind the scenes the whole time.

And finally, section five, the flawed theodicy equation. What Elihu is attempting here is what scholars call a theodicy, a formal philosophical defense of God's goodness and justice in the face of human suffering. And Dr. Walton notes, he's actually more right than any other human speaker in the entire book, but he still ultimately fails.

Let's weigh his arguments. Looking at what he gets right, he's absolutely spot on to condemn Job's self-righteous attitude. Job really was way too willing to defend himself at the expense of God.

Elihu is also a hundred percent correct that God is not accountable to us and that God's justice is utterly unassailable. We cannot impugn his governance. But moving over to what Elihu gets wrong, he mistakenly believes Job is secretly harboring this hidden desire for prosperity, something Job has thoroughly proven false.

But even more importantly than that, he gets the underlying mechanics of God's cosmos completely fundamentally wrong. The irony of Elihu's character is just incredibly thick, and it's perfectly captured in this quote by Dr. John Walton. He notes that he does not seem to realize that in attempting theodicy, he is falling prey to the same fault of which he accuses Job.

Just think about that for a second. Elihu correctly accuses Job of being terribly arrogant for questioning God's actions. Yet Elihu is exhibiting the exact same arrogance by overestimating his own human ability to perfectly explain God's actions.

He boldly, foolishly believes he can bring total coherence to the universe based purely on his own finite human understanding of justice. Now, what's really interesting about this idea is that Elihu's ultimate philosophical failure is that he's basically treating the universe like a cosmic math problem. He assumes that coherence in the universe comes strictly from justice and that he can just map it all out on a giant chalkboard.

Sure, by adding preventative retribution to the mix, his equation is definitely slightly more complex than the simple remedial math used by Job's older friends. But at the end of the day, a slightly more complex equation is still just an equation. He still wrongly assumes that a simple justice equation can comprehensively capture the vast infinite realities of exactly how God operates.

So, the absolutely crucial point we're left with today is this profound question. Can God's justice really be contained in a human equation? Elihu's grand six-chapter interruption brilliantly highlights this desperate human desire we all have to put God into a neat, predictable little box. Elihu got closer than anyone else, but the box still broke.

And honestly, how often do we do the exact same thing today? We try to mathematically solve our own suffering, expecting a clean, perfectly logical answer. Elihu's ultimate failure leaves the courtroom painfully silent once again, making us absolutely ravenous for the only voice that can actually answer the unanswerable. After all this waiting, we are finally ready for Yahweh's impending response.

Thank you so much for joining me for this explainer today, and keep exploring!