

Was Elihu Right?

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The major difficulty facing any suggestion that Elihu provides a possible explanation for Job's suffering is that nothing he says comes close to describing the events described in the book's prologue. This paper builds on the suggestion that the account in the prologue is not meant to provide a comprehensive rationale for Job's continuing suffering, freeing the reader to review Elihu's contribution in a new light. Furthermore, I argue that Elihu's contribution presents a non-retributive rationale for Job's suffering which does not fall under the same condemnation as that of his friends. Ultimately, then, Elihu's account might be correct. This serves the author's purpose by allowing an alternative to retributive justice while, by not affirming Elihu's explanation, ensuring the reader understands that the true cause of Job's suffering must remain a mystery.

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The status of the enigmatic character Elihu within the book of Job has long been a point of contention among scholars. He is the Melchizedek of the wisdom literature—appearing from nowhere to address Job and his friends, then disappearing as the divine storm approaches, never to be heard of again. Some see great insight in his words—finally breaking free from the captivity to the doctrine of retributive justice which bedevilled the friends' counsel.¹ Others see little more than a recapitulation

1. A recent positive appraisal of Elihu's contribution can be found in C. -L. Seow, "Elihu's Revelation," *ThTo* 68 (2011): 253–71. See also J. H. Walton ("Job 1: Book of," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* [ed. T. Longman III and P. Enns; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008], 338–39), who says "it is important to note that he does not simply rehash the arguments already presented by the other friends. He is more theologically creative . . . He expands the retribution principle so that it not only describes the remedial consequences of past actions (reward for righteousness, punishment or suffering for wickedness) but also now allows that suffering may be

of the arguments of the friends.² One significant consideration in determining the status of Elihu's arguments is the fact that the prologue gives the reader an insight into the heavenly court and the exchange between YHWH and the Satan which appears to set in train the disastrous events which subsequently overtake Job. Yet Elihu never even hints that such an exchange may lie behind Job's suffering, and so there appears to be just cause for dismissing Elihu's arguments along with those of the other three friends—in spite of YHWH's failure to condemn Elihu in the epilogue. If the prologue is understood as providing an account of the reason for Job's suffering, Elihu's failure to point to that reason would seem to justify answering the question "Was Elihu right?" with a resounding "no"!

However, if we, as readers, are wrong to judge the prologue's events as the only—or even primary—cause of Job's continued suffering, then Elihu's argument cannot be so easily dismissed, and perhaps a fresh look at Elihu's contribution to the argument of the book is warranted.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? ELIHU'S ROLE IN THE BOOK OF JOB

The place of Elihu within the book of Job has long been a subject of controversy. He is often disparaged, marked as secondary or a late interpolation,³ condemned for the supposedly poor aesthetic quality of

disciplinary and thereby preventative as it functions to restrain someone from following an unacceptable course of action." In the end, however, Walton does note that Elihu's view is "still tied too closely to the retribution principle." W. P. Brown (*Character In Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996], 84–89) presents a very positive assessment of Elihu: "Elihu as the gifted, rhetorically adept youth provides a prototype of the young Daniel depicted in the story of Susanna and the Elders in the Septuagint text . . ."

2. Clines provides a summary of a number of very negative assessments of Elihu but then proceeds to say that "[a]ll this hostility is overblown. None of Elihu's critics gives, in the end, an adequate account of what harm he does, or can say why he is so much worse than the other friends." See D. J. A. Clines, *Job 21–37* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 710. The critical reading of Elihu finds some antecedents in the Greek translation. See K. V. Kutz, "Characterization in the Old Greek of Job," in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. R. L. Troxel et al; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 352–54. However, Kutz offers the caveat that "I do not think that the translator deliberately tried to recast Elihu as unreliable" (p. 354).

3. E.g., D. N. Freedman, "The Elihu Speeches in the Book of Job: A Hypothetical Episode in the Literary History of the Work," *HTR* 61 (1968): 51–59; M. V. Fox ("Job 38 and God's Rhetoric," *Semeia* 19 [1981]: 56–57) says "When you consider further that Elihu does not appear in the epilogue with the other friends, though he should be

his speech,⁴ dismissed as merely an echo of his predecessors, or even designated the mouthpiece of the Satan.⁵ Longman, for example, writes that “[w]hat then does Elihu, under the influence of the spirit, bring to the debate? As it turns out, nothing new. He extols the same doctrine of retribution that the three friends did earlier.”⁶ Cheney goes further:

. . . when one examines the potential for caricature in Elihu’s monologue, especially in the first poem, the unevennesses in the structure, the use of repetition, the naïve use of polysemous terms, the frequency of self-reference and the incessant call for a hearing indicate that caricature, or at least rhetorical flaccidity, dominates the portrayal of Elihu. The argument that Elihu is not a comic figure because he ends on a serious note is really no argument at all since parody is always a careful admixture of seriousness and buffoonery. If a buffoon ends on a serious note, so much the worse for the serious note!⁷

chastised no less than they, it seems most likely that the Elihu speeches are a later addition, an addition that detracts from the dramatic force of the book.” Against this view, however, have been a number of more recent studies which argue for the originality of the Elihu material, for example, K. G. Wilcox, “‘Who is This . . .?’: A Reading of Job 38:2,” *JSOT* 78 (1998): 85–95. Wilcox argues that Job 38:2 refers not to Job but to Elihu and thus Elihu *is* judged by YHWH along with the other characters, strengthening the case for his originality. One difficulty with this is the close lexical tie between Job 38:2 and 42:3 where Job owns up to the very charge made by YHWH in 38:2—in 42:3 Job quotes the charge and then concedes that he has spoken without knowledge.

4. For negative assessments of Elihu’s style and speech, see N. C. Habel, “The Role of Elihu in the Design of the Book of Job” in *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Palestinian Life and Literature* (ed. W. B. Barrick and J. R. Spencer; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 81–98; E. M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job, with a Translation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 321, 326. Habel describes Elihu as “a pompous, insensitive bore” and “insufferably pompous.” Kidner says “We are kept waiting for the great moment of the Lord’s reply, tantalized by a torrent of talk which promises enlightenment but offers in the event little more than eloquence. Secondly, in the end it is totally ignored. It does not even qualify for condemnation . . .” See D. Kidner, *Wisdom To Live By* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 70. By way of contrast, see C. G. Bartholomew and R. P. O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 142. They judge that “Elihu’s poetry is more powerful and sophisticated than the friends . . .” See also Brown, *Character In Crisis*, 84–89, quoted above in footnote 1.

5. So the *Testament of Job*, where Elihu is the only one of the friends who is *not* forgiven!

6. T. Longman, *Job* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 62.

7. M. Cheney, *Dust, Wind and Agony: Character, Speech and Genre in Job* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994), 165–66.

Elihu's very place in the book is problematic—he is not introduced with Job's other friends in the prologue, he is not mentioned in the epilogue. Consequently he stands, neither formally affirmed in his arguments nor rebuked for them. What, then, is Elihu doing in the book of Job? Scholars have offered a number of different, not always mutually exclusive, explanations for his presence.

Elihu the Intruder

For many modern scholars, Elihu is an intruder into the story of Job. His absence from the prologue and epilogue simply reflects the failure of the redactor even to attempt to integrate Elihu's words with the remainder of the text. Robert Alter claims that, following on from Job's words in chapter 31, "in the original text, the LORD would have spoken out from the whirlwind, but a lapse in judgment by an ancient editor postponed that brilliant consummation for six chapters in which the tedious Elihu is allowed to hold forth."⁸ The supposed motivation for the intrusion is unclear but there is no shortage of speculation. For example, Carol Newsom suggested that Elihu's words derive from the ideas of a dissatisfied reader who has sought to redress perceived inadequacies in the earlier form of the book.⁹ Furthermore, the book seems to make good sense if Elihu's words are removed and Job's final proclamation of his own righteousness is followed immediately by YHWH's appearance.¹⁰

However, these arguments against the originality and importance of Elihu's words are neither insurmountable nor irrefutable. I shall argue below that there are good grounds for Elihu's exclusion from the epilogue and that Elihu does make an important contribution to the overall argument of the book. Furthermore, there is no indication in any ancient manuscript or version that the Elihu speeches were either located elsewhere or else absent from the book at any stage in its history.

8. R. Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2010), 6. Elihu is also seen as a later insertion by D. N. Freedman ("The Elihu Speeches," 51–59) together with others mentioned below.

9. C. A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 200–33; cf. S. E. Balentine, *Job* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 510–13.

10. E.g., S. R. Driver and G. B. Gray, *The Book of Job* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1921).

Elihu the Go-Between

Job's monologue includes an appeal to YHWH to answer Job's complaints and to speak and offer an explanation for Job's predicament. Some have seen Elihu's speech as a buffer between Job's demand that YHWH appear and YHWH's ultimate arrival and address to Job.¹¹ This is, it is suggested, a means by which YHWH's independence is maintained such that he does not appear to be at Job's beck and call, but rather is allowed to respond in his own time. As Seow notes, Elihu appears in an intermediate role, standing between the friends' arguments built upon logical exposition of their underlying presuppositions and the direct divine revelation in the theophany to follow. Elihu highlights revelation as a source of wisdom (Job 33:14–16) rather than the wisdom of the elders (cf. Job 8:8, 10; 15:10, 18).¹² In short, Elihu's wisdom is more deuteronomistic or prophetic than proverbial and hence exists removed from the wisdom of Job's other friends, anticipating the revelation that follows.¹³

Seow concludes that “[i]nstead of seeing the Elihu speeches as an interruption . . . one should consider it a necessary transition from the blatant judicial plea of Job to the overwhelming response of the theophany. Without the Elihu speeches, the movement from Job's passionate asseveration to the answer from the storm-wind would have been too abrupt.”¹⁴ Walton suggests that, unlike the friends who seek to

11. See, e.g., Kidner, *Wisdom To Live By*, 69–70; J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 427–28; Brown, *Character In Crisis*, 89 n. 14; L. Wilson, “The Role of the Elihu Speeches in the Book of Job,” *RTR* 55 (1996): 93. See also A. Pelham (“Job as Comedy, Revisited,” *JSOT* 35 [2010]: 100), who notes that Job “forces God to hear and answer him,” and yet “[t]he problem is, God does not appear . . . Standing at his full height, speaking his most serious words, all Job manages to do is to summon Elihu.”

12. See Seow, “Elihu's Revelation,” 262–63. Seow suggests that Job 32:8 refers to divine revelation. It is, however, better to understand Elihu's appeals to the Spirit of God as relating not to special revelation but to the equality of all people in access to wisdom rather than it being restricted to the elders. Elihu seems to appeal to the fact that all of them share the same created status as a means to equalise his standing with the others, so in addition to Job 32:8–9; 33:4, he claims equality with Job in 33:6 by again appealing to his created status.

13. See also D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 148. He says that “his main themes prepare the way for the central thrusts of the answer that God himself ultimately gives. If he is not praised, it is because his contribution is eclipsed by what God himself says; if he is not criticized, it is because he says nothing amiss.”

14. Seow, “Elihu's Revelation,” 270. Seow also notes others who have recognised this

convince Job that he has committed some secret sin, Elihu rebukes Job's self-righteous attitude so that the reader does not believe that the appropriate response to suffering is to issue a challenge to God.¹⁵

Elihu's transitional role concludes when his final words anticipate YHWH's own words to Job by insisting that human wisdom is limited and hence our understanding of the divine economy is also limited (Job 36:26–33). Here Elihu employs various aspects of the natural world to highlight the limits of human understanding, but also chooses the oncoming storm from which YHWH shall speak to make this point.

Elihu and the Basic Narrative Conflict

Elihu follows Job's impassioned monologue in defence of his own integrity in the face of his suffering (Job 29–31). Job insists on the underserved nature of his own suffering and, in doing so, restates one side of the dilemma the book has set forth repeatedly from its beginning. The opposing side of the paradox of the book is the notion of YHWH's justice and goodness, and much of Elihu's speech is dedicated to defending this idea (e.g., “. . . to my Creator I will ascribe righteousness” [Job 36:3], although this continues as a dominant theme throughout Job 36). While it has been widely noted that Elihu specifically interacts with what Job has said previously, the bulk of that interaction centers around the justice of God, not the root causes of Job's suffering. Thus, in these speeches of Job and Elihu, the basic problem of the book is restated: God is just, but Job is underserving of his suffering. In this recapitulation, the author prepares the audience for YHWH's ultimate arrival and interrogation of Job—an interrogation in which the book's resolution to this dilemma is to be found.

Elihu Brings Balance

Viewed from afar, the book of Job's structure is relatively straightforward. A simple analysis indicates that Elihu's speech contributes to that structure by providing an aesthetically pleasing balance to the book, while also serving to place the poem about wisdom in Job 28 at the centre of the book. Although it is possible to describe the book's structure in substantial detail, at the macroscopic level it conforms to a simple chiasmic pattern:

same contribution of the Elihu speeches to the argument of the book.

15. J. H. Walton, *Job* (NIVAC; Zondervan, 2012), 375–76.

- Prologue (1–2)
 3 × Speech Cycles (3–27)
 Wisdom Poem (28)
 3 × Monologues (29–42:6)
 Epilogue (42:7–17)

Elihu's monologue thus balances the speeches and hence draws attention to the pivotal poem in Job 28, a poem that affirms the basic thesis of the text that there is some wisdom that only God can access.¹⁶ The centrality of that notion is reinforced during YHWH's speech which largely consists of questions for which the sages had no answers.

Elihu as Comic Relief

A number of scholars have suggested that Elihu is a somewhat comical figure. Michael Fox, for example, writes:

Elihu is indeed a comic character, with his two-chapter preamble in which he refers to the words that he himself is about to speak as a lot of gas about to bubble up from his stomach (32:19). But is this buffoonery a deliberate creation of the author of these chapters? This is an interesting possibility—one is reminded of Shake-speare's comic interludes before the dénouement. But in Elihu's case the humor does not continue throughout the speech, and there is nothing that signals humorous intent on the part of the author.¹⁷

The notion is more fully developed by W. Whedbee, who claims Elihu plays the role of the buffoon (ἀλαζών) in a Greek drama.¹⁸ However, as readers we ought to be cautious before deciding too quickly that Elihu was intended to fill such a role, as a number of scholars have appro-

16. See D. J. Estes, "Job 28 in its Literary Context," *JESOT* 2.2 (2013): 161–64. On the significance of the central element in the chiasmus, see J. Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 19.

17. Fox, "Job 38 and God's Rhetoric," 56.

18. See J. W. Whedbee, "The Comedy of Job," *Semeia* 7 (1977): 1–39. At one level, Whedbee is to Job as Whybray is to Qohelet (in R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 [1982]: 87–98). John Morreall, however, raises a number of valid criticisms of Whedbee's arguments. See J. Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 5, 13, 98–99.

priately cautioned that humour does not always easily translate from one culture to another, and that what modern readers find funny may not have been funny to the work's original audience.¹⁹

Nonetheless, it is difficult to dispute the observation that some aspects of Elihu's speech do border on the absurd. Abigail Pelham, for example, notes various aspects of Elihu's speech which she identifies as explicitly comedic such as the manner in which his insistence over the urgency of his message itself is so extensive that it delays those very words he considers to be urgent. Elihu's subsequent comparison of himself with a bursting wineskin (32:19–20a) after which he continues to procrastinate for several more verses further adds to this absurdity.²⁰

A comical Elihu, however, also fits with the author's tendency to invert expectations throughout the book. The righteous wise man suffers, the wise and respected friends who apply the conventional doctrines turn out to be wrong, yet the comical young man whose speech clearly reflects his inexperience as a sage, against all expectations, speaks more profoundly than all others. Qohelet would have been right at home here declaring that this world made no sense!

Elihu as Alternative Theodicy

While many scholars find nothing new in Elihu's speech regarding the nature of Job's suffering, others recognise something that moves beyond the simplistic application of retributive justice which forms the basis of the arguments of the three friends.²¹ In particular, Elihu suggests that suffering may also function preemptively, serving to prevent a person from pursuing a course of action which would ultimately prove detrimental.

Although much of Elihu's speech functions primarily to affirm

19. Y. T. Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Y. T. Radday and A. Brenner; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 25.

20. Pelham, "Job as Comedy, Revisited," 98. Habel notes the manner in which Elihu supposedly picks up on Eliphaz's words in Job 15:2, words which were sarcastic, but appropriates them without any sign of recognising the sarcasm in Job 32:17–18. However, given that we discover at the end that Eliphaz was wrong, perhaps we need to invert our reading of his sarcasm such that Elihu's "belly of wind" is indeed the way the wise man ultimately does answer! Nonetheless, Elihu does not directly quote Eliphaz and so the connection may be more tenuous than Habel suggests.

21. Note Seow, who says "Elihu does not presume Job is guilty." C.-L. Seow, *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 98.

the righteousness of God, in Job 33:14–28 Elihu does propose a possible explanation for suffering. Precisely what Elihu claims is, however, disputed. If Elihu merely says that suffering is a forewarning of the more dire consequences of some misdeed already committed, then he is certainly saying no more than Job’s older friends. There are, however, good grounds for finding in Elihu’s words something new which moves beyond the simple appeal to retributive justice which underpinned the arguments of the three older friends.

To begin, Elihu presents only a possible explanation for suffering—he does not claim to have the definitive reason for Job’s suffering. In Job 33:14 we do not read (as the NIV would have it) “for God *does* speak . . .” Rather, the imperfect verb דָּבַר suggests a modal aspect to his words and so is perhaps better understood as “for God *may* speak . . .”²² If this is the case, Elihu’s words do not overstep the book’s insistence on the hiddenness of God’s ways but instead propose only a possible explanation for Job’s circumstances. Furthermore, the parallel “for one . . . and in two . . .” suggests that Elihu is not intending to provide a comprehensive account of all the means by which God may speak, further supporting a modal reading.²³ By offering suggestions from a hypothetical array of possibilities, Elihu is not aiming to speak exhaustively, just suggestively. Clearly Elihu’s words are not *entirely* hypothetical—they do connect to Job’s circumstances in specific ways: Elihu speaks of suffering and distress, and of being terrified in dreams, particular things that Job could directly relate to (cf. Job 7:14). Nonetheless, Elihu does not claim to offer the definitive explanation for Job’s circumstances.

22. While Revell and others have noted that the imperfect form appears at the head of its clause when used modally, as it does here, the applicability of such analysis to poetry is less clear. See E. J. Revell, “The System of the Verb in Standard Biblical Prose,” *HUCA* 60 (1989): 1–37. Waltke & O’Connor argue that an irreal mood is an inherent property of the imperfect form. See B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), § 31.4.b. The LXX here uses λαλήσαι which, read as an optative, reflects a modal reading of the Hebrew.

23. See Clines (*Job 21–37*, 730), who notes that “other ways” are implied in Elihu’s words. He also notes that other scholars identify explicit reference to other forms of divine communication in cultic experience (Job 33:23–28, so Habel) or angels and prayer (in Job 33:23–24, 25–29, so Good).

The key to understanding Elihu's argument here lies in verse 33:17 where he offers a rationale for the suffering and distress he has described: "so that a person may turn aside from a deed . . ." (להסיר אדם מעשה). As noted above, if the sufferer is being called upon to turn from some past or present sin, Elihu says nothing new. However, the verb סור can be used with the meaning "to avoid" (cf. Prov 14:27), which suggests that Elihu may here be proposing that the warning, the discipline, the instruction could be preemptive.²⁴ If that is the case, then this is unprecedented in the book of Job.²⁵

There are a number of other considerations that lend support to this reading of Elihu's words. The term used in the immediately preceding verse to describe God's word that comes through any one of numerous means, מוסר, is a common wisdom term and appears repeatedly in Proverbs, and not merely as a word to describe disciplining someone for their erroneous behaviour. It is also used to describe instruction for avoiding such behaviour in the future. So, in Prov 10:17 we read:

ארח לחיים שומר מוסר
ועוזב תוכחת מתעה

The one who heeds instruction is on the way to life,
but the one who rejects rebuke goes astray.

Similarly, in Prov 19:27:

חדל בני לשמע מוסר
לשגות מאמרי דעת

Cease listening, my son, to discipline,
and you will stray from the words of knowledge.

24. Similarly, see Seow ("Elihu's Revelation," 265): "Elihu argues, however, that dreams and visions may not be due to God's intent to torment or to punish. Rather, they may be preventative."

25. A number of scholars read Elihu's words here in a similar fashion, including John Walton, who writes that "Elihu considers these communications to be instructive and constructive rather than punitive. In this he offers a perspective not represented in the thinking of Job or his friends." See Walton, *Job*, 355. Seow ("Elihu's Revelation," 266) notes that Elihu's "point . . ." is that there may be other explanations besides the two options laid out by Job and his friends (see also Seow, *Job 1–21*, 98). Hartley (*Job*, 427) also notes that "He teaches that misfortune may befall a person in order to awaken him to some wrongful attitude or unconscious error and thus keep him from taking a wrong course."

In wisdom literature, instruction and discipline—concepts which overlap—function not simply to rebuke, but are given so that actions and choices in the future may be made with wisdom. They prevent one from going astray. This type of disciplined instruction has a preemptive function which seeks to avoid future error.²⁶

Furthermore, there are later indications that Elihu is speaking about suffering that functions as a warning, preempting a possible sin. For one, this idea appears to lie behind Elihu's words in Job 36:15–21 which conclude with the warning:

השמר אל תפן אל און
כי על זה בחרת מעני

Watch out! Do not turn to sin,
for you have preferred this to affliction.²⁷

The first line is sufficiently clear to recognise that Elihu sees that Job has not yet turned to sin but that he has been issued with a warning. Finally, the absence of Elihu from the epilogue supports the notion that Elihu's explanations for Job's suffering should not simply be identified with those of Job's older three friends and as such it cannot be dismissed with their arguments.

Consequently, Elihu tentatively proposes a different explanation for suffering, an explanation which moves beyond the simplistic appeal to retributive justice which dominates the arguments of the three friends. Nonetheless, there remains one significant obstacle preventing the reader from accepting this as a viable explanation for Job's suffering: it does not correspond to the reason for Job's suffering presented in the prologue.²⁸

26. Seow (*Job 1–21*, 98) notes that “Elihu uses *mūsār* not in the sense of punishment but in the sense of ‘warning’, a warning that will turn out to be revelatory and redemptive (33:16).” Seow goes on to note that Elihu neither claims to offer a definitive explanation of all suffering, nor even of Job's suffering, merely to note that there may be more explanations for suffering than the two proposed by Job and his friends (p. 99).

27. The second part of this verse is difficult, and many suggest various emendations, although it is possible to make sense of it as it stands and many of the proposed alterations are no simpler than the extant text. Clines (*Job 21–37*, 823), for example, suggests repointing בחר as pual and reading the following preposition as signifying “efficient cause” and so translating this as “for that is why you are being tested by affliction.” However, he correctly notes the difficulties this introduces: there are no examples of בחר in the pual elsewhere in BH, and it would be more natural to use the preposition ב in place of מן.

28. This is the principal objection to this reading raised by Wilson, “The Role of the Elihu Speeches,” 86.

This problem would appear to be insurmountable—that is, unless the prologue’s account is either no longer applicable to Job or else is not intended to offer a comprehensive explanation for Job’s present predicament. As it turns out, there are good reasons to believe these limitations on the prologue’s story do apply.

If it is true that Elihu does offer a way out of the bind that Job’s three older friends face in the light of their unswerving commitment to the doctrine of retributive justice, then we might draw from it some further conclusions. Where many scholars consider Elihu brash and stylistically impaired compared to the aesthetically loftier poetry of the remainder of the work, we might see the skill of the author who employs such style to reflect the character’s youth and to set him apart from the others. But perhaps there is more here as well. Qohelet’s epilogist noted that Qohelet had sought to find pleasing words but did not allow aesthetics to overrule truth (Eccl 12:10),²⁹ so Job’s author has presented the false claims of Job’s three older friends with greater style than the words of Elihu. Job’s author is well aware that we ought not to judge a book by its cover!

ELIHU AND THE PROLOGUE

The prologue sets out the circumstances which lead to Job’s suffering by relating details of a wager between YHWH and the Satan over Job’s motives for living a faithful life. This account would, at least initially, appear to undermine Elihu’s claim that Job’s suffering could function as a warning to Job rather than a rebuke. A careful reading, however, reveals that the prologue does not offer an exhaustive explanation for Job’s suffering, leaving the reader as much in the dark about all that is going on as Job and his friends are. Although the account of the encounters between YHWH and the Satan in the prologue can mislead the unwary reader into believing that a full account of the cause of Job’s suffering has been revealed, there are clear indicators in the prologue and subsequent text of Job which serve to highlight the fact that the information is incomplete.

The structure of the prologue justifies this observation—the repeated pattern of the Satan’s arrival in the heavenly court followed by him questioning the motives for Job’s devotion with the assertion that Job would curse God if he were allowed to suffer, the infliction of suffering on Job, and finally, Job’s response makes it clear that YHWH’s

29. See M. A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 64–69.

claims about Job are vindicated not once, but twice. Furthermore, there are no further challenges from the Satan after YHWH is proved right about Job in Job 2:10. The upshot of this is that Job's *continued* suffering after the defeat of the Satan cannot be attributed to the wager. Consequently, we do not know why Job continues to suffer.³⁰ The reader, just like Job and his friends, is not privy to all the answers. We, like Job, are in the dark, and so must stand with Job before YHWH and share his discovery of his ignorance of the complexity of the universe as we see that complexity paraded before us in the words from the whirlwind.

There is, however, one thing we do know for certain. We know that Job's suffering is not the result of a secret sin, some transgression which he has committed and which warrants the suffering he endures. We know this because both YHWH and the narrator affirm it repeatedly in the prologue. Thus, we know that Job's three friends are mistaken as they persistently seek to impose the logical implications of the doctrine of retributive justice on Job.

But what of Elihu? The passage cited earlier (Job 33:14–28) offers an explanation for Job's suffering which is not a simple application of retributive justice, but is a rather more nuanced and complex rationale for suffering. While it could be rejected as erroneous if the prologue's record of the exchange between YHWH and the Satan is accepted as a comprehensive explanation for Job's suffering, once that is shown not to be comprehensive, then Elihu's account remains a viable possible explanation for Job's suffering.

This introduces another role for Elihu within the story beyond those already outlined above. For an audience which likely agreed with the notion that suffering would always be evidence of some sinful action in the past, Elihu introduces another possible explanation for suffering, an explanation which does not demand that the sufferer is guilty. Elihu suggests that suffering may be instructive, teaching the sufferer to avoid some future transgression. This frees the audience from seeing suffering as the inevitable outcome of retributive justice and allows them to contemplate the possibility that Job was indeed innocent in spite of his suffering.

Yet Elihu's suggestion is just that—a suggestion. Elihu's speech carefully retains the language of possibility, not certainty. Elihu, unlike the three friends, does not offer a definitive rationale for Job's suffering, for to do so would be to undermine the message of the book that we are limited in our understanding, that there is some wisdom which is hidden from the eyes of all the living.

30. For a more extensive and detailed justification for this reading, see M. A. Shields, "Malevolent or Mysterious? God's Character in the Prologue of Job," *TynBul* 61 (2010): 255–70.

ELIHU AND THE EPILOGUE

Elihu is absent from the epilogue, but he is not the only character who is missing—the Satan does not appear, nor does Job’s wife. For many, Elihu’s absence from the epilogue clinches the case for the secondary nature of his speech. Elihu’s absence is the result of editorial oversight or redactional incompetence—the editor who added Elihu failed to include him in the epilogue.³¹ Otherwise, if Elihu was simply repeating the basic arguments of Job’s older three friends, his absence from the epilogue is inexplicable.³² On the other hand, if Elihu was right and Job’s suffering was, at least in part, intended to serve as a warning, why did God not explicitly approve of his words as he does for Job’s own words? The complete absence of either approval or disapproval of Elihu’s words seems difficult to justify if he is either right or wrong, and that absence then would seem to bolster the case that Elihu was, indeed, an incompetent addition to the original story after all!

Yet perhaps this assessment is premature, and there may be a better explanation for his absence, one that fits with the overall design of the book and also accounts for the absence of the Satan (and even Job’s wife) from the epilogue. The Satan does not appear because his role in the book comes to an end in the second chapter when the grounds for his attacks upon Job are proven to be baseless—he claimed Job would curse God, but after he had unleashed his attacks on Job, Job responded with faith and trust, vindicating God. The Satan’s role in the book thus ended, no more needed to be said. His claims were proven false before the friends had even arrived. There was no need for the Satan to return to be discredited in the epilogue.

31. Seow (“Elihu’s Revelation,” 270) suggests that Elihu’s absence from the prologue is not because he is a late addition to the book, but rather because he is not one of Job’s friends. Rather, Elihu fulfils the role of divine intermediary. Seow concludes by saying “His [sic] is not mentioned in the Prologue not because he was not present in the original story but because he is, unlike the friends of Job, not wrong, for he speaks for God.” However, I would add that while he is not wrong, he is also not right. To maintain the mystery of divine wisdom we cannot know either way.

32. Longman (*Job*, 63) claims that “[t]he lack of response to Elihu is the ultimate put-down of the school of thought he represents,” and later “[t]he absence of a response thus should be understood as a lack of interest. Elihu says nothing new and therefore can safely be ignored” (367). These are not particularly compelling arguments. Why did God not just condemn one of the friends? Is it really that much trouble to include Elihu with the other three if he was so deserving of condemnation when failing to do so would clearly leave the field open for claims that he may have been right? Rather, the explanation for Elihu’s non-inclusion in the epilogue which I offer herein ensures that Elihu’s monologue becomes an integral part of the overall argument of the book.

Similar considerations apply to Elihu's speeches. If they merely recapitulate the basic arguments of the three friends then he, too, would warrant rebuke in the epilogue. But if Elihu's contribution differs and yet is completed without the need for further elaboration, he needs no place in the epilogue. Understood as I've suggested above, his words offer possibilities without certainty. To maintain the author's insistence upon the mystery of suffering, the epilogue must neither confirm nor refute Elihu's contribution but allow it to stand as no more than a possibility—a viable alternative to the strict application of retributive justice demanded by the friends. Thus, Elihu's absence from the epilogue leaves us uncertain as to whether his explanation for Job's suffering, an explanation which allows Job to have been innocent, is correct. We learn from Elihu that there is a possible explanation for suffering that does not demand that Job is guilty, but we ultimately remain in the dark as to God's reasons. We know that Job was innocent and, thanks to Elihu, we know that there can be reasons for suffering other than as a result of specific sin, but we—like all the characters in the book with the sole exception of God—do not know the way to that particular piece of wisdom which would tell us definitively why Job suffered as he did.

CONCLUSION

So was Elihu right? To some extent the answer is "yes." He was right to affirm the justice and righteousness of God. He was also right in remaining somewhat tentative in offering explanations for Job's suffering rather than attributing it unequivocally to some secret sin committed by Job. He was also right to note that Job spoke without knowledge (Job 34:35; cf. 38:2; 42:3). Beyond this, however, we cannot say for sure if Elihu's somewhat tentative explanation for Job's suffering was correct—not because of some innate difficulty understanding the text. Rather, we do not know because the author did not want us to know, for to do so would be to undermine the fundamental message of the book in which the root causes of Job's suffering are shrouded in the mystery inherent in the interplay between God's sovereignty and the vast complexity of the universe. Yet what we can say, and what we could not say had we accepted that the prologue presented a comprehensive rationale for Job's suffering, is that Elihu might not be wrong. Job's three friends were wrong, for their argument was definitively undermined by both YHWH and the narrator in the prologue, and again by YHWH in the epilogue. Yet Elihu presents an alternative possible explanation for Job's suffering which is neither affirmed nor denied, just left as a possibility.

Here, then, is Elihu's contribution. Suffering is real but in many instances—without specific divine revelation—there are only possible explanations for suffering, there are no certainties. The only certainties that the book of Job offers are that YHWH is just and that his universe is complex beyond human understanding. All too frequently the rationale for human suffering is impenetrably hidden amidst the complexity of the divine economy.