

# Wineskin or Windbag? Elihu and the Problem of Justice in the Book of Job

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## INTRODUCTION

Of all the books in the Biblical canon, Job is one of the most perplexing. Its main action is framed by a curious pact between Satan and God, where, with God's permission, the pious and innocent Job suffers by the hand of Satan. In addition to the losses of his property, family, and health, Job finds no comfort in his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Job's innocence is established in the prologue, but the three friends insist that no innocent person suffers since all suffering is punishment for some transgression. They accuse Job of impiety, wickedness, and guilt.<sup>1</sup> Convinced that Job is guilty of some wrongdoing, each friend urges Job to repent and reconcile with God.<sup>2</sup> This advice only adds to Job's anguish, highlighting the question of why the innocent suffer.

Job endures three cycles of speeches from his friends and remains certain that God would recognize his innocence and remit his suffering, if only he could gain God's attention. He laments, "Oh, that today I might find [God], that I might come to his judgment seat! . . . There the upright man might reason with him, and I should once and for all preserve my rights" (23:4, 7). Job eventually pleads in a grand fashion for God to answer his questions and deliver him from his affliction: "Of all my steps I should give him an account; like a prince I should present myself before him. This is my final plea; let the Almighty answer me!" (31:37). The tone of finality in this tercet emphasizes the turning point that the book has reached, priming the reader to expect an immediate response from God. Instead, the book takes an unexpected turn with the abrupt introduction of a new character named Elihu. William Whedbee notes, "The effect [of the arrival of Elihu] is an ironic reversal of expectation and

1 See 8:13, 11:5–6, 15:4–6, and 22:4–5. All Biblical citations refer to the book of Job; quotations taken from *The New American Bible*.

2 See 8:5–6, 11:14–15, and 22:21–23.

a jarring example of incongruity. We expect God—and we get Elihu!”<sup>3</sup> Matthew Lynch adds, “What is essentially a literary *conclusion* serves to emphasize the rhetorical impact of the Elihu speeches . . . and increases the alienation between Job and the conversation partner he longed for.”<sup>4</sup> The place and manner of the introduction of this new character raise questions about the nature and significance of Elihu and whether his speeches are later additions that compromise the integrity of the book of Job as a literary whole.<sup>5</sup>

Despite what would appear to be some justification for downplaying their significance, the speeches’ role and literary placement are neither haphazard nor superfluous. Elihu’s speeches have a grandiose and legalistic tone, whereby Elihu attempts to grant Job’s request for a formal trial with God by acting as a legal arbiter. In addition, Elihu adds new content over and above the speeches of the three friends by penetrating deeper into the question of why human beings suffer. However, his own account is riddled with misinterpretations of Job’s complaints, revealing that he never fully understands the cause or nature of Job’s suffering. Ultimately God overshadows and supersedes Elihu’s account and shows how at many turns Elihu has acted foolishly. Of all Job’s interlocutors, Elihu provides the most comprehensive rational explanation of the nature of divine justice and the cause of Job’s suffering, but his misinterpretations of Job’s complaints and his foolish confidence in his own ability to explain Job’s suffering represent the inability of human reason to comprehend divine justice, preparing Job for the new and different sort of wisdom that he attains at the end of the book.

### THE FORM OF ELIHU’S SPEECHES

#### His Background, Demeanor, and Mode of Presentation

After conversing with his three friends, Job summarizes his complaint; he recalls the days when he lived in comfort and peace as an innocent and righteous man (chapter 29). His summary then turns to the terror he faced with the coming of unexpected and undeserved suffering. He recalls how “days of affliction have overtaken [him],” and how his “frame takes no rest by night” (30:27, 17). He pleads to have his case heard by God himself: “But what is man’s lot from God above, his inheritance

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3 “Comedy of Job,” 19.

4 “Bursting at the Seams,” 349.

5 For commentary on the placement of Elihu’s speeches see Lynch, “Bursting at the Seams,” 346; Simundson, *Message of Job*, 122; Ross, “Phenomenology of Lament,” 38; and Freedman, “Elihu Speeches,” 51–59. For views of Elihu’s significance see Lynch, “Bursting at the Seams,” 346; Whedbee, “Comedy of Job,” 1–44; Freedman, “Is it Possible to Understand?,” especially p. 44; and Wilson, “Role of the Elihu Speeches,” 81–94.

from the Almighty on high? . . . Does he not see my ways and number all my steps? Let God weigh me in the scales of justice; thus will he know my innocence!" (31:2, 4, 6). At this point, however, not God but Elihu appears. An examination of not only *what* this unexpected interlocutor says, but also *how* he says it through the form of his argument, his rhetoric, and his personal background, will clarify the meaning of his speeches.

Upon Elihu's entrance into the conversation, the narrator relates that Elihu is a descendant of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram. If the Ram indicated is the same Ram coming from the line of Judah, then Elihu is of the Davidic line of descent,<sup>6</sup> meaning that Elihu speaks from within the Israelite covenantal fold, unlike Job, who is a foreigner and not bound in any explicit way to God's covenant with his chosen people. This previously silent character has been present all along, listening to the dialogue between Job and his three friends. Upon the close of Job's final speech, Elihu will no longer remain silent and bursts into the conversation, incited by a rush of anger (32:2–3).

This sudden onslaught of emotion is due in part to adolescence; Elihu has the spirited demeanor characteristic of his youth. At first he restrained his speech out of deference to his elders, as was customary.<sup>7</sup> When the elder friends finish speaking, however, Elihu is concerned that the true reason Job suffers is being overshadowed by false speeches.<sup>8</sup> As Elihu enters the conversation, the narrator informs the reader that Elihu is "angry," that "his wrath was inflamed" (32:2–3, 5). In the short prologue to Elihu's speech, the narrator says three times that Elihu is angry and once that he is filled with wrath.<sup>9</sup> In striking contrast, Elihu presents himself as having been calm and patient, as having "held back," "followed attentively," and "given ear" (32:6, 11–12). According to Elihu's self-presentation, then, his anger is not uncontrolled, but justified and appropriately timed. Is this because Elihu does not realize he is angry? Does he not admit his anger because it is not rhetorically useful? Or is the narrator mistaken about Elihu's interior disposition? Is this a first indication of the unreliability of Elihu's account, or a subtle way of displaying his rhetorical mastery?

After dispensing with the obligation to remain silent any longer, Elihu employs lofty language to gain Job's attention. The *leitworte* that Elihu employs draw attention to modes of speaking, listening, and seeing. Referring to his own speeches, Elihu tells Job to "hearken" to his

<sup>6</sup> Sacks, *Book of Job with Commentary*, 256.

<sup>7</sup> See also 12:12 and 15:10; cf. Aquinas, *Literal Exposition on Job*, 366n3.

<sup>8</sup> See also Aquinas, *Literal Exposition on Job*, 366 and 369.

<sup>9</sup> Sacks, *Book of Job with Commentary*, 349.

words five times, “behold” him five times, “listen” twice, and “hear” him four times.<sup>10</sup> He also prefaces the content of his speeches by saying that he will either “speak” or “say” (eight times); “teach,” “show,” and “instruct”; use “breath,” “sound,” and “words”; and give “voice.” In the prefaces to his speeches, Elihu also employs anatomical words: “lips” (twice), “mouth,” and “tongue.”

Elihu uses these *leitworte* in parallel ways to buttress his claims to wisdom. For example, in his opening speech Elihu says, “Days should speak, I thought, and many years teach wisdom!”<sup>11</sup> Though age and experience of the three elder friends should teach Job, the friends have failed in their task. Elihu then skillfully reverses these *leitworte*: “If you have taught me to say, then answer me. Speak out! I should like to see you [Job] justified. If not, then do you listen to me; be silent while I teach you wisdom” (33:32–33). Here the speaking and teaching are no longer predicative of the elder three friends. Elihu incites Job to speak, and if he is not able to speak, then Elihu orders him to listen. In this way, Elihu uses the *leitwort* “speak” as a transition to silence. No longer will anyone but Elihu speak; they will now listen and hear what he has to say and teach. Throughout the prefaces to his speeches, Elihu artfully shifts the focus of authority to himself through his word choice.

Elihu’s repetition of the *leitworte* also increases Job’s already intense agony. Job has previously said to the three friends:

You are glossing over falsehoods and offering vain remedies, every one of you! Oh, that you would be altogether silent! (13:4–5).

Be silent, let me alone! That I may speak and give vent to my feelings (13:13).

I have heard this sort of thing many times. Wearisome comforters are you all! Is there no end to your windy words? (16:2–3).

I am indeed mocked, and as their provocation mounts, my eyes grow dim (17:2).

How long will you vex my soul, grind me down with words? (19:2).

Look at me and be astonished, put your hands over your mouths (21:5).

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<sup>10</sup> Elihu’s speeches are found in chapters 32–37.

<sup>11</sup> 32:7; all emphasis in scriptural quotations added.

At first, it seems that Elihu will be sensitive to this problem of using words to torment Job. He tells Job not to fear him, or “let his presence weigh heavy” upon him (33:7). Elihu also gives Job three chances to “Speak out!” hoping to see Job justified (33:5, 33:32, and 34:37), and suggesting that Job might finally be able to converse with someone who will not persecute him. Unlike the three friends, Elihu asks Job to speak and ostensibly leaves open the possibility that Job might have a valid complaint. However, this apparent openness to conversation is immediately closed off as Elihu commences the longest monologue of the entire book of Job. Thus, in addition to Elihu’s lengthy prefaces proclaiming his worthiness, he also is the most loquacious in the body of his speech. Rather than assuaging Job’s misery, Elihu’s rhetoric ironically *magnifies* it.

Elihu also claims his lengthy pronouncements are full of wisdom and divine inspiration. Rejecting age as an indication of wisdom, he says, “But it is a spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding” (32:8); also, “I am full of matters to utter; the spirit within compels me” (32:18). Elihu implies that he has the spirit that gives understanding, and thereby knows the reason why Job suffers. In addition, Elihu repeatedly declares that he has knowledge,<sup>12</sup> and is wise.<sup>13</sup> Elihu even boldly, and some say shamelessly,<sup>14</sup> goes so far as to claim that he is speaking *in persona Dei*:

Wait yet a little and I will instruct you,  
for there are still words to be said on God’s behalf.  
I will bring my knowledge from afar  
and to my Maker I will accord the right.  
For indeed, my theme cannot fail me:

the one perfect in knowledge I set before you. (36:2–4)

From Elihu’s perspective Job has good reason to listen, since Elihu, through the spirit of God, has knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and the words of God himself.

If Elihu did possess this wisdom, then he would be justified in his verbosity and admonition of the elder friends. Furthermore, his explanation that he is “like a new wineskin with wine under pressure,” and that his “bosom is ready to burst” would be apt (32:19). Elihu would be the container of wine, a rich drink with divine allusions. However, his similes may instead be an indication of his foolishness. Norman Habel interprets the reference to wineskin as an example of how Elihu unknow-

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12 32:10, 32:17, 33:3, and 34:2.

13 32:12–17 and 33:33.

14 See Lynch, “Bursting at the Seams,” 360.

ingly turns himself into a comical figure, because a wineskin's physical shape coupled with the breath of Elihu's speech make him look more like a "windbag" about to burst.<sup>15</sup> Habel's observation that Elihu is in some respects a windbag and a comedic fool is accurate enough; however, one may ask whether his presence in the narrative at such a critical juncture does not serve a greater purpose.

### THE CONTENT OF ELIHU'S SPEECHES

#### Part I: Elihu as Legal Arbiter

Job's plea has a decidedly *legal* character. His vocabulary expressing a desire to speak with God could also be used in a trial or a summons to trial. Job speaks of his "rights" (23:7) and says that he wishes to "reason with God" (13:3) and to have God "listen to the reproof from his lips" (13:6) so that he may "defend his conduct" (13:15). Habel notes that in all these cases Job uses the *hiphil* form of the verb that can mean "to plead or defend a case" or "to arbitrate between conflicting parties."<sup>16</sup> Job uses further legalistic language when he says that he wants God to "decide between a man and his neighbor" in his presence (16:21). He pines, "would that there were an arbiter between us, who could lay his hand upon us both and withdraw his rod from me" (9:33). Thus Job's final sentence before Elihu enters the conversation is an intensification of a theme present in his previous speeches, and Elihu attempts to be this legal arbiter.<sup>17</sup> In Job's "hearing" (33:8), Elihu will try to "refute" (32:14), "answer" (32:15–16), "reply" (32:20), "give ear to arguments" (32:11), remain impartial (32:21–22), uphold justice,<sup>18</sup> list "offenses" (35:6), vindicate (36:6), uphold rights (36:6), speak of just punishment (35:15), speak of a legal trial (34:24), and speak of the guilty who are condemned (34:24).

Elihu interjects as an arbiter rather than have God defend himself out of the belief that he can defend God and uphold Job's rights on humanly rational grounds. From this perspective, God need not be present since humans can judge Job's case. But while Elihu attempts to remain impartial, he determines that it is necessary that God win; he will eventually develop this claim by arguing that it is impossible to put God on trial. Nevertheless, Job's repeated request for a just trial is finally possible since the wise Elihu is now able to preside as arbiter and deliver judgment on

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<sup>15</sup> *The Book of Job*, 444. See also Whedbee, "Comedy of Job," 1–44, referred to in Lynch, "Bursting at the Seams."

<sup>16</sup> "Role of Elihu," 82.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 82–83. Cf. Sacks, *Book of Job with Commentary*, 282–83 for a different interpretation.

<sup>18</sup> See esp. chapter 35.

whether or not Job's rights have been violated according to the standards of human justice. With this prologue, Job's trial with God begins.

### **Part II: Human Insight amid Misquotations and Misinterpretations**

During the trial, Elihu gives four speeches of increasing depth and intensity (chapters 33–37). The first three speeches have an identical structure: Elihu justifies himself as a credible arbiter, states what he takes to be Job's complaint, and defends God against it. The fourth speech has a distinct structure that serves as a transition to God's speech and, more importantly, shows the need for God to speak by revealing the inadequacies of Elihu's speeches. Perhaps the most vital part of the speeches is the way that Elihu *misquotes* Job *every time* he attempts to portray Job's complaints.<sup>19</sup> Elihu's subtle yet ubiquitous errors prevent him from understanding and responding adequately to Job's problem. But despite these major blunders, Elihu does give cogent and powerful responses to the misquotations.

#### **Speech 1: God's Presence Despite His Verbal Absence**

After loquacious attempts to establish his importance, Elihu says he heard Job say:

I am clean and without transgression;  
I am innocent; there is no guilt in me.  
Yet he invents pretexts against me  
and reckons me as his enemy.  
He puts my feet in the stocks;  
he watches all my ways! (33:10–11)

Elihu has four responses. First, Job is unjust in filing this complaint, because God is greater than humans (33:12). Second, God need not account for his actions in any case and need not be present at his own trial (33:13). Third, though Job may think he suffers because God "invents pretexts," God never permits suffering without a just reason (33:19–30). And fourth, God is not necessarily responding to Job's pleas with silence: God repeatedly reaches out to human beings in ways Job never suspects (33:14).

In his third and fourth responses Elihu admits that suffering may be a form of punishment. God afflicts humans with physical pain to chasten them. A human's soul "draws near to the pit, and his life to the place of the dead" if he acts badly (33:19–22); and punishment ultimately brings people back to the light of life by leading them to change their behavior. Aside from punishment through suffering, God also reaches out through

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19 See Aquinas, *Literal Exposition on Job*, 372ff.

dreams and angelic mediation in order to warn people to turn away from evil and to teach them how to act well. God often appears to people in dreams in order to scare and warn them, and turn them away from evil by thwarting their pride. In so doing, God “withholds [a person’s] soul from the pit and his life from passing to the grave” (33:15–18). God also sends angels who act as mediators to teach people, act as a ransom, and bring people back to justice. Through such mediation, God will “[d]eliver [people] from going down to the pit . . . and [they will] behold the light of life” (33:23–28). Elihu concludes his speech by intensifying an earlier claim: whereas before God spoke “once or even twice,” now Elihu proclaims, “Lo, all these things God does, twice, or thrice for a man, bringing back his soul from the pit to the light, in the land of the living” (33:29–30).

In this reply to Job’s speech, Elihu goes beyond the three friends’ claims that suffering is always merely punishment. Elihu claims suffering can also serve to educate or warn. He is also the first to suggest that angels can act as mediators on behalf of men, aiding in delivery from the pit. Elihu likely considers himself to be this kind of special mediator for Job.<sup>20</sup> Finally, Elihu argues that God reaches out to Job in one of these three ways, and in so doing God saves Job from the pit of death. Thus Elihu responds to Job’s first complaint by implying that Job’s suffering may not be a punishment; it could also be rationally justified as a beneficial lesson or a preemptive warning.

While novel, Elihu’s conclusion that not all suffering is punishment does not follow from his argument. In his speech, Elihu claims that dreaming serves to warn, suffering serves to chasten, and angelic mediation serves to educate. Nowhere does Elihu show how suffering serves to warn or educate. Elihu originally raised the possibility of special dreams and angelic mediation to show that God communicates in ways Job did not recognize, but through false inference Elihu takes the intended purposes of dreams and mediation as possible purposes of suffering. Whether or not Elihu’s conclusions are true, he never demonstrates their validity.

In addition to the logical deficiencies of Elihu’s conclusion, Thomas Aquinas aptly notes that Elihu misrepresents Job.<sup>21</sup> Elihu claims that Job accuses God of inventing pretexts against him, but Job actually frames the problem in the form of a question by saying, “Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?” (13:24). Job speaks figuratively about the problem of divine justice and, by asking a question, avoids pointedly

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20 Sacks, *Book of Job with Commentary*, 262 and 265. For a different interpretation, see Aquinas, *Literal Exposition on Job*, 372ff.

21 *Literal Exposition on Job*, 372.

accusing God of injustice.<sup>22</sup> He never accuses God of concocting false accounts in order to punish him; his question is more inquisitive than accusative. Contrary to Elihu's recollection, Job also never implies he is God's equal.<sup>23</sup> His claims are much more modest. Therefore, Elihu does not directly respond to Job's questions. While his replies deepen our understanding of why people may suffer more than the explanations offered by the three friends, his responses do not fully apply or respond to why Job suffers.

### **Speech 2: God Cannot Violate Justice**

Elihu begins his second speech by presenting Job's complaint as follows: "For Job has said, 'I am innocent, but God has taken what is my due. Notwithstanding my right I am set at nought; in my wound the arrow rankles, sinless though I am'" (34:5–6), and "It profits a man nought that he is pleasing to God" (34:9). Elihu responds to this complaint by developing a conception of divine justice through a string of intensifications that display the scope of God's cosmic power.

At first, Elihu replies, "[F]ar be it from God to do wickedness; far from the Almighty to do wrong!" (34:10). Two stanzas later, he intensifies this, saying, "Surely God cannot act wickedly, the Almighty cannot violate justice" (34:12). He repeats the claim made in his first speech that God both *punishes* conduct and *educates* through suffering in order to bring a person back to the light of life (34:11). Then he emphasizes God's power: God created, governs, and sustains the earth and human life (34:13–14), so it would be impossible for "an enemy of justice" to be in control of the world. Aquinas illuminates this inference by explaining that "if God Himself were unjust, justice would be found nowhere, since to Him belongs the universal judgment of all men."<sup>24</sup> These replies reiterate the conclusions of Elihu's first speech with the additional claims of God as creator and sustainer.

In the same way that Elihu's first speech revolves around one misinterpretation of Job's words, Elihu crafts these responses around another. When Job says that "as God lives, [he] withholds my deserts" (27:2), Elihu interprets this as an accusation. Aquinas reminds the reader that an alternative interpretation of Job's statement is possible. Rather than an accusation, Job may have meant that God's judgment "was according to the providence of one proving his justice."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps here Job first sus-

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22 Ibid., 373.

23 See esp. 9:2–10.

24 *Literal Exposition on Job*, 384.

25 Ibid., 382.

pects that there is another kind of justice he has yet to understand. Elihu's interpretation that Job thinks that pleasing and good conduct does not matter to God is a derivation from Job's statement, "Then you turn upon me without mercy and with your strong hand you buffet me" (30:21). Here again, an alternative interpretation is possible. Aquinas supposes that "Job felt he was displeasing to God even though he had followed Him, but Job had referred [God's buffeting] to external persecution, not to internal reproach."<sup>26</sup> Job has not lost faith that God cares about pleasing and good conduct, but he is nevertheless mystified that God is not rewarding such conduct. Again, Elihu's reproaches of Job's comments are misdirected because Elihu does not understand Job's true complaint. Consequently, Elihu once again fails to offer Job a satisfying response.

### **Speech 3: Teachings on Justice Intensified**

In his next speech Elihu quotes Job as saying, "I am just rather than God," and "What does it profit me; what advantage have I more than if I had sinned?" (35:2–3). Elihu does not directly refute the accuracy of these points, most likely assuming that he has already proved them errant. Instead, he intensifies the cosmic theme of justice introduced in the previous speech and shifts the focus toward God's transcendence and power by asking whether human conceptions of justice have anything in common with divine justice (35:6–8). As in all his previous speeches, Elihu reiterates that God helps the suffering person and hears and notices every human action even when he is silent (35:10–13). Once again, Elihu incorrectly accuses Job of having claimed to be more just than God.

### **Speech 4: Cosmic Orientation and Limits of Reason**

Quotations of Job are absent from Elihu's last speeches, indicating that by this point Elihu as arbiter has concluded the trial and ruled in God's favor. Elihu concludes that God does not withhold the just person's rights, he grants vindication to the oppressed, he teaches people about the good, and he warns them to turn away from evil; Elihu then adds the qualification that God will do all these things *if* people obey and serve him (36:5–11). With this conclusion, Elihu essentially promotes the same general theme as the three friends, since they had all maintained that God does not allow purposeless suffering. Elihu's most significant contribution, then, is that not all purposeful suffering is punishment, since some suffering may be a curative salve meant to correct a non-culpable deficiency. As it turns out, Elihu's views on suffering, though

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26 Ibid., 383.

more sophisticated, still fail to penetrate to the heart of Job's question of why a *faultless* person suffers.

Elihu concludes his speech by changing course and focusing on the limits of human reason and the incomprehensibility of divine knowledge. He proclaims, "Lo, God is great beyond our knowledge" (36:26). Here the qualitative difference between human and divine knowledge at last begins to surface. Elihu describes the wonders of God's creation, highlighting the marvelous, rather than fearful, chasm between earthly and divine knowledge. He evokes the imagery of divine fear only in light of God's awesomeness, reiterating that God "does things beyond our knowing; wonders past searching out" (37:5). Elihu's context for describing his fear and trembling starkly contrasts with Job's repeated use of fear and terror. Elihu's "heart trembles" when he sees the wonders of God's universe; Job's fear overtakes him because he sighs, groans, and has no peace or rest.<sup>27</sup> While Elihu trembles from joyous marvel at God's creation, Job fears what sorrows may still be in store for him as God's creature. This difference in perspective is yet another sign that Elihu does not understand the nature of Job's suffering.

Elihu concludes his speeches with an ode to God's incomprehensible power and judgment, likening God to a clarifying light (37:21–22). His final two verses proclaim, "The Almighty! We cannot discover him; pre-eminent in power and judgment; his great justice owes no one an accounting. Therefore men revere him, though none can see him, however wise their hearts" (37:24–24).<sup>28</sup> This is an unexpected ending, given where Elihu began. Elihu, the self-proclaimed sage, promised to provide a rational justification for Job's suffering. Instead, ironically, he concludes his speeches by highlighting humankind's impotence to understand God's ways. Habel interprets this ending as part of the drama of the trial and Elihu's role as arbiter by calling it "[a] defense of [God's] transcendence emphasizing that he does not 'answer' human claims in person."<sup>29</sup> But this explanation is insufficient, since it fails to account for the major emphasis in Elihu's final speech on conveying human reason's inability to understand divine ways. Elihu's final exhortation to take comfort in an incomprehensible and wondrous God is a conclusion opposite to what he explicitly set out to prove. His final speech, therefore, only adds to Job's fear that there might be no reason for his grief.<sup>30</sup>

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27 See 37:1 and 3:23–26, respectively.

28 See also 34:29.

29 *The Book of Job*, 95.

30 Sacks, *Book of Job with Commentary*, 284.

Despite his contributions, Elihu's final conclusions are conspicuously inadequate. His explanations of human suffering do not, under scrutiny, fully apply to Job's particular case, and he unknowingly judges Job under false pretenses. Elihu's retreat to blissful unknowing falls far short of the original lofty task he boldly proclaimed he would accomplish. God's speech, which directly follows Elihu's monologue, serves to highlight the implications of both the failures and successes of Elihu's speeches.

#### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Immediately following Elihu's speech, God speaks to Job out of a whirlwind. God denounces Job's three friends for having accused Job falsely and orders them to repent; but Elihu's name is conspicuously absent. It is a matter of debate whether God mentions Elihu indirectly at the beginning of his speech when he says, "Who is this that obscures divine plans with words of ignorance?"<sup>31</sup> Whether God refers to Elihu indirectly or not, it is clear that God's appearance to Job refutes or improves on what Elihu has said in four main respects.

First, Elihu has gone on at length to demonstrate that God need not manifest himself to Job in order to respond to Job's questions. The placement of Elihu's appearance also indicates that he thought his speeches would be sufficient to defend God, and Elihu's last statement reiterates this belief: "Therefore men revere him, *though none can see him*, however wise their hearts" (37:24). Immediately after this proclamation, however, God appears to Job and proceeds to answer his questions directly. This not only refutes Elihu's claim that God would not appear, but also suggests that the content of Elihu's speeches is insufficient, lest God appear superfluously.

Second, God elaborates upon Elihu's claim that human knowing is inherently inadequate for understanding divine knowing. Through a series of scathing questions about creation, life, and death, God reveals Job's ignorance on a much deeper level than Elihu's suggestions about the limits of human knowledge (chapters 38–39). Elihu may be content to marvel and tremble with delight at God's wondrous ways; God, however, squarely places the nature of his transcendence back in the context of Job's terror and fright.

Third, by convincing Job of his own ignorance, God implicitly calls into question Elihu's attempts to justify divine ways. While Elihu maintains, "Surely, God cannot act wickedly, the Almighty cannot violate justice" (34:12), God asks Job, "Would you refuse to acknowledge my

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<sup>31</sup> The pronoun may refer to either Elihu or Job. See Wilcox, "A Reading," 85–95 for an overview of opinions. See also Simundson, *Message of Job*, 141.

right? Would you condemn that you may be justified?" (40:8). Earlier, Job wished that he, an upright man, could reason with God in order to defend his rights (23:7). Though he wants to give a defense, Job also consistently understands that God can always overpower any of his claims to his rights. Job's inability to defend his innocence seems to be the primary cause of his anguish. He laments, "If it be a question of strength, he is mighty; and if of judgment, who will call him to account? Though I were right, my own mouth might condemn me; were I innocent, he might put me in the wrong" (9:20–21). Job pines for an alternative relationship with God: "Even should [God] contend against me with his great power, yet, would that he himself might heed me!" (23:6). It is here that Elihu tries, and fails, to explain God's ways to Job.

God, on the other hand, offers Job no explanation. He sets his conceptions of justice, right, and might over and against Job's conceptions of innocence, right, and justice that pertain to human understanding. While Elihu tries to defend God's actions by showing that Job's rights have been justly preserved, God himself is not concerned with upholding Job's rights. God sternly addresses Job: "Gird up your loins now, like a man. I will question you, and you tell me the answers! Would you refuse to acknowledge *my right*? Would you condemn me that *you may be justified*?" (40:8). Unlike the three friends, God acknowledges Job's innocence, but also condemns Job's inference that innocence ought, by right of justice, to be rewarded. By the end of the book Job himself understands this, saying "I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:6). Job's conception of how his rights relate to God's power and justice radically changes after the theophany. Job's pride in his innocence has dissolved, and he now sees the errors of his previous inferences and demands.<sup>32</sup>

This new ability to see the truth has nothing to do with God upholding Job's rights, or, as Elihu would have it, with a logic-chopping explanation of God's ways. Job's true education lies in realizing there is a new, mysterious conception of justice that he knows is true but does not fully understand. The anatomical *leitworte* that Job and Elihu use reinforce how Job's understanding surpasses Elihu's conclusions. Elihu's repeated requests that Job hear, see, and listen to him are set in contrast with Job's repentance: "I had *heard of* you by *word of mouth*, but now my *eye* has *seen you*" (42:5). As Thomas Dailey notes, "Job's seeing entails something *experiential*; radically real, it yields an unmistakable certainty that surpasses the standard logic of knowing."<sup>33</sup> Unlike Elihu's invocation of

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<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to Ruth Slack for this insight.

<sup>33</sup> *Repentant Job*, 125–26.

the eye, ear, and mouth, Job's understanding of their functions after the theophany is connected more personally and immediately with God.<sup>34</sup> Thus, God's elaboration of Elihu's teaching on the chasm between human and divine knowledge serves as a refutation of Elihu's conflicting claim that God's ways can always be justified on human grounds.

Fourth, God sets Elihu's thematic praises of the wonders of his creation in a radically different cosmological context. God praises the behemoth and leviathan, two beasts that terrify men. Elihu's explanation of the world is that God "shuts up mankind indoors; the wild beasts take to cover and remain quietly in their dens" (37:7–8). By contrast, God speaks of the leviathan that "[w]hen he rises up, the mighty are afraid . . . should the sword reach him, it will not avail" (41:17–18). By emphasizing man's tininess and weakness, God calls Elihu's orderly and benign cosmological portrait into question. Job all along has understood the cosmos as God explains it and is terrified by it. Ultimately, this terror spurs Job to attain a deeper kind of wisdom made possible because he has suffered. Elihu's failure to feel this terror precludes his obtaining such wisdom.

These demonstrations of Elihu's shortcomings finally reveal that his self-important claims to wisdom and divine inspiration are foolish and even comical. God's proclamation that Job is innocent reveals the irony in Elihu's claims that "Job to no purpose opens his mouth, and without knowledge multiplies words" (35:16).<sup>35</sup> Both times when Elihu says Job multiplies his words without knowledge, it is Elihu who puts words into Job's mouth, since Job never actually speaks during his trial. Elihu's condemnation of Job shows not only that he fails to understand God's ways and the nature of Job's suffering, but also that he fails to understand himself as someone who is not truly wise. All along, only God knew what was truly in Job's heart. In the end, it is *Elihu's* verbosity that is revealed to be ignorant and Job who attains wisdom.

However, despite his failures, it would be reckless to dismiss Elihu as a simple imbecile. God corrects Elihu by pushing the teachings on cosmology, justice, and knowledge to their limits—so much so that they surpass rational explanation. While this is the source of the criticism against Elihu, it is also his vindication. For on the grounds of *human rationality and justice*, Elihu does provide the best defense of suffering in the book of Job. Elihu surpasses the three friends' explanation that Job suffers as a punishment; and his attempt to give Job a fair trial shows that he, more than any other, takes Job's suffering seriously. Elihu unknowingly hits the

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34 Ibid., 126.

35 See also 34:37.

mark when he says that Job may suffer for educative purposes. Job does, in fact, suffer into wisdom, but what Job learns is far deeper than anything Elihu had imagined. Job's education is according to different standards than those Elihu employs. Job learns the important and mysterious lesson that human rationality is not coextensive with human wisdom. He further learns to place his previous demand for respect of his rights within the new context of divine justice. Elihu's insistence that Job can understand his predicament according to the old ways of justice turns out to be folly, and by clinging to these misconceptions, Elihu is unable to understand Job's newfound wisdom. Still, Job's wisdom is mysterious indeed, and Elihu is not an imbecile for failing to understand it.

The placement of Elihu's speeches, then, is orderly and masterful. Right after Job makes his final plea for a hearing, Elihu emerges to give him the fairest trial possible on human grounds. Despite providing this best rational defense, however, his speeches fail in a quite daunting way. By insisting he can reason to understanding, Elihu fails to show what is unique and central to Job's suffering. For the purpose of Job's suffering is not reducible to argument, since, according to human standards of justice, the innocent ought not suffer at all. Yet the ultimate order of the world is not confined to operate within the standards of human reason alone. In the end it is Job's suffering, rather than his rationality, that leads to wisdom. Elihu's character serves to heighten this tension between reason's fecundity and its limitations; through his failures no less than his successes, Elihu truly emerges as both *wineskin* and *windbag*. Unwittingly, he brings to our awareness the problem of how humans can understand divine justice when they cannot reason to that understanding. By indicating to us the need to embrace suffering as a gateway to understanding divine justice, he provokes us to ask what it means to be truly wise.

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