



Another Ending to the Book of Job¹

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THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF JOB

The book of Job is highly regarded both as literature and as a theological treatise, but the book is also very complex. The structure is clear at first: The book starts and ends with a prose tale. In between, the main section of the book consists of speeches in poetic form—cycles of speeches between Job and his three friends. Each time one of the friends speaks, it is countered by a speech from Job. But the clear structure falls apart in the third cycle, where we do not find a speech by the third friend, Zophar; at least there is not a separate heading for this. Most commentators, however, attribute certain parts in chapter 27 to Zophar, both for the reason of structure and for the fact that what is stated in these verses does not seem

¹ It is a privilege to be invited to contribute to this special issue of *Word & World* to honor my friend Mark Throntveit for his many years of service. When Mark visited and taught at our seminary in Sweden some years ago, it became obvious that he has a special interest in finding structures in the biblical text. That is why I, in this article, have chosen to deal with the chapters of Elihu in the book of Job, chapters that many commentators regard as superfluous and of little value, or even as harmful to the structure of the book.

The book of Job is well known for having a very complicated structure, especially the central section, where Job and his friends have long speeches. Usually the speeches of one friend, Elihu, are disregarded—but if the structure of Job is reimagined, these speeches might be more consequential than is commonly thought.

congruent with Job's ideas.² A number of other suggestions concerning the overall structure have been set forth by different scholars.

After the "discussion" between Job and his three friends, the structure of the book changes. Chapters 29–31 contain an extended monologue by Job where he mourns for his former days and by oaths claims his innocence. The section concludes with the line "The words of Job are ended" (31:40). So the reader wonders, What will happen now? It is at this point that we find the Elihu speeches: four speeches, comprising no fewer than five chapters! This could be the end of the poetry section, with Job at fault and the traditional retributive-justice dogma confirmed. But, finally, the Lord addresses Job in two challenging speeches with short, submissive replies by Job, who regrets his former boldness in questioning God's control of justice and the world. The epilogue contains the shocking verdict that Job has spoken rightly about the Lord, while his friends have not done so, despite their consistent attempts to defend God's sovereignty and justice. Job is reinstated, his friends have to bring offerings, and Job prays for them. Elihu does not appear in the epilogue, which is the main reason most scholars regard his part of the book as a secondary insertion.

My interest in this article is simply to take another look at the Elihu speeches with regard to content and placement, in order to ponder their function. It seems clear that the book in all its brilliance is a patchwork of different sources and editors, which makes it hard to determine what is primary and what is secondary. The large number of text-critical issues indicates a complicated history. David Clines, in his immense commentary, attributes more than eighty-seven pages to text-critical notes only for the Elihu speeches. But regardless of text-critical and diachronic matters, the matter of interest in this article is, What function can be attributed to the Elihu speeches in the overall structure of the book?

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ELIHU AMONG SCHOLARS

Elihu as a person and the Elihu speeches are usually not highly regarded among scholars. Michael Cheney, with special interest for linguistic devices, states: "The unevenness 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

² David Clines suggests that 27:7–10, 13–23 constitutes Zophar's third speech, along with 24:18–24, which he inserts between 27:17 and 27:18 in *Job 21–37*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 18A (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 663.

that caricature, or at least rhetorical flaccidity, dominates the portrayal of Elihu.”³ David Robertson states: “The Elihu speeches function in the present text as unintentional comic relief and were certainly added by some pious soul desperate to rescue and improve upon the arguments of the friends.”⁴

John Gray starts out the section on the Elihu speeches in his commentary with arguments for regarding them as an interpolation. His arguments are Elihu’s absence in the prose sections and the difference in style—being more a lecture than part of the dialectic argument between Job and his friends. Nor does Gray find that the speeches make many fresh contributions to the debate in the book. Instead, he finds that the Elihu material “disrupts the literary structure of the book, and barbarously impairs the dramatic effect of God’s reply to Job (38.1–40.14) both by its insertion after Job’s passionate appeal in his oath of purgation and by anticipating the substance of God’s reply.”⁵

There are, however, some scholars who are more sympathetic regarding the Elihu speeches. Gregory W. Parsons finds him to be more correct than the three friends by emphasizing Job’s pride as the problem and making it clear that suffering can be remedial.⁶ Robert Gordis states: “By creating Elihu, who opposes the attitude of the Friends as well as that of Job, the author is able to express this secondary idea [suffering as discipline], giving it due place in his world view!”⁷ And Norman Whybray compares Elihu to the other figure who does not appear in the epilogue: “Elihu is perhaps best seen as a transitional figure who quite properly disappears once his role has been played out—a counterpart to that other figure, the Satan, for whom also there was no further room in the author’s scheme.”⁸

THE ELIHU SPEECHES

The first speech by Elihu is introduced by an anonymous narrator who tells that the three men, earlier referred to as Job’s friends, have stopped answering Job “because he was righteous in his own eyes” (32:1).⁹ Instead is supplied a fairly detailed description of the younger Elihu, including reference to his family and where he comes from. The names are more familiar to the Old Testament compared to those of the three friends, which has been an argument that Elihu may

³ Michael Cheney, *Dust, Wind and Agony: Character, Speech and Genre in Job*, Coniectanea Biblica, OT Series 36 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994), 165.

⁴ David Robertson, *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 47–48.

⁵ John Gray, *The Book of Job*, The Text of the Hebrew Bible 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 392.

⁶ Gregory W. Parsons, “The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job,” in *Sitting with Job: Selected Studies on the Book of Job*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 25.

⁷ Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 114.

⁸ Norman Whybray, *Job*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary, ed. John Jarick (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 23.

⁹ James L. Crenshaw, *Reading Job: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 134, notes that LXX, Symmachus, and Syriac read “he was righteous in their eyes,” which is an interesting reading that would motivate Elihu’s intrusion.

represent Israelite wisdom.¹⁰ Emphasis in the narrator's description, however, is upon this young man's anger; three times it is repeated that he is angry—with Job for justifying himself and with the three friends because they are not able to refute Job and have given up the discussion. When Elihu himself starts to speak, he explains his former silence as caused by his youth compared to the older men, but now when Job's three friends have nothing to say, he finally takes up the case. And he seems confident that he can solve the situation—he is literally bursting with words, directed both to Job's friends and to Job.

Elihu's main point to start with is that God does indeed answer human beings, something Job has complained is not the case. God answers through dreams and visions (33:15) and through chastening (33:19–22), the latter clearly referring to Job's situation. Elihu even indicates that there might be someone, an angel or a person (*mal'akh*), who can appear on Job's side as an intermediary (*melits*), sparing him from going down to the Pit—if he is just willing to admit his guilt (33:23–28).¹¹ In all this, Elihu seems anxious to show that he is on Job's side. Elihu presents himself as superior in wisdom, but eager to straighten things out so that Job can be cleared (33:32).

In Elihu's second speech, he continues to make more or less accurate quotations of what Job has been stating. Job has never actually said that he is without any fault, but that is the way Elihu understands him (34:5). And Elihu formulates the classic dogma about God's retributive justice: "For according to their deeds he will repay them, and according to their ways he will make it befall them. Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice" (34:11–12). This is the central matter of the book, a dogma that has also been Job's, but one that he now finds to be faltering. In this second speech Elihu focuses on God's sovereignty: God acts totally independent of humanity's expectations, and the divine greatness makes it unrealistic that any of God's doings would need to be explained to human beings, which is something that Job must realize. Here Elihu's anger at Job's haughtiness becomes clearer, and he accuses Job of being a scoffer and in company with evildoers (34:7–8, 36–37). The tone against Job has suddenly become harsher, and he comes close to Eliphaz, who accused Job of all kinds of evil actions against his fellow beings (ch. 22). But for Elihu it is Job's speech that is in focus: that through his challenging words, Job rebels against God.

In the third speech Elihu goes further with the idea of God's greatness and the immense distance between God and human beings. Here appears an idea from wisdom thinking that is now pushed to the limit: God is beyond what happens in the world, is a *deus absconditus*. Elihu even states that whether Job is righteous or is a sinner does not affect God (35:6–7). God has given humanity more knowledge than to the rest of creation (35:11), but God acts totally on God's own terms. Elihu

¹⁰ John Walton, "Job, Book of" in *Dictionary of the OT: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

¹¹ Gösta Eriksson, *Job och hans Gud* (SAM-förlaget, 1995), 263, points out that *mal'akh* could as well be understood as a human messenger and that Elihu here refers to himself, functioning as an intermediary to tell Job "what is right for him" and, in so doing, save him from disaster.

makes it clear to Job that there is no hope for him to expect a personal answer from this God: “There they cry out, but he does not answer, because of the pride of evildoers. Surely God does not hear an empty cry, nor does the Almighty regard it” (35:12–13). Job’s insistent cry for a specific answer from God about his own situation is without hope (35:14). Here Elihu’s insistence upon God’s sovereignty rules out the idea of divine nearness and intimacy, especially to the needy and suffering, which is an important theme in wisdom theology. Norman C. Habel notes: “Elihu’s contention, that the doctrine of God’s transcendence precludes God answering Job directly and Job seeing God, is significant in the total design of the book. The theology espoused by Elihu establishes the virtual impossibility of Yahweh’s subsequent advent in the whirlwind.”¹²

The fourth speech of Elihu is the longest and the most surprising. The young, self-confident man, who started out with the ambition to set things straight with the rebellious Job through wise and convincing arguments, gradually shifts over to almost mystical notions about God and divine involvement in the world.

The fourth speech of Elihu is the longest and the most surprising. The young, self-confident man, who started out with the ambition to set things straight with the rebellious Job through wise and convincing arguments, gradually shifts over to almost mystical notions about God and divine involvement in the world. Clines notes with surprise: “Given all that we have heard so far from Elihu, we would not expect him to turn now to descriptions of the created world.”¹³ He starts out in this last speech with arguments similar to his earlier ones about God being just and giving people the chance to turn back by chastising them, giving them the possibility of repentance. But soon he shifts over to hymnic praise about different phenomena in creation, telling of God’s greatness, marveling over rain, lightning, thunder, snow, and ice, which God in sovereign ways lets happen. The admonition to Job is: “Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God” (37:14). This is followed by rhetorical questions similar to those stated by Yahweh in the following chapters: “Do you know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of the one whose knowledge is perfect?” . . . Can you, like [God], spread out the skies, hard as a molten mirror?” (37:16, 18). Cheney remarks: “As we have observed all of the participants thus far has made significant use of nature and cosmological motifs. Of all the speakers, Elihu’s use of these motifs appears the closest to that found in the subsequent monologues of Yahweh.”¹⁴ Clines points out that the function of the speech is to invite Job to stop his complaining against God’s way of

¹² Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 490.

¹³ Clines, *Job 21–37*, 868.

¹⁴ Cheney, *Dust, Wind and Agony*, 168.

executing justice and rather to marvel at how divine justice and self-revelation are shown in different meteorological phenomena.¹⁵

The fourth speech ends with language that could be understood as a theophany in the sense of a personal revelation to Elihu: “Out of the north [God] comes in golden splendor” (37:22), but more probably it is to be regarded as part of traditional hymnic praise that arises from Elihu’s astonishment over nature’s witness about God. His conclusion reformulates his earlier words about God’s detachment: “The Almighty—we cannot find him; he is great in power and justice, and abundant righteousness he will not violate” (37:23). There is some discussion about the second strophe of the verse, if the verb *’nah*, as in most translations, should be translated to say that God does not “violate” or that God does not “answer.” In view of the recurrent use of the verb *’anah* in the beginning of Elihu’s argumentation (ch. 32), the LXX translation, and the occurrence of the term just afterward in the introduction of the first Yahweh speech (38:1), it seems closer to “answer.”¹⁶ It is more consistent with Elihu’s earlier statements about the transcendent God to translate the end of Elihu’s speech as the following: “The Almighty—we cannot find him; *in his justice and great righteousness, he does not answer. Therefore, mortals revere him, for does he not have regard for all the wise in heart?*” (37:23–24, italics my translation).

DISCUSSION

After this survey, what conclusions can possibly be made when it comes to the function of the Elihu chapters as part of the book of Job? The first is the obvious problem for the expository preacher. The speeches of the different speakers in the book cannot be judged primarily based on content. It is rather a matter of whether their ideas and statements are appropriate for the situation. The majority of what Job’s three friends say is totally in accordance with the teachings of the Old Testament in general, not least the wisdom books. Still, it is the friends who, in the epilogue, receive the astonishing verdict that, remarkably enough, they have spoken what is wrong about God. Job says many things that are most challenging, even heretical, to Israelite thinking about God and the ways of the world. Still, it is Job who has spoken what is right about God. When it comes to Elihu, the problem is that we do not have any final assessment but must conclude that there is no radical difference between his ideas and those of Job’s three friends. So, is he also on the wrong path?

Elihu is described as an intruder, not nice and humble, in the story. That is the way he appears to modern readers, and that must have been the case also for the first readers. Yet, his argumentation keeps closer than the three friends’s assertions do to the crucial matter of the book—Job’s words. Elihu, in contrast to the

¹⁵ Clines, *Job 21–37*, 853.

¹⁶ Eriksson, *Job och hans Gud*, 255, notes that the verb occurs sixty times in the book of Job, and ten times in ch. 32.

friends, does not go so far as accusing Job of evil activities, but limits his criticism to Job's way of speaking about God and his own situation. The reader, who has read the prologue, knows that the whole drama was about speech. The issue between the Lord and the prosecutor, *ha-satan*, was just this: Would Job curse the Lord if all blessings were taken from him (1:11; 2:5)? And Elihu is consistent in his anger and admonitions that Job, in his words, is wrong, since he in bold words challenged the Lord. For Elihu, as for the others, Job's way of speaking against God's way of ruling the world is blasphemous.

It seems feasible to understand Elihu as taking upon himself the role of an intermediary who can help Job get back on the right track in his understanding of God. Habel in particular points to the juridical pattern of the book, including Elihu's role. It is not so clear what kind of intermediary Job had been hoping for, but in Elihu's mind it is inconceivable that God would communicate with an individual like Job through a celestial being or a prophet. For Elihu, schooled in wisdom theology, the matter needs to be solved within the limits of this world, and thus, he takes that task upon himself. It is interesting, however, as noted above, that the final speech of Elihu comes close to theophany.

What is remarkable about Elihu's concept of God and the world is his strong emphasis on God's transcendence. This might be said to be constitutive of early wisdom theology, where there seems to have been little space for revelations, prophets, and cult. Both Eliphaz (ch. 4) and Elihu hint at spiritual experiences (33:14–15; 35:10), but these seem to be of a more general kind. Indeed, Elihu describes God as far beyond the reach of the individual, as untouchable, not affected by the prayers, laments, or complaints of the suffering person. Here is a theology radically different from the optimism of the individual laments in the Psalter, in which the individual hopes for personal help and guidance in times of persecution and suffering.

Here is a theology radically different from the optimism of the individual laments in the Psalter, in which the individual hopes for personal help and guidance in times of persecution and suffering.

The Elihu speeches end, as I indicated previously, with the absolute claim that God does not answer human beings: "The Almighty—we cannot find him; *in his justice and great righteousness, he does not answer*" (37:23–24, italics my translation). This seems to function like the end of the poetry section. But in the final version of the book of Job, this statement is promptly reversed. The Yahweh speeches start by stating the very opposite of what Elihu has just declared—and using the very same verb, no less:

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm." (38:1)

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this survey is that it seems the final version of the book of Job supplies two alternative endings to the poetry section that are, in a sense, mutually exclusive—that of the Elihu speeches and that of the Yahweh speeches. Which one is the earliest may be difficult to establish. They are contradictory, but in a way typical of Old Testament texts both versions have been preserved next to each other. They show clear similarities, primarily in reproaching Job for his bold speech about God, but they also stand in sharp tension with each other when it comes to the concept of God’s transcendence or nearness to the suffering person.¹⁷

So, the conclusion concerning the function of the Elihu speeches is that they could well have been, in some version of Job, the end of the poetry section of the book, followed only by the epilogue. Job is scolded for his arrogance and harsh words against God. Elihu’s reasoning has brought the arguments of the three friends further along and has strongly emphasized the transcendence of God and the impossibility for Job to expect any direct intervention from God. His only hope is submissiveness and regret of his strong words.

If the Yahweh speeches follow Job’s claim of innocence, it is the other way around. There the transcendent God breaks in and, in a similar way as in the Elihu alternative, makes Job understand that he has been careless in his speech and lacks a larger perspective of the ways of the world. In this alternative, we are told that Job regrets his words.

In the final form of the book, as it has been preserved, these two contrasting endings of the poetry section follow one after the other, the first one ending with the assertion that God will not answer, and the next one opening with the statement that the Lord answered Job. The beginning of the Yahweh speeches is traditionally translated with the conjunction “then”: “*Then* the Lord answered Job . . .” But in this final version of the book, following the Elihu speeches it would be more fitting to emphasize the contrast by translating it adversatively: “*But* Yahweh answered Job . . .”

Whichever version we follow, it is still a complete surprise when we come to the epilogue and hear the verdict—that Job is the one who has spoken what is right about God. That was not anticipated, neither from the content of the Elihu speeches nor from the Yahweh speeches! ⊕

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¹⁷ A common view is to regard the Elihu speeches as making way for the Yahweh speeches: e.g., Parsons, *Structure and Purpose*, 28, but in this analysis, the point is that, rather, they tend to rule each other out.