

The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

Job and the Problem of Suffering

Readings: *Job 32:1-37:24*

Reflections:

- Elihu's speeches, four in total, add a very interesting twist to the unfolding narrative. Elihu is not mentioned prior to or following his speeches. He is not introduced at the beginning nor is he mentioned by God or Job at the end. It would appear his speeches stand alone within the text. Also, if one was to remove his speeches, the book of Job would make perfect sense although it would end even more problematically as there is no clear conclusion or answer to the issues raised by Job. For this reason, many scholars believe that the editor that removed the speech titles of Bildad and Zophar at the end to try to place more positive statements in Job's mouth, also added these extended speeches to provide a more positive conclusion to the book of Job, one that gives a more faith-based answer. It should also be noted that Elihu refers to himself as being younger than the other friends (Job 32:6-9) which may be a way that the writer acknowledges that this later insertion is not as old as the original story. This theory makes a lot of sense and allows those reading this parable to see both that the representation of God and the lack of clear answers in this ancient story were probably as problematic 2500 years as they are today. This account by Elihu also gives us some insight into how those in Israel who were seeking to live by faith in God would have thought prior to the coming of Jesus.
- Elihu is claimed to be descended from Buz who may be from the line of Abraham Genesis 20:20-21 mentions Buz as a nephew of Abraham. Again this may be a more cryptic indication that Elihu's character is grounded in the kind of faith in God that Abraham possessed. Clearly the story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac would find a kind of parallel to Job's story. God appears to be horrible until you see the final outcome and then the readers understand that Abraham's testing was demonstrating his character and complete trust in God. Elihu's speeches will in a very clear way align with this approach to God and suffering.
- Elihu begins by being frustrated. He is frustrated that Job's friends had not found a way to answer Job and that Job was not defending God.

- Elihu begins by making a clear statement that reveals a later understanding from Scripture: “But it is the Spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty that gives him understanding.” Elihu sees that God’s spirit working within him enables him, although he is young, to have more understanding than his elders. This should encourage young leaders. Although it is right to respect your elders and listen to their wisdom, it is also important to realize that at times God speaks through a person who is young and God expects the community to listen to him or her. The key to understanding is ultimately God’s revelation through his Spirit. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 1:15:-19. Possibly this section was inserted later after Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel began their prophecies about the coming of the Spirit and the inner transformation and revelation the Spirit would bring.
- The Spirit moves Elihu: “I am full of words, and the Spirit compels me...I must speak to find relief...” For those that are given a prophetic word to speak, often this is exactly how it feels. There is a burning passion and drive to speak what God has given them.
- Elihu then goes on to be very clear with Job. Job has complained that although he is righteous, God is not speaking to him to answer his plea. Elihu does not accept this. In the following verses we see a very clear teaching how God speaks: “For God does speak – now one way, now another – though a man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night...he may speak in their ears...” God speaks through dreams or visions, sometimes with the gentle whisper in the ear like Elijah. Elihu affirms that God does speak.
- Yet, there is another way God speaks and reveals himself: When someone suffers, if a mediator appears and redeems the person from their suffering, in that redemption, a person experiences the revelation of God. This image of a redeemer may be again a foreshadowing of the coming of the Christ. In the context of Israel suffering in captivity, the hope of the coming Messiah would have helped them endure the suffering as they anticipated the revelation of God’s grace to them through the Messiah. What does the one who has been saved declare? “I have sinned, and perverted what was right, but I did not get what I deserved. He redeemed my soul from going down to the pit, and I will live to enjoy the light.” This revelation of grace and salvation can only come through a path of difficulty and suffering and therefore God can use pain to help us more fully comprehend our fallen position and his power to save us.
- Elihu says that God will do this over and over (two or three times) to turn us back from our own destruction.
- Elihu now turns his attention to a new topic: Job’s negative view of God. “For he says, ‘It profits a man NOTHING when he tries to please God.’” This direct attack on God by Job is something Elihu tackles head on. How can Job say this when his very life is completely dependent on God? “If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all mankind would ...return to dust.” We see the clear connection with the creation account and the fact that our lives are simply dust that has come alive by the Spirit of God.

- Elihu declares God's complete sovereignty and omniscience. How can Job speak against God? By definition, God is beyond our complaints and when we talk this way we speak empty words. God rules rightly. God saves the suffering. God is all powerful. In all of these things we must simply trust God.
- Now Elihu uses an image that will unfold in the rest of the narrative. Elihu uses the image of a terrible storm to describe God. After describing storm clouds that are filled with water and shooting out powerful bolts of lightning, Elihu says, "He brings the clouds to punish men, or to water his earth and show his love." In this way Elihu points out that the clouds of suffering (thunder and lightning) can also bring water that reveals the love of God. The storm comes first but then the life giving, love-revealing rain.
- In this section Elihu also announces the coming revelation of God (Job 37:1-7), "Listen! Listen to the roar of his voice, to the rumbling that comes from his mouth." God will speak out of this storm, Elihu declares and we see in fact that is exactly how it is described in the coming chapter.
- In all of these things Job is to reflect on God's power and greatness and simply trust him. "The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress. Therefore men revere him, for does he not have regard for all the wise in heart?"
- This speech by Elihu is in one sense separate from the flow and argument of Job and his friends. Yet it represents a much clearer and insightful teaching on what it means to trust God even when a person doesn't understand what God is doing and what God will do. Elihu's words are well worth remembering when everything is storming, the clouds are dark and no light can be seen: "Listen for God's voice in the storm and remember, God can cause rain to fall from a storm."
- As we mentioned, Elihu disappears from the story and is not included in the divine condemnation of Job's friends (42:7-9) nor included in Job's prayer of intercession (42:8-10). This silence implies a type of divine approval for what Elihu has said and so the editor seems to add nothing more than this speech for us to consider.