

THE ROLE OF THE ELIHU SECTION IN THE BOOK OF JOB

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Much has been written about the contribution of the Elihu speeches in the book of Job, their authenticity, authorship, and role. The conjecture that these speeches were interpolations to Job led to doubts whether there is a role for them at all. There is very little basis for rejecting the authenticity of these speeches, and the case for excising them is weak. Approaching the Elihu speeches holistically – seeing them as an integral part of the book of Job, giving due consideration to both their literary design and their doctrinal contributions – brings the conclusion that the Elihu speeches form the theological bridge on which a righteous person may maintain faith and integrity in the midst of suffering, moving from faith that is untested towards faith that is tested and vindicated.

Introduction

The Elihu speeches (chs 32–37) in the book of Job are the theological-philosophical contributions of a man who is young relative to the four men (Job, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar) whose Dialogue dominated the book thus far (3–31). His contributions have been variously described as “the product of the [Joban author’s] experience during a lifetime,”¹ or as not carrying the discussion forward any distance.² His character and style have also been variously described as “overweening vanity,”³ pompous, insensitive and opaque,⁴ and prolix.⁵ A survey of the literature amply demonstrates that much has been written about the contribution of the Elihu speeches to the book of Job, the authenticity and authorship of this section (whether it is an interpolation of another author or authors), and the role of these speeches⁶. This essay focuses on more recent articles and

¹ R. Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965), 287.

² E. M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1990), 321.

³ D. Wolfers, *Deep Things Out of the Darkness* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 297.

⁴ Good, 321.

⁵ F. I. Andersen, *Job* (London: Tyndale, 1976), 51.

⁶ See the surveys in recent articles by L. J. Waters, “The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches in Job 32–37,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (Jan–Mar 1999): 28–41; R. V.

commentaries on the role of the Elihu speeches in discussing the proposition that these have no role in the book of Job. Doubts as to whether there is a role for them had been founded on the conjecture that these speeches were later (and usually deemed inferior) accretions to Job.⁷

It is noted that even as the discussion on whether there is a role for the Elihu speeches rages on, it appears that there *is* indeed a role for them in stoking a lively scholarly discussion. Althann's recent (1999) short essay⁸ on Elihu's contribution listed five Elihu studies produced in the preceding decade alone, while Waters' two articles in the same year, which presented an extensive study on Elihu's theology⁹ and robustly asserted their authenticity,¹⁰ have a very ample bibliography spanning more than two centuries.

Critical Analysis of the Authorship and Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches

According to Waters, critical analysis of these speeches in the 19th century set the ball rolling on doubting that they were part of the original.¹¹ This, together with questions on the integrity of other parts of Job, has in turn given rise to countless theories about the composition of and redaction schemes shaping the book of Job.¹² Janzen listed some major objections to the authenticity of these speeches¹³ - the lack of reference to Elihu elsewhere in Job, not even in the Epilogue, the diffuse and pretentious literary style, the linguistic differences with the rest of the book, and the tangency between these speeches to the divine speeches as resolution to Job's problem.

McCabe, "Elihu's Contribution to the Thought of the Book of Job," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 2 (Fall 1997): 47–80.

⁷ L. Wilson, "The Role of the Elihu Speeches in the Book of Job," *Reformed Theological Review* 55:2 (1996): 81–94.

⁸ R. Althann, "Elihu's Contribution to the Book of Job," *Old Testament Essays* 12:1 (1999): 9–12.

⁹ L. J. Waters, "Elihu's Theology and His View of Suffering," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (Apr–June 1999): 143–159.

¹⁰ Waters, "The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches," 28–41.

¹¹ Waters, "The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches," 29.

¹² Andersen, *Job*, 41–42.

¹³ J. G. Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta: Knox, 1985), 217–18, cited in Waters, "The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches," 30.

Other scholars remarked upon their seeming disruption to the flow of events,¹⁴ their unremarkable theological content,¹⁵ or their inferior literary style and quality,¹⁶ as further proof of their non-authenticity. Some have also suggested that these add nothing new to what has already been presented, e.g. Elihu's suggestion of suffering as discipline from God in 32:19–22 rehashed Eliphaz's point in 5:17,18. As a result, one could surmise a "real" version of Job without the intruding of Elihu speeches.¹⁷

The ramifications of the view that the Elihu speeches are inauthentic, again, appear to be myriad. Some have theorised a multiplicity of editors or authors; some decided that they have no role in the overall scheme of Job and have excised them from their scheme of the study of Job; some have advocated radical reorganisations of the material, while others hold that notwithstanding their non-authenticity, they are not only essential but also beneficial as contributing to the understanding of Job's suffering.¹⁸

It is important to canvass and evaluate some of these objections to the authenticity of the Elihu section. As Waters pointed out, one net effect of rejecting the authenticity of the Elihu section is a deficient view of the uniqueness of Elihu's contribution to the philosophical and theological arguments concerning suffering.¹⁹ Wilson also pointed out that Elihu's contribution is not only at the level of the speeches themselves, but also to the literary and thematic purposes of the book of Job as a whole.²⁰

The authenticity of these speeches has been somewhat enthusiastically defended in recent studies in the literature. Hartley pointed out that Elihu's absence in the Prologue and Epilogue could be explained from a stylistic point: the lengthy introduction of Elihu in Job 32 compensated for his absence earlier, and neither the Satan nor Job's wife received a mention at the end. Moreover, supposing that Elihu had finished fulfilling his role of preparing Job for the

¹⁴ R. N. Whybray, *Job* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 22.

¹⁵ R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (1952), 673, cited in Andersen, *Job*, 51.

¹⁶ H. H. Nichols, *AJSJL* 27 (1910–11): 97ff, cited in Andersen, *Job*, 51.

¹⁷ Andersen, *Job*, 42.

¹⁸ Waters, "The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches," 31–32.

¹⁹ Waters, "The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches," 31–32.

²⁰ Wilson, "The Role of the Elihu Speeches," 94.

theophany, there is neither a need for a divine verdict on him, nor any special mention at the end.²¹

On the literary, linguistic and stylistic bases against the integrity of the Elihu speeches, Gordis has provided a fairly robust defence. He began by noting that the dissection and atomisation of ancient literary documents, without due attention to the unity and meaning of the literary whole, is poor scholarship and was beginning to fall out of favour to a more holistic approach.²²

On the contention that there are marked variations in the vocabulary between the Elihu speeches and the rest of the book, e.g. the divine names, pronouns and prepositions, Gordis stated that these variations are relative rather than absolute – these words occur throughout the whole book but the proportion of usage in the Elihu speeches differed from the rest.²³ Snaith's later study also demonstrated no significant degree of variations in the vocabulary to warrant a theory for separate authorship.²⁴ As Andersen pointed out, one could line up impressive names and supply lists of words and idioms on both sides of this question. In actual fact, the vocabulary difference could also be explained by the author's desire to give Elihu a distinctive character.²⁵

The fact that Elihu appears to quote earlier speeches by Job and the other friends has been used as evidence that his speeches are later interpolations. But Gordis pointed out that it could equally be argued for a single authorship – the use of quotations is commonplace in ancient literature.²⁶ Elihu's quotation of earlier speeches could be part of the author's plan, e.g. in his role as Job's arbiter.²⁷ Moreover, Job's quotations of Yahweh's speech (42:2–6) further strengthen the case for single authorship.²⁸

Arguments from the alleged differences in style and quality of style between the Elihu speeches and the rest of the book could be quite simply subjective. One could easily line up students of Job on one side or the other.²⁹ Andersen highlighted that a good author

²¹ J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 28.

²² Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 106.

²³ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 106–107.

²⁴ N. H. Snaith, *The Book of Job* (London: SCM, 1968), 75–85; cited in Waters, "The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches," 26–37.

²⁵ Andersen, *Job*, 51–52.

²⁶ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 107.

²⁷ N. C. Habel, "The Role of Elihu in the Design of the Book of Job," in *In the Shelter of Elyon*, W. B. Barrick and J. S. Spencer, eds. (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 81–98.

²⁸ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 107.

²⁹ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 108.

does not make all the characters speak the same. Furthermore, if the last human word appears “weak and turgid,” they serve to contrast the brilliance of the final word from God.³⁰

Much has also been made of the integrity of the Elihu speeches within the structure of the book of Job. The abrupt appearance and disappearance of Elihu, together with the sudden incursion of the “Wisdom poem” in Job 28, and the absence of a third speech by Zophar, have long been the subject of much discussion and conjecture.³¹ The question of structure is extremely vexed and subjective.³² One example is that while it is generally recognised that Job’s dialogue with his three friends in chapters 3–31 could be structured as three cycles with the third cycle breaking down, the long-recognised propensity for the number four in Job has led some students to recast Job 3–31 into two cycles of 4 speeches, thereby smoothing over the supposed absence of Zophar.³³ The fact that Elihu made four distinct speeches appear to bolster the case for their integrity with the rest of Job. Further complicating matters is the proposal of a five-part division of the Elihu speeches!³⁴

Getting back to the subject of the integrity of these speeches within the structure of Job proper, it has been argued that the elimination of these speeches would allow for Yahweh to appear immediately after Job’s plea for his presence in Job 31. This could simply be refuted by the argument that Yahweh’s appearance had already been requested right from the start (9:3), and again at several places (13:3, 16:18–22) to no avail. There is no reason to expect Yahweh’s immediate appearance to Job’s plea in chapter 31.³⁵ Freedman’s structural study of the Elihu speeches also indicated that they are reasoned responses to the ideas found in earlier sections of Job, and notwithstanding his novel reconstruction of Job which involves redistributing the Elihu speeches, he showed that

³⁰ Andersen, *Job*, 51.

³¹ A. E. Steinmann. “The Structure and Message of the Book of Job,” *Vetus Testamentum* 46: 86–88.

³² A quick scan through commentaries on Job would quickly reveal as many structural schemes as commentators!

³³ See for example Andersen, *Job*, 19–23; and Steinmann, “The Structure and Message,” 91.

³⁴ D. A. Diewert, “The Composition of the Elihu Speeches: A Poetic and Structural Analysis”, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1991, cited in Waters, “The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches,” 28.

³⁵ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 108.

there is likely structural integrity of these speeches within Job.³⁶ There is also increasing recognition that for all the difficulties with the presence of Elihu structurally, these speeches play an important function in the design of the book of Job,³⁷ and that they set the stage for the Yahweh speeches.³⁸

Arguments against the content of the Elihu speeches are the ones that strike at the heart of their authenticity, and whether there is a role for these in the book of Job. A major contention is that they add nothing new or significant to the discussion. However this contention is self-defeating for it would raise the question of why anyone would take the trouble to add these to the book of Job.³⁹ Furthermore, the sheer volume of these speeches – going on for nearly six chapters, and nearly as long as the speeches of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar put together – indicate that these have more substance than just mere repetition.

It has also been suggested that these speeches were added by a writer dissatisfied with, variously, the theological perspective of the original, or the inconclusive nature of the arguments. These speeches are “orthodoxy at its safest.”⁴⁰ However, if the original ideas in the book of Job were as heretical as it was supposed, the book would have been consigned to neglect and oblivion, rather than revision or addition⁴¹. Moreover, as has been mentioned earlier, Elihu appear to agree with Eliphaz on the educative nature of suffering; and by the time he spoke in chapter 37, he was speaking in language and terms that are almost identical to that of Yahweh in Job 38–41⁴². It appears more likely that Elihu occupies a ‘middle ground’ between the perspective of Job and that of his three friends.

They Have No Role! Excise them?

Where once upon a time, objections against the authenticity of the Elihu section have led many to conclude that these speeches play no role in the “real” scheme of the book, and therefore they ought to

³⁶ D. N. Freedman, “The Elihu Speeches in the Book of Job,” *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 51–59; cited in Hartley, *Job*, 29.

³⁷ Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, 321

³⁸ G. W. Parsons, “The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (Apr–Jun 1981): 141.

³⁹ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 109.

⁴⁰ Andersen, *Job*, 50.

⁴¹ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 109–110.

⁴² Whybray, *Job*, 23.

be excised, there now appear not to be many who favour excision of the Elihu section. Waters listed only four proponents of this drastic course of action among recent works.⁴³ My own survey turned up only one, by Ross, who while not actually advocating excision, asserted that this section was clearly a later addition, included for its cultic connection with the lament psalms, and basically adds nothing to the scheme of the book of Job.⁴⁴ There appears widespread recognition that excision creates more problems than it purports to solve by getting at the “real” message of Job, the most significant problem being the abrupt appearance of Yahweh in Job 38 following Job’s speech in Job 31. It has long been recognised, even by those who did not accept the Elihu speeches as authentic, that they play a preparatory role to the theophany.⁴⁵

The most significant issue, which is most difficult to be set aside by those advocating excision, is that among the extant manuscripts of Job, the Elihu speeches are never absent.⁴⁶ Indeed the Jewish “tradition has never known a book of Job without [them]”⁴⁷ and although this may be viewed as an argument from silence,⁴⁸ all scholarly proposals of an “Elihu-less” Job have been found wanting. It has been noted also that three of the four Qumran manuscript fragments of Job are portions of the Elihu speeches.⁴⁹ As Whybray concluded his introductory remarks on the Elihu section, if the burden of proof is upon those favouring excision, their case is not proven.⁵⁰

There appear to be little support for the case that the Elihu speeches play no role in the book of Job. Even so, enthusiasm for their inclusion could well lead one to overplaying one’s case. For example, Althann argued that Steinmann’s structural fourfold grouping in Job is evidence that the fourfold Elihu speeches belong

⁴³ Waters, “The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches,” 31–32.

⁴⁴ J. F. Ross, “Job 33:14–30: The Phenomenology of Lament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (Mar 1975): 38–46. It must be commented that this study is putting too much emphasis on a small section of the Elihu speeches. It ignores the fact that this section is only part of a larger contribution by Elihu, and that the entire speech contributes to the overall scheme of the book of Job.

⁴⁵ H. H. Nichols, *AJSJL* 27 (1910–11): 101, cited in Waters, “The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches,” 30.

⁴⁶ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 156, cited in Waters, “The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches,” 41.

⁴⁷ W. L. Michel, “Job’s Real Friend: Elihu,” *Criterion* 21 (Spring 1982): 29–32, cited in Waters, “The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches,” 41.

⁴⁸ Absence of an Elihu-less Job is not evidence of absence of an Elihu-less Job.

⁴⁹ Parsons, “The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job,” 153.

⁵⁰ Whybray, *Job*, 23.

to Job from the beginning.⁵¹ However, arguments from the structure of the book of Job must remain tentative because of their subjective nature. Moreover, Steinmann's fourfold scheme appears contrived at some places, e.g. the classification of Yahweh's condemnation of Eliphaz and his friends in 42:7-8 as the fourth speech by Yahweh.⁵²

Fitting the available data

In an attempt to fit the variations exhibited in the style of the Elihu section, Gordis suggested that these chapters are the product of the same author writing at a later period in life. He suggested that the greater complexity and near unintelligible form of these chapters could be compared to the same complexity of later works of relatively modern writers such as Shakespeare and Goethe. The Elihu speeches allow the author to express his own experience over a lifetime through a character interpolated into a traditional folktale, thereby explaining some of the structural incongruence.⁵³ Substantially speaking, Elihu's speeches offered a "solution" that denies the conclusions of both Job and his three friends: suffering may not be the penalty of sin, yet God's justice is unassailable.⁵⁴ In addition, a proper comprehension of suffering as discipline and as warning could not easily be located within either the three friends, with whom the author (and Job) are out of sympathy, or with Job, who has already denied any justification for the suffering of the righteous, or with Yahweh, where it might weaken the main answer. The creation of Elihu enabled the author to express this idea and give it due weighting.⁵⁵ Gordis also dwelt on the pedigree of Elihu, the only person in the entire book to have a substantial genealogy. He cited Elihu's obvious Hebraic origin as proof of a single authorship.⁵⁶

Writing at an era where critical scholarship was still quite skeptical about the integrity of the Elihu section, Gordis was a trailblazer for a holistic reading of the book of Job. Although the projection of Elihu as a character representing the author late in life appears quite contrived in today's reading, perhaps Gordis needed to overstate his case for the scholarship of his era?

⁵¹ Althann, "Elihu's Contribution," 9.

⁵² Steinmann, "The Structure and Message," 93-94.

⁵³ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 110-112.

⁵⁴ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 113.

⁵⁵ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 112-113.

⁵⁶ Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 115-116.

It is now generally recognised that, notwithstanding the possibility of more than one author, the Elihu speeches are not an independent composition by an unthinking interpolator. There appears to be awareness of the previous speeches by Job and his three friends, and his arguments reflect that.⁵⁷ Elihu's theological contribution is very distinct, and rather than interrupting the sequence of events, they appear to deliberately retard the flow, thereby heightening the climax of the theophany.⁵⁸ He could even be viewed as a herald of the theophany, correcting the arguments of Job's three friends.⁵⁹

Hartley also suggested that Elihu was deliberately both given prominence and downplayed at the same time. His discourses were not contradicted, and appear before the Yahweh speeches. Yet he appears to be cast as an angry young man, bombastic and altogether comical. This serves to amuse and provide light relief for an audience tensed by Job's climactic oath in Job 31 and the expectation of the theophany.⁶⁰

Other modern students are not as congenial towards Elihu. In Habel's legal metaphor framework of the book of Job, Elihu's self-understanding of his role is that of an arbiter that Job had sought to arbitrate his case before God.⁶¹ However, the depiction of Elihu as hotheaded and untutored,⁶² together with his self-ascription of being a "windbag" using the satirical language of Eliphaz,⁶³ leads one to conclude that he is a young fool. Elihu asserted that Yahweh does not answer people like Job (35:13–14), but then the response of Yahweh from the whirlwind pronounced a verdict on Elihu without a word being spoken directly to him.⁶⁴

Wilson noted that, even though the Elihu speeches fulfil important literary and thematic purposes, Elihu's words are not the final verdict, nor were they entirely endorsed by the book. Yahweh's appearance dismissed his arguments, and Yahweh's freedom sweeps aside his rather orthodox view of retributive justice⁶⁵. Viviers suggested, in his rhetorical analysis of the Elihu speeches, that the

⁵⁷ Whybray, *Job*, 22.

⁵⁸ Whybray, *Job*, 23.

⁵⁹ Whybray, *Job*, 23.

⁶⁰ Hartley, *Job*, 29.

⁶¹ N. C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 452.

⁶² Habel, *Job*, 447.

⁶³ Habel, *Job*, 454.

⁶⁴ Habel, *Job*, 516.

⁶⁵ Wilson, "The Role of the Elihu Speeches," 94.

author cast him as a defender of the doctrine of retribution. This character was cleverly and deliberately crafted to be ignored, functioning as an “anti-model” to overturn traditional wisdom.⁶⁶

A more sinister appraisal of Elihu reads 38:2 as Yahweh’s judgement on Elihu for his speeches in 32–37. Wilcox suggested that in condemning Job, Elihu presumed himself to be equal to God, and is therefore condemned as “darkening [God’s] counsel.”⁶⁷ While he correctly pointed out that God’s verdict on Job’s words is that they are right in contrast to the three friends, 42:7–8, his attempt to explain the absence of any mention of Elihu in the Epilogue falls flat. Job’s repeat of the question in 42:3 clearly identified himself as the subject of the question in 38:2, and 38:1 also clearly identified Job as the one God questioned directly. Despite his elaborate post-modern re-reading of both 38:2 and 42:3, Wilcox is totally unconvincing.⁶⁸

Towards a Role for Elihu

Even without exhausting the extensive literature on the Elihu speeches, this study has shown (in truth, only partially) the mind-boggling breadth of viewpoints and opinions on the character Elihu and his speeches. It was perhaps with his tongue-in-cheek, after sketching the various interpretations of Elihu in the literature, and drawing from no less than seventeen different publications, that McCabe suggested the multiplicity of interpretations actually “provide an invitation to reexamine [*sic*] Elihu’s contribution!”⁶⁹ Ah well! What difference does one more opinion make? “I also will give my answer; I also will declare my opinion.”⁷⁰

First, it is noted that one has to approach the Elihu speeches holistically – seeing them as an integral part of the book of Job, giving due consideration to both the literary design and the doctrinal contributions.⁷¹ The general consensus of scholars today is that the Elihu speeches could be fruitfully explored, they can be purposeful

⁶⁶ H. Viviers, “Elihu (Job 32–37), Garrulous but Poor Rhetor? Why is He Ignored?” in *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture*, S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht, eds. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 150–151.

⁶⁷ K. G. Wilcox, “Who is This...?: A Reading of Job 38.2,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 78 (1998): 88–90.

⁶⁸ Wilcox, “Who is This...?,” 91–94.

⁶⁹ McCabe, “Elihu’s Contribution,” 49.

⁷⁰ Elihu, Job 32:17 (NRSV).

⁷¹ McCabe, “Elihu’s Contribution,” 49.

in the present context, and that excision of these speeches is unwarranted.⁷²

Considering the book of Job as a whole, and giving due weight to the Prologue as introducing the plot, Steinmann seems right in asserting that the central concern of Job is how a righteous person's faith and integrity comes through a crisis,⁷³ though one need not be in agreement with his proposed structure of Job.⁷⁴ The plot is propelled forward by the Satan accusing Job, before God, of self-serving righteousness. Job's suffering is consequential to this plotline, and so it is somewhat misleading to suggest that human suffering is the focus of the book (although there is much to be said concerning human suffering and God's justice).

Job maintained his integrity, and refused to charge God with wrongdoing and did not sin in what he said (1:22, 2:10). He did however curse the day he was born (ch. 3), and it was this protestation of innocence that precipitated the Dialogue. His three friends argued from conventional wisdom, rigidly applied the doctrine of retribution, *viz.* God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, and thereby condemned Job of having committed some gross sins to warrant such great suffering. They counselled repentance before God to effect restoration of his wealth and health. Nevertheless, Job continued to hold on to his innocence and challenged his friends to prove him wrong. They failed to press their case and ran out of puff. This too, is the verdict of the author (32:1). Into this silence Elihu stepped in.

Fast-forwarding to the end (ch. 42), we find that the doctrine of retribution, as espoused and expounded by the three friends, was condemned by God as "not spoken of [God] what is right" (42:7). Job was vindicated: his innocence affirmed, and his integrity intact. This was clearly demonstrated by God's affirmation of Job as his servant (42:7-8), and the fact that God accepted his intercession for his friends (42:8-9). The restoration of his wealth, and to his family and community followed the vindication, thereby showing him to be well and truly a righteous man, as God had said to the Satan (1:8, 2:3).

Job had spoken *of God* what is right. However, Job had not spoken right. He had spoken "words without knowledge" (38:2) and

⁷² Wilson, "The Role of the Elihu Speeches," 83.

⁷³ Steinmann, "The Structure and Message," 99.

⁷⁴ See above.

so had clouded God's design.⁷⁵ Significantly, when he responded to God in 42:3–4, Job quoted God not just once but twice, therefore doubly affirming that he had indeed clouded God's design through his ignorance. Consequently, Job despised himself and repented in dust and ashes (42:6). However, this is not a picture of a dejected Job who crumbled before an overpowering God; rather it is a picture of a triumphant Job, who, having received what he had asked for - to see God with his own eyes (42:5, cf. 19:26,27) - is vindicated and proven innocent. He had overstated his case in 31:37, prior to the Elihu speeches, that he would approach God "like a prince." But now, having been put in his rightful place, he may be rightfully justified as well. Although some commentators take the view that by his appearance, God humiliated Job and overpowered him, "showing him his foolishness and impertinence,"⁷⁶ yet there may be irony at play here. God's interrogation of Job was not threatening, but rather educative; as though God was taking a walk through his creation and inviting Job to accompany him and consider his sustenance of the created order.⁷⁷

How does one transition between the Job who was exasperated and exhausted from the Dialogue, and the Job restored and vindicated by Yahweh? How does a righteous person maintain integrity in the midst of suffering, even when the cause of the suffering is obscured? We the readers, of course, know why. Elihu, of course! Here is one who at first sight would not be a threat to the orthodox doctrine of retribution: a young obfuscating fool who took five verses just to say "Listen to me" (33:1–5)! He was disarmingly comical, but he is not a comic.⁷⁸ Here is one who will lay the axe to the root of conventional wisdom, who understands that God's relationship with human beings is far more complex, and accepts that the righteous may suffer. As Elihu proceeded, he assisted Job to reach the point where he was no longer overwhelmed by his suffering and the seeming injustice of it, and he was prepared to

⁷⁵ Habel, *Job*, 517.

⁷⁶ D. Atkinson, *The Message of Job: Suffering and Grace* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 145.

⁷⁷ D. Atkinson, *The Message of Job*, 145.

⁷⁸ If he was truly a fool as Habel declared (*Job*, 452), whose assertion (that Yahweh does not answer people like Job) was dramatically contradicted by the response of Yahweh from the whirlwind, then why did his discourse go for nearly six chapters? Why give him four discourses, one more than the others bar Job? Why not cut him off mid-sentence somewhere in chapter 34 or 35 to further highlight his irrelevance? As will be shown later, his theology deepened as he progressed, and his stature rose to great (though unexpected) heights by the time we reach the end of his discourse.

meet God and receive vindication.⁷⁹ Commentators have long remarked upon the similarity of Elihu's language in Job 37, and Yahweh's in Job 38,⁸⁰ and have vividly imagined that even as Elihu was marvelling at the complexity of storm meteorology in 36:27–37:18, the storm from which Yahweh appeared was rising over the horizon.⁸¹ Along the way, he subtly yet significantly reshaped the doctrine of retribution. Whereas Job's friend held that a person suffers because of some sinful deed, Job developed the thesis that God uses suffering to instruct a person (33:12–22).⁸² In fact, his most important contribution could be that God's presence is precisely where Job least expected it – in suffering.⁸³ Job himself had to abandon the doctrine of retribution, but he had also not yet received vindication of his faith.

Elihu's arguments developed in a systematic and well thought-out way. He quoted Job's case (33:8–11), made his case for the educative purpose of suffering (33:14–22), and suggested that the sufferer may be restored through humble repentance of sin (33:27–30). He then made it clear that he was not abandoning orthodoxy altogether. He started with a proper theology of God, his justice and righteousness, who is transcendent and whose ways are inscrutable (34:10–33). While it is true that God is affected, neither by our righteousness, nor our wickedness (35:4–15), yet he is immanent and involves himself in human affairs to judge the wicked (36:5–21). He reminded Job again of God's transcendence (36:22–26) and ended by turning Job's attention to God's might, displayed in the atmosphere (36:27–37:18), and prepared him for the theophany.

Elihu's argumentation is not without flaw. After all, he was only another human player, who was not privy to the events behind the scene in the Prologue. His understanding is part of flawed human wisdom.⁸⁴ He did not know the *real* cause of Job's suffering, and thus spoke from that limited point of view. But he did not speculate as the three friends did, and did not speak of God wrongly.

⁷⁹ Waters, "Elihu's Theology," 158.

⁸⁰ e.g. Whybray, *Job*, 23.

⁸¹ Gordis, *The Book of Job*, 117.

⁸² Hartley, *Job*, 485.

⁸³ Waters, "Elihu's Theology," 158. Waters unhelpfully uses the term "compensation theology" for what is commonly termed in the literature "retribution theology." He reserves the term "retribution theology" to describe the principle that there is room for exceptions in the operation of God's justice. In "conventional" retribution theology (and compensation theology), punishment for sin and reward for righteous acts are automatic and fixed, 149–151.

⁸⁴ McCabe, "Elihu's Contribution," 70.

Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that, far from having no role, the Elihu speeches form the theological bridge on which a righteous person may maintain faith and integrity in the midst of suffering, moving from faith that is untested towards faith that is tested and is vindicated (Job 23:10).