

Ask Away – January 13

1) Was Elihu right in saying that Job had condemned God? (Job 32:2; 33:9–11).

If I could offer a reader's guide to the book of Job, it would be this: (1) listen to Job with patience and understanding; (2) listen to Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu with suspicion and skepticism; (3) listen to God with reverence and humility. That being said, it's only fair to ask: Were Job's friends ever right? Did they ever say anything true? Well, yes, but their speeches were also filled with fallacies, half-truths and misguided thinking. With this in mind, let's examine the various things Elihu said about Job and see if any of them are valid:

- Elihu's view of Job: "He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God" (Job 32:2). Job did justify himself, but only because his friends attacked him. When they accused him of sin and wickedness, Job vigorously defended his integrity. When they told him that God always punished the guilty and blessed the innocent, Job pointed out that the wicked often prospered and died in peace. When they insisted that God was just to bring disaster on him, Job denied it. And indeed, up to that point, God had not given Job justice.
- Elihu to Job: "You say, 'I am pure, without transgression; I am clean, and there is no iniquity in me. Behold, he finds occasions against me, he counts me as his enemy, he puts my feet in the stocks and watches all my paths'" (Job 33:9–11). Job did say something similar to this (Job 13:24–27), but he also admitted to having sinned in the past (Job 13:26), so he never claimed to be sinless. Also, God Himself said to Satan, "You incited me against him to destroy him without reason" (Job 2:3), so Job was right in saying that God had treated him like an enemy (so far).¹
- Elihu to Job: "Why do you contend against [God], saying, 'He will answer none of man's words?'" (Job 33:13). Job did say that God was silent when he cried out for help (Job 19:7; 30:20; 31:35), but this was *not* a general statement about how God treats everyone. Indeed, as part of the test, God had not answered Job or come to his aid, so Job was right (so far).
- Elihu of Job: "Job has said, 'I am in the right, and God has taken away my right; in spite of my right I am counted a liar; my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression'" (Job 34:5–6). Job did claim to be righteous (Job 27:6), and he also said God had not treated him in keeping with his righteous life (Job 27:2). But Job never accused God of branding him a liar, and thus telling a lie. In fact, Job's main complaint was that up to point, God hadn't said anything at all!²

¹ Andersen: "In any case, Job had never gone quite this far in explicitly accusing God of malice, dishonesty or injustice, although he often came so close to this that it could seem to the listener that he had. Like the friends, Elihu was shocked by the sound of Job's words, but he had not grasped the essential point as Job experienced it." Francis I. Andersen, "Job: An Introduction and Commentary," *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* Vol. 14 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976) 268.

² Andersen: "Elihu represents Job's position by means of a mixture of identifiable quotations (such as 27:2) and summaries which are harder to trace to Job's reported words, and which, perhaps, distort his views...In any case Elihu is exaggerating, for Job has never accused God of branding him a liar, and thus telling a lie. His complaint has been that God has not lodged any formal charge at all." Andersen, 271.

- Elihu of Job: “[Job] has said, ‘It profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God’” (Job 34:9). Job did say that God’s judgment doesn’t always fall on the wicked as expected, and he also said that trouble comes to good and bad alike. But Job never said there was no point in serving God. In fact, the attitude Elihu attributed to Job is exactly what Job found in the wicked (Job 21:14f). It is completely unfair for Elihu to claim that Job thinks this himself.
- Elihu to Job: “Do you think this to be just? Do you say, ‘It is my right before God,’ that you ask, ‘What advantage have I? How am I better off than if I had sinned?’” (Job 35:2–3). Job did defend his innocence, and he insisted that God’s treatment of him was not just (in the sense of punishment for sin), but Job never claimed to be more righteous than God. Elihu was guilty of hearing what he wanted to hear. When Job said, “It is all one; therefore I say, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked” (Job 9:22), Elihu heard: “What do I gain by not sinning?” But that wasn’t Job’s point. He was showing his friends that there were exceptions to their worldview.
- Elihu of Job: “[God’s] anger does not punish, and he does not take much note of transgression” (Job 35:15). Job did say that sinful men often prosper and flourish, but Job never said that God didn’t punish the wicked. In fact, Job made of point of saying exactly the opposite (Job 24:18–25; 27:13–23)! Elihu is guilty of taking Job’s words out of context.

In conclusion, I believe Elihu was very much mistaken in his opinion of Job. Did Job ever say anything rash? Sure—in fact, he admitted as much when he thought back on cursing the day of his birth (Job 6:2–3). But Job was not adding “rebellion to his sin” when he defended his integrity (Job 34:36–37). Based on the current situation, Job had painted an accurate picture of the calamity God had brought upon him.

Now, in fairness, it should be asked: If Job was right and Elihu was wrong, why did God ask Job, “Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?” (Job 40:8)? Also, what did Job repent of after God talked with him (Job 42:4–5)? For the answer to this question, see January 15.