

# Who is Elihu in the Book of Job?

*By C.M. Alvarez*

In Job chapter 26 to 31, Job presented his case to God. He exalted God's justice and majesty, acknowledged that God was his only hope, and then asked God to show him anything that he had done wrong. Job laid it all out and awaits a response.

Does he receive one?

Job 32 introduces one of the most interesting characters in the Book of Job. We remember in chapter 2 that Job had three friends who came to comfort him: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. It is they with whom Job has been conversing in a series of exchanges up until this point.

But now, someone new speaks up, Elihu. We're going to read the beginning of chapter 32 and then talk a little bit about this new character.

## **Elihu in Job 32**

So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. 2 Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned with anger. He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God. 3 He burned with anger also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong. 4 Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he. 5 And when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, he burned with anger.

## **Who is Elihu?**

So who is Elihu? We are told that he is "the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram." This description is much more specific than the other three friends, which tells me that this must have been a well known family at the time. As a "Buzite," he was descended from the son of Abraham's brother, Nahor. We are given a partial family tree of Nahor in Genesis 22 at the end of the passage on the binding of Isaac.

20 Now after these things it was told to Abraham, "Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: 21 Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, 22 Chesed, Hazo, Pildash,

Jidlaph, and Bethuel.” 23 (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. 24 Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.<sup>1</sup>

Buz's descendants are also mentioned in the book of Jeremiah as those who will experience the wrath of God.

15 Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. 16 They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.”

17 So I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it: 18 Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and officials, to make them a desolation and a waste, a hissing and a curse, as at this day; 19 Pharaoh king of Egypt, his servants, his officials, all his people, 20 and all the mixed tribes among them; all the kings of the land of Uz and all the kings of the land of the Philistines (Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod); 21 Edom, Moab, and the sons of Ammon; 22 all the kings of Tyre, all the kings of Sidon, and the kings of the coastland across the sea; 23 Dedan, Tema, Buz, and all who cut the corners of their hair; 24 all the kings of Arabia and all the kings of the mixed tribes who dwell in the desert; 25 all the kings of Zimri, all the kings of Elam, and all the kings of Media; 26 all the kings of the north, far and near, one after another, and all the kingdoms of the world that are on the face of the earth. And after them the king of Babylon shall drink.<sup>2</sup>

This is another placement in the generations after Abraham, but obviously before Mt. Sinai. If you remember, Bildad the Shuite was a direct descendant of Abraham through his second wife Keturah. Eliphaz the Temanite was a descendant of Esau<sup>3</sup>. Zophar is referred to as the “Naamathite,” and we’re not sure what that reference is to.

Elihu states that he is younger than the other three. This may be the

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:20-24 ESV

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 25:17-26 ESV

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Benzinger, “Teman,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14300-teman>.

reason that Elihu wasn't mentioned up until this point. Maybe the other three were actual friends of Job's and Elihu just accompanied one of them. Maybe his young age didn't registered enough importance that he didn't deserve a mention. We'll discuss a few other thoughts about Elihu later on in the lesson.

### **Meaning of Elihu's Name**

Elihu means "God is Lord," and as *Lockyear's All the Men of the Bible* notes, it suggests his desire to exalt the Almighty. One writer has described him as 'the forerunner of Jehovah.'<sup>4</sup> The meaning of his name is close to the only thing that people agree on regarding Elihu, but we'll discuss that after we read the rest of his words to Job's friends.

6 And Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite answered and said:

"I am young in years,  
and you are aged;  
therefore I was timid and afraid  
to declare my opinion to you.

7 I said, 'Let days speak,  
and many years teach wisdom.'

8 But it is the spirit in man,  
the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand.

As Job pointed out previously, true wisdom and understanding come from God. Elihu is saying the same thing here. He said nothing while he listened to the others speak, as they had more age and experience. However, he, like Job, does not feel that they've given satisfactory answers and are missing the point. Elihu believes that he has been given understanding of the situation by the Almighty.

Elihu also refers to what Irenaeus of Lyons calls the "imago Dei," or the image of God.<sup>5</sup> We have been given life by the "breath of the Almighty" and it is because of this we are rational and creative beings. It is when our spirit connects to the one from whom it came that we can have true understanding. As Jacques Ellul points out in his commentary on Job chapter

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<sup>4</sup> "Elihu," *Lockyer's All the Men of the Bible*, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-men-bible/Elihu>.

<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. Book 3, VII.9.

32 in *On Freedom, Love, and Power*, “Elihu contrasts wisdom with the intelligence that comes from God’s Spirit. He challenges tradition and experience to the benefit of the true revelation.<sup>6</sup>”

9 It is not the old who are wise,  
nor the aged who understand what is right.

10 Therefore I say, ‘Listen to me;  
let me also declare my opinion.’

11 “Behold, I waited for your words,  
I listened for your wise sayings,  
while you searched out what to say.

12 I gave you my attention,  
and, behold, there was none among you who refuted Job  
or who answered his words.

13 Beware lest you say, ‘We have found wisdom;  
God may vanquish him, not a man.’

This was from the ESV, but I think Young’s Literal Translation gives a little more clarity here, so let’s read those verses in that translation.

9 The multitude are not wise, Nor do the aged understand judgment.

10 Therefore I have said: Harken to me, I do shew my opinion --  
even I.

11 Lo, I have waited for your words, I give ear unto your reasons, Till  
ye search out sayings.

12 And unto you I attend, And lo, there is no reasoner for Job, [Or]  
answerer of his sayings among you.

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Ellul, “7. Elihu (Chapters 32–37),” in *On Freedom, Love, and Power* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 105, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.3138/9781442625693-009/html>.

13 Lest ye say, We have found wisdom, God doth thrust him away, not man.<sup>7</sup>

What Elihu is saying here (“the multitude are not wise”) is that just because the majority of people believe a thing, it doesn’t mean it’s true, nor does simple age give wisdom. Elihu waited, listened to their responses, found them lame and now he is going to give his own response.

Part of the reason Elihu wants to give a response is because he does not want the friends to go away thinking that they are right and that it actually is God’s judgment on Job and they “man” are correct in abandoning him in his time of need.

14 He has not directed his words against me,

and I will not answer him with your speeches.

Elihu thinks their arguments are weak and so he is not going to use their arguments in his own response.

15 “They are dismayed; they answer no more;  
they have not a word to say.

16 And shall I wait, because they do not speak,  
because they stand there, and answer no more?

17 I also will answer with my share;  
I also will declare my opinion.

18 For I am full of words;  
the spirit within me constrains me.

19 Behold, my belly is like wine that has no vent;  
like new wineskins ready to burst.

20 I must speak, that I may find relief;  
I must open my lips and answer.

21 I will not show partiality to any man  
or use flattery toward any person.

22 For I do not know how to flatter,  
else my Maker would soon take me away.

That is the total of Elihu’s words for the three friends. He says that the

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<sup>7</sup> Job 32:9-13. YLT.

friends don't know what they are talking about. Elihu is fired up and has some words to say. He's not going to hold any punches or play to their ego or else he knows his "Maker would soon take me away."

### **The Drama Over Elihu**

Before we move on in the next chapter of Elihu's response directly to Job, we're going to discuss the role he plays in the book of Job. As I noted earlier, some commentators look at Elihu as the "forerunner of Jehovah." In this way, he could be seen as a foreshadowing of John the Baptist who was a forerunner of Christ. We see later on in the book that God himself does have some words with Job.

However, just like everything else in the Book of Job, there is debate over exactly who Elihu symbolizes as well as his messages. From *Lockyear's*:

This youthful, somewhat self-assertive speaker reaches a high level and has "a far juster and more spiritual conception" in dealing with the problem that has confronted Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. But he gives only half the truth, and his appeal, although so lofty and eloquent, is marred by a self-assertiveness evident from his sayings, "Great men are not always wise: neither do the aged understand judgment" (Job 32:9) and, "My words shall be the uprightness of my heart" (Job 33:3).

It is interesting to observe that Job did not reply to Elihu as he did to the other three, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?" This was Jehovah's word to Elihu, in which He lays the very charge at his feet which he had sought to bring against His servant Job (Job 34:35; 35:16).<sup>8</sup>

Again, often a commentators interpretation of the Book of Job depends largely on doctrines and preconceptions that they hold coming into the study. Lockyear claims that Jehovah chastises Elihu with the words "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge." That is a direct misrepresentation of the passage, not only misrepresenting, but misquoting. The quote is from Job 38:2, and Job 38:1 is God directly addressing Job, not Elihu. God is confirming Elihu's words, not condemning them.

Also, while we aren't going to go into detail about this now, at the end of the book of Job, Job's three friends are told to ask Job for forgiveness ... not Elihu. The commentary in the NET Study Bible points this out.

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<sup>8</sup> "Elihu," *Lockyer's All the Men of the Bible*, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-men-bible/Elihu>.

There are now four speeches from another friend of Job, Elihu. But Job does not reply to any of these, nor does the Lord. The speeches show a knowledge of the debate that has gone on, but they take a different approach entirely. ... It becomes evident that Elihu correctly identified Job's determination to maintain his integrity at God's expense as the primary problem in at least the latter stages of the dialogues (32:1-3; 34:37; 35:16; cf. 38:2; 40:8; 42:3). Elihu was respectful of his elders (32:4), but remained uninfected by their error (32:14). He sought to maintain impartiality (32:21-22) and to offer true wisdom (33:33), believed like Job that a mediator existed (33:23-24), and desired Job's vindication (33:32). In addition, Elihu focused on vindicating God's actions (34:12; 35:10-11; 36:2-3, 22-26) and announced the coming theophany (37:1-5, 22). It appears that he was not included in the divine condemnation of Job's friends (42:7-9) and was excluded from Job's prayer of intercession (42:8-10)—both perhaps implying divine approval of his behavior and words.<sup>9</sup>

### **What We Can Learn From Elihu**

We will look at Elihu's role in Job's saga a little more in our discussion of later chapters, but what can we learn from Elihu's response to the three friends?

First, crowd sourcing isn't the best route when you're searching for understanding. Just because "everyone" thinks a thing doesn't make it so. We are not to "lean on our own understanding" but so seek God for understanding. Elihu knew that he had understanding from the Almighty, and so there were parts of the friends' arguments that didn't ring true.

Job sought an answer from God, and this is the beginning of him receiving it. In this case, the beginning of the response comes from an unlikely source, Elihu whose presence, for whatever reason, doesn't even warrant a mention at the beginning of the book. He's young and not the one who was first considered to be a source of good counsel. We have to always test the spirit and the words of whatever we are hearing. Sometimes "experts" are wrong.

Second, if God has given you a message, if his spirit has stirred up within you, make sure you deliver it regardless of intimidating obstacles that may be in your way.

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<sup>9</sup> *NET Bible*, Full-notes Edition. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2019) Job 32, note a.

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