

Pathways of Interpretation: Facing God Without Flinching¹ Or The Elihu Option?

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This article surveys different methodological approaches to a full-form reading of the Book of Isaiah to see how they address disturbing elements in the character of the divine as encoded in the text. The purpose is to assess the extent to which each methodology adopts what is termed the Elihu option, defined as conforming the text to prior governing dogmatic-theological assumptions. The alternative explored is to face the God of the text without flinching, a reading strategy that brings to the fore dimensions of the text that are characteristically muted or overlooked. The article concludes with observations on how closer attention to the text frees it to be a more significant resource in contexts of pastoral challenge and sensitivity.

What Elihu Thought He Knew

Major biblical figures knew it. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Job and Jeremiah certainly did. The list is not exhaustive. In academic perspective Rudolph Otto knew it.² From a more popular viewpoint C. S. Lewis indicated that he knew something of it too when he said that Aslan was not a tame lion. What they all knew is that the character of the divine as encoded in the biblical text has dimensions, which are challenging, disturbing, robust (to say the least) and unjust

¹David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 235.

²Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* ([trans. J. W. Harvey] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 17, 26, 27, 31.

(potentially and perhaps). As David Gunn puts it, “God does have a dark side.”³

Faced with this aspect of biblical data, many interpreters adopt what may be termed “the Elihu option.” That is, they devise an interpretive strategy that ensures the divine remains immune from question or criticism irrespective of what other voices in the text might say. Elihu is confronted (indeed affronted) by Job’s claim to innocence and his conviction that were he able to summons God to court, God would not have a legal leg to stand on. In response Elihu effectively proposes, “that the Almighty and justice are inseparable and coequal.”⁴ For him, “God stands above the Law”: divine justice “can no more be separated from the Deity than can His wisdom or power.”⁵ To buttress his case Elihu constructs the composite term “Just-Mighty” for God (Job 34:17), “as if to say the power and justice of God are, in essence, one and the same. Even when God seems totally inaccessible to man and His purposes utterly obscure...Elihu takes it as axiomatic that those obscure purposes must be compatible with justice.”⁶

Among others, a major problem with this approach is that God does not subscribe to it: in Job 42:8, Job’s “friends” are condemned by God but Job is vindicated. Yet the Elihu option is strong in both popular and academic circles across the range of biblical literature.

Reading Isaiah Without Elihu

In this article I will survey methodological approaches to the biblical text—pathways of interpretation—to assess how and why they are influenced by the Elihu option. The primary focus will be a full-form reading of the book of Isaiah, particularly in literary perspective, to

³David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 131.

⁴Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 151.

⁵*Ibid.*, 152.

⁶*Ibid.*, 152.

see if it better facilitates sensitivity to the nuances of the text, especially as they speak of disturbing elements of the divine character.⁷

Approaching the Bible as literature or “serious entertainment”⁸ has the potential of generating more open readings of the text. But old habits die hard. Sometimes despite protestations to the contrary, studies still operate on the *a priori* assumption of God’s justice and righteousness.⁹ From this starting point an understanding follows that, as a whole, the book of Isaiah illustrates a “theological plot of divine goodness, human rebellion and subsequent judgment.”¹⁰ Given this governing rubric, of which Elihu would have approved, the relationship between the different sections of Isaiah is designed to explain “the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile, and the post-exilic restoration.”¹¹

Against this neat scheme, taking Isaiah as a literary-theological construct, which tackles contentious, difficult, disturbing issues, particularly as the divine may be implicated in them, is not at all to trivialize the text. Rather, it is to engage with and confront it without the easy, unthinking, overly assured and textually distorting certainties of dogmatic theology. The purpose is to probe, examine and illuminate dimensions of the biblical witness that have been toned down or functionally eliminated altogether to conform to

⁷For violent, exaggerated, possibly excessive aspects of the divine as they are depicted in Isaiah, see 24:1-3; 34:5-6; 49:26; 59:12-20; 63:1-6, to name but a few; for verses, which at face value at least suggest the divine response has been disproportionate to perceived offence, see 40:2; 47:6; 52:5; 54:7; 64:9; 65:6-7.

⁸David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), 61.

⁹Andrew Davies, *Double Standards in Isaiah: Re-evaluating Prophetic Ethics and Divine Justice* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 187.

¹⁰Peter D. Miscall, *Isaiah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 23.

¹¹Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition* (BZAW 171; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 98-99.

predetermined theological formulations.¹² This is a serious enterprise. It is to face God without flinching.

It may thus be examined whether the strictly applied scheme of human rebellion being met by a fully justified and proportionate divine response is as completely endorsed by the rhetoric of Isaiah as a whole as has often been assumed. In other words, if the prophetic appeals in the first part of Isaiah for the addressees to place their trust solely in God (12:1; 26:4; 30:15; 31:1) can, on the internal rhetoric of Isaiah as a literary-theological work, be shown to be summons to reliance on a divine literary character of some unreliability, then both the overall justness of God is rendered problematic and a reconceiving of the nature of justice, especially in terms of its origin, is made possible.¹³

The Function of Judgment and Salvation in Full-Form Isaiah

Perhaps the central function of the putative pre-exilic prophets is to announce God's word of judgment and woe upon a people irremediably given over to idolatry, covenantal complacency and social injustice. As a result of failing to turn from these sinful ways, the horror of exile occurs. At one level this effectively renders invalid the election of Israel: the "treasured possession" of Exodus 19:5 becomes the "Not my people" of Hosea 2:23. In this configuration, prophetic discourse is closely aligned to the voice and viewpoint of God. It functions to condemn and deconstruct the foundations of the Israelite world.

However, the voice of prophetic condemnation, in a full-form reading, rarely comes in isolation (e.g., the woe oracles of Isaiah 1-39 are followed by the salvation oracles of chapter 40 and

¹²John Goldingay, "Isaiah 40-55 in the 1990s: Among Other Things, Deconstructing, Mystifying, Intertextual, Socio-critical, and Hearer-Involving," *BibInt* 5, no. 3 (1997): 231, perceives that the text "leaves things open but finds that interpreters want to close them."

¹³See Mark Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

following). It is therefore possible to explore the rhetorical relationship between these types of materials to examine if the schematic pattern of judgment followed by subsequent restoration grounded in divine mercy is the only or indeed most credible interpretative option available. More significantly, it is also legitimate to interrogate the condemnatory sections of the prophetic works to see if subjecting them to a close reading, in order to assess their inner consistency and coherence in respect of the judgment they announce, sustains the judgment-mercy scheme (i.e., that God is good and reliable, and that therefore God's judgments are by definition just). Evidence to the contrary may indicate ideology at work.

Irrespective of the supposed original *Sitz im Leben* of these oracles, in the final form of the works into which they are integrated, they have undergone a process of redactional shaping. Whatever else they may be, they are part of a post-exilic retrospect and readers/listeners must be attentive to the ways in which they have been designed to explain and legitimate what had already happened.¹⁴ This is to say readers/listeners must be aware of the role of these texts in providing a sufficiently sinful rationale to justify the reality of exile. Therefore, the idea must be entertained that they are a key rhetorical component in a larger mechanism, which of necessity must try to conform history to a predetermined outcome.

But, avoiding the inherent circularity of the Elihu option, there is no reason why, as readers of the Isaianic corpus we must simply accede to this agenda of constructing in the rear-view mirror an historical context commensurate with the punishment of exile.¹⁵ The story encoded in the text may be more complex than divine justness and the appropriateness of exile as a response to obdurate human sinfulness.

¹⁴ Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition*, 24, 98-99.

¹⁵This may be related to Walter Brueggemann's concept of "Structure Legitimation"; see Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 199), 1-21.

With the shift in scholarship towards accepting the validity of synchronic-thematic interpretations of biblical works in their entirety, there is additional capacity to avoid uncritically accepting both the ideological assumptions inherent in the texts and those imported by readers. Attention to the text, deploying, for example, an element of deconstruction, ensures both sufficient critical distance from the allure of the text on its own terms, and a more independent framework for engaging with the work of other scholars in discussing how pre-existing theological convictions significantly determine what is seen in texts.¹⁶

The Insights and Limitations of Form-Criticism

No review of the prominence of the theme of divine judgment in the prophetic literature would be complete without consideration of the seminal work of Claus Westermann. He has demonstrated that the judgment oracle is the primary mode of prophetic communication.¹⁷ Through methodologically pursuing a form-critical approach, with its emphasis on establishing the boundaries and integrity of discreet sections of text, he has however avoided the issue of how theologically to understand a God whose core message is one of doom to all the people, oppressors and oppressed alike. Moreover, because it is not part of the analytical agenda of this approach to account for the overall shaping of the work, he has not addressed the

¹⁶Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Hermeneutics of I-Witness Testimony: John 21. 20-24 and the 'Death' of the 'Author'," in *Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson* (ed. A. Graeme Auld; JSOTSup 152; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 368 suggests that texts should have rights in order to protect them from "interpretative violence" at the hands of those who too aggressively wield deconstruction as a hermeneutical tool; it might be suggested that a type of violence is also visited on the text by those at the other end of the hermeneutical spectrum who effectually excise that which does not fit the required theological agenda. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), 550 evidently has little sympathy with this tendency of conferring rights on texts as if they were humans.

¹⁷See Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967).

question of the rhetorical relationships between the pre-eminence of judgment oracles and subsequent salvation oracles.

More attuned to the potential problem of a God who is relentlessly judgmental, and therefore theoretically open to the accusation of acting tyrannically in punishing everyone in a blanket fashion, Patrick Miller has attempted to show that the sentence of doom announced by the prophets is characteristically closely correlated to the sin to which, in his estimation, it is a proportionate response. He concludes that,

“The correlation of sin and punishment while effected by Yahweh is not manifest in a capricious and irrational way unconnected to the nexus of events, as if it were an ‘act of God’ in the sense that insurance companies use such a term.....There is no trivialization of the notion of judgment in the passages studied.”¹⁸

In this way, Miller defends the integrity of God from accusations of excess: the punishment always fits the crime and the justice of God is maintained.

God is ultimately the guarantor of a just order, the judge of the final court of appeal to which the oppressed and afflicted can confidently turn for redress when the corrupt or inadequate systems of this world fail them.¹⁹ This theme re-emerges in an article in which Miller argues that in the world of the Psalms, “lament is not the last word.” Doxology is, for, “The one who praises and gives thanks calls for all to praise and give thanks because of what God has done.”²⁰ The problem of pain and any possible prolonged scrutiny of the character of God are quickly and coercively subsumed into the choir singing of divine goodness and justice, thereby creating the impression that any

¹⁸Patrick D. Miller, *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982), 138.

¹⁹Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 109-110.

²⁰Patrick D. Miller, “The End of the Psalter: A Response to Erich Zenger,” *JSOT* 80 (1998): 108.

reluctance to participate in this doxological outpouring indicates a defective human understanding of the way things really are.²¹

Concluding his article, Miller applies this pattern to a section of Isaiah, observing that in Isaiah 12 “we encounter a similar kind of ending to a book within a book that we seem to have in Psalm 145.”²² In both cases judgment gives way to the proclamation of divine rule through human agency and the promise of salvation through a new exodus. In response the people are now called to sing songs of praises. “Like the movement of the song of thanksgiving, like the movement in Psalm 145, and like the movement in Psalms 145-50, the individual who praises evokes the praise of the many.”²³

The question is whether the rhetoric of Isaiah, in part or as a whole, supports such a tidy pattern.²⁴ Further, a related question is whether the evocation of a chorus of praise is as credible as Miller believes: to call for praise is not necessarily to receive it. Indeed, it can be argued that to assume that the call will or should be answered in the affirmative is to be seduced by the rhetoric of the text. More

²¹This analysis does not adequately take into account, for example, Brueggemann’s critique of the end of the Psalter (*Israel’s Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988]), in which he observes that the summons to praise in Psalms 145-150 is characteristically not accompanied by a reason or motivation to praise. On the strength of this, he speculates that these psalms represent an ideological attempt by the Jerusalem elite to induce praise without generating the energy to struggle for justice. In this way, they create acceptance of an unjust status quo, which is claimed to be divinely ordained. Note however, that even in this more shrewd thinking, the justice of God is not impugned. Rather, God (reputedly the liberationist God of the Exodus), is co-opted to serve the agenda of a scheming ruling elite who, manipulate the ancient tradition of a God who wills freedom and justice; again God is functionally absolved from wrongdoing.

²²Miller, “The End of the Psalter,” 110.

²³*Ibid.*, 110.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 110; in this quotation, Miller himself acknowledges that Isaiah 1-12 is made up of disparate materials, an observation that in itself begins to undermine all efforts at ordering it according to one interpretative plan.

precisely, this instance, with its underlying theological assumptions, gives hermeneutical primacy to one ideological strand in the interplay of ideas within the dramatic context of the work as a whole.

In *Seek the Lord!* A. Vanlier Hunter presents a bleak picture of the nature of Israelite society when confronted by prophetic calls to mend its sinful ways. For him, the proclamation of judgment is not so much intended as a warning of what will happen if heed is not taken of the prophetic message, but a way of announcing the inevitability of divine retribution. As he puts it, "The prophets have not come at the eleventh hour when a chance, however slight, to change the future still existed, but at the twelfth hour when the judgment, already a foregone conclusion, is beginning to break in."²⁵ According to him, the pre-exilic prophets are thus not social critics but odd divine spokespersons entrusted with words of unremitting doom. Their pessimism is absolute and unrelieved. When he concludes that, "Perhaps we have not perceived the full and terrible impact of classical judgment prophecy until we realize that a subtle part of the judgment lay in the temporary inefficacy of the repentance to which the people were nevertheless called,"²⁶ he effectually aligns himself with the school of thought which accepts Israel as unregenerate at this point. However, he does not sufficiently question how people can be justifiably subject to God's anger when it seems the text itself supports the contention that they are of themselves incapable of altering the behaviour that gave rise to it.

²⁵A. Vanlier Hunter, *Seek the Lord! A Study of the Meaning and Function of the Exhortations in Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah and Zephaniah* (Baltimore: St. Mary's Seminary and University, 1982), 278; see also 176-190, 273-280.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 280. Hunter reaches his conclusion by careful form-critical work. Deploying a close reading strategy Gray (*Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah*, 32-35) raises a similar issue concerning Isa. 1:16-17, when the possibility is introduced that the prophet is calling for a level of reform that cannot be effected and that, moreover, is beyond the prophet himself without divine assistance; questions are thus raised about the integrity not only of the prophet, but also of the God who commissioned and sent him.

Extending Guilt: The Canonical Coup

Canonical approaches, which have attempted to discern coherence in the final form of prophetic works, also reveal a significant acceptance of the storyline that speaks of Israel's sin and God's justifiable punishment. Brevard Childs, arguing for "a complex process of editing"²⁷ indicative of a "skilful intertwining of traditions"²⁸ that highlights the ultimate victory of promise over judgment,²⁹ offers a summary of his understanding of the message of Isaiah as a whole when he writes that,

"Israel has rebelled against God and become totally estranged. The divine judgment has fallen and the country lies in desolation. Israel tries to appease Yahweh by false worship, but God seeks to woo his people back to himself. He promises that salvation will come and Zion will one day be called a faithful city."³⁰

From the perspective of this article, the importance of this thought is not so much that it adheres to the formula of Israel rightly incurring the just punishment of God for sin, but that it extends the theological presuppositions on which it rests throughout the book of Isaiah.

Thus, regarding the view that "has been frequently aired by commentators that Second Isaiah's promise to the exiles was a noble concept, but was actually frustrated because the return of the exiles did not usher in the expected paradise,"³¹ Childs proposes that "The discrepancy between what happened after the exile and the prophet's eschatological description of God's will is not a criticism of the truth

²⁷Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979), 330.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 331.

²⁹Ronald Clements substantially agrees with this assessment that the final form of prophetic works has been redacted around the twin themes of judgment and promise; see "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah," *Int.* 36 (1982), 117-129 and "The Prophecies of Isaiah and the Fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.," *VT* 30 (1980) 421-436.

³⁰Childs, *Introduction*, 331.

³¹*Ibid.*, 327.

of the promise, but rather an indication of how little the exilic community partook of the promised reality.”³²

Following in the footsteps of Elihu, the honour and trustworthy nature of God are resolutely defended: as the blame for the exile is laid squarely at the feet of the people, so now the blame for the failure of the glorious future envisioned in Isaiah 40-55 to materialize is also laid at their feet. The culture of theological blame, devised to confer absolution on God, becomes operative in all dimensions of the Isaiah corpus, without Childs ever wondering why a people would be so recalcitrant as not to partake of promises so idyllic. If this interpretation is indeed reflective of the narrative of the book, then the issue is raised as to the extent which Isaiah the book is a totalizing text, which finally seeks to coerce rather than persuade its audience into accepting its vision and viewpoint.³³

Although Childs acknowledges that large portions of Isaiah are made up of poetry, rather than exploring and pondering the subtle, polyvalent nature of that poetry for its possible meanings, he is keen to move on to what he perceives as the unambiguous theological hard-core, “which bears testimony to God’s reality and his coming rule.”³⁴ Apparently, Childs cannot begin to contemplate a more subversive and questioning aspect of the text, one that can be located within the rhetoric of the text itself, and which is in tension with the text’s more overt and pronounced totalizing tendencies.³⁵

³²Ibid., 327.

³³As Goldingay, “Isaiah 40-55 in the 1990s,” 237 puts it, “Isaiah 40-55 shouts very loud, and we have laid down and surrendered”; amplifying this, he argues that the reason “why Isaiah 40-55 shouts so loud, why it seeks so hard to manipulate its hearers into compliance” is related to “questions about power. Consciously or unconsciously, texts are written to serve interests of their authors and their communities.”

³⁴Childs, *Introduction*, 327.

³⁵See Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah*, 202-206

Credulous Reading: A Literary Approach

Contemporary literary methodologies in several instances also conform to this act/consequence pattern, which postulates the sin of Israel (act), followed by the righteous punishment of God (consequence). The attendant theological worldview, grounded in the immutable goodness of God, is also therefore accepted. Katherine Pfisterer Darr speaks of “the destruction merited by Israel”³⁶ and the “just punishment of God’s people.”³⁷ One of the results of this interpretation is that everybody in Israel must be conceived of as culpable and therefore deserving of divine retribution. So Pfisterer Darr, of a necessity dictated by prior theological commitments, labels “Israel—*all of it*—a rebel from birth”³⁸ and chillingly delivers the opinion that “God’s children—and especially their leaders—deserve to die.”³⁹

Note, however, should be taken of that “especially their leaders,” for it introduces an element of differentiation into the common sinful mass and identifies the ruling elite as more deserving of blame than other sectors of society. From the perspective of social justice, this implicit acknowledgement that the broad tar brush approach in attributing universal guilt might not be the most accurate or sensitive analytical tool does not adequately address the question of why oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited, in the end both seemingly warrant equal punishment. It is important to be attentive to who exactly is threatened with what punishment to see if pronouncements of universal condemnation are rhetorically convincing and secure, particularly in light of Isaiah’s widely recognized concern with justice.⁴⁰

³⁶Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *Isaiah’s Vision and the Family of God* (LCBI; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 62.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 164.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 68 (italics in original).

³⁹*Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁰See Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah*, 118-178

Parallel to this divided consciousness, which seems uncertain of whether to apportion blame to all or to the rulers, Pfisterer Darr at one stage imagines Israel as a whole as an embodiment of the rebellious son of the book of Deuteronomy. She concludes that "If, as Deut 21:21 states, the disobedient son's offences justify capital punishment, then Israel is no less deserving of death."⁴¹ Yet later, clearly still with the rebellious son of Deuteronomy in mind, she also says "Jerusalem's intemperate, oppressive rulers are spoiled, headstrong children who stand sorely in need of harsh discipline."⁴² To pick the former of these options and follow the majority opinion in regarding all of Israel as deserving of punishment (though perhaps accepting that the rich deserve it more than the poor), is fundamentally to maintain the justice of God; to seriously struggle with how, in a situation of injustice, everybody is to be equally condemned, is to entertain doubt about the justice of God and to wonder, in a variation of Psalm 94:20 if God is allied with corruption, bringing misery by God's decrees.⁴³

Like Elihu, many interpreters too readily take the side of God against humanity. But perhaps, in terms of the familial metaphor used by Isaiah, if Yahweh can be shown to be not only a husband, but an abusive husband, then the negative perception of Israel's rebellion

⁴¹Pfisterer Darr, *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God*, 69. Note, however, that whereas in Deuteronomy independent arbitration, in the form of the village elders, is given on the father/son dispute, in Isaiah, if Pfisterer Darr's analogy is accepted, God-the-father-figure effectually becomes judge and jury in his dispute with his son Israel. There is no independent arbitration and this gives rise to justifiable suspicion, especially in relation to the issue of the justice of God.

⁴²Ibid., 83.

⁴³During the Korean War, U. S. troops massacred all the Korean peasants in a designated area in order to be certain of eliminating (punishing?) possible communist agents, whom they regarded as an enemy worthy of death: as the justice of the U. S. service personnel, and the regime of which they were a part, must be called into question, so too must the justice of God, if a comparable pattern is evident in the thought world of Isaiah.

calls for re-evaluation: Pfisterer Darr's family of God may be more theologically dysfunctional than she cares to admit.

The Language of Divine Violence: Contemporary Insights

In a departure from the theological mechanisms deployed to ensure that God's justice is ultimately never impugned, Gracia Fay Bouwman Ellwood breaks new ground by examining the biblical text to see if the language it uses reflects a dispassionate account of crime committed and proportionate punishment duly delivered. Following the established pattern of observing Israel's sin being met by divine response, she notes that,

"The prophets and historians describe a prolonged period.....of a build up of tension due to Israel's affairs with Baal.....and alliances with foreign governments. They show Yahweh finally lashing out at his unfaithful wife.....in the attacks of Assyria and Babylon, and the captivities that followed."⁴⁴

The original contribution in this, of which the use of the phrase "lashing out" forms a part, is that she is prepared to follow the contours of the biblical language, without too quickly moving to sanitize or rationalize it in order to justify God. As a result she is open to pondering the implications of the darker side of the divine as encoded in the text.

Pursuing this line of inquiry, she perceives that "the Sacred Marriage" metaphor, according to the biblical rhetoric itself, is imbued with "the quality of overkill.....Sadistic tortures are employed" and "Murder is threatened."⁴⁵ Attention to text rather than conformity of text to theological presuppositions, as in the framework devised by Elihu, raises the possibility of acknowledging disturbing traits within the divine character which do not sit easily with the concept of God's justice. Using insights gained from recent

⁴⁴Gracia Fay Bouwman Ellwood, *Batter My Heart*, (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1988), 6-7.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 9.

research into different types of violent marriages, Ellwood draws parallels to the biblical depiction of God. She concludes that “Yahweh.....is a destructive, pathologically disturbed individual.”⁴⁶ She acknowledges that “Some may hesitate to accept” this assessment because, in portraying Israel as “an innocent victim.....it seems to do away with the reality of human guilt.”⁴⁷ Whatever the merits of this, the converse point has to be put, that even if Israel is partially—or indeed totally guilty—this does not justify or satisfactorily account for punishment that is cruel and excessive: Israel’s guilt or innocence does not absolve God of abuse.

Ellwood identifies, in a way germane to the exploration of social justice in Isaiah, how the biblical rhetoric, taken seriously on its own terms, gives rise to unease when she argues,

“In so far as the prophetic critique denounces Israel for social exploitation and abuse, we have a somewhat different matter. Few would wish to deny that the abuse of the poor in the days of the prophets.....was a great evil, that it incurred guilt, and that outrage was an appropriate reaction to it. What is unacceptable and abhorrent is imaging these social evils as the acts of the rebellious child or insubordinate wife justly incurring the violence of the husband and father in the attacks of Assyria and Babylon. Considering that the chief oppressors were in fact husbands/fathers, the prophets have turned the natural image upside down when they metaphorically blame the two oppressed classes.”⁴⁸

Further confirming that it is appropriate to question whether an all-encompassing collective punishment is just or not, she notes, “It is obvious that the violent attacks of Assyria and Babylon fell upon Baal-worshipper and loyal Yahwist alike. On the level of metaphor, Yahweh’s jealous rage blinded him so totally that he could not distinguish guilt from innocence.”⁴⁹ Essentially Ellwood here

⁴⁶Ibid., 18.

⁴⁷Ibid., 18.

⁴⁸Ibid., 18.

⁴⁹Ibid., 11.

underscores that, “The violence of Assyria and Babylon, though striking with particular venom at the powerful, also destroyed many defenseless and innocent [people].”⁵⁰

If it is found convincing, to put the matter judiciously, that the presentation of the character of God in certain sections of the prophets is problematic and may indicate hitherto ignored evidence of abuse, then as Ellwood contends, “we cannot take the batterer simply at his own self-evaluation.”⁵¹ This is to say, that it is necessary to resist being mesmerized by the biblical rhetoric like rabbits captivated by the headlights of an oncoming car. The rhetoric must be examined closely both to clarify precisely what it is saying and to see if some of the biblical writers are in fact more open to radical ideas than some scholars are capable of being, with their Elihu mindset. In this instance, the issue is not immediately jumping to the defense of the notion of the justice of God, but evaluating whether a biblical writer can plausibly deploy the language of abuse and still credibly present God as ultimately acting in a just and appropriate manner.

Renita Weems acknowledges the importance of Ellwood in the development of her thinking,⁵² before building on the insights of *Batter My Heart*.⁵³ Firstly, she offers a reason for the prophetic utilization of sexually graphic imagery, arguing that it was a rhetorical device to capture the attention of a predominantly male

⁵⁰Ibid., 19.

⁵¹Ibid., 15.

⁵²Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and, Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (OBT. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), xiii.

⁵³In addition to the work of Ellwood, for studies devoted to problematic texts, see also: PhyllisTrible, *Texts of Terror* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987); idem., *Murder and Difference* ([trans. M. Gumpert] Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988); more generally, see Carol Newsome and Sharon Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1992), esp. Kathleen O'Connor, “Jeremiah,” 169-177 and T. Frymer-Kensky, “Deuteronomy,” 55, for her analysis of *'innah*, the Hebrew word for abuse.

audience.⁵⁴ She suggests that, “The portrait of the sexually loose woman struck at the heart of two of the most cherished and sentimentalized institutions in Hebrew patriarchal culture: marriage and family.”⁵⁵ The intention of the rhetoric, given the analogy between God as the husband and Israel as the wayward wife, was to get men to imaginatively place themselves in a context where they clearly understood who was in the wrong. In this way the rhetoric becomes a vehicle “for evaluating the public activities of men in the cult and palace.”⁵⁶ If, as expected, their outlook on life led them to condemn the wanton and support her husband’s punishment of her, they were effectually condemning themselves in terms of the metaphor constructed by the prophetic discourse. The purpose of the disturbing imagery was to arrest a male audience,⁵⁷ thereby getting it to view its behaviour in a shockingly novel way in order consequently to amend it.

It may be argued, however, that faced with imagery too explicit or too filled with invective, either at the level of metaphor or, in the case of Isaiah 5, directed towards actual women, men might well have rejected the prophetic rhetoric, especially if, in the case of actual female referents, they felt that it was directed against *their* wives; so much for getting a hearing. Furthermore, the thrust of this overall explanation diminishes the offensive nature of the language used by saying that it is really only a way of talking about something else.

Secondly, in relation to rhetorical methodology, Weems helpfully suggests that in communication one should be willing to suspend “one’s own opinions until one has had the opportunity to hear a speaker out,” a process that involves being “willing to share the value systems the prophets operate within.”⁵⁸ Allied with her interest

⁵⁴Weems, *Battered Love*, 3.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 35.

in rhetoric,⁵⁹ this results in evaluation of prophetic works being based on close attention to what is said. Given however that as “we have neither within the Old Testament nor external to the Old Testament any explicit information about the assumptions that underlie Hebrew rhetoric” and that therefore “we are forced to rely on the literature of the Old Testament to help illuminate principles behind Hebrew rhetoric,”⁶⁰ the text must be read carefully, without necessarily acceding to its ideology. As Weems notes, “One may in the end roundly reject the prophets’ argument...but to do that one must first hear the argument out.”⁶¹

Thus Weems develops a reading strategy that is both open to the text and critical of it. Deploying this strategy, she recognises that one of the intentions of the prophetic discourse, through using marital imagery to demonstrate that there was “legitimate cause for outrage and retaliation” on the part of the divine husband, is to rationalise “the just nature of God’s punishment of Israel.”⁶² Pursuing this thought, she reasons that “God...is not a harsh, cruel, vindictive husband who threatens and beats his wife simply because he has the power to do so. He is himself a victim, because he has been driven to extreme measures by a wife who has again and again dishonoured him.”⁶³ On an equally understanding note, she later adds that, “God in the end is as much a victim as Israel is...when Israel is punished God suffers as much as Israel suffers.”⁶⁴ Since, though, God was responsible for the punishment of Israel through controlling the geo-political forces that led to exile, this sounds as unconvincing as the “This is going to hurt me as much as it is going to hurt you” line.

This more skeptical perspective is present in Weems’ study, especially as she struggles with how God’s harsh punishment of Israel impacts an understanding of God’s character. Perhaps

⁵⁹Ibid., see e.g., 6, 15, 66, 85.

⁶⁰Ibid., 37.

⁶¹Ibid., 35.

⁶²Ibid., 13.

⁶³Ibid., 19.

⁶⁴Ibid., 77.

reflective of the difficulty of the subject, she contends, “Although [the prophets] went to great lengths to insist that Israel’s punishment corresponded to Israel’s actions, they did not deny the fact that sometimes the punishment was exceedingly cruel.”⁶⁵ The inclusion of that “exceedingly” strictly speaking indicates that in certain instances Israel’s punishment did not in fact exactly correspond to Israel’s actions, but exceeded what was merited. In a similarly dissimulating way, she observes that, “Without the analogy of marital love, the interpreters of Israel’s theological traditions were hard pressed to explain what sometimes must have *felt like* the unpredictably abusing side of God.”⁶⁶

Occasionally though, Weems breaks free of semantic incongruity and recourse to the language of appearance to come clean “that Israel’s history had shown repeatedly that God was as capable of being abusive as God was of being compassionate,”⁶⁷ and that “the punishment meted out to Israel sometimes exceeded the crime.”⁶⁸ Strangely, however, given this potentially cathartic moment of truth telling, we are immediately asked to believe that “God’s abuse and unpredictability were not to be construed as defects in God’s character.”⁶⁹

Positive despite her doubts, Weems asserts that, “however one might take exception to the image of God as abusive and destructive, one must commend Israel for its courage to grapple with the dark side of human history, the dark side of God, and the dark side of intimacy.”⁷⁰ Perhaps so, but it is also legitimate to wonder how slipping back into blaming Israel for its fate, as happens when Weems argues that “Israel was destroyed not simply because God was unpredictable, but chiefly because Israel had transgressed God’s

⁶⁵Ibid., 74.

⁶⁶Ibid., 71 (emphasis added).

⁶⁷Ibid., 72.

⁶⁸Ibid., 78.

⁶⁹Ibid., 78.

⁷⁰Ibid., 82.

covenant...God was unpredictable, but Israel was stubborn”⁷¹ furthers “the unfinished agenda of liberation scholarship”⁷² mentioned at the outset of her work.

No matter, however, what reservations one might have about how Weems resolves disturbing aspects of God’s character, it needs to be stressed that she validates the requirement to struggle with the entirety of the divine characterization, inclusive of abusive and violent dimensions, as encoded in prophetic rhetoric. The Elihu bolthole of assured governing theological formulations that do a disservice to the text will not suffice.

Facing the God of the Text

The work of David Blumenthal is important for how it approaches the characterization of God. Of particular relevance is his combination of the concept of divine personality made accessible through the biblical text with an acute sensitivity to textually mediated indications that God at times might be other than “fair.”⁷³ Against the Jewish medieval notion that God is so absolutely different from anything humanly conceivable that nothing can essentially be said of the divine character, Blumenthal argues that God has certain attributes made available to humanity through “the evidence of Scripture and tradition,” and also as “the result of logic.”⁷⁴ Thus, God has a “personality” which “is portrayed by the tradition in its texts.”⁷⁵ As he observes,

“God, as understood by the personalist stream of the tradition and experience, is personal. So God too must have a character,

⁷¹Ibid., 82.

⁷²Ibid., 8.

⁷³Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, 15; this is the term he favours rather than “just,” which he considers too strong. As he notes, “God must act fairly, appropriately punishing the wicked....and appropriately rewarding the faithful”; for him, problems arise when the divine departs from this sense of fairness.

⁷⁴Ibid., 246.

⁷⁵Ibid., 13.

sensitivities, an individual history, and a moral capacity. These together identify God as a distinct person. The purpose of theology is to get to know this holy person, God.”⁷⁶

A way to do this is through a close examination of the texts in which the personality of God is encoded.⁷⁷ Consequently, Blumenthal endorses the methodological approach to theology which grounds reflection on the divine nature in paying close attention to the God rendered in the pluravocacy of the biblical word.

Faithful and relentless adherence to this methodology leads Blumenthal to confront the totality of the biblical divine character “without flinching” and without deploying the kind of Elihu defense mechanisms characteristically used when accusations of wrongdoing are made against God. He rejects all attempts to sanitize or explain away problematic aspects of the divine personality on the basis of prior theological convictions,⁷⁸ importantly arguing that, “We cannot understand God (or ourselves) if we censor out what we do not like, or what we would like not to see. The texts on God’s abusiveness are there. To censor them out because they are not ‘ethical’ is to limit our understanding of the complexity of human and divine existence.”⁷⁹

Emphasizing that this approach is not a faddish denigration of God in order to reject the divine (something Blumenthal opposes),⁸⁰ but a necessary constituent part of an authentic search for healing and justice in the world, rooted in speaking the truth about God, he makes the appeal that “We must break the conspiracy of silence [about God] and tell the truth,”⁸¹ even though sometimes that truth “is awesome; sometimes it is awful. But we owe it to one another, to

⁷⁶Ibid., 11.

⁷⁷Ibid., 14-20 on the “Six Personalist Attributes of God.”

⁷⁸Ibid., 243.

⁷⁹Ibid., 245.

⁸⁰Ibid., 238 states “I accept also the rule that one cannot reject God”; see also 262.

⁸¹Ibid., 249.

the tradition, and to God to speak the truth and to let the truth stand, unmitigated by our anxiety and our dreams—even if the truth is heretical by community standards.”⁸² In keeping with the concerns of this article, primacy is given to the biblical text for what has usually been marginalized within it or excluded from interpretation of it, rather than to the strata of theological overlay by which it has been interpreted.

Blumenthal concludes “that Scripture does indeed portray God as an abusing person; that God, as agent in our sacred texts, does indeed act abusively; that God, as described in the Bible, acts like an abusing male: husband, father, and lord.”⁸³ Softening the starkness of this position he adds,

*“God is abusive, but not always. God, as portrayed in our holy sources and as experienced by humans throughout the ages, acts, from time to time, in a manner that is so unjust that it can only be characterized by the term ‘abusive.’ In this mode, God allows the innocent to suffer.”*⁸⁴

In consequence, the biblically based potential for God to indulge in excessive violence (of which the punishment of exile may be an example) necessitates a re-examination and re-evaluation of the sources and nature of justice in the Isaianic corpus. New lines of thinking about the concept of justice are thus opened and endorsed, especially if it can be illustrated that the final redactors of Isaiah understood that one of their tasks was to try to account for the actions of a God whose behaviour, in certain quarters, was believed to have been excessive.⁸⁵ The subversion of the theological model that attributes all justice to God and all guilt to Israel, and which, further, understands God’s punishment of Israel as proportionate and appropriate, encourages readings which are more sensitive to the drama of the text.

⁸²Ibid., 237.

⁸³Ibid., 242.

⁸⁴Ibid., 247 (italics in original).

⁸⁵See Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah*, 235-265

Related to this, mention ought to be made of the study of Isaiah 34-35 by Peter Miscall⁸⁶ for the way it questions old assumptions and encourages approaching the Isaianic corpus more attentively attuned to what the text actually says rather than to what prior theological commitments lead us to suppose it says.⁸⁷ Building on the work of scholars who have started to read the Bible as an example of fantastic literature,⁸⁸ he argues that his approach represents “a deliberate turn from the religious and theological dichotomies of righteousness and sin and the salvation and judgment to which they lead.”⁸⁹ Effectually he thus eschews initially understanding the text in theological categories and instead opts for a reading strategy that stresses the polyvalent and allusive⁹⁰ as a way of bringing out dimensions normally suppressed or overlooked. In this way, never making claims beyond what the text itself permits, he demonstrates that scholarship which views Isaiah 34-35 “as an example of a general prophetic pattern of judgment on the nations and salvation for Israel”⁹¹ is too schematic, too theological and too restrictive.

After subjecting the text to a close reading, however, Miscall does raise some pertinent theological questions, particularly with regard to the justice of God. Noting how commentators are keen to find justification for divine rage,⁹² providing the usual theological motivations to absolve God from charges of wrongdoing even when the text does not mention them,⁹³ he contests that none is given and

⁸⁶Peter D. Miscall, *Isaiah 34-35: A Nightmare/A Dream* (JSOTSup 281; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 39 indicates that too often, on the basis of theological presuppositions, we “assume that we already know what the text is saying.”

⁸⁸See George Aichele and Tina Pippin, eds., *The Monstrous and the Unspeakable: The Bible as Fantastic Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

⁸⁹Peter D. Miscall, “Isaiah: Dreams and Nightmares, Fantasy and Horror,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 8 (1997): 151-169

⁹⁰Miscall, *Isaiah 34-35*, 24, 62-63, 69, 120.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 17.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 65, 67.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 68.

concludes that if one of the purposes of the Isaiah scroll is to elicit allegiance to God on the part of hearers (of whatever time or place), then this “is not a simple affirmation,”⁹⁴ for the God encoded in the text is untamed and decidedly problematic. As he asks, “If YHWH can step outside justice to choose a people as his own, does he also move beyond justice at the other extreme to destroy innocent people in unbridled wrath?”⁹⁵ Pressing home the point, he further asks, “If YHWH can be merciful and compassionate without moral motivation, can’t he also be brutal and wrathful without moral motivation? (I note that Job would answer this with a resounding Yes!)”⁹⁶

Miscall avowedly interprets to “unsettle our reading of the manifest text.”⁹⁷ In this he is successful. He further highlights the need to approach the text with sharp eyes and a minimum of doctrinal overlay in order to be appreciative of its inherent disturbing subtlety. In particular, he demonstrates that if cherished theological certitudes derived from old paradigms of interpretation (such as that of sin and punishment grounded in the idea of the immutable justice of God) are dispensed with because they do not in fact find the support in the text that was once supposed, then the whole issue of the Isaianic presentation of justice needs to be rethought.

Meshing a close reading strategy with an interest in the character of God, Walter Brueggemann argues that the data we have as a resource for reflection on the nature of the divine is the biblical text in which God is exclusively located. Placing his work in the contemporary academic context, he notes that “Our postmodern situation, which refuses to acknowledge a settled essence behind our pluralistic claims, must make a major and intentional investment in the practice of rhetoric, for the shape of reality finally depends on the power of

⁹⁴Ibid., 99.

⁹⁵Ibid., 64.

⁹⁶Ibid., 67.

⁹⁷Ibid., 122.

speech.”⁹⁸ Applying this type of thinking specifically to Old Testament theology, he contends that “speech constitutes reality, and who God turns out to be in Israel depends on the utterance of the Israelites or, derivatively, the utterance of the text.”⁹⁹ Nailing his colours firmly to the rhetorical mast, he says “*I shall insist, as consistently as I can, that the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text and in no other way.*”¹⁰⁰ For Brueggemann, as regards “Old Testament faith, *the utterance is everything,*”¹⁰¹ and consequently “Yahweh Fully Uttered” in essence represents “a presentation of the character of Yahweh”¹⁰² which in all its complexity and difficulty has to be dealt with. Notwithstanding reservations about Brueggemann’s approach,¹⁰³ it makes a significant contribution towards endorsing

⁹⁸Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 71.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 66 (italics in original).

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 122 (italics in original); note how Norman Gottwald, “Rhetorical, Historical, and Ontological Counterpoints in Doing Old Testament Theology,” in Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, eds., *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 16 challenges the absoluteness of this position by observing that Brueggemann himself accepts the historicity of the exile (however this is understood) as the shaping reality for some of Israel’s most intense and daring theological formulations. Gottwald further observes, in respect of the connection between rhetoric and ontology that he “would venture to say that the only time we are willing to risk is when rhetoric is felt to correspond to or reverberate with a history that we are helping to make and an ontology that gives us a sense of what is most assuredly and reliably real” (21).

¹⁰²Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 267.

¹⁰³James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), 547 identifies a downside to adopting a rhetorical approach. He suggests that “Brueggemann seems blind” to the fact “that rhetoric is *despised*” [italics in original] because “very suddenly there comes a moment when one says ‘It’s only rhetoric’. There is nothing behind it.” It may be suggested that while this represents a certain popular understanding of rhetoric, it fails to fully appreciate the linguistic and philosophical basis for the rhetorical approach. Furthermore, in an

and legitimating careful study of the divine rendered in the world created by the text. This is the primary source of theological articulation, comprised of both constructive and critical dimensions, which is to say, aspects that support the idea of God's justice and aspects that questioningly subvert it.

Human Sin: The Central Paradigm of Western Theology

As the history of biblical interpretation has unfolded, it may be argued that Elihu has increasingly found himself in august and elevated theological company. Indeed, the fundamental underpinning elements of his system—that God is always just and people always get what they deserve—have been endorsed by and incorporated into the work of hugely influential thinkers.

In a profound way, that the narrative of God's righteousness (*iustitia Dei*, in Martin Luther's phrase) and human sinfulness, fully warranting punishment, should, in variant form(s), play a significant role in a swathe of Old Testament interpretation, is not surprising. It is one that has dominated Western theology since the time of Augustine,¹⁰⁴ with his concept of humanity's "total depravity."

Echoing the importance of just divine punishment, Luther understands the event of the cross as "God fighting with God" (*Gott mit Gott*),¹⁰⁵ by which he means that within God's very being, the God of love is struggling with the God of wrath, who would be perfectly justified sentencing sinners to death. In the modern era, Karl Barth has asserted how God and humanity are fundamentally

important sense, this attitude prejudices the issue of whether the rhetoric is artistically convincing or not, as determined by methodologically critical standards.

¹⁰⁴As Jacques Pohier, *God in Fragments* ([trans. John Bowden] London: SCM, 1985), 224 observes, "St Augustine was what one might dare to call a master where sin was concerned," bequeathing to us "a theology of sin which was to weigh heavily....on all the later development of Western Christianity."

¹⁰⁵Martin Luther, *Samtliche Werke* (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883), 45: 370.

opposed on account of human sinfulness.¹⁰⁶ He has also insisted that Israel's history is best described as one of disobedience and rebellion against God's covenant.¹⁰⁷ This is not to argue that biblical interpreters have deliberately conformed their thought to this schema (though, undoubtedly some have). It is rather to suggest that a sophisticated version of the Elihu option has been such an important paradigm in Western theology that its validity, function and relevance have been virtually unquestioned. It significantly defines the worldview of biblical theology and has thus exercised a pervasive and extensive influence.

Recent scholarship, however, has begun to erode this Augustinian consensus.¹⁰⁸ Fredrik Lindström argues that the idea of human sinfulness is inadequate as an explanation for all human suffering because in a significant number of cases in the Psalms of complaint, human innocence is assumed.¹⁰⁹ Thus it will not do to attribute every evil in the world ultimately to "original sin." More broadly, Kendall Soulen discusses the way in which the standard doctrinal formula of God rescuing an endlessly sinful human race (culminating in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the exemplary model of this pattern of thought), insufficiently deals with all the biblical data.¹¹⁰ He proposes that the proper horizon of biblical theology is not the story of salvation (often narrowed even further to the story of personal salvation), but consummation, in the creation of shalom and social justice.

¹⁰⁶Karl Barth, *Theology and Church* (London: SCM, 1962), 190 and passim.

¹⁰⁷Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), II/2, 195 and passim.

¹⁰⁸Pohier, *God in Fragments*, 24 terms it "the Augustinian variant of Christianity."

¹⁰⁹See Fredrik Lindström, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1994).

¹¹⁰See Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

Conclusion: Beyond the Elihu Option

This article is dedicated to Professor Stanley McIvor. In his professional life he was a scholar of the biblical text and it is therefore appropriate that I explore pathways of interpretation in academic perspective. As a teacher in a denominational institution—Union Theological College of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland—implicitly or explicitly he also prepared students for the ordained ministry to encounter often-difficult pastoral situations in the light of scripture.

Beyond purely academic propositions and considerations, the books of Job and Isaiah arise from pastoral contexts. “Comfort, comfort my people” says the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:1). Job suffers because of a wager in the Divine Council and with limited knowledge his visitors try to explain why according to their theological lights. Ministers follow in this pastoral tradition. They are perhaps more likely to start out thinking they have the answer to every problem contained in their doctrinal formulations. But lived experience invariably throws up examples of hurt that do not conform to orderly theological schemes and leave questions to ponder, sometimes forever.

How do you help a mother who has buried her third son in three years make theological sense of what has happened? The first has died as a consequence of an insatiable appetite for food and drink, and the second from a wasting motorneurone disease. The third hangs himself.

What do you say to a person of Christian faith who says they find it difficult to trust God on account of the pit they are in as a result of depression and anxiety? A minister has told her she needs to get rid of an evil spirit in her.

A young woman suffers from chronic arthritis. Her minister tells her during a pastoral visit that her suffering comes from sin. Her brother hears this theological diagnosis only years later. Had he learnt it at the time he says he would have hit the minister.

A minister is off with stress. He is advised by a Christian counseling service to get help, but to get it from a secular counseling agency. It will not make the link between sin and his situation. This is wise, but surely we have the resources in the Bible and within the community of faith to bring such matters to resolution, with sensitivity and without recourse to a crude Elihu approach.

It is no coincidence Elihu has the confidence of youth (Job 32:6). But what he thought he knew is inadequate. Whatever the pitfalls, problems and theological challenges of alternatives, we must, to take our own primary texts seriously, face the God of the text without flinching.

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