

Angel's voice heard and ransom found? Exegetical study on Job 33:23–24

Anioł przemówił i znalazł okup? Studium egzegetyczne Hi 33, 23–24

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Słowa kluczowe: Księga Hioba; *melitz*; wstawiennictwo; mowy Elihu; anioł śmierci.

Abstract. The meaning of Job 33:23–24 has never been unanimously explained. Since the antiquity commentators have struggled with its interpretation. The identity of *mal'āk mēliš* and his actual task (23), as well as the meaning of *kōper* (ransom) and the actual subject of the second verse (24) are the most crucial problems that one must face when interpreting the two verses. The current paper is a first offers a survey of the most prominent solutions to the enigma of the concerned passage. Then the author goes on examining the text in order find answers to the four crucial issues mentioned above.

Streszczenie. Artykuł dotyczy interpretacji enigmatycznego tekstu Hi 33,23–24, w którym m.in. występuje postać „*melitz*”. Tożsamość tej postaci nie doczekała się jednoznacznej interpretacji. Na ogół uważa się go za anioła wstawiennika. Autor przedstawia zarys historii dociekań odnośnie do interpretacji Hi 33,23–24, a zwłaszcza do postaci *melitz*. Następnie proponuje swoją lekturę tego fragmentu z uwzględnieniem całej złożoności różnych przenikających się w nim wątków.

The topic of intercession in the Book Job has always fascinated me. I dedicated my doctoral dissertation to the intercession of the main protagonist's arguing for its crucial importance for the understanding of the Book.¹ Quite recently I returned to the issue of intercession as pictured in the first Eliphaz's speech (5:1).² A number of scholars recognized in the verse an echo of angelic intercession. I hope to have proved that there is enough data to claim

¹ *The Dynamics of Job's Intercession* (AnBib 161; Rome 2006).

² „Courtroom imagery – the neglected background of Job 5:1”, M. Gilbert Festschrift.

that Eliphaz is alluding here to courtroom procedures but as for the setting he takes for granted the divine council operating as a law court. The Temanite brilliantly explores there any possible scenario for the heavenly intercession Job might count on simply to dismiss it a minute later as foolish and irrational. At any rate, he does recognize the possibility of the angels being intercessors for humans. Another passage from the Book concerned that scholars often mention as an example of angelic intercession is Job 33:23–24. There an individual is talked about who definitely identifies himself with the sufferer and works for his benefit. He is pictured against a thousand of other beings of the kind, of whom scholars are not absolutely sure if they are equally benevolent towards the sufferer. He is described as *malāk mēliš*, which is not a proper name, but a function he assumes. Nevertheless, there are serious questions concerning his identity, role and the setting within which he operates. In the current paper I want to briefly present some of the most important interpretations regarding Job 33:23–24 and see if there is any room for a fresh approach to the *malāk mēliš* issue.

1. Interpretations

The interpretation of Job 33:23–24 seems has challenged commentators and translators since the antiquity. J. E. Hartley enumerates several proposals offered in the history of exegesis and the diversity of opinions is impressive. It starts with another *human being* (a friend, a prophet, or a teacher) or even the sufferer's own *conscience*; through *one of the angelic host*, the *heavenly witness* mentioned in 16:19 or the special *angel / messenger of Yahweh* (e.g., Gen 21:17; 22:11.15; Judg 6:11–22; 13:2–23) up to *the concealed Christ*.³

The oldest canonical interpretation of the *malāk mēliš* is found in the LXX. It is in fact a very unique and enigmatic interpretation, which instead of improving our understanding of the scene rather darkens it:

If there were a thousand death-bearing angels not one of them would wound him

if he should take it to heart to turn to the Lord.

On the contrary, He proclaims to man his fault and shows him his senselessness.

He will withstand his falling into death.

³ Cf. J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NIC; Grand Rapids ²1991) 446.

He will renew his body as ointment on a courtly wall.
His bones He will fill with marrow⁴ (Job 33:23–24).

In this passage the singular Hebrew noun *mal'āk* is rendered as a plural: *angels*. Those *angels* are defined as *death-bearers*, which is an interpretation of the key word of the sentence, namely *mēlīš*. It is really hard to account for this rendition. It could be that the translator had a different version of the Hebrew text at his disposal or that he was extremely periphrastic. That however may only be classified as a scholarly guess.⁵

The Vulgate translates Job 33:23 quite differently: *If there shall be an angel speaking for him, one among thousands, to declare man's uprightness (si fuerit pro eo angelus loquens unum de milibus ut adnuntiet hominis aequitatem)*. C. Barth observes that “this is the earliest passage to ascribe to an angel the role of mediator”.⁶ L. Alonso Schökel further notes that because of three factors present in our text – compassion, intercession and ransom for life – some ancient commentators using allegorical method of interpretation were seeing Jesus himself in the figure concerned (e.g. Gregory the Great).⁷

The vast majority of the contemporary commentators recognize in the figure an angelic being. They differ though in defining that figure's exact role. It would be in order to bring up some of those scholarly opinions to give the sense of the different shades of meaning ascribed to *mal'āk mēlīš*.

S. R. Driver takes *mal'āk mēlīš* for *an interpreter* belonging to a special class of angels intermediating between God and man. Their function “was to interpret to men, as it were, the foreign and intelligible language of God's dealing with them”.⁸ He believes the text speaks of a critical situation for the sufferer, when he is about to die for the sin committed. Ironically, he (the sufferer) does not know where he went wrong and here the angel enters. He is to “interpret to him what God had been saying to him through his sufferings (23)” and that

⁴ J. G. Gammie, „The Angelology and Demonology in the Septuagint of the Book of Job”, *HUCA* 56 (1985) 1–19 [5].

⁵ Cf. J. G. Gammie, „The Angelology and Demonology”, 5. Gammie believes “that the translator may have had the *diabolos* in mind when he refers to angels as “death-bearers” in Job 33:23. For in the Prologue the *diabolos* is, after all, instrumental in bringing about the death of Job's sons and daughters (Job 1:19)” (*op.cit.*, 12).

⁶ C. Barth, „*לִישׁ *lyš; לִישׁ לִישׁ; לִישׁ לִישׁ; לִישׁ לִישׁ*”, *TDOT* VII, 547–552 [551].

⁷ Cf. L. Alonso Schökel – J. L. Sicre Diaz, *Giobbe*. Commento teologico e letterario (ed. and tr. G. Borjonovo) (CB; Roma 1985) 536–537.

⁸ S. R. Driver – G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job* (Edinburgh 1921 [1986]) 290.

knowledge should bring him to acknowledging the sin and repentance to be then “brought back from death’s door to complete health (24f.)”⁹

J. Behm believes that the name for the *mēliš* here should be *an advocate of a higher rank* “who intercedes with God for the sinner smitten with sickness, so that God forgives and heals him (cf. 19–25): the interceding angel (= *interpreter, mediator, advocate*) to whom there is reference in Job 5:1 and perhaps also 16:19–22 and 19:25–27. The angel, one of thousands (not a single professional advocate), has pity on man in his distress and stands at his side as defender and helper before the judgment seat of God when Satan acts as accuser, Job 1:6–12 [...]. But he also shows man his duty, corrects him, and calls him to repentance, 33:23f. That the advocate and friend in heaven seeks to vindicate man against God (16:19–22) brings out clearly the legal character of the idea of the interceding angel”¹⁰

L. Alonso Schökel also speaks here of an individual belonging to a group of *angels intercessors* (plural: *angeli intercessori*), who seem to be members of the assembly called *The Thousands* (*i Mille*). He also calls them *supernatural intercessors* making a direct link to Eliphaz’ statement in 5:1 where – he believes – they are also alluded to. Verse 24 he interprets as playing on concepts taken from the commercial practice. From Psalm 49:8–10 we learn that man cannot pay ransom for his life. What if the ransom is paid by an angel? Here we have an example of one supernatural being paying ransom to another supernatural being – presumably God.¹¹ It is worth noting that even though Alonso Schökel understands *mal’āk mēliš* as *angel intercessor* – it is hard to avoid the impression that his translation of Job 33:23–24 is rather free:

Ma se incontra un angelo propizio,
Uno tra mille come intercessore
Che abbia compassione di lui e dica
“Salvalo dal discendere nella fossa,
Che gli ho trovato un riscatto [...]”

But if there is to be found a propitious angel
one among thousands as intercessor

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ J. Behm, „παράκλητος”, *TDNT* V, 800–814 [809–810]. Similarly C. Barth, „לִישׁ *lyš; לִישׁ *liš*; לֵשׁ *lēš*; לִישׁוֹן *lišōn*; מְלִישׁ *mēliš*”, 551, who also notes that the term can take on different meanings depending on the context. For example in Gen 42:23 it denotes a professional interpreter; in 2 Chr 32:31 it is to be translated as *envoy* and in Job 16:20; 33:23 as *advocate*. On the other hand in Isa 43:27 it is preferred to translate it *rebel*.

¹¹ Cf. L. Alonso Schökel – J. L. Sicre Díaz, *Giobbe*, 536–537.

Who'd have compassion of him and said
 "Deliver him from descending to the pit,
 For I have found him a ransom [...]"

L. Alonso Schökel then rightly observes that the interpretation of this passage largely depends on the idea one has of the angel. Those who ascribe to him (angel) a simple function of *interpreter* (*mēlîš*) translate 23c as *so that he may make known to the man his duty*. Nonetheless, the context of verses 23–24 presents the angel with a more gracious mission; it seems preferable to interpret *mēlîš* as *intercessor*, *mediator* or *advocate*. His main task is indicated by v. 24: intercession and ransom.¹²

Going further in presenting scholarly opinions regarding possible interpretations we may refer to M. H. Pope's observations. He sees here an example of an angelic mediation, which – on its part – is not something unique to Elihu's speech. He places it in a larger Mesopotamian context where the idea of a personal god looking after the interest of his mortal client in the divine assembly was quite common and at the same time closely related to the concept of guardian angels and interceding saints. He argues for the angels being "lesser gods among whom a man might have or find a defender".¹³ M. H. Pope directly speaks here of the heavenly court, which was believed to be very numerous. Thus the chances for finding at least one favorable member of the court willing to intercede for the man before the king of the gods were quite high.¹⁴

N. C. Habel confirms the intuitions of Pope seeing in the figure an individual patterned after the Mesopotamian personal deities. What is original to his interpretation is that he takes further the notion of a trial. He holds that the angel at stake is actually an *advocate* – at the same time taking for granted the context of a trial. He explicitly states that *mēlîš* here "functions as a defense attorney to interpret the case to the celestial court". He then also sees in him a *mediator*. Elihu is alluding to the earlier expressed hopes of Job for a mediator "who would rise to justify his integrity before God and the court of heaven (9:32–35; 16:18–22; 19:21–27)".¹⁵ Habel argues that Elihu "in this hypothetical case depicts a scenario in which the angelic mediator defends the uprightness of a human sufferer in anticipation of his humble penitence".¹⁶ He insists on the

¹² Cf. *ibidem*, 524.527.536–537.

¹³ M. H. Pope, *Job. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 15; New York–London–Toronto–Sydney–Auckland 1973) 251.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibidem*.

¹⁵ N. C. Habel, *The Book of Job. A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia 1985) 469–470.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 470.

setting being forensic and referring to the court of heaven.¹⁷ The commentary that Habel provided makes it explicit that he does think of the angel concerned as of an *advocate*, who “vouches” (not intercedes!) for the sufferer’s uprightness. On the other hand his translation of the following verse (24) starts with the description of what the angel is doing, namely “he pleads mercy for him”¹⁸ – and that is what an intercessor would do.

J. E. Hartley takes the figure of *mal’āk mēlīš* for a *mediator* of a different kind. His main task is to teach the sufferer what “is right for him” and the whole translation is kept in the conditional mode: “if there is a mediator”.¹⁹ In his translation of verse 24 he emphasizes the *mediator’s* being gracious toward the sufferer, which is equal to speaking for him.²⁰ Hartley depicts the figure as *an angel*, a *heavenly intercessor* who “takes up the sufferer’s case”.²¹ So basically the *mediator’s* activity would include speaking to and for the sufferer. Furthermore, he orders the death angel to spare the sufferer’s life, because he found a ransom for him.²²

J. E. Hartley’s observations are worth mentioning in one more aspect. Just like for example Behm and Alonso Schökel he also links this very part of Elihu’s speech with the statement by Eliphaz from his first speech (5:1). He however believes that Elihu is here countering Eliphaz position on the existence of a heavenly intercessor who’d plead his case. While Eliphaz was denying Job any such supernatural help, Elihu strongly insists on the existence of such a “special angel who works for the redemption of the afflicted. [...] In Elihu’s teaching this special angel works for the restoration of those who have strayed from the right way. This means that God does not immediately abandon any of his servants who err”.²³ So, in other words, there is hope for Job!

J. F. Ross translates the term *mēlīš* as *spokesman*. His understanding of the *spokesman’s* role is quite broad. It is worth seeing first that he is on the same page with Hartley as far as the understanding of the differences in approach to *the heavenly intercessor* between Eliphaz and Elihu are concerned. He holds that Eliphaz even denies that such a being exists (5:1). Ross believes the *mēlīš* is to be aligned with the figures of *the mokiah* and *the goel* (19:25) and that their main task is “to bring about a legal reconciliation between the contending

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 456.

¹⁹ J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 444.

²⁰ Cf. ibidem, 444–445.

²¹ Ibidem, 446.

²² Cf. ibidem, 446.

²³ Ibidem, 447.

parties. Throughout the whole of the dialogues it is Job's clear intention to haul God into court, so that he can present his case; *the witness* or *the spokesman* is, in Job's mind, a legal official. And this is the major difference between Job and Elihu on the subject. Elihu's *spokesman* is a cultic functionary in the heavens, one who first interprets the meaning of suffering and brings about repentance, and then asks God for redemption. He is not a *defense attorney*, a *prosecutor*, or an *amicus curiae*. The only thing he has in common with Job's "friend" is the title *mēliš*, *spokesman*, and this coincidence may be a result of Elihu's conscious attempt to refute Job's legalistic use of the word".²⁴

J. M. Ross argues for a kind of positively seen automatic retribution here. If God almost has to take a stand on people's evildoing and punish them for it – which Job should know from his own experience – then God is also almost forced to reward the repentant man who turned away from evil. The question is if "man hears the "interpretation" of his suffering, learns his duty, and thus is enabled to return to righteousness. [...] everything else, including the angel's intercession and God's restoration, follows almost automatically. The order of events is crucial: suffering, the presence of the *malāk mēliš*, the announcement and acceptance of duty, the intercession, the entreaty by the sinner, the restoration, the cultic confession and thanksgiving".²⁵ On the other hand, in his opinion "Elihu thinks that the reconciliation between God and man takes place because God is gracious in his acceptance; man's entreaty is the consequence, not the cause, of the divine act. This is clearly Elihu's view in his subsequent speeches. [...] Suffering, for him, is [...] a way in which God gets the attention of man, so that the angel can interpret its meaning and show the way to repentance. Thus man's ransom is won, and he can now entreat the deity".²⁶

The above presentation showed the most important opinions of distinguished scholars concerning the interpretation of Job 33:23–24. It is worth noting that they rather unanimously take the figure of *malāk mēliš* for a supernatural being – an angel. The differences are found in determining the identity and the role of that figure. After having said that we now turn to the second task that has been set for this paper, namely checking if a fresh approach to the *malāk mēliš* issue is possible.

²⁴ J. F. Ross, „Job 33:14–30: The Phenomenology of Lament”, *JBL* 94 (1975) 38–46 [43].

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 42.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

2. Translation and tentative interpretation

It is often difficult to avoid the impression that some authors read too much into our text. Thus it is preferable to be faithful to the text and see what it actually lets us say about *mal'āk mēlîš*. We bear in mind that the form of the verses concerned is quite difficult and irregular.²⁷

If he has an angel, an intermediary

– one of a thousand to declare to man what is right (for him)

He will show favor to him and then he will say

“Deliver him from going to the pit – I found a compensation”

Job 33:23

I read the first phrase in v. 23 (’im-yěš) as introducing a condition, which is “thought of as possibly (or probably) occurring in the present or future”.²⁸ The “he” in the verse is of course the sufferer – any suffering person. Elihu is trying to make his point starting with a general observation containing universal truth. This way he shows his gentleness by not going directly to Job’s case but simply painting an image that can hold true for every sufferer – Job included. For Elihu the existence of *mal'āk mēlîš* in case of human suffering is something natural and undeniable. However, it takes some methodology on the side of the sufferer to find one. Elihu seems to suggest that *mal'āk mēlîš* does not necessarily need to be found in heaven and that his role should not be overestimated – it is only auxiliary.

Before going into etymological considerations related to *mēlîš* it is appropriate to define the relationship between the two words: *mal'āk* and *mēlîš*. W. A. Irwin is right on taking them as not being in a construct state or genitive relationship, but rather as parallels (*a messenger* (?), *an intermediary*): “The intermediary, then, is a messenger”.²⁹ I follow his understanding of the two, though with a slight difference in translation. His rendering of *mal'āk* as *messenger* is not wrong, but it can be misleading in our context, so we would prefer to render it as *angel*. In short we have here *an angel* who is *an intermediary*.

The key problem in the interpretation of the verses (23–24) is the exact meaning of the word *mēlîš*. It occurs only five times in the entire Hebrew Bible,

²⁷ Cf. S. R. Driver – G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job*, 290.

²⁸ E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, §159, l.

²⁹ Cf. W. A. Irwin, „Job’s Redeemer”, *JBL* 81 (1962) 217–229 [225].

twice of which are in the Book of Job (cf. Gen 42:23; 2 Chr 32:31; Job 16:20; 33:23; Isa 43:27). Most probably it comes from the root *lw/yš*. Unfortunately its precise meaning hard to grasp. H. N. Richardson argues that the meaning of the root is *to speak freely or big*. Consequently he criticizes authors taking the word to mean *an interpreter*. He is rather “a speaker of considerable fluency, but not an interpreter in the strict sense of the term” and “his sole function is to inform man of his rights and that a way has been found for him to be restored”.³⁰ Finally he states that the preferable meaning for the noun is *babbler*.³¹

J. F. Ross accepts this interpretation confirming that the root *lw/yš* “seems to mean *babble or speak a great deal*”, and as it has already been mentioned he prefers to take the term *mēlîš* for a *spokesman*: “the main idea seems to be that of *conveying something by speaking*”.³²

S. A. Meier is making an interesting point indicating that the confusion and lack of unanimity among scholars concerning the meaning of our term is also due to the fact that it may bear positive or negative connotations. They are hard to reconcile. So respectively, Ps 119:51 (Hifil), Prov 3:34; 9:12 (Qal) meaning *to scoff, scorn, mock (scoffer)* render it negatively; and Hifil participle forms in Gen 42:23 (*interpreter*), 2 Chr 32:31 (*ambassador*), Isa 43:27 (*spokesman*) and Job 33:23 (*mediator*) are of positive connotations. One of them – Job 16:20 – is interpreted either positively or negatively.³³

S. A. Meier also emphasizes the difficulty about the identity of the figure concerned based on the lack of agreement on how the various characters in our passage relate to one another. It is not, however, that we may not say anything certain about him. In fact Meier lists three things that are beyond dispute: 1) because the words *mal'āk mēlîš* have no definite article, they refer to an unspecified figure (‘a *mal'āk*, a *mēlîš*) whose role here could be filled by a number of candidates; 2) not every human encounters such a *mal'āk mēlîš*, for a conditional clause introduces his presence: “*If he has a mal'āk mēlîš...*”; 3) the task of a *mal'āk mēlîš* at minimum encompasses the conveyance of information about proper conduct to humans (“to tell his uprightness to mankind/a man”, v. 23).³⁴ The above observations by Meier are more than sufficient to summarize everything that one can read from the text itself.

³⁰ H. N. Richardson, “Some Notes on מְלִיץ and its Derivatives”, *VT* 5 (1955) 163–179 [169].

³¹ Cf. *ibidem*, 179.

³² J. F. Ross, „Job 33:14–30”, 41.

³³ S. A. Meier, „Mediator I מְלִיץ מְלִיץ”, *DDD*, 554–557 [554].

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 555.

When it comes to the number of protagonists in Job 33:23–24 I distinguish three different ones: *malāk mēlîš*, the sufferer and God. It is easy to see the first two in verse 23. One must also address the problem of what the verse is saying about the number of those beings able and willing to assume the role of the *malāk mēlîš*. It says he is “one out of thousand”. Does this emphasize the difficulty of finding one in the crowd of that many (cf. *Tg. Jonathan; b.Shab.* 32a) or does it say that nothing could be easier than finding one since there are so many willing to do the job?³⁵ From the context of the verse (conditional mode) it seems preferable to interpret it as: there are many who may theoretically be turned to for help, but there is one especially willing to do the job. Who is this? The wise man who is speaking – meaning Elihu himself. I give credit to Meier for unraveling this subtle twist in Elihu’s speech. “Elihu is implicitly presenting himself as just such a messenger from God enlightening Job”.³⁶ This way Elihu puts himself in line with the wisdom movement, which is not so much interested in the supernatural help but in finding solution on earth. Here he is – a messenger from God willing to show Job a way out of his misery. Job should not seek for an extraordinary individual to take up his case, but find wisdom in the experience of the sage (Elihu) he has found most willing to instruct him. Job should not look for intercession but enlightenment. In other words Elihu offers to Job an interpretation of what happened and how to proceed to be saved.

In Elihu’s mind it is a matter of explaining to the sufferer the reason for which he suffers. He hopes to fill in the shoes of such an angel and teach him about everything so that he might finally make sense of his suffering and make up for it in an adequate measure. In this he resembles the friends who tried to lecture Job on the very reason why he had to suffer. In the end of the Book it becomes clear that it is not about talking and finding the appropriate words. The knowledge they might bring about is still useless.

Job 33:24

It is time to examine the second part of the discussed text (33:23–24). I believe the correct understanding of the word *kōper* commonly translated as *ransom*, may shed some light on the entire passage. S. R. Driver interprets it as some kind of price that should have been “paid in lieu of forfeiting life (Ex 21:30)”.

³⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, 556. As a matter of fact, Meier dismisses many of the so far provided interpretations not leaving us with any new solution to the problem. Instead he’d rather leave it up in the air contemplating the difficulties and inconsistencies.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 556.

As for its nature he does not give a precise explanation and only limits himself to observe that one does not need to say “that the ransom is the repentance”.³⁷ N. C. Habel struggles with the meaning of the term, stating that it can be meant either as “redemption money (Ex 21:30; 30:12) or a substitutionary vehicle for rescuing the life of someone in danger (Isa 43:3; cf. Job 36:18; Matt. 20:28)”.³⁸ But what it really refers to in our text is rather ambiguous. Does the author mean here “the person's past uprightness (v.23), the sufferer's anticipated repentance, or the pledge of the advocate to stand surety for the afflicted individual?”³⁹ J. E. Hartley believes that “the meaning of ransom is not restricted to a payment of money. It may include anything accepted in compensation for an obligation, freeing the indebted party from the obligation. In such a case the exact nature of the ransom this angel makes is not specified. Whatever it is it compensates the divine justice for that person's failures, so that person is freed from the punishment demanded by his errant ways. Once the angel pays the ransom, the death angel must leave the offender. Only God himself can provide the ransom that the angel offers [...] (cf. Ps 49:8-10[En. 7-9])”.⁴⁰

Finally, P. Bovati puts Job 33:23 among the examples of “compensation and gifts” typical of the *riḅ*. “The supplicant tries to get pardoned by backing the plea up with gifts which, on the one hand, represent a kind of compensation for the wrong caused, and, on the other hand, are a sort of request for a peaceful solution. To start with, if something is presented to the angry accuser, it is something pleasing, something which – at least symbolically – is to be put in the balance against the misdeed that occasioned the *riḅ*. [...] Secondly, the act of making an offering means that a peaceful solution is being asked: accepting the gift is a *de facto* agreement to the supplication, whereas rejecting it is to maintain an attitude of aggressive anger”.⁴¹

I believe the observations of J. E. Hartley and P. Bovati are the most useful from among those aforementioned when it comes to determine the nature of the word *kōper* in our text. J. E. Hartley is right by stating that *kōper* should be understood as something including anything accepted in compensation for an obligation to free the indebted party from the obligation. Unfortunately, he steadfastly holds on to the thought that *mal'āk mēliš* is the subject in this verse

³⁷ S. R. Driver – G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job*, 291.

³⁸ N. C. Habel, *The Book of Job*, 470.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 446.

⁴¹ P. Bovati, *Re-Establishing Justice. Legal Terms, Concepts and Procedures in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOT.SS 105; Sheffield 1994) 137–139.

(which I will address later on). P. Bovati comes up with an additional suggestion placing the motif of the *kōper* within the context of the *rīb*. It would be then something given to the accuser in order to compensate for the misdeed and this way bringing the controversy to an end. If we consider the fact that the two parties of the controversy are God and man – it becomes obvious that money (seen as a compensation) is hardly the issue. Why would God need money? So what would that be? The answer is to be found in the previous verse (23). There the *malāk mēlīs* was believed to bring the sufferer to the correct understanding of his situation. That on its part was to lead the man to a change of his attitude for the better i.e. to repentance. I believe the verse 24 dwells on this. So the *kōper* at stake is best understood as a change of mind and heart on the part of the sufferer (repentance) so that the anger of Go might cease and the controversy finished.

The very last question to be answered here is: who actually finds the ransom (24)? In other words – who is the subject in verse 24? In my opinion there is a subtle shift in subjects between verses 23 and 24. *malāk mēlīs* can be considered the subject in verse 23, but in the following verse the subject seems to be different. Verse 24 begins: “and then he will show favor to him (to the sufferer)”. *malāk mēlīs* has already been pictured as showing a significant favor to the sufferer by teaching him what is right and making sense of his suffering. Verse 24 clearly introduces a new subject whose turn has come to show favor in response to what had happened. That can only be God. Secondly it is hard to imagine *malāk mēlīs* as commanding God to save somebody’s life (imperative). Finally, the *kōper* could be found and only recognized by God. If then God is the subject in verse 24 who is/are the individual/individuals He is ordering to save the sufferer’s life? From the Prologue we know that God ordered the satan to save Job’s life when at the same time He was authorizing the satan to put Job to the test. I believe there can be here an echo of that idea especially when in verse 22 it says about the so called, *executioners – the angels of death*. Evidently, by means of this action God is showing favor to the repentant and turning down the controversy.

Conclusion

In search for a fresh approach to Job 33:23–24 we finally arrived at some interesting conclusions. First, we observed that *mal'āk mēlīš* who shows up in verse 23 is an angel. The main task of this angel – as presented by Elihu – is to instruct an errant man and bring him to the correct understanding of his situation. That should result in an appropriate change of mind and heart – i.e. repentance. He hardly sees the role of *mal'āk mēlīš* as intercessor. He believes rather it is all about bringing knowledge and understanding of the sufferer's situation. Secondly, for Elihu that figure serves only a pretext for a more sophisticated reasoning aimed at convincing Job that he need not look for one such an angel out there in the supernatural world, because he has someone standing right next to him who can do the job. In fact, Elihu is eager to play *mal'āk mēlīš*, which he had stated from the very beginning. Thirdly, the blessing that he hopes to gain with his service is described in the following verse (24), where God is the subject. Fourthly, it is He (God) who is to find the *kōper* (*ransom*) understood as repentance on the side of the sufferer. God shows favor to the repentant sufferer by driving away the Angel of Death, whom he commands to leave the sufferer alone. By doing so, God is actually resolving *the controversy* (*rīb*). So, finally we may say that Elihu sees himself as an indispensable instrument in bringing God and Job together. His message appears to be that once Job accepts his role of *mal'āk mēlīš* and gives ear to his instructions, everything will resolve itself.

It is my hope that the above analysis provides a clearer explanation of the somewhat enigmatic verses concerned. At the same time, it should be seen as one of several possible solutions to the problems the verses pose.

