Job xxxiv 36 is spoken by Elihu near the conclusion of a chapter-long harangue addressed in the first place to Eliphaz and his friends. In xxxiv 16, 17 the recipient is unobtrusively changed to the singular, and Job himself is addressed directly in v. 33, but to whom the intervening vv. 18-32 are spoken is nowhere sufficiently clear. It is, however, certain that v. 34 and the following final three verses are not addressed to Job, for 34 and 35 read:

> Any reasonable person will say to me
> Yes, any sensible person who hears me
> “Job is talking without sense,
> And his words are without discernment”.

After this, comes the subject of this note, v. 36:

> ąbhn ąx̂b d-nx̂ h l-tšbt b%sh-y-wn

No doubt, the sense of the second stich is “Because of replies like those of men of sin”. The first stich, however, does not seem to have been so transparent to the company of scholars, and for some reason, hidden from this writer, they have, at least from the time of the Targum, all but unanimously either rendered ąbhi as “Would that!” or “I desire”, or treated ąbhn as jussive, or both.

ąbhi, “my father”, is usually the second word that a Hebrew-speaking baby learns, and that it (any more than “Daddy”) should have an entirely unrelated alternative meaning is, for that reason alone, almost impossible. There being no precedent for ąbhi to have
anything resembling this sense, much ingenuity has been expended in seeking some sort of plausible, or even implausible, derivation for it. Franz Delitzsch, whose compendious commentary is usually a repository of excellent wisdom and scholarship, devotes more space to the spurious analysis of this word than to any other single problem in the book. His conclusion is that it derives from a dialect spoken by Arabs in the Hauran region. Delitzsch accepted this derivation from J.G. Wetzstein who spent six months with the poet Musa Rara in Damascus learning this dialect from him, and may perhaps be forgiven on that account for so far-fetched an assumption. Many modern scholars uncritically accept this explanation, but Driver and Gray (see n. 11) enter the caveat that “to entreat” is “a relatively modern dialectical sense of bayya”.

Others take it as a form of by, as in the phrase by ‘dwyn, but even were there a connection, it would be better to read the latter as “Sire, my lord!” than the former as “I beg you”. There have been suggestions (e.g. Ibn Janah, Levi Ben Gershom [Ralbag]) that it is derived from ‘bh “to be willing”, but as Berechiah ben Natronai Krespia Hanakdan scornfully comments, as well derive bny, “my son”, from bn, “to build”. The wildest of all derivations is reported by Rashi, that it is derived from h’bywnh, sexual desire (Eccles. xii 5). Rashi attributes this suggestion to Menachem ben Saruq.

More recent scholarship has contributed little of value. M. Dahood sought to render it by the Ugaritic “My foe”, but this has impressed none. N.H. Tur-Sinai saw ‘by as a defective spelling of ‘buy, which he read as “Woe”! Some delete it, or treat it as a deformed dittograph of ‘ywab.

The crux of the problem surely lies in a combination of Delitzsch’s confident assertion “ybhn is certainly intended as optative”, and almost every commentator’s claim that “my father” is meaningless or inappropriate in this context.

Where and how the idea began that ybhn should be read as optative is hard to fathom. The sentence ybhn ‘ywab ‘d ns not only makes perfect sense as indicative, “Job is being (or will be) tested to the end”, but it admirably sums up his apparent situation. On the contrary, “Would that Job were tested to the end”! is not only an abominable and brutal sentiment at odds with Elihu’s stated intentions, but it is difficult to imagine its intended content. In the literal reading of the book of Job, the man has lost all his posses-