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The Problem of Suffering in the Light of the Book of Job.

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IF ever there was a time in the world's history that urgently called men to face the question of the meaning of human suffering, that time is the present, when the storm-cloud of adversity has burst in a torrent over so many nations. In examining the problem of the motive and purpose of such suffering it is only natural that we should think of that book in Holy Scripture where we read of how a once happy life was crushed down by sudden catastrophe. How often has the book of Job been admired and imitated by princes among the poets, such as Dante and Goethe! Let us then examine closely this magnificently constructed work of art, in the hope that perchance we may discover in it an interpretation of the problem of pain that will bring light and comfort to our own troubled hearts.

But when, in our eager search for instruction, we have proceeded only a short way in our study of the book, the fear is awakened in our minds that it does not present a harmonious and consistent solution of the problem of the purpose of suffering. Can unity, indeed, be looked for in a book where so many different personalities pass judgment on the matter, and where the sight of pain leads to manifold controversies? To a superficial glance it is anything but a harmonious view that presents itself to us.

1. For the Satan, the 'adversary' who roams the earth only in quest of material that will further his pernicious designs, suffering is simply a means of *tempting* man. He would use it to sow in the heart the seeds of suspicion as to the justice, nay, the very existence, of a Disposer of the world's history. In destroying the property and the health of his victim he hopes also to destroy his confidence in the goodness and the impartiality of Providence. He purposes to lay in ruins the proud edifice of prosperity and piety, and to plant upon the ruins his banner of scepticism and pessimism.

Whilst this malicious conception of the aim of suffering is not shared by the so-called friends of Job, and we thus experience a measure of relief, it is true all the same that the book thus discloses to

us a twofold view of the problem. The friends regard suffering as *penal*. They champion the doctrine that all suffering is the punishment of human transgression. Their confidence in the strength of their contention is shown by the circumstance that three times over they step into the arena to dispute in its favour (chs. 4-14, 15-21, 22-31). Nay, their theory is not repudiated *per se*, even by the hero of the book, who objects only to the application to himself of the general principle. Not by any means that he declares himself absolutely innocent, as is often assumed. It is from his own mouth that we hear the question which answers itself in the negative: 'Who will seek to find one clean among them, seeing there is none' (14⁴)? What he denies is that the frightful measure of suffering that has overtaken him is proportional to his sin.

The diversity of judgment regarding the woes to which man is subject is still further exemplified, when a new speaker, Elihu, interposes in the controversy (chs. 32-37). He contends that the Disposer of events is to be regarded not as an enemy (33¹⁰) but as a *trainer*, who only punishes until he can let man go because he has found 'a ransom' (33²⁴), and the sufferer has been brought to recognize his sin (v. 27). The Divine aim has been reached, when God has 'brought back the soul of man from destruction, and enlightened him with the light of the living' (v. 30). Elihu thus represents a view intermediate between the two extremes—God is neither to be viewed as if He makes use of suffering solely for penal ends, as the friends contended, nor as one who unjustly denies the just claims of an innocent man (34⁵ 35¹), or is careless in the matter of retribution (35¹⁴), as Job had suggested. God's real function in this matter is that of an instructor (36¹⁰) and teacher (v. 29), whose unsearchable power and majesty must be honoured with humble reverence (37²⁴).

2. Is it, then, only the explanation of suffering which is put in the mouth of *God Himself* that is to be regarded as the consistent and harmonious one?

From time to time down to very recently (e.g.

in Budde's *Handkom. v. Buche Hiob*, 1913, p. xxxviii) we read of a 'wager' which God has made with the Satan in the prologue. This assumes that it was God that took the initiative, which is contrary to the text. No, what happens is that, when 'the adversary' proposes a plan whereby he may seduce the relatively pious man from allegiance to his ideals, God only *consents* to the visitation of Job with misfortune, while at the same time imposing the condition that the life of the sufferer is to be spared; and He cherishes quite a different design from that of the Satan. God desires and hopes that His servant Job, when faced with misfortune, will *stand the test*, and His expectation is not falsified. It is not through suffering itself that Job's steadfastness is shaken, as we see from 2¹⁰. It is only after his friends, breaking their silence (2¹⁹)—a silence which is itself a condemnation—proceed to weigh in the scales of a Shylock his terrible sufferings against his sins that he breaks forth in a monologue of despair (3³⁻²⁶) and a mistaken arraignment of the order of the universe. Thus, according to the prologue, suffering is sent by God to test and *confirm* the faith of man.

Is it the same view of the aim of suffering that is expressed in the addresses put in the mouth of the Almighty in 38^{1ff.}? There the unsearchable power of God is exhibited by referring to the world of Nature (notably the two creatures, the hippopotamus and the crocodile, 40^{10-19, 20-41²⁶}), whereby Job is brought to see that, in spite of his guarded criticism of the Divine government of the world, he has been too hasty in his demand for a recognition of his relative innocence. In other words, the addresses of the Almighty are themselves a new source of suffering and as such serve the same end of confirming the faith of Job. Directed as they are towards preserving him from *arrogance* in his view of the constitution of Nature and the order of events, they serve to purify his character and so help to complete the *establishment of his steadfastness*. When this result of the Divine toil with his soul (cf. Is 43²⁴, 'Thou hast made me to serve') has been acknowledged by Job in touchingly humble words (42⁵⁻⁶), God expressly announces that suffering in the case of this man has accomplished its purpose of *establishing* him, and this is formally recognized by the restoration of his former prosperity.

3. But, even if the attitude of the Almighty to human suffering is consistent and harmonious in

those passages where he plays a part, yet, as we have said, the book presents *four* theories on the subject. Let us ask now *whether even these may be combined so as to form a unity*.

This question, looking at it first of all from the point of view of the *form* of the book, would naturally be answered in the affirmative, on the ground that the author, anticipating Plato, shows himself such a master of the art of unfolding truth by means of the dialogue, or rather of exhibiting all the sides of a truth by allotting its discussion to a number of persons. Again, when we consider the *contents*, all the four replies which the book gives to the question of the purpose of human suffering may be understood as the harmonious parts of one comprehensive view. They may be regarded as *the four reactions* and interpretations to which the advent of suffering gives rise in the soul of man.

Is it not the case that, as a rule, when a *wave* of misfortune breaks upon us, the *first* result is to tempt us to abandon the thoughts we have hitherto cherished about God? If this storm has been weathered, our *second* impulse is to regard our sufferings as a punishment for sins of which, however numerous may be our good points, we feel that we can readily accuse ourselves. Once we have been brought to see in our experiences the chastening hand of the Disposer of events, then, if we are honest in our efforts, we reach *the further stage* when, with Elihu, we see in the arm that punishes also the action of a wise teacher who in holy love waits for the moment when He may let us go because he has (brought round) our soul, that is, turned us back from following a mistaken course in our interpretation of the course of history. We are helped *finally* to learn this lesson by contemplating what the God who spoke to Job from the whirlwind presents to our view, namely, the incomprehensible power and majesty of the Creator of the universe. We thus learn humility, and, through our contemplation of the wondrous works of God in Nature, are led to infer the grandeur, surpassing knowledge, of His disposal of the world's history.

To sum up. The answer of the Book of Job to the question, What is the purpose of human suffering? is to the following effect. It is intended partly as a means of strengthening against faithlessness in the battle of life; partly as a punishment of the sins of which men are guilty; partly as a

means of purifying individuals and nations ; and finally it is to be regarded as part of the arrangement of a universe which exhibits in what is comprehensible so many indubitable indications of wisdom and goodness that we have the fullest warrant for attributing to its Author a wise and

beneficent purpose also in the relatively small dose of ills and sufferings we discover in the constitution and the history of the world.

This solution of the problem of suffering, offered to us by the author of Job, will approve itself as correct for all time.

In the Study.

Virginibus Puerisque.

Rearing a Monument.

'Now Absalom in his life time had taken and reared up for himself the pillar, which is in the king's dale : for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance : and he called the pillar after his own name.'—2 Sam. 18¹⁸.

MOST of you have been taken at some time or other to see a monument or statue erected in memory of some famous man. Perhaps you were visiting a strange city and among the sights of the place there was pointed out to you the statue of a man who had been born there and who had afterwards made a name for himself in the world. His fellow-townsmen were proud of him ; they wanted to recognize his great gifts, and they wanted to connect his name always with their city ; so they erected a monument to his memory.

But were you ever taken to see a monument which a man had erected in honour of himself? Of such a monument we read in this verse out of the old sad story of Absalom.

Absalom could not bear to think that he might be forgotten. Admiration was the very breath of life to him. He would rather have been hated than not noticed. But he had no son to carry on his name. So he took this curious way of having his memory kept green. He built a monument to himself.

Now Absalom's name *has* been remembered, but not in the way he intended. It has been remembered as the name of a treacherous son who plotted against his own father and tried to deprive him of the throne. It has been remembered as a name for vanity, selfishness, and ingratitude. In the end of the day he lay, not near the pillar he had erected to his own glory, but in an inglorious grave in a lonely forest, and over his grave was cast a great heap of stones. Near Jerusalem there

is a monument which is called Absalom's Pillar. Very probably it is mistakenly so called, but the Jews and Muhammadans believe it is the original pillar. And every Jew who passes throws a small pebble at it and utters a solemn curse to express his disapproval of the man who 'set at light' his own father. So is Absalom's name remembered.

Men have done strange things to have their name remembered. One man set on fire the beautiful temple of Diana at Ephesus, so that he might not be forgotten. Some men are remembered for their cruelty, others for their cleverness, others for their beauty. Artists, poets, musicians have left behind them monuments in the works they have created. But there are others who have left behind them a better monument than any of these. They are remembered for their loving, self-sacrificing service to others.

Some years ago a missionary was visiting a village in the East of Africa. He was staying with the chief of the village, and one day an old native presented himself at the dwelling of the chief and asked to see the white man. He wished to see him because he hoped he would resemble the only white man he had ever known. Over his shoulder the old native carried with great care and tenderness a mouldy, moth-eaten coat, and he told the missionary that it had once belonged to 'the white man' and that he had kept it for ten years. He went on to describe his friend. 'He treated black men as his brothers,' he said, 'and his name will be remembered up and down the Rovuma valley long after we are all dead and gone. His eye was piercing, but his words were always gentle and his manners were always kind. He knew the way to the hearts of all men.'

Then very carefully the native took the mouldy coat from his shoulder and gave it to the missionary to keep, because he came from Britain and