

The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Job (continued)

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From Job 3:1 to 42:6 we have the main part of the book, cast in dialogue form, and exhibiting the regular features of Hebrew poetry. The R.V. rightly prints it in poetical form, and thus makes it easier for the reader to follow the rhythm of sound and parallelism of thought, and thus to have a better appreciation of the sense.¹

The prologue ends with three of Job's friends and neighbours coming to condole with him on account of the pitiable plight into which he had fallen. The poetical kernel of the book begins with Job's cursing the day of his birth, declaring that it would have been best for him never to have been born, or, failing that, to have died at birth. The untroubled darkness of the grave would have been far preferable to the bitterness into which life has now brought him. This soliloquy of Job's (ch. 3) gives the cue to his friends to speak their minds, and so the dialogue begins.

The main dialogue—that between Job and the three friends mentioned in 2:11—is divided into three rounds. In the first round Eliphaz speaks (chs 4-5) and Job answers (chs 6-7), Bildad speaks (ch. 8) and Job answers (chs 9-10), Zophar speaks (ch. 11) and Job answers (chs 12-14). The second round follows the same pattern: Eliphaz speaks (ch. 15) and Job answers (chs 16-17), Bildad speaks (ch. 18) and Job answers (ch. 19), Zophar speaks (ch. 20) and Job answers (ch. 21). The third round appears to be truncated; in it only two of the friends take part: Eliphaz speaks (ch. 22) and Job answers (chs 23-24), Bildad speaks (ch. 25) and Job answers (ch. 26), but instead of a further interchange between Zophar and Job, Job continues talking after his direct reply to Bildad, giving voice to what is called 'his parable' (Heb. *niashal*) in 27:1 and 29:1—actually a meditation on the majesty and mystery of God's power and wisdom (chs 27-28) and on the contrast between the prosperity and righteousness of his own former life and his present misery (chs 29-31).

Then comes a brief prose interlude (32:1-5), introducing a new character, Elihu, who (it appears) has been all the time

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listening to the conversation as a silent and unobtrusive outsider. But now, no longer able to contain his exasperation at the failure of these four older men to see the truth of the matter, he breaks in and offers his own solution (chs 32-37) of the problem which they have so inconclusively debated. Then he disappears as suddenly as he appeared, and there is no further reference to him; the next Interlocutor is God Himself, who ignores Elihu's intervention and takes up the argument at the point where Job left off in ch. 31, addressing Himself directly to Job. God's answer to Job covers chs 38-41, with the exception of Job's brief apologetic interjection in 40:3-5. The poem ends with Job's humble response to God in 42:1-6; the prose epilogue follows and concludes the whole book (42:7-17).

¹ In many other respects as well Job is much more intelligible in the R.V. than in the A.V.

There is a subtle differentiation in the character-portrayal of the three friends. Eliphaz is respectful; he is a deeply religious man, and appeals to divine revelation, given, for example, in the form of a night-vision (cf. 4:12 ff.). Zophar, contrariwise, is blunt and harsh; he states his point of view dogmatically. Bildad is betwixt and between; he appeals to the authority of ancient tradition (cf. 8:8).

These three men, like Job himself, begin with the same conventional doctrine, that suffering is the result of sin, but he and they draw opposite conclusions from the doctrine. Job says: 'Suffering is the result of sin; but I am innocent. Therefore it is unjust that this should befall me.' This is the basis of his argument against God, to which God at length replies. His friends, however, say: 'Suffering is the result of sin; therefore Job must be a sinner.' And the purpose of their arguments is to persuade Job to confess his sin. It may be some secret sin, known to himself but successfully kept hidden from his fellows thus far, which has found him out at last; or it may be some sin not known even to himself. In either case, they insist, it is useless arrogance on Job's part to go on arguing against God; whether consciously or unconsciously, he must have sinned; let him therefore confess that he is a sinner, in order that the suffering may be removed.

Elihu then emerges into the limelight for a brief space in order to help Job and his friends to break out from the impasse of their debate: 'Both sides are wrong', he says, 'suffering is sent to train and refine us; in the present instance, it is sent to purify Job of his self-righteousness' (cf. 34:5 ff.). Elihu's point of view, in fact,

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is similar to that which finds expression in the New Testament in Heb. 12:7-11.

We can trace little progression in the arguments of the three friends; they keep on ringing the changes on the same old themes: God is omnipotent and God is righteous; Job must therefore submit and repent. But Job's replies do show a real progression of thought, which reaches its peak in the words of 19:25-27a. These words are among the most difficult to translate in the whole book of Job: a comparison of the text of the R.V. with the marginal alternatives will show how uncertain their sense is. But here is an attempt to represent it:

Yet I know that my Champion lives,
And at last on the earth he will rise up;
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
Even apart from my body I shall see God;
I shall see Him on my side, my eyes will behold Him,
And not as an adversary.

Job's friends, throughout their arguments with him, have no thought at all of bringing in a new world to redress the balance of the old. There is no suggestion that one who receives evil things in this life may have the compensation of comfort in a life after death. And elsewhere Job also limits his outlook to the horizon of this bodily life. That is what makes his mental anguish so poignant. His vindication, he believes, must come—if it comes at all—in his lifetime. For once a man dies, he is dead. If there were any hope to be expected in a future life, how eagerly would he embrace it!

If a man die, shall he live again?

All the days of my warfare would I wait,
Till my release should come.
Thou shouldest call, and I would answer thee:
Thou wouldest have a desire to the work of thine
hands (14:14 f.).

But he has no such hope:

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will
sprout again,
And that the tender branch thereof will not cease...
But man dieth, and wasteth away:
Yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? (14:7-10).

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All the more impressive, therefore, is his sudden upward leap of faith in 14:25, where—if only for a moment—he declares that his vindicator, his champion, his kinsman-redeemer, his *goel*,² is alive, and that his vindication will be manifested, it not here and now, then somehow after the dissolution of this present bodily life. Nay more: this Vindicator is God Himself, and Job looks forward to seeing Him stand up as his Advocate, not as his Adversary.

When we hear the familiar rendering of the words, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth...' recited at the burial of the dead or sung in Handel's *Messiah*, we fill them with a fulness of meaning which would have been impossible to Job. For we live in a day when Christ has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel, and we receive the words in the light of their fulfilment in Him who rose from the dead and became the first-fruits of those who sleep. We can say that we know, for we know that Christ is risen; but for Job in that day to say 'I know' involved an outreaching of faith which we can scarcely comprehend, even if, at the time, it was but momentary. We know that many of the things said by Job and his friends were wrong; God accused the three friends of not speaking concerning Him 'the thing that is right' (42:7), and He even charged Job himself with 'darkening counsel by words without knowledge' (38:2). But in these words of Job we have a pure example of prophetic inspiration, a meeting-place of God's revelation and man's responsive faith.

There is no stated solution of the problem of suffering in the book of Job, not even when God Himself enters into the debate. But we are warned against accepting too facile and naive a solution. The greater part of what God says in chs 38-41 is intended to make Job realize that there are a great many things in the world that he does not understand, and that he must therefore not be stumbled if he fails to understand the suffering that has come upon him. Job learns his lesson; and in the presence of God the problem disappears. He humbles himself before God and accepts His will as best.

Job was a wiser man as the result of his suffering; he appreciated the mystery of the ways of God and his own littleness more than he could ever have done in a life of unbroken prosperity. So the

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² The word that is used of the 'kinsman-redeemer', in the book of Ruth and also of the 'avenger of blood' in Num. 35 12, etc.

suffering which befell him in the first instance because satan presented God with a challenge that could not be ignored was overruled by God for Job's own benefit. When he was 'exercised' by it, it produced in him 'the peaceable fruit of righteousness' (Heb. 12:11). 'Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world' (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 81).

A number of years ago, Dr Campbell Morgan wrote a book with the suggestive title, *The Answers of Jesus to Job*. Questions raised in Job's day about the deepest issues of life had inevitably to remain unanswered until Christ came and gave the answer. And when He came, He gave the answer not only in word but in deed. This is supremely so with regard to the central question of the book of Job—the problem of suffering. For when we see our Lord accept and fulfil the prophecy of the obedient and suffering Servant of Isa. 53, bearing the sin of many in order to present them righteous before God, there we have the true answer to the problem—if only we could grasp it.

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