

THE PROBLEM OF THEODICY
IN
THE BOOK OF JOB *

BY

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Foreword.

Most of the authorities on the O. T. literature think that in the Book of Job we have the supreme literary masterpiece of the Hebrew genius.

The grandeur of its lofty style, the richness of its vocabulary and the passion for truth expressed in a solemn and dignified message for all times, give it its singular position among the great or classic products of the whole world literature. Its character is lyric and dramatic, but this does not mean that our book must be strictly classified as epic or drama. It belongs rather to a class by itself, as a particular kind of *sui generis* Semitic product, than to any Greek poetic form.

The unknown author was a man with a singular experience. As another hero of Ithaca, he was ἀνήρ πολύτροπος, a man who lived among civilized people and travelled in the desert, a man who loved freedom and enjoyed an independent life, who loved God and his neighbor, but who at last met with pain and was perplexed by the problem of evil. This truly religious personality with his advantages and misfortunes, his power of reading the depths of the human heart and his efforts to understand the mysteries of God, especially in His dealings with man and his suffering, is still living in his book.

To seek, however, to understand the mysteries of God is generally an incessant human desire in any inhabited place and at any period of time; similarly, to look after the ways of God will be the main anxiety in the time to come, and from this point of view the value and direct application of our book will endure for ever.

The book in its present form includes sections which appa-

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rently come from earlier or later hands. The spiritual struggles of our poet (chs. 3—31 and 38—42, 6, composed probably at the end of the fifth century or the beginning of the fourth) were framed by the beginning and the end (prologue, chs. 1—2, and epilogue, 42, 7—17) of a pre-existing popular story. Later insertions are the Elihu's speeches (chs. 32—37), the poem of Wisdom (ch. 28) and the descriptions of the Behemoth and the Leviathan (ch. 40, 15—ch. 41, 34).

1. *The Problem of Theodicy.*

The problem of the book of Job is what theologians call the problem of theodicy. The term (Germ. Theodizee, adapted from Fr. théodicée which is a compound of Gr. Θεός «God» + δίκη «trial», «judgement»), used first in its distinctive sense by Leibniz («Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de l'homme et l'origine du mal»), means literally the (or a) justification or vindication of God. As a rule, the use of the term is in keeping with its literal meaning, and theodicy is understood as the (or a) vindication of the divine providence in view of the existence of evil.

The problem then arises from the difficulty to compromise the theistic conception of God as powerful, wise and good with the presence of evil in the world. To answer the question «Si deus bonus, unde malum?» is perhaps the most serious challenge to the theistic human mind. Geniuses of religion and philosophy came forth to

«assert Eternal Providence,

And justify the ways of God to men»¹,

to defend the Creator of the world against the accusations presented against Him by reason «on account of the anomalies of the world»², but all of them met with the same hardships.

The need of such a defense and vindication is felt neither in primitive religion under polydaemonism, since the world is subject to good and evil spirits, nor in dualism and polytheism, where gods or principles (or the God or the principle) of evil are responsible for it. In these stages of religious belief the thought is uncritical and instinctive to the point that even the gods come under the fate or necessity hovering over the world (cp. the Gr. ἀνάγκη καὶ θεοὶ πείθονται). This fatalistic concep-

1. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. i. l. 25 f.

2. Kant, I. «Theodizee» in *Berlinische Monatschrift*. Sept., 1791, p. 194.

tion is also found in the beginnings of all the historical religions, and examples of it exist in the great heroic poems, as the Iliad, the Mahabharata and the Niebelungenlied.

To minimize evil or reduce it to illusion is a tendency of the monistic systems, diverging from reality. This tendency is observable in the cosmic and acosmic pantheisms of Stoicism and Brahmanism respectively.

At the monotheistic stage of religion, however, where thought becomes critical and reflective, the problem of theodicy arises and calls for a solution. Here, God is recognized as wholly good, and evil as truly evil and the question «Si deus bonus, unde malum» remains a constant challenge.

2. *The Problem of Theodicy in the O. T.*

The fatalism referred to above is found also in the early period of the Hebrew religion. Yahweh, here, is represented like the other ancient deities, moody and capricious, subject to violent outbursts of anger. The eating of the forbidden fruit in Eden (Gen. 3), the attempt to build a tower reaching heaven (Gen. 11), the sin of Sodom and Gomorah (Gen. 18), the neglect of circumcision (Ex. 4,24) and so many other examples (cp. Gen. 32,24 f.; 41, 25—32. Judg. 6,13. I Sam. 4,3. II Sam. 16,10. II Kings 10,32; 15,15) arouse the anger of the deity, which breaks forth blindly and brings disaster not at all in proportion to the offence. This fatalistic conception, developed during the times before the prophets, was shaped in the dogma of retribution which is later denied in the book of Job. According to this retribution, reward is coupled with righteousness and punishment with impiety, or, again, prosperity with godliness and misfortune with sin. The chosen people stand responsible even for individual sins and only a collective repentance may check the coming divine vengeance (Nu. 21,6—9). As a rule, however, collective retribution applies to the national or individual actions as effect is related to cause (Ex. 20,12, Lev. 26,3. Gen. 2,17. Lev. 26,5; 13,22. Deut. 28,20. I Sam. 2,9-10).

When the prophets began to emphasize the moral aspect of the covenant and placed Israel on an equal footing with the other nations of the world in respect to God's impartial and righteous rule of the universe, world history was transformed into a continuous process of world judgment. Here, again, the fortunes

of the peoples depend on their attitude towards God's command.

This emphasis of the righteousness of God, made by the prophets and particularly by Amos (Am. 3,2), does not mean that it made the problem easier, but, on the contrary, made it more difficult.

Further, the rise of individual retribution put new stumbling blocks in the way of this perfect theodicy. The fact that righteousness and prosperity did not coexist too often in the same person contradicted the dogmatic faith. Jeremiah himself, who with *Īzekiel* laid the foundation for the doctrine of individual retribution, was perplexed by the anomalies of the everyday life (Jer. 20,7—13). Habakkuk is also acquainted with the shortcomings of retribution (Hab. 1,13).

During the post-exilic period, cruel fate, which visited on hapless people, could find little justification in their conduct, as many a Psalm contrasts the righteousness of a defeated and oppressed Israel with the triumph of the wicked and godless nations (Pss. 44; 59; 69; 74 etc.), or presents the shock felt by the pious on account of seeing the wicked prosper (Pss. 10; 37; 73; 92; 94 etc. Cp. also Mal. 3,14 f.). The strong conviction of a final retribution (Pss. 1; 7; 32; 37; 68; 119; 145; 147; cp. Pss. 2,21 f.; 3,33; 10,24f. et al.) did not give any real issue to the problem. Here, the consolation, coming from messianic expectations, was an uncertain future retribution escaping the need of the individual for just reward of his piety. The sufferings of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked could be reconciled with the justice of God only if this world was viewed as a fragment of the existence in the hereafter, which would round out life into a harmonious whole¹.

Some of the psalmists, however, approached the problem in a superb religious way similar to that used in the book of Job; they no longer search for a logical answer to the problem, since they find that «the nearness of God» is their Good (ps. 73, 28. Cp. also Pss. 7,9f; 17,3 f.; 37,39f.).

3. *The Problem of Theodicy in the Book of Job.*

In Job the problem of theodicy may be stated as follows:

1. In Christianity the problem of theodicy is treated by the doctrine of Fall, whereas in Judaism (the Talmudic and the later rabbinic theology) by a very complicated doctrine of retribution.

«since God is responsible for all that exists, he is responsible for evil; unless evil can be shown to have either a rational purpose or a rational explanation in human actions, God cannot be regarded as benevolent and just»¹.

In other words, the problem of evil involves the task of reconciling two ideals; that of Power and that of Good. If God is all-powerful, how can He be all-good and permit evil to exist? The opposite statement—if He is all-good, how can He be all-powerful and allow evil to infest the world—is not stated, since the author of Job does not raise the question of the omnipotence of God.

Now, let us follow the main lines in the book itself, passing over, however, what we already considered as additions.

A. The prologue (chs. 1—2) contains the story of Job who in spite of the severest trials, the loss of his wealth, children and health maintains his faith in God. The events take place in heaven and on earth. There, Satan is given his will to test Job whose blameless piety is confessed by Yahweh Himself, but denied by Satan as not pure and disinterested; here, Job's answer to calamity is «Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord» (1,21). This attitude he maintains and to this spirit he holds fast in the face of his wife's unbelief and the sorrowful silence of his friends.

B. The debate between Job and his three friends (chs. 3-31) constitutes the main part of the book. In ch. 3, Job, moved by the presence and the sympathizing gestures of his friends, loses his self-control and breaks out into a passionate cry for death. In 3,20, his complaint is climaxed: «wherever is light given to him that is in misery, And life unto the bitter in soul»?

After that, there are three cycles of speeches: Job speaks, and each of the three friends in turn answers him.

In our present text, no third speech is assigned to Zophar. Most commentators feel that the first verse of ch. 26 has found its way into the text by accident, and that Bildad's third speech includes this chapter also. Of Job's answer, only 27, 1—6 survives, for it seems clear that the remainder of ch. 27 belongs to Zophar. Probably a section containing the end of Job's speech and the beginning of Zophar's was lost at an early stage in the history of the text.

1. Pfeiffer, R. H. Introduction to the O. T., p. 694.

These series of speeches present the problem of Job's afflictions, and the relation of evil to the righteousness of God.

To this problem, the three friends have to give a short and simple answer: happiness and unhappiness are distributed to men in this life, in exact accordance with their merits. Their answer is not any other than the old doctrine of retribution which regarded all suffering as punitive. Job must have been wicked beyond all men to have incurred so great a penalty. From this position the friends never move; the only change they experience is emotional, not intellectual, for, as the debate proceeds, they grow steadily more angry with Job and more outspoken in their accusations. Their speeches cover the same ground again and again. It is, however, of the very essence of the writer's purpose that they should one and all say essentially the same thing. They formulate different aspects of the same theory, or proofs of it, such as the divine origin of it (4, 12f. Eliphaz), its antiquity (8, 5 f. Bildad; 15, 8f. Eliphaz; 20, 4 Zophar), the impossibility, due to man's ignorance, of successfully disputing it (11, 5 f. Zophar) etc.

This theory Job strenuously combats in presenting the convictions of the author of the book. He knows that it is not true. In the inmost depth of his consciousness he is certain that he has not provoked the calamities which have fallen upon him by his sins. But if so, how are his sufferings to be accounted for? Can it be that God does not care? Are goodness and wickedness indifferent to Him? If not, why do so many of the ungodly prosper? Why is the just, upright man so often oppressed and laughed and scorned? Job despairs of solving his problem before he comes to personal acquaintance with God. Before that, he is portrayed as a thoroughgoing sceptic, if not a stark pessimist. He finds no meaning in life; no reason in reality.

He agrees with his friends as to the might of God, and as to the frailty of human nature. But while all men sin, men differ widely in the extent to which they sin. But it is those who like himself are relatively free from sin and within the limitations of human frailty perfect who suffer, and it is the wicked who often prosper, so that it may, at least, be said that God sends on suffering indifferently to the perfect and the wicked (9, 22—24). Sometimes, he speaks as if God were simply indifferent to moral distinctions, slaying good and bad without discrimination. At other times, he speaks as if God directly favoured the wicked.

The difference is largely one of mood and expression. What he means is that the Government of the world is radically immoral. For Job evil is a real existence which unbearably closes him around, and since everything owes its existence to God, evil must be identified with God's injustice. Witnesses to it are his own experience and the cry of the outside World. His own suffering proves the delight of God in tormenting a weak mortal, one of His own creatures (7, 17 f.). It is God who sent the unexampled misfortunes, a most painful and loathsome disease, the defection of his wife, the cruel charges of his friends, the desertion of his relatives, the insulting language and actions of the rabble and all the other forms of evil which befell him (ch. 19), so that his sorrow became heavier than the sand and was felt as poison in his soul (6, 2 f.). It is God who assails him like a giant and dashes him to pieces; who cruelly persecutes him, breaks him with a tempest and dissolves him in the storm; who dismays him with terrors and horrible dreams.

Further, his own misery sharpens his insight into the misery of the world. What happens to him is a fate for many others, whereas no man knows what his own share will be. So, the whole mankind comes under the threat of evil and man is valued no more than a worm or a blossom. «Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble» (14, 1). It is true that our author admires the greatness, order and wisdom of the physical and animal world, but with regard to man he could have endorsed the Homeric :

«οὐ μὲν γὰρ τί ποῦ ἐστὶν οἰζυρότερον ἀνδρὸς
πάντων, ὅσσα τε γαῖαν ἐπι πνεῖται τε καὶ ἔρπει»¹.

Man might not trust himself as well as the surroundings in which he lives. His neighbors and nature itself are to him sources of trouble. Here, his neighbors thieve, deceive, move landmarks (20, 19; 22, 6 et al.). Murderer, thief and adulterer commit their sins in the darkness of the night (24, 16 f.). Human society may become a shelter of inequalities in rank and property and a disguise of humiliation and affliction on the weak person and the low classes (ch. 24). There, nature is no less cruel than man. There are animals and plants which are hostile to him and their very existence blocks his way to a prosperous life (5, 22; 10, 16;

1. Iliad XVII. 444 f. «There is nothing more wretched than man
Of all things that breathe and move about upon the earth».

20,14; 31,40 et al.). Famine, war, illness, death and so many other ills afflicting mankind (5,20—22; 7,5; 18,14; 19,13—19; 27,14 et al.) give us a picture of the indisputable existence of evil in the world. That is why the misery of man's life is unbearable, and only in death may the release be found Job's wish to die begins with ch. 3 and further underlies every other of his complaints :

μη φῦναι τὸν ἅπαντα νι-
κα λόγον· τὸ δ', ἐπῆν φανῆ,
βῆναι κείθεν ὄθεν περ ἦκει,
πολὺ δεύτερον, ὡς τάχιστα¹.

C. The speeches of the Lord out of the storm (chs. 38-42,6) come as a consequence to Job's repeated demand that God appear and solve the riddle of his life. God answers Job out of the storm. By the descriptions of natural phenomena and animal life, vivid and powerful as they are, Job is brought face to face with God in Nature, the sphere where His wisdom and power are supremely manifest.

God asks him many questions, as it were to ask him, «Who am I?» and «What art thou?». Job, who is called to gird up his loins and meet the challenge as to his own knowledge of the vast mysterious world in which man's lot is cast, has not anything more to say than :

לְשִׁמְעַתְּ אָזְן שָׁמַעְתִּיךָ
וְעַתָּה עֵינִי רָאִתְּךָ
עַל-כֵּן אֲמַאֵם וְנִחַמְתִּי
עַל-עָפָר וְאֶמֶר :

(«I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye has seen Thee.
Therefore I retract and repent
In dust and ashes» 42,5—6)².

His former knowledge of Him was like that learned from

1. Soph., Oed. Col. 1225 f. «Not to be born is the most to be desired; but having seen the light, the next best is to go whence one came as soon as may be».

2. According to the American Translation.

hearsay, dim and imperfect; now he saw Him eye to eye, and in dust and ashes he repents his former words and demeanour.

D. The epilogue, in prose (ch. 42,7—17), though a conclusion of the popular story of «the patient Job», frames the struggles of our «impatient hero».

Yahweh justifies Job, condemns the friends, accepts the prayer of Job for their forgiveness, and restores to him in double what he had lost. The book closes with a picture which represents the ancient Israelite ideal of prosperity. The poet who used the beginning of the story may have kept its end as a concession to the feeling, prevalent in his day and ours, that called for «a happy ending».

4. *The Religious Answer to the Problem.*

As we have seen, the result of the sharp controversy between Job and his friends was an increase of bitterness and misunderstanding. Job and his critics are driven constantly farther apart; any chance of reconciling such divergent views is more hopeless at the end than the beginning. The epilogue gives Job the right as against his friends, but this is a plain connotation of Job's solemn attitude towards the problem. This attitude is not expressed by an «academic» discussion, but by a strong man's religious view of the oppressive facts of life.

It is true that he was burdened by the order of things as it appeared to him, but it was a question not of an abstract scheme. The lofty monotheism attained by his people thoroughly sustains even the boldest of his arguments. He speaks much about the darkness, and while his path is beset by mystery, he still clings to the belief that behind the darkness there is God. To such a man, blank atheism, shallow agnosticism, or coarse materialism is impossible. In one sense we may say that the intensity of his faith is the measure of his doubt. Besides, it is this faith that gave the problem its singular exposition corresponding not only to the author of a remote time, but to our own souls, in times of perplexity.

Further, it is this faith that gives a religious answer to the problem. The way to it is mainly opened by two traits in Job's thinking; his hope of a life beyond and his protest against the doctrine of retribution.

The first appears in the speeches of Job as a feeble, fluctuat-

ing and uncertain hope. At times Job's faith pierces through the darkness and cherishes the thought that God's purpose may include the underworld, the shadowy realm of Sheol. Passages as 14,14 («If a man die, shall he live again...»), 16,19 («Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven, .»), and the great passage 19,25—27, though they do not reliably express the idea of bodily resurrection, afford us with the vague hope that even after death Job may know that the controversy as to his substantial righteousness has been decided in his favour.

The second is his criticism of the rigid doctrine of retribution which made sin the explanation of all suffering. This doctrine might not be applied to individual cases without injustice. There are cases of suffering which come not under the strict measurement of retribution, but left in mystery beyond the power of our limited thought and relieved by patient submission to God.

Job, in the presence of the Divine Vision, acknowledges that he feels his own vileness, that he has been reckless in his speech, that he has been too prone to make man's mind the measure of God's thought.

This is submission sincere and complete, but it is not abject; it is before God, not man or man's creed, that he humiliates himself in the dust.

In his own way and after a fierce struggle, Job found not complete intellectual satisfaction, but a real relationship to God. The descriptions of God's power and wisdom in Nature show his escaping from the close atmosphere of self into a larger world where the great battles of faith and freedom are won and a final appeal to the throne of the living God is possible.

5. The Philosophical Insolubility.

Beyond a religious answer, it is, as the authorities on the subject affirm, impossible to find a philosophical solution of the problem. Every proposed solution, in the field of philosophy, either leaves the old question «si deus bonus, unde malum»? unanswered or raises new ones. A religious answer, as the one given above, should not be called theological, since the last term is mainly dialectic and, consequently, may be used for philosophical reasoning. The victory through faith is no more man's justification of God's ways than God's justification of His own

ways, and this not by accounting for the world's evil, but by saving men from it.

To assert, as in the prologue of the book of Job, that suffering is to test the nature of a man's religion and show whether it is sufficiently disinterested to stand the storm, or, as Job's friends maintain, that it is for punishment which invariably follows the breaking of God's law, or, further, as Elihu thinks, that it is meant as a warning which should lead to repentance and amendment, may explain a number of cases, but it does not stand for a religious or intellectual facing of the problem.

The insolubility of the problem does not mean, however, that philosophy should stop attempting its solution. It is by its real nature that philosophy attempts every probable approach to truth. From this point of view the most well-known approaches to the problem in contemporary philosophy are those attempted by pluralism on the one hand, and dialecticism, on the other. Pluralism holds to a limited God; we have to be His fellow-workers in order to arrive at the greatest good that He knows to be possible of attainment. Dialecticism denies good and evil as such for all time and all spaces.—The lack of commonness and uniformity of nature in pluralism as well as the abolition of the problem in dialecticism show how far we are from a real rational solution.

Such being the nature of the problem, it is easily understood why the following theists express their theodicies with measured words.

Macintosh, D. C. says that «While this world is far from being as yet the best possible one, nevertheless in view of its general constitution it may be regarded as the best possible kind of world in which to have man begin his development, and ... the evils which exist in the world furnish no good reason for abandoning belief in a God who is both good enough and great enough to meet every religious need»¹.

Taylor, A. E. confesses that «Life can be terribly hard, and why a good God should permit it to be as hard as it often is none of us can say. What we can say, and what I do say, is that there is still room for the faith that he who encounters its trials with a high-hearted humility will, in the end, find that he has won a prize which was worth the full price he has paid for it.

1. *Theology as an Empirical Science*, London, 1919, p. 217.

But if the prize is to be won, the price has to be paid»¹.

Finally, Pfeiffer, R. H. closes his chapter on Job as follows: «Man is an insignificant being in the magnificently glorious world around him, a world which manifests so clearly God's power and wisdom. His own miseries may have an incomprehensible purpose in the scheme of things or, if such is not the case, they are so infinitesimal in the cosmos that they can hardly mar the perfection of God's creation and the character of the Creator. Such was perhaps the final conclusion of our author»².

Conclusion.

From what we said above, we may conclude that the problem of theodicy may be considered either from a religious point of view, when evil is to be overcome by faith, or from a philosophical point of view, when evil is to be explained by reason.

In the book of Job, the answer to the problem is religious and, consequently evil is faced by faith in God.

True, Job's questions are not intellectually answered, but for him it is enough, for in the presence of God they are forgotten. It is, after all, here that the final message of the book lies. Questions may agitate the mind of man, problems may torture his spirit, but when once he has seen God, when once he has stood before Him and begun by fellowship to know Him, the questions and problems vanish.

There is something deeper than reason, more convincing than logical argument, and in the light of religious experience one might deeply understand Job's words [13,15];

«Though He slay me
Yet will I wait for Him»³.

1. Does God Exist?, New York, 1947, p. 166.

2. Introd. p. 707.

3. According to the *Revised Version*.