

The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Job

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Of the various Wisdom books of the Old Testament the book of Job, by general consent, is outstanding both for literary beauty, for penetration of thought, and still more for the intensesness with which one of the fundamental problems of life is wrestled with. It is easy to answer the question 'Why do men suffer?' by saying that they suffer because they sin—easy, so long as the thinker holds himself aloof from the real facts of human experience and is content to view the whole subject in abstraction. One of the most influential theologians of our generation has contrasted what he calls the 'balcony' view of life—which looks down upon the crowded street from a comfortable detachment and philosophizes about all that appears to be taking place down there—with the view

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that one gets down on the street as one of the crowd itself. Whatever advantage is gained by the detachment of the balcony is outweighed by the lack of personal experience, personal involvement in all that is taking place. Job in the days of his ease was well content to accept the conventional solution of suffering with which he had been brought up—that a man's suffering was proportioned to his sin. But when he himself was involved in the, mystery of undeserved suffering, it assumed quite a different aspect. And the reason for the perennial appeal of the story of Job lies in the fact that the problem with which he had to grapple—and for which he found no satisfactory solution—is perhaps the most poignant problem with which ordinary men and women still have to grapple.

The bulk of the book of Job is cast in poetical form, but it is provided with a prose prologue (1:1—2:13) and a prose epilogue (42:7-17).

In the prologue Job is introduced to us as a Bedouin sheikh, living in the land of Uz, in north-west Arabia, belonging to a clan which, like the Israelites, traced its ancestry back to the family of Abraham (cf. Gen. 22:21; 36:28). He was possibly of Edomite stock, as also were his friends, although there is no convincing ground for identifying him with the Edomite king Jobab of Gen. 36:33 ff.¹

The prose parts of the book may be older than the main poetical part; at any rate, the reference to him in Ezek. 14:14-20 suggests that his reputation for righteousness was famed from ancient days.

¹ This identification was made in Jewish tradition as early as the closing centuries B.C. The Septuagint text of Job appends a note at the end as follows: 'This is translated from the Syriac book [presumably from an Aramaic Targum of Job]. He lived in the land of Uz on the borders of Edom and Arabia, and his name at first was Johab. He took an Arabian wife and begot a son whose name was Ennon. His father was Zerah, a son of the sons of Esau, and his mother was Bozrah; so that he was in the fifth generation from Abraham. And these are the kings who reigned in Edom, the land which he himself also governed: first Balak the son of Beor, the name of whose city was Dinhabah; after Balak, Jobab who is called Job; after him, Husham who was a chief from the land of Teman; after him, Hadad the son of Barad who slaughtered Midian in the field of Moab, the name of whose city was Geththaim. And the friends who came to Job were Eliphaz of the sons of Esau, king of the Temanites; Bildad, ruler of the Shuhites; Zophar, king of the Minaeans.' This is a piece of typical midrashic exegesis.

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The prologue tells how he was stripped of everything that, in the opinion of most people, made life worth living, and yet maintained his loyalty to God; the epilogue tells how his fortunes were restored.

The reader enjoys an advantage over Job and his friends; he is told at the outset why Job was allowed to suffer. We are shown the heavenly court, the Council of Jehovah, in session (for other pictures of this see 1 Kings 22:19 ff.; Zech. 3:1 ff.). Satan ('The Adversary') appears at court in his proper function of public prosecutor. As he roves throughout the world of men, he finds ample occasion to enter accusations against them before the Supreme Judge; hut God challenges him to find anything blameworthy in His servant Job. Of course there is none, says Satan; it pays Job to be righteous. When God has endowed Job with so much of this world's goods, Job would be a fool not to do God's will. 'But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hash, and he will renounce thee to thy face' (Job. 1:11). The challenge must be taken up; God's own reputation is bound up with His servant's, and Satan is accordingly permitted to deprive job in one day of all his family and his wealth. The sequel vindicates God's estimate of His servant; Job maintains his righteousness. But Satan persists in his cynicism; at the next session of the heavenly court his attention is again directed to Job's steadfast character, but he argues that so long as Job enjoys good health he has a material motive for serving God. Again the challenge is taken up, and Job is covered from head to foot with loathsome leprous sores. The highly respected sheikh who had until lately lived in comfort and affluence now sits a beggar on an ash-heap, trying to relieve his festering skin of its intolerable itch by scraping it with a piece of broken pottery. Now he has no material motive left for serving God, hut even when his wife urges him to give up the whole thing as a hopeless business, his response is: 'What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?'

So much for the prologue. It introduces us to the main body of the book, where various solutions arc offered by Job and his friends as they tackle the problem of why so apparently good a man should suffer so. But even when the prose narrative is resumed in the epilogue, and Job's fortunes are restored, he still remains ignorant of the true cause of his afflictions. This, however,

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it to be noted, that the prose narrative itself, however early it may be, gives the lie to the view that a man's sufferings are necessarily the consequence of his sin. The prose narrative thus makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to the treatment of the problem of suffering. How the problem is treated at greater length and in more detail in the poetical body of the book will be the consideration of our next paper.

(to be continued)

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