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ARTICLE III.

THE BOOK OF JOB.

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THE whole Bible is so real a book in all its parts that it seems unnecessary to raise the preliminary question whether the incidents and characters of the book of Job are historical or merely the creations of the poet's fancy. We shall assume it as conceded that Job and his friends were real men, Satan a real devil, the property which Job lost real marketable wealth, the disease, the ashes, and the potsherd real, the thoughts and mental states historical, and only the presentation of the facts poetical.

The book of Job is, beyond question, the sublimest poem in all literature. Leaving out of view, for the moment, the fact of divine inspiration, looking at it simply as literature, as we look at the Iliad, the Prometheus, the Æneid, the Divine Comedy, King Lear, Hamlet, Paradise Lost, or Faust, it plainly surpasses all these masterpieces in the sublimity of its purpose, the consummate skill of its plot, the jewelled richness of its materials, the repose of its manner, the resistless rush of its thoughts, the consenting unity of all its parts.

There has been much shallow criticism of Hebrew poetry. Our literature took its rise in Greece. Ancient and Modern Italy, France, England, Germany, and America—all trace their letters back to Cadmus. Aristotle is the father of our systematic rhetoric. Because the poetry of the Bible does not fall readily into a Greek classification, the impression has gone abroad that Hebrew poetry

is of a nondescript character, lacking in artistic symmetry and perfection of type. Never was impression more unjust. The poetic types of the Psalms, the Song of Songs, and of Job are as perfect as the lyric and dramatic types of Attica.

The question has been debated whether Job is a tragedy. Perhaps not, if the word "tragedy" is defined in a narrow fashion, combining essential characteristics with the accidental developments or accessories of the Dionysiac stage of Athens. It is not adapted to be acted in a theatre. But all the fundamentals of tragedy are present in a striking degree. The plot, as in the best Greek tragedies, takes in God and man. The protagonist is of just that character which Aristotle has pronounced the best subject for tragedy—one not deeply guilty nor altogether innocent. In enlarging upon this canon, Barron says: "The proper characters for tragedy should be possessed of high virtues to interest the spectators in their happiness, but they should be exhibited as liable to errors and indiscretions arising from the weakness of human nature, the violence of passion, or the intemperate pursuit of objects commendable and useful. The misfortunes of such persons properly painted take hold of the mind with irresistible effect. They engage every sympathetic feeling of the soul, and they make us tremble lest, by our indiscretion in similar indulgence of our passions, we shall throw ourselves into similar distress."

The question of this drama is the one supreme question of humanity in all ages and places. What is the proper attitude of man toward the government of God? or, to change the phrase, In what mood should a good man accept the mysterious providences, the bitter disappointments, the sudden and heart-breaking calamities of life? The book answers this question by presenting in dramatic form what one great soul did pass through and did attain. There is an entanglement, a progress of action, and finally a surprising but self-evidently right solution. There is

indeed in Job but little external action. The book is in this like the Prometheus of Æschylus and the Hamlet of Shakespeare. The interest of the tragedy centres in the mental experiences of the chief actor. Upon the stage of his mind there is variety and progress enough.

The book of Job ends not in woe but in peace, not in horror, blood, and suicide, but in triumph. But it is not therefore excluded from the category of true tragedy. We are not therefore compelled to call it, as Dante felt compelled to call his "Vision," a comedy. Rather here is a divine superiority. Tragedies commonly end in darkness, because the poets cannot bring their heroes again into the light without relaxing the intensity of the emotions and returning to the commonplace. The Hebrew poet carries his hero onward and upward through darkness into a celestial light more sublime than the storms of passion, and thus from a merely artistic point of view achieves a double triumph in a good ending without a bathos.

The claim is often made that art to reach its highest excellence must exist only for itself. A moral purpose is thought to change the winged steed into a cart-horse. But this canon of criticism cannot be accepted. Purposeless eloquence is mere declamation; purposeless verse, mere jingle. Language is but the expression of thought, and aimless thought is folly. High art must choose high themes; highest art, the highest. Tragedy must go for its intensest passions to the relations of the soul with its Creator. It must show us estrangement and reconciliation in the one great love-affair. Art is art so far as it is true and holds a mirror up to nature. In nature the religious is highest and deepest. Highest art, deepest art, will then be art portraying the deepest religious experiences of a great soul. Such is the book of Job. This book is the only divinely guided attempt to deal poetically with the greatest of human experiences. It is the only successful attempt. And therefore it is necessarily, as I have said,

the sublimest poem in literature. Let us now examine in such detail as our brief time allows the structure of this wonderful book, the colors with which the author paints, and the truths which he succeeds in setting forth.

As a Swiss guide who is about to lead a party up the Matterhorn I need not beg pardon if I pause a moment to remind my fellow-travellers that the ascent is high and difficult. A steady foot and a courageous heart are demanded. Not all can climb with comfort among Alpine sublimities, or breathe easily in this high air, or look without dizziness down on mountain ranges.

The scene of the book of Job is laid in the unchanging East under the crystal sky of Arabia,—

> "So cloudless, clear, and purely beautiful,
> That God alone is to be seen in heaven."

The poet recognizes and uses down to the minutest fact the artistic value of the situation. The patriarchal life of Arabia strikes with unmatched felicity the meeting-point of civilization and wildness. The freeness and mystery of the desert is in it without the stupidity and brutality of North American or African savage tribes. Profound spiritual philosophy and personal worth are as naturally in place under a black Bedouin tent with the silent desert around and the silent stars above as in university halls. By exquisite touches, through constant reference of all the speakers, all the products and aspects of nature as known in Arabia are kept before the eye of the reader. Gold and silver and ruby and topaz and onyx and sapphire lend their glitter. There is not an animal or a plant, not even a weed, unnoticed. The vines and shocks of corn, the rushes in the mire, the flags in the water, the saltwort and nettles and thistles and cockles and purslain,—each has its place in the picture. Every phenomenon of plant life and death illustrates or embellishes the thought. The driven leaf, the withering bloom, the ripened grain, the sprouting stock where a tree has been felled,—each suggests by analogy or contrast a human ex-

perience. As with the plants so with the animals. From beginning to end of the poem we see them,—the eagle nesting on the crag and swooping on the prey; the ostrich leaving her eggs in the sand, the raven, the hawk in his flight southward; the wild ass ranging the wilderness and the mountains untamable, the hinds, the wild goats, the jackals, the lions roaring and tearing the prey, the horse with his quivering mane elated in the tumult of battle, the hippopotamus, the crocodile. Insects are not forgotten. The spider's web, the corroding moth, and the worm are each in its place.

All the phenomena of day and night, the opening of the eyelids of the dawn, the moon walking in brightness; the Pleiades, Orion, and the signs of the Zodiac burning in their crystal deeps; Arcturus with his sons traversing the celestial spaces under divine guidance,—all these phenomena are referred to, each in a phrase that is a jewel of literature.

For all the forms of water—mist, dew, cloud, rain, shower, torrent, flood, billow—the Hebrew language, limited as is the literature which we possess, is said to have by actual count as many separate words as the English. And in the book of Job this rich vocabulary is freely employed. Ruskin has dwelt with enthusiasm on the exquisite picture of the brook running black in winter between snowy banks but dry and gone in summer when the fainting caravan turns away confounded and perishes in the waste.

We may say that lightnings flash and thunder rolls from one end of the poem to the other.

Yet with all this mass of material there is no sense of crowding or of confusion, but, on the contrary, a repose like that of the desolate palaces and tombs of the desert, crumbling unhurried, in silence, where time is of no account and even decay feels no haste.

On the Arabian plains, with his flocks and herds grazing far and wide about his tent, lived Job the patriarch in prosperity as unclouded as an Arabian summer day. But

in the spirit world God met his sons, and the great accuser of God and man raised a question. The mystery of the entrance of evil into the universe is one upon which neither the Bible nor philosophy makes any pretense of throwing a ray of light. But evil exists, and existing it must be opposed and conquered. For a thousand years the Christian church held as a theory of the atonement that the death of our Lord was a ransom paid to Satan in discharge of claims upon man as a sinner, and therefore by right Satan's bondslave. It was a ghastly theory which advancing thought outgrew. Still, what the spiritual part of the church has ever held as truth must have at least a side of truth. That truth was in the fact that, evil being present in the world, it must be conquered and silenced by the sufferings of righteousness. As Delitzsch, the most eminent living Old Testament scholar, has said, "The problem of the book of Job is the problem of Golgotha." Satan boasts that Job's apparent piety is hypocritical policy. To meet this slander God permits him to do his utmost upon the possessions and upon the person of faithful Job.

This key the poet gives to us and then refers to it no more. But it must not be forgotten. Job was God's champion divinely selected and put forward to fight for God's honor. This is the first truth of the book of Job. What you and I may suffer, may have its primary reference not to our special needs, but to God's glory in the unseen world. Our patience and loyalty may be accepted by him as priceless service more honorable to him than the accomplishment of any earthly enterprise. Could Job have known from the outset that he was God's champion, how cheerfully would he have borne the brunt of Satan's onset! But he never knew it. Even the divine addresses at the end did not reveal it to him. It remains a fact known to the spectators from first to last, doubling the significance of the drama, but from first to last unknown to him to whom it would have changed every-

thing. By this simple stroke the poet has taught the essential conceit and narrowness of that spirit which asks in each trial of life, What have I done that this calamity should come upon me? As if Job rather than God were the centre of the universe.

We all remember how the story goes on. Job's three friends come to comfort him and help him toward a right moral attitude. There are three rounds of discussion: Eliphaz leading, Bildad following, Zophar closing. To each Job replies. In the third round Zophar, feeling the uselessness of prolonging the colloquy, fails to speak. Then Elihu, a younger man, comes forward to offer his views. At the end Jehovah answers Job out of the whirlwind. Job prostrates himself, accepts the divine reproof. Prosperity returns.

Look first at what Job's friends contribute to the discussion. Let us do them no injustice, as by the sarcasms of Job and the divine rebuke we may be inclined to do. They are the best men of their time and country. Nowhere is age more venerable than in Arabia. A life in the pure open air of the desert, active but not laborious, temperate without hardships, thoughtful without wearing study, ceremonious in courtesy without the dissipations of society, leads to an age of imperial dignity. As these patriarchs in flowing robes and snowy beards approached the sufferer erect and clear-eyed, they were fit types of manhood in its ripe maturity. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar were just men, reverencing a just God. The divine government as they understood it was an administration of inflexible justice, slow, possibly, but sure in its rewards and retributions.

When now they found Job stripped of his wealth and

their opinions. What they saw was readily adjusted to their general notions of the fallibility of man and the methods of the divine government. The plain duty which they thought they saw was to lead Job to the confession of his crimes, and so again to peace. They began tenderly, setting forth the majesty and holiness of God, his justice and irresistible omnipotence, his readiness to forgive, and the inevitable doom of the obstinate sinner. All is general and impersonal. But as Job repels their advice, denies their theory, asserts his innocence, and lays all the blame on God, his friends are horrified at such contumacy, and frankly charge him with adding hypocrisy and blasphemy to a long catalogue of crimes. This is all that they can do.

But the friends of Job are not introduced by the poet simply to reject all their ideas. Far from it. That sin must bring penalty, and righteousness reward, is a truth for all time, and never more timely than now. But the apparent converse is not true, that all suffering argues sin and all prosperity virtue.

What now does Job himself contribute to the discussion? From first to last as against the challenge of Satan he is triumphantly victorious. Satan's question was as to the disinterestedness of Job's piety. Did Job value his gifts only because they came from God? or did he value God only because he gave the gifts? Job, we see, lets his possessions go without a struggle, but is cast into desperate perplexity about his God. Job had shared the notions of his friends regarding the divine government. God is light and in him is no darkness at all. Whatever else is inexplicable, God's ways will always be their own vindication. What God does will always be self-evidently right. Job sincerely loved God and sincerely trusted him and he had always thought that he understood him. But now unconscious of any change in himself he encounters a change in God's dealings. Clouds and thick darkness shut out every ray of light and quench hope.

Notice that the victory of Job over Satan is simply in the proof that Job's personal relation to God is that for which he is concerned supremely. But otherwise Job goes far wrong. He curses his day, he laments and repines, and reproaches his friends. Each of his replies begins with fierce assertions and sarcasms, and dies away in plaintive laments and the utter desolation of woe.

To Job the present situation was an intolerable enigma. He had met an enigma just at the point where, according to all his previous thinking, no enigma could be believed to be. To find a difficulty and an impossibility in justifying the ways of God did not seem to him compatible with religion, any more than confidence in a bank officer seems to us consistent with inability to understand how he balances his accounts. These dreadful doubts shook as with a seismic rocking the foundations of the moral universe. Confident in his own integrity, Job longs to come face to face with God and have everything explained. If for a little while the terrors of omnipotence could be veiled and God would listen to Job, Job could prove that things should be otherwise. With really profane self-confidence he clamors for a hearing in the court of heaven. Wrestling in this awful darkness, however, Job gains a second great victory—a triumph which thinkers of to-day may well ponder.

In the patriarchal age the history of God's redemptive revelation lay yet concealed in the future. The historic Christ was unknown. If Job and his friends knew God at all by revelation, that revelation was scarcely more than a confirmation of the light of nature, no addition to it. The question is often asked now a days whether without a knowledge of the gospel men could find warrant for

ny; the jeers of base men and the solemn condemnation of good men thrust him outside the circle of human sympathy. God is eclipsed. His earthly future is a few days of loathsome disease, and then he will go to the land of darkness and of the shadow of death—a land of thick darkness, as darkness itself, a land of the shadow of death without any order and where the light is as darkness. Of the future of the soul there has been as yet no syllable of revelation. What remains to Job? The intuitions of an honest heart. Rising to the height of his imperial soul, he cries:—

> "I know that my Redeemer liveth,
> And that he shall stand up at the last upon the dust;
> And after my skin hath been thus destroyed,
> Yet without my flesh shall I see God:
> Whom I shall see for myself,
> And mine eyes shall behold and not another.
> My heart is consumed with longing within me."

Immortality of the soul, personal identity, divine fidelity to justice,—these hopes no overflowing flood of horrors can sweep from his grasp. No man ever knew less of unseen things than Job: no man can find himself sucked downward by a fiercer maelstrom of swirling calamities than Job. As Job triumphed, every pure soul should triumph.

Job's three aged friends, unable to find any common ground, relapse into silence. At this point Elihu in the ardor of youth, displeased with the inadequate attack and defence of the preceding speakers, offers his contribution, which, so far as it is new, is an elaboration of the truth that affliction may be not retributive but a fatherly chastisement. His explanation is that when men are bound in fetters and be taken in the cords of affliction, then God sheweth them their work and their transgressions that they have behaved themselves proudly. He insists also that God is great and giveth not account of any of his matters. The speech of Elihu is an essential contribution to our thought. He comes very near to the expression

of the principal truth of the book, but does not completely distinguish the acceptance of suffering as chastisement from the acceptance of it simply as God's mysterious will. Chastisement Job's sufferings were not.

As Elihu draws to a close a storm is gathering. The roll of thunder and the lightning's flash usher in the approach of Jehovah. Out of the whirlwind he answers Job. It is in these divine speeches that the poet's genius was confronted with its supreme task, for who could write speeches worthy of God? And it is here that his triumph comes, for an inspiration far above that of human genius sustained his adventurous flight. These divine speeches are as wonderful for what they do not contain as for what they do. Their purpose is not to anticipate the historic divine revelation, but only to call Job's attention to the light of nature. God does not tell Job of Satan's slander which Job as God's champion is to refute. He does not, as the three friends, tell him that it is what his sins deserve. He does not confirm the wise and soothing exhortations of Elihu to accept pain as chastisement. He makes no direct reference to the great question of human suffering and divine justice which Job and his friends have been so eagerly debating. But he calls Job to contemplate the grandeur of the universe and to reflect upon the perfections of Him who is from eternity, and by whose wisdom and power all things were created and are sustained.

Job is called upon to imagine cosmos springing out of chaos.

> "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?
> When the morning stars sang together,
> And all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

Then the vast order of creation is reviewed—the sea born like a young giant and swathed in darkness, the light, the treasuries of snow and hail, the winds, the lightning, the burning constellations.

> "Canst thou bind the cluster of the Pleiades,
> Or loose the bands of Orion?
> Canst thou lead forth the signs of the Zodiac in their season,
> Or guide the Bear with her train?"

Then the animal creation is reviewed: the wild goats, the hinds, the wild asses and wild oxen, the ostrich, the horse, the hawk and eagle, the hippopotamus and the crocodile,—all so different, so marvellously gifted and so perfectly adapted to their circumstances.

At the end Job admits that he has nothing further to say.

> "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear;
> But now mine eye seeth thee,
> Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes."

How different the outcome from what Job had anticipated when clamoring for an opportunity to set his case before God!

What has happened? This man, the vindication of whose righteousness was proposed at the outset, abhors himself and repents in dust and ashes. This man, whose whole soul cried out for explanation, when offered an opportunity to question, is silent. Has Satan after all conquered? No: as against Satan Job is completely victorious. He loved God and not prosperity. That has been demonstrated.

But Job had loved God without any adequate sense of God's greatness, wisdom, and majesty. Job assumed that he understood all about God. Job had a theodicy, that is, a complete explanation for all of God's dealings. There are many people nowadays who have come to feel that they must have a theodicy. If we cannot explain the justice of God in every one of his dealings, they say, we cannot ask men to trust and obey him. Whatever appears to be the course of human affairs, or whatever may seem to be the plain meaning of the words of Scripture, depend upon it God will never do anything but what seems to you and me now the right thing for him to do. Job began sincerely loyal to God and unconscious of wrong; he ended in sincere loyalty; but in looking back upon his earlier feelings toward God they seemed coarse and profane. Job had gotten no light on the question why

his sufferings had come upon him. He had gotten past the need of light upon that subject. He had gotten a new view of the splendor of the divine majesty and the vastness of God's works. He had gotten such a view of God in his eternal wisdom, holiness, and might that it was enough simply "to lie passive in his hand and know no will but his." To ask God "why" had become to his reverent trust impossible.

Thus at the last Job falls penitent and adoring before the divine glory, his bereavement, his leprosy, the contempt of his enemies, the misconstruction of his friends, his bitter doubts, all forgotten in the one overpowering vision which gives back to him his God never more to be doubted or questioned or chided. In the divine wisdom there can be no mistake, in the divine administration no injustice, in the divine love no change. Why should we ask for a theodicy? In reverent awe we confess,—

> "God is great, and we know him not;
> Great things doeth he which we cannot comprehend."

Now we see how the book can be a tragedy with a good ending because the intensity of emotion grows through the storms and into the light, and we leave Job at a crisis sublimer than that of death—the crisis when a human soul and God understand each other and embrace.

Looking back now we see that the great purpose of the book is not so much to explain the uses of affliction as to lift the troubled soul above the need of explanation by presenting full orbed the thought of God. And we see with what consummate skill the poet has kept Job and Eliphaz and Bildad and Zophar and Elihu successively exhausting the powers of eloquence in describing the wonders of nature and the perfection of God. Each

Job after a flight of imagination over the vastness of space out to the confines of light and darkness, whispers overawed:—

> "Lo, these are but the outskirts of his ways:
> And how small a whisper do we hear of him!
> But the thunder of his power who can understand?"

Thus, whoever is speaking, the one central theme advances. All these references to nature are not poetic embellishments merely, but contributions to the main argument, and when at last Job sees God the Creator and Ruler, the reader also seems to see him in overpowering majesty.

Are we not justified in saying that this little book of Job, which is printed on less than thirty pages of an ordinary Bible, which may be perused at leisure in a couple of hours, yet in its use of natural imagery, in its analysis of the heart, in its passionate utterances of anguish and victory, in its lyric laments, in its sarcasms and invective, in the boldness and comprehensiveness of its handling of profound practical questions to-day in the foreground of Christian thought, and in its magnificent displays of the divine splendor, surpasses every other single work in the whole world of poetic literature?