THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING IN THE BOOK OF JOB

THERE are some problems which continue to baffle the keenest intellects from age to age and though new minds see old problems in a fresh light, a final solution seems no nearer. The unpleasant facts of suffering and evil enter this category; so long as we have records of men's thoughts we find that they have pondered over the experience of suffering and the reason for it, trying to reconcile its apparently arbitrary allotment with an idea of an omniscient and wise providence. Still the problems persist: why do men suffer? what is the origin of suffering? Is there any method in the strange system whereby the good suffer as much as if not more than the evil?

I

The writer of the Book of Job being deeply concerned in this question of suffering depicts the doubts and difficulties which might occur to an orthodox thinker, in dramatic form; the book is a kind of epic poem, though in places it almost takes the form of debate. This, however, is of oriental type and is not comparable with Platonic dialogue where truth is sought by sharing and comparing ideas. Here theories and counter-theories are laid out in dogmatic and decided manner; no effort is made to find why differences exist or to construct a possible ground for building a fresh statement. Each side makes its own contribution and the reader is wisely left to draw his own conclusions.

The book falls into several distinct parts:—Prologue, three cycles of dialogue with friends, the outburst of Elihu, the speeches of God and the Epilogue. Each section contains its own lines of thought and it is necessary to consider them separately before attempting to summarise or estimate the contribution of the book as a whole to the problem of human suffering.

In the Prologue Job is introduced as a man remarkable

for his piety and also renowned for his riches. It is significant that these facts are so closely connected in the beginning because much of the false reasoning displayed by some speakers is based on the seemingly necessary connection between piety and riches. Job's friends would have said he was rich because he was pious, Satan the reverse, the book itself seems to be endeavouring to show that there is no vital connection between them.

At the instigation of the Satan two tests were arranged, to be imposed on Job because he was accused of being a convincing and plausible hypocrite, appearing pious because of his possessions. The Satan was cynical but unbiased, desiring to protect God, by testing not punishing Job. It has been pointed out that here as in Greek tragedy the onlooker is in the beginning given the key to all that follows, so that he can understand better than any of the performers the true meaning of events.

The Satan first took away Job's children and possessions, but Job uttered no word of complaint. No fault could be found with the man who was able to say " The Lord gave: the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord " (i. 21). The second test was directed towards Job's person on the theory that a man can stand loss but not personal discomfort. However, it was Job's wife who complained and was rebuked by her husband (ii. 10). Job himself suffered in silence until he was joined by some close friends who came to talk with him and comfort him. So the stage is set for the real drama to begin and by the author's ingenuity it will be viewed with biased minds which compare all statements with the ideas set forth in the Prologue.

Here suffering is shown as a test of character, like the refiner's fire. There is no question of unfair affliction of some who have done nothing to deserve their misfortune, nor does the idea of retribution enter at all, with the suggestion of a personal deity repaying evil for evil or an impersonal automaton who cannot help allotting to all their due rewards. Job is quietly content, realising that man cannot expect always to have life's choicest morsels. It is his wife who errs by making a false connection between piety and riches. This was a common error and the realisation of it caused much of the ensuing debate.

Job, sitting with three trusted friends who had come to commune with him, and feeling the strain of his suffering,

thought he could safely unburden himself to them. His discomfort was both physical and mental, the latter more acute because he had no clue to the meaning of the former. So he curses his life violently and wishes himself dead to escape it all. Here can be read the first faint echoings of Job's intellectual troubles.

According to his own theology God sent evil only to those who were evil; in his own mind he knew himself to be good, yet he was afflicted with the lot of the evil. As Dr. Peake says in his introduction (*Century Bible*), " the old axiom so long verified by his own felicity had proved unequal to the strain of facts ".

His friends in this first cycle of debate had no such difficulty and their solution to Job's problem was simple if not kind. Eliphaz, a strong exponent of traditional theology, who had not been troubled by personal afflictions, admitted that Job was pious and worthy but asserted that there *must* be some hidden sin in his life, for, as he says in a rhetorical question, " who ever perished being innocent? " (iv. 7). Evil only comes to evil doers. Either by way of emphasising his statements or to soften the sting for Job, Eliphaz asserts that all men in the sight of God are evil (iv. 17), that they are indeed " born for trouble as the sparks fly upward " (v. 7). There follows the advice to seek God, as the man whom God corrects is happy, showing the fundamental assumption that Job is suffering as a punishment. Job, full of the conviction of his own righteousness, was so pained by Eliphaz's hard reasoning that he burst into an open tirade against God as the author of all his troubles (vi. 4). The reason he could not understand because there was no fault in him. He declares that he will not remain silent, demanding to be shown his sin if any, " If I have sinned what do I unto thee, O thou watcher of men ? " (vii. 20).

Bildad continues Eliphaz's argument by declaring that either Job or his children must have sinned (viii. 4); if God has cut down Job there is a reason, for God will not cast away a perfect man.

Job's next speech refers back to the first: admitting that no man is just in God's eyes, while God is all powerful, he wonders how any man can approach God; although Job regards himself as perfect (ix. 31) he recognises that there is no answer from God. Yet he will cry to God for an answer, saying, " let

me alone that I may take comfort a little before I go whence I shall not return ".

The third friend, Zophar, roughly rebukes Job, asserting that he is wrong and cannot by searching find out God. The best thing he can do is to admit his guilt and put it from him. Job in a general reply considered himself as wise as the friends, yet would continue to reason with God (xiii. 3). Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. There is little in life or after life to look forward to.

It will be seen that the chief idea underlying the statements of the three orthodox theologians is that suffering comes as a retribution for sin. Though Job had seemed good and pious there must have been some hidden sin in his life; so their theory is preserved at the cost of their observations. Job himself was convinced of his own perfection, consequently, in his opinion, the cast-iron case of the old theology cracked. The friends having no troubles of their own were shocked at his outbursts and found no difficulty in attributing to him personal sin. To Job their words, which were at first in a tone of mild admonitions, became like unfair whips and caused him to retaliate so that they were further alienated from him.

The second cycle of the debate is less important from the point of view of one seeking a solution of the problem of general suffering but it contains Job's most triumphant personal utterance.

Eliphaz and Bildad both rebuked Job for not realising the truth and for turning from God, and told of the fate of the wicked, even their name being forgotten. Zophar contended that the joys of the wicked are short-lived.

Job knew all these arguments, however, and although God had smitten him yet he appealed to Him rather than to his friends. His great conviction was that his redeemer or vindicator lived; " I know that my Redeemer liveth " (xix. 25); although his name might be smirched now and justice never done during his lifetime, eventually his name would be cleared and God would see that all was made right. To Zophar he made the obvious reply that the wicked live and prosper. They turn from God and He lets them continue in prosperity, but man has no right to teach God how to act, or how to deal with evildoers.

The ideas of this section centre round God's moral judgment and the fate of the wicked. Although Job repudiated

the ideas of the three friends concerning the wicked, he was convinced of the existence of his own vindicator (*go'el*). The use of this word at this point has caused much debate, some writers thinking that it means only "kinsman", as in Ruth, others appealing for the full sense of personal Redeemer. While it is true that the sense of the word developed considerably, it is unlikely that Job had in mind all that would be understood by it since its use by St. Paul, or he would surely have made more use of the idea. His Redeemer was probably one who would sooner or later come to clear his name of all the false charges that had been hurled at him, or as we should say, a vindicator.

The third cycle of the debate returns to the attempt at an interpretation of suffering. Eliphaz put forward an interesting idea of God as an automaton, cold and disinterested (xxii. 3). "Is it any pleasure to the Almighty that thou art righteous?" On this theory God could not, on account of His nature, punish anyone unless there were a fault in his life. Then definite evidences of faults in Job's life were brought forward; he had a grasping nature, had oppressed the poor and treated the defenceless in a shameful fashion and now his former sins were returning upon his head. His best course would be to repent, make God his treasure and consequently be restored to riches. Job, however, still longed to find God and plead his cause (xxiii. 4) because then deliverance would come. He knew he was only being tried and would emerge triumphant (xxiii. 10): "He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me I shall come forth as gold"; but it did not prevent him from demanding times to be appointed for appealing to God against present ills.

At this point there is considerable difficulty in estimating the correct text. The speech of Bildad seems to have been interrupted and words ascribed to Job which echo ideas more akin to Zophar's former utterances. Bildad made a characteristic contribution, declaring that man was vile and wormlike (xxv. 6); on the other hand God is great and cannot be comprehended (xxvi. 14); surely a hint to Job that apart from traditional views the problem of suffering is insoluble. Job's reply was merely an ironical onslaught on the friends and a fresh affirmation of his own innocence. The speech which appears to be Zophar's final word once more stressed that destruction would always

be the lot of the wicked. Job brings this cycle of debate to a close with a long description of his former greatness when all listened to him (xxix) and a comparison of this with his present misery when all scorned him. He had been thrust on one side by God, yet he had not been guilty of evil desires or actions, falsehood or adultery, nor had been unjust or unkind. Finally he appeals for an answer from the Almighty.

This third cycle is a more emphatic statement of the ideas of the friends found in the first cycle. Eliphaz very definitely holds to the idea of retribution in an even less pleasant form than before. God is no longer a personality who takes care to see that retributive justice is done but a heartless, passionless automaton; a veritable blind Justice whose scales must act as they are weighted. So since Job's lot had come down heavily with evil it definitely meant that something was wrong somewhere. While Bildad also represented the same school of theology as Eliphaz he evidently had a kinder heart, for he tried to soften the verdict, declaring that while Job was evil so also were all men. Zophar fierily described Job's punishment as he assumed his guilt.

Job was left unmoved; the arguments of his friends were bitterly interesting but quite unconvincing, for Job's secret thought was the common refuge of all apparently defeated minds —" they do not understand me ". Slowly his conviction of his own righteousness and God's mercy were being resolved out of the chaos caused by his suffering into a new theory of redemption and vindication with the assurance of the eventual complete triumph of virtue.

When the friends had finished the arguments it would seem that the author had then but to sum up. Many scholars think he did this, but there are six chapters of fresh argument fitted in between the last debate and the Epilogue. These represent the contribution of a young man, Elihu, exasperated at his elders' reasonings. He plainly declares that Job is not just (xxxiii. 12); God is greater than man and speaks to man through dreams and afflictions, by the latter testing the true nature of man (xxxiii. 13, 23). God cannot be considered wicked, for He is the Supreme Ruler and therefore just and as such strikes the wicked (xxxiv. 26). God is omniscient and man must not oppose or answer Him or cry to Him; although the wicked are afflicted it is for their instruction and discipline

(xxxvi. 10, 22); as such Job ought to consider it in reverence and humility.

Elihu thus brings to the problem not so much a ready-made solution as a way of approach that may help to throw the light of understanding on what seems senseless: he really emphasises a thought of Job in ch. xxiii in suggesting that suffering was a disciplinary measure and that at the end there would emerge a purified penitent.

There remain only the speeches of the Lord and the Epilogue to be considered. Here Job is represented as having his desired interview with God, but not as he had expected. He had asked to be allowed to enter the Courts of God in his capacity of a prince and powerful man but when God came he uttered no word and was humbled before being restored. Did Job in comparison with God's knowledge and power know anything or could he do anything? Job was forced to admit his own shortcomings. Could Job make good his own case by imputing unrighteousness to God? Had he any power over nature? To all, Job was forced to say No. Then, faced with the majesty and wonder of the Almighty, he did understand something of his own meanness, and repented. "I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." Finally, in the Epilogue Job received pardon for his wild utterances and was restored to his former position, while significantly enough Eliphaz and company were rebuked. This seems to repudiate the idea of punishment as merely retributive and God as a cold automaton.

II

In endeavouring to sum up the contribution of this book to the question of human suffering it is essential to bear in mind that several distinct viewpoints are brought out and that there seems to be no attempt at a definite solution though, as has already been seen, some of the theories are shown to be very thin. The author, wishing to consider the problem of suffering in its various angles, very skilfully took a concrete problem and worked round it in eccentric circles of debate.

There are really two problems:

(i) Personal—Why am I, Job, suffering?
(ii) General—Why do men suffer?

(i) From the standpoint of the central figure or victim, Job, the problem is one of reconciling two powerful forces—tradition and personal experience. Had he and Eliphaz been in reversed positions they would undoubtedly have also reversed their arguments, for Job was also of the orthodox school which clung to the theory of retribution, though Job claimed he would have been more sympathetic. But retribution was only a cold theory and had not been tested in real life by any of them. When Job was afflicted it gave him a new factor to work into his scheme of reasoning. He knew that God was good and believed that he was himself just and so realised that justice and sorrow must exist in one person. Had the friends been sympathetic he might have dismissed his problem as one impossible of solution but their growing emphasis on their preconceived notions drove him to seek some other way out. This he found in his *go'el* or vindicator who should put all things right, in the future, whatever happened now. This is only one step in advance of complete resignation for it is a tacit admission of the impossibility of solving the problem. Yet it is a big step, for it snatches victory out of defeat even if it retains the scars of battle. It reminds us that in daily life it is far more important to have a right attitude, whether to pain and suffering or to joy, than to have a correct solution to the problems arising from them. St. Paul tells us that he had a thorn in the flesh and prayed to God three times that it should be removed. Instead of finding it removed, Paul received the word of God, "My grace is sufficient for thee". This knowledge enabled him to glory in his weaknesses for Christ, saying, "when I am weak then am I strong" (2 Cor. xii. 7–10). Neither St. Paul nor Job says it is better to suffer than not to suffer, nor does either claim any special sanctity through the fact of suffering but both show that through the fires of suffering there may emerge a pure and refined faith worth much fine gold.

(ii) Concerning the general problem, "Why do men suffer?" the Book offers several possible answers:

(*a*) It has been suggested that the Book was written to depict a suffering hero or one who like Moses or Aeneas or Ulysses stands almost as a representative of a whole nation and depicts in his trials and tribulations the sufferings to which the human race is liable. If this were so it would mean that the writer felt that there was no answer to the problem of

suffering or perhaps that there was no problem of suffering at all, but that he believed that suffering would come and strike when and where it would. It is not impossible to support this idea, for we live in an environment of persons and this very fact means frequent clashes, and all too often clash means pain for someone. If we ask why God does not interfere to lift from the shoulders of His suffering children the pain which is often more than they can bear, we know the answer. He will not interfere with natural laws simply to stop the suffering of one unfortunate individual when another has set in motion the laws which by their operation have brought about the pain or suffering.

(*b*) The most insistent solution is the one which was offered by Eliphaz and his friends who said that suffering resulted from sin. However great might have been their regard for Job they would not forsake their theories for personal considerations. So while Job was driven by their hard logic to seek a new answer, they were driven by Job's apparent blasphemy to an even more rigorous and extreme conservatism. In his first speech Eliphaz thought of God as a personal judge, but in his third speech justice was administered by one who was almost an automaton without the slightest interest in any personal aspect of the case to be judged. Bildad, finding himself unable to convince Job of his own personal sin, tried in a later speech to convince him that all are sinners and that Job must inevitably be a sinner on this account. It is not easy for the modern mind to accept the doctrine that personal suffering comes from personal sin, although we know all too well that sin and evil are powerful elements in human experience and often it is possible to detect a definite connection between the sin and the suffering: but to proceed to the full theory of retribution, " an eye for an eye and a penalty for a sin ", is alien to our thought. Nevertheless suffering and sin existing side by side seem to be closely connected and this is probably the reason which prompted Niebuhr to write in *The Destiny of Man*: " God's word is spoken against both his favoured nations and against all nations . . . the real problem of history is the proud pretention of all human endeavours which seek to obscure their finite and partial character and thereby involve history in sin and evil." It is the very deep-seated sin of pride that both drives us away from God, and causes us to think ourselves sufficient unto ourselves with-

out Him, which brings so much of the world's suffering in every age. In this limited respect we can agree with the friends of Job that suffering does come through sin.

(*c*) The speech of Elihu, although to some extent emphasising the harsh idea of Eliphaz, does offer as a definite suggestion a possibility with which Job had previously toyed, namely that suffering is sent as a discipline for our own education. This bears a resemblance to the Prologue but it is not quite the same, for there suffering is a test of character inflicted by the Satan whereas Elihu maintains it is a discipline imposed by God. Throughout the discussion Job had insisted on his righteousness: when Elihu burst in with his caustic remarks he declared that Job's righteousness was nothing but self-righteousness which had to be purged by the discipline of suffering. This again is an idea which has met with considerable support and many of the heroes of literature are those who have suffered most deeply and have emerged triumphant. This note is surely to be found in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and it is not absent from the New Testament, for the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes: " It is for chastening that ye endure. . . . All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous: yet afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness " (Heb. xii. 7, 11). More recently the thought has been restated by C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain* when he writes: " Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience and shouts in our pain. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." According to Mr. Lewis, if the first and least operation of pain shatters the illusion that all is well, the second shatters the illusion that what we have, whether good or bad in itself, is our own and enough for us. With some apparent hesitation he suggests that when suffering comes upon hard-working mothers or thrifty little tradespeople it is warning them in advance of an insufficiency that one day they will have to discover. While we know and admit that God has all power and we cannot fully understand His working, it is nevertheless a little difficult to believe that He deliberately snatches from the lowest and least of His children the few simple joys in life that help to give them courage. Discipline and correction coming from God we can fully understand, but there is a certain repugnance to the idea

of a God who inflicts crushing blows upon the defenceless: the Scriptures themselves suggest that the poor and downtrodden are God's own particular care.

(*d*) Finally, after all the words of men have passed over Job's head, the Lord God speaks. Job had asked to be allowed to enter the presence of God as a prince and plead his cause. Now God comes; Job has a vision of the Almighty. He is allowed to enter the presence of God and finds that he must go upon his knees. In this moment all distinction between righteousness and unrighteousness disappears: all human finery becomes as filthy rags. The words of Isaiah are called to mind: " We all become as one that is unclean and all our righteousnesses are as a polluted garment and we do all fade as a leaf and our iniquities like the wind take us away " (Isa. lxiv. 6). Perhaps after all Bildad was right. Job realised at this point that however good he may have been there is still perfection as his ideal and however much he may have known, there is still much beyond his ken. Here is no logical answer, but Job has seen God and all his questionings are at an end. Faith takes the place of both question and answer. Faith in the almighty power of God who plans all things and sees all things and in His own time will draw all things to their rightful conclusions. This is the most important element in the teaching of the Book of Job; for while the whole Book is a thoughtful enquiry into the problem of suffering it is not merely speculative but spiritual and practical. We have remarked before that our attitude to suffering is more important than our solution of the problem. So often we hear, or ourselves say, " Why do I or my friends have to suffer? " " Why is there so much suffering in the world ? " " How can I see this, or suffer this, and still believe in God ? " If like Job we have been granted a vision of God, we know that God suffers for and with us. Jesus Christ the Son of God suffered mentally and physically and died, but He still believed in God, and God still loved and cared for the human race which killed His Son. He did not give us up though we blasphemed against His name. His sufferings and the sufferings of His Son did not turn Him from us who caused His pain. Why should we turn from Him who has done so much for us?

Perhaps we shall not find one single answer to the problem of pain because it may be that pain and suffering are not one

problem but many problems. But instead of one single answer the Book of Job and even more the Christian Religion gives one triumphant and unconquerable attitude; the attitude of faith and trust in God. Once more, to quote the Epistle to the Hebrews, we find that Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham and others all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar. The sufferings of Job were a test of his faith: his faith was strong enough to bear them and his faith was a sufficient answer. His triumphant cry, " I know that my Redeemer liveth ", is perhaps best echoed in the words of St. Paul, " I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to usward " (Rom. viii. 18). Both had suffered and both leave us a message that suffering no less than prosperity may be the means of teaching man the truth of God's love and grace.

A. A. JONES.

Woodstock.