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WAS JOB AN AGNOSTIC?

IN this paper we purpose simply and solely to treat of the Book of Job as a reflective poem with a view to discover how far it may be said to contain a kind of devout agnosticism, and to what extent this differs from typical forms of agnostic thought in the present day. For this purpose it is not necessary to enter upon questions affecting textual criticism, or the authorship, date, and character of composition of the book. Accepting on this head the main outcome of recent researches by recognised authorities, we will address ourselves to the task of carefully marking its philosophical bearings in their modern application. For here we have, undoubtedly, a discussion of "the most obscure and fascinating problem that ever puzzled and tortured the human intellect." The cosmopolitan character of the book, in representing its hero as a type of humanity, has been more than once noticed, as well as its resemblance to the Prometheus, Hamlet, and the Faust, as world-poems, suggesting, if not satisfactorily solving, problems which at all times have occupied thinking minds all over the world. Hence, too, its permanent interest and its attraction for such men as Goethe, Carlyle, and Tennyson, the last of whom speaks of it as "the greatest poem, whether of ancient or modern times."

Thus much may be premised before we proceed: that the book belongs to the wisdom-literature of the Hebrews, that it was written at a time when national misfortunes produced gloomy broodings on the strange vicissitudes of the individual life as well as sad reflections on the mystery of national calamities that then gave rise to doubt concerning the moral government of the world and discussions on the principles of Divine justice; that

though it is possible that such thoughts may have engaged reflecting minds in the latter days of King Solomon's reign, they reached a fuller maturity as time went on, gathering strength with the increased misfortunes of the Jewish people in their exile. We may also accept, provisionally at least, the theory that in the didactic poem before us we possess a philosophical treatment of one of those "ancient stories of men that pleased God," mentioned in the prologue of Ecclesiasticus somewhat in the same way as the Prometheus and the Faust are later adaptations of classic legends or the mediæval *Volksbuch* to meet the requirements of advanced thought. The problem suggested in the Book of Job is the suffering of the righteous. What is the conclusion arrived at by its author? Does it actually tell us in its final outcome that we know nothing at all, and cannot arrive at any satisfactory solution whatever, and that therefore it is useless to try and fathom the secret of the Most High, that we must simply submit to the Divine decree without asking any more questions? That seems to be the opinion of the most competent of modern critics. But if so, Job was undoubtedly an agnostic in this sense of the word. On these grounds he puts to silence his friends who think they know in falling back for a solution on that retribution theory which it is Job's aim to demolish, whilst he himself is silenced by the voice of God in the Theophany compelling him humbly to acquiesce in ignorance about such matters, because they are far beyond his mental range, that the righteous man, when suffering wrongfully, must yield to the unfathomable will of God. In fact the process of purification through suffering has apparently this end in view, that is, as Professor Budde says in the Introduction to his recently published Commentary, purification from intellectual or spiritual pride which constitutes his danger.

The object of the trial is not so much to prove Job's unwavering fidelity, or to indicate his disinterested piety, as to bring about humble submission to ignorance as to the reasons of God's dealings. It is this which brings him into a close proximity to modern agnostics, who also speak of man, his place in the universe, and his destiny as an insoluble riddle.

Dr. Dillon, in his book on *The Sceptics of the Old Testament*, represents Job as saying of man that he "knows really nothing, never can know anything, about the origin and reason of things. They are absolutely unknowable" (page 63).

This statement requires examination. We may ask, then, in the first place, how far the Book of Job in its negative criticism controverts the false optimisms of that age, and see what support it gives to our modern agnostics following the same lines. For here, as Renan remarks, we have a human document in this "sublime dispute," in which the sufferings and the doubts of all ages may find their most eloquent expression.

We may, in the next place, consider this unique poem from its positive side as an attempt to raise the Jewish conception of morality from the low mechanical retribution theory to a higher level in order to see what resemblance it bears to similar attempts of modern agnostics in their opposition to utilitarian ethics and their attempt to vindicate the principle of "disinterested goodness."

This will prepare the way for considering, in the last place, the main question, namely, how far the humble confession of ignorance with which the Book of Job closes bears any resemblance to the following description of agnosticism given by Mr. Frederic Harrison (*Fortnightly Review* for January, 1889, p. 145):

"The agnostic proper is one, who, having honestly sought to know, acquiesces in ignorance, and avows it as the best practical solution of a profound but impenetrable problem."

And by "agnostic proper" must be understood every variety of modern agnosticism—the thorough-going agnostic, who, like Mr. Leslie Stephen, speaking of "the religion of all sensible men," tells us that "the whole mass of human belief may be regarded as a chaotic nebula surrounding a solid nucleus of definitely established truth"; the scientific agnostic, who takes his stand with Huxley's formula, "ignoramus et ignorabimus," in reference to the last problems of existence; the pessimistic agnostic, who, like the late Mr. Greg, dwells despondingly on the "Enigmas of Life"; and the optimistic agnostic, who, like the late Mr. S. Laing, cheerfully repeats the dictum, "we know not anything." As far as we are here concerned all these come under one or other of the heads we have given above, and we will begin with the first and inquire: (1) Have we really in this book "the most audacious piece of rationalistic philosophy which has ever yet been clothed in the music of sublime verse"? Is it simply an attempt to demolish the dogmatic optimisms or old-world truisms of Job's friends to prove that in this best of worlds—

"Whatever is, is right"?

The writer of the book of Job wants to prove the contradiction between the old formula about rewards and punishments, and the fact in his own case, and by implication in that of others, of innocency and righteousness not meeting with their due reward, but on the contrary suffering for no just cause, that, therefore, all cannot be right. In this way must be understood the dramatic discomfiture of the friends of Job in using this

argument about deserts. In this sense, too, one of them, deviating inconsistently from the rigid foundation of the theory itself, reminds Job: "God exacteth, (remitteth, Heb.) of thee less than thine iniquity (deserveth)" (Job xi. 6), which contradicts the *quid pro quo* theory, and then immediately proceeds to say in the language of agnosticism: "Canst thou by searching find out God?" In the same way Elihu, the genuineness of whose discourse as a component part of the book is now again in favour among such commentators as Budde, gives expression to a similar agnostic thought, "we cannot find Him out" (xxxvii. 23). Those passages in which the hero of the poem is represented as arraigning the Deity before the bar of unalterable justice are intended to show the hopelessness of the attempt of Job's friends to vindicate "the law of God" in the old-fashioned way. In so doing they only aggravate the conflict between the moral conscience and the consciousness of unmerited calamities on the part of Job. This produces exasperation in his mind, and tempts him to a denial of Divine justice, though all the while he clings to his belief in the living God. As a devout Hebrew he appeals from the apparently unjust adversary to the Divine Advocate to judge his cause; in his pathetic struggles against doubt he demands a Divine explanation to reassure his faith. But happen what will, "yet shall the righteous hold on his way" (xvii. 9). And as the shadows of doubt grow deeper still: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him"—words which, as Delitzsch has pointed out (*in loco*), have been the consoling stay of many pious souls in their last moments, notably so in the case of Grace Aguilar, whose last movement was to spell out with her emaciated finger these words of Job. Then, in the final development of the tragedy, and after the outbreak of the storm, symboliz-

ing the inner storms of a mind perplexed and moved in its deepest depths of doubt, gleams of sunlight return, and faith humiliated and prostrate before the inscrutable Divinity returns with a rush of repentance and rests on Him who judgeth righteously, and this without any real enlightenment as to the how and when of the final rectification. The Theophany does not unlock the secret, and the epilogue shows that the writer does not absolutely reject the popular retribution theory as a whole. True, the three cycles of argument are intended to show the untenableness of that narrow view of it professed by Job's friends. But the general outcome of the controversy is this, that there is a positive value in the suffering of the innocent as a test of disinterested worth, intended, moreover, to elevate and purify the character. Therefore the leading idea of the book remains the same as that of the Chochma literature throughout, that to fear God and keep His commandments is the whole duty of man. But this implies a positive assertion of the existence of God, and the inviolability of His Divine Law. "The object of the book of Job," says Goethe in a notice of Lavater's Sermons, is to prove incontestably that the ways of "Divine Providence are inscrutable, and yet in their final consummation admirable."

This is a very different view from that which represents the writer of the Book of Job as a destructive critic of current views. His aim is rather to modify and correct the dominant theory, and to attack false or dishonest methods of defending it. It teaches resignation when only a partial revelation of Divine designs is vouchsafed, not a resignation of agnostic despair.

(2) This leads to the next point, *i.e.* the ethical significance of suffering as one of the solutions of the problem. Here it may be as well briefly to compare the Hebrew with the Greek drama of Æschylus and the modern tragedy of

the Faust, in both of which, as in Job, we are shown how—

“Calm wisdom gained by sorrow profits much.”

A further comparison will discover a curious correspondence between these and the most recent agnostic attempts to evolve a higher morality from the mystery of evil in the cultivation of a spirit of self-renunciation as the best method for solving the dark riddle of existence.

Job has been called the Hebrew Prometheus. In both we have angry cries of distress, loud and long, protestations of injured innocence. But whilst Job all along maintains a sturdy defence of his own uprightness as contrasted with the apparent injustice of the God he serves, this never degenerates into the temerity of defiance we note in the speeches of Prometheus. And whereas Prometheus suffers as the champion of the human race at war with Jupiter, Job suffers as the advocate of Divine righteousness, and makes his appeals throughout to the supreme Court of Justice of Him who is invisible and unfathomable. The final outcome in the case of both is the same: “Pain is gain”; “Sweet are the uses of adversity.” The lesson taught is the duty of humble submission in the consciousness of speculative limitations. Both heroes reach a higher level of spiritual experience by the purifying influences of humble trust, a broader view of duty opens before them to do what is right and to bear what seems wrong, since man is incapable with his feeble grasp to hold the balance of Divine justice, or to make himself the arbiter of the law of life.

The resemblances between Job and the Faust are still more remarkable, though partly explained by the acknowledged indebtedness of Goethe to the Book of Job. These are all the more important for us here since the Faust contains the creed of the nineteenth century. Both poems

deal with a soul struggle in which the mind and conscience are at war with the facts of existence and in which intellectual errors and faults of feeling find their correction and culminate in the final reconciliation of the conflict. The Faust, however, differs from Job in many ways. Its scientific agnosticism ends in intellectual despair and a consequent moral catastrophe. The moral conflict in Job's mind is brought to an end by the avowed ignorance of nature.

But what concerns us here is the tendency to agnostic thought in both. The agnosticism in the Faust finds its best expression in the well-known lines containing the confession of faith, where the hero, speaking of God, says :

“ Who dare name Him ?
 Who dare confess Him ?
 Who dare profess and say
 I believe in Him ? ”

Also in the expression, “Feeling is all.” It is the mystic conception of the unknown source of all being, inspiring love and awe, but defying intellectual apprehension, which lies at the root of present day agnosticism. It lacks the moral earnestness and spirituality of Job's theism. Modern agnosticism, in relinquishing the attempt of arriving at any solution of the problem, resigns itself to work on till the death knell strikes; the agnosticism of Job simply recognises the futility of the attempt of penetrating into the arcana of Deity, and takes comfort in the thought that in the end the Judge of all the world, of whose existence it never doubts, will do right.

(3) In the last place, how far does Job's confession of ignorance resemble the agnostic creed, as such, in the present day?

To Job, too, God is the “Infinite Unknown,” and so far scientific agnosticism finds some support in this book of

“sapiential philosophy.” He too fails to understand, like J. S. Mill in his *Essays on Religion*—the cruelty of nature on the supposition that its Author is all-powerful and all-good. In some places the tone of complaint at this unexplained mystery is profoundly sad when the Author of the Book of Job dwells on the world’s sorrow, the mystery of pain, the strange vicissitudes of life, the dark curtain which hides Sheol (ix. 22; xiv. 13-15). But in vain do we look in this “Divine Comedy” of the ancient Hebrews for those expressions of agnostic helplessness and hopelessness when dwelling on the last problems of life and mind.

Job’s agnosticism differs, then, from its modern counterpart in its pronounced Theism, its teleological conceptions of the Cosmos and human destiny, though in all these—most of all in the last—it fails to attain to anything like the Christian standpoint.

It does not, indeed, make clear statements on the Divine attributes in the theological sense of the term; it settles no difficulties about the Absolute and the Infinite philosophically. It only recognises a God high above nature, and far beyond the grasp of human comprehension. On the other hand, it does not rest satisfied with a mere confession of ignorance, as if this were the finality for human reason to rest on, which really amounts to a virtual worship or culture of the Unknowable, as when Herbert Spencer tells us that “it is alike our highest wisdom and our highest duty to regard that through which all things exist as the Unknowable.”

In fact, the intellectual abasement produced by the stupendous grandeur and sublimity of nature fills the writer of the Book of Job with awe and reverence towards the Divine Being. He acknowledges in full the existence of God as the Divine Architect of the universe, though the plan is beyond his grasp. His sentiments are

best expressed in the well-known lines of a modern poet—

“ Ah! sure within him and without,
 Could his dark wisdom find it out,
 Then must he answer to his doubt.”

His teleological views correspond to his theistic creed. There is a meaning and a purpose in the scheme of things, which, however, it is impossible for mortals to discover. “Where is wisdom to be found,” that higher wisdom which shall unlock the riddle to the universe? That is Job’s outcry. But it does not induce him to stand off in the proud self-consciousness of his limitations to renounce further research or give up intellectual inquiry. His hope and endeavour is to know in part, if he cannot know all, and this is the standpoint of many thoughtful writers, even among agnostics of a less pronounced type. As a French writer of this description puts it: “Our ignorance is great enough; there is no need for indulging ourselves in exaggerating it; it is not of sufficient value to cultivate it. It is an imperfection which we ought to diminish. . . . The unknown cannot be *known* as the Unknowable.”¹

Again, we have not in the Book of Job a reasoned Theodicy, but no more have we here a form of agnosticism excluding it, but ending in itself. As to the question of man’s ultimate fate, no doubt a dark cloud hovers, as Reuss says, over the portal of the future; the “blessed hope of everlasting life” has no resting-place in the pensive soul of Job.² There is at least a gleam of hope, that is of hope of a final vindication, but nothing more. Indeed, the outlook is not so gloomy as it would be if we adopted the translation of chapter xlii. 6 by Bickell in his earlier

¹ F. Pulhan: *Le Nouveau Mysticisme* (1891), p. 168.

² See Ch. vii. 9 et seq., x. 20 seq., xiii. 28 seq., xiv. 14, xvii. 11 seq.; also compare Dr. Hermann Preiss, *Zum Buche Hiob*, a reprint from *Theologische Studien und Skizzen aus Ostpreussen*, p. 21.

attempt as far back as 1882, and again in his latest in 1894, where it reads thus :

“Therefore I console myself and acquiesce
If dust and ashes are my portion.”

“Drum tröst ich mich, bescheid' mich,
Dass Staub mein Theil und Asche.”

The more gloomy, because Bickell rejects the epilogue, so that these form the very last words of Job.

There are well-known passages which show that the soul's immortality was the idea which fitted across the writer's mind in the course of the poem, although it ends in terrestrial bliss as his reward. But here, again, there is a wide gulf fixed between his agnosticism and that of our day. The consolation of Positivist philosophy, putting its trust in posthumous immortality, or the recent attempts of leaders in “psychical research” to find “in the realm of automatism and human personality” indications of a “possible survival of bodily death,” or by means of observation and experiment applied to the “phantasms of the living” in communication with the spirits of the departed to find “a possible extension of our terrestrial science so as to embrace *possible* indications of life lying beyond, yet conceivably touching the life and the conditions of earth”¹ are so many attempts to snatch from the region of the unknown a narrow strip of *Hinderland* by the conquests of psychological science, endeavours to get behind the “great black veil of death.” They contrast unfavourably with the restful resignation of the Hebrew, to whom the unknown region beyond the tomb was forbidden ground, which he dare not explore.

¹ F. W. H. Myers: *Science and a Future Life* (1893), pp. 7, 14, and *passim*. Note the expression *possible*, which we have put in italics to show the reluctance of yielding up greater possibilities to Positivist science on the part of agnostics.

To sum up. Whilst we have no final solution of the great riddle of life in this "book of the trial of man," no answer to satisfy eager minds dwelling on the problem of evil, no "Apology" for the existing order of things, but, on the contrary, ironical reflections on the self-constituted advocates of Divine Right, or would-be interpreters of the secret hidden from mortals (see ch. xii. *init.*), we have here a firm reassertion of the existence of God, the Author and Ruler of the world. We are also clearly told here that His plan of action, as a whole, is concealed from view. The destiny of the race and that of the individual in a future existence are left *in vacuo*; but, in accordance with prevailing beliefs, poetical justice is done in the end, to show that God is just.

The Hebrew agnostic accepts the fact of his own limitations, and bows before the inscrutable Power with undiminished devotion and superadded faith. The modern agnostic, on the contrary, acquiesces in the ultimate reason of things, and, in ceasing to ask further questions relinquishes faith and trust in Him who holds the key to the riddle. The Hebrew agnostic rises from his trial of faith morally and spiritually freed from the fetters of a narrow view of retribution; the modern agnostic abandons the old belief, trying to discover some other basis for the moral edifice in physical laws or social needs, and this with a kind of self-pitying renunciation self-imposed. The former accepts approximate and partial truth when fulness of knowledge is not attainable (ch. ix. 10 et seq., xxviii.). The latter, whilst adopting this principle in the search after natural truth, discards the idea of applying the same principle to spiritual truth, on the principle "that no such knowledge as the Unknowable *can be ever reached.*" "I know that my Vindicator liveth somewhere, and will appear some time or another," Job seems to say. "I do not know what becomes of me, but I will put myself right with

the universe before I quit it," says the modern agnostic. There is stoical firmness in both forms of agnosticism, but whereas in the one case it is inspired by a fervid faith which triumphs over every obstacle, in the other it is the result of a sad resignation, sighing over a lost faith, rejecting all help from transcendental or intuitive sources of knowledge. But is it not true and more philosophical to say :

"We are so constituted that if we insist upon being as sure as is conceivable in every step of our course, we must be content to creep along the ground, and can never soar. If we are intended for great ends, we are called to great hazards ; and, whereas we are given absolute certainty in nothing, we must in all things choose between doubt and inactivity, and the conviction that we are under the eye of One who, for whatever reason, exercises us with the less evidence when He might give us the greater."—Dr. Newman's *University Sermons*, sermon xi., *On the Nature of Faith in Relation to Reason*, p. 215.

Here we have the modern rendering of the thought running through the whole Book of Job ; it is, perhaps, the best *résumé* of its devout agnosticism.

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