

THE MODERN READER'S BIBLE

THE BOOK OF JOB

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THE MODERN READER'S BIBLE

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IN MODERN LITERARY FORM

THE BOOK OF JOB

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INTRODUCTION

TO arrange works of art in order of merit, and discuss which are to be considered greater and which less, is outside formal criticism. All the same it is an elementary instinct of appreciation to express a sense of the greatness of a particular work by claiming that it is greatest. If then a jury of persons well instructed in literature were impanelled to pronounce upon the question what is the greatest poem in the world's great literatures, while on such a question unanimity would be impossible, yet I believe a large majority would give their verdict in favour of that which is the subject of the present volume, the *Book of Job*.

It deals with the most universal of all topics, the Mystery of Suffering. Even the frivolous are driven by suffering to think about the meaning of life. For the theologian, next to the existence of a good God, the most fundamental question is the presence of pain and evil in a world he has ordered. The significance of these terms is no less fundamental in philosophy. The whole of sociology rests upon the same basis of human suffering. If the theory of pain and evil is outside physical science, yet to fight against these makes great part of its practical application. And of

poetry the larger half draws its inspiration from the tragedy of life.

For the treatment of so universal a subject Hebrew has advantages over other languages. It bases its verse system on a parallelism which is also a function of prose; accordingly it constitutes a highly elastic medium, which can shift at will from the measured beauties of verse to the freedom of prose, while the verse itself can reflect any change of feeling in some metrical variation. Again, what seems at first a defect of Hebrew literature in reality increases its range: the lack of a theatre to specialise drama has caused the dramatic impulse to spread through other literary forms, until epic, lyric, discourse, are all drawn together on a common basis of dramatic presentation. Thus of the two distinguishing features of Hebrew, the one draws together the different forms of poetry, and the other tends to unite poetry with prose. Thus in the *Book of Job* all these literary forms can be combined, and all the modes of thinking of which these forms are the natural vehicles. The bulk of the work is a philosophical discussion of the question of suffering, and different mental attitudes to this question are successively exhibited. But the philosophical discussion is also a dramatic debate: with rise and fall of passion, varieties of personal interest, quick changes in the movement of thought; while a background of nature, ever present, makes a climax in a whirlwind which ushers us into the supernatural. Interest of rhetoric is added for

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emphasis: the argument is swayed out of its course by sustained outbursts of verbal workmanship, such as are wont to rouse assemblies of men to strong feeling. Again, the situation, which is to be discussed with all these varieties of resource, is brought forward for discussion by a narrated story; a story so evenly poised between the two functions of story—epic and history—that readers are divided on the question whether the *Book of Job* is a narrative of fact or an imagined parable. All this does not exhaust the elements of this literary masterpiece. The human world which endures and meditates on the suffering is in the *Book of Job* presented as fringed round with another world, the region of transcendental existence from which prophecy draws its inspiration; and the question which is debated in the human drama has in the prologue been solved in the mysteries of heaven.

Not only have we here the whole range of literary expression applied to a universal topic, but another note of the universal is struck in the selection of the personages in whose experience and meditation the topic is to be presented. It is no mere poet's caprice that has located the story in the land of Uz. No doubt the scene is idealised; but the very name carries us to a conception of patriarchal life, which is a middle point in human development in touch with the whole of human experience. It is a full life that these patriarchs lead; there is no narrowness of external circumstances such as might cramp sympathy and

mental vision. The description of Job's wealth displays the pastoral life united with the settled life of agriculture, and house or tent is used indifferently to express a dwelling place. The mention of camels implies traffic and merchandise which would draw out of isolation into world intercourse. Country has combined with city: we have the administration of justice in the gate,—simple justice, with its daysman to lay hands on combatants, its single witness, its simple infamy of the stocks. The picture stops short only of the enterprise and competition that tend to swallow up life in adding to the means of livelihood. The age of the patriarchs seems to make a borderland in social evolution, from which the whole can be studied; and a speech of Job describes with scientific precision the changes from the primitive commune to the turbulence of crowded life. But for themselves these children of the east have adopted a stationary life: absorbed in higher thoughts they are content to sit still and let the world go by, as swift posts between great empires hurry past them, or the caravans of Tema stay a night in their neighbourhood, passing to and from the desert. In their thoughts they are familiar with the whole range of the larger world. They speak of kings and counsellors and judges and priests; of solitary sepulchral piles where the great lie with their buried gold; Egypt, under the name Rahab, is a byword with them. They have marked the lessons of nations in their rise and fall. They know of

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cities, the abode of the prosperous wicked, who cover their faces with fatness and have collops of fat on their flanks; the place also of prisons, slaves, and taskmasters. They talk familiarly of the gold of Ophir, and the topaz of Ethiopia, and can picture every detail of the miner's venture into the earth. War they know: the casting up of military roads and encampments, the warrior with his thick bosses of bucklers, his iron weapon and bow of brass; they know the chances of war, and have perhaps had their share in redeeming from oppressors, and delivering the fatherless from the casting of lots. They know also the robber bands, whose god is their strong right hand, breaking upon the prosperous out of their lairs in desolate and ruinous cities. Their knowledge extends even to the outcasts of mankind, savages gaunt with want and famine, gnawing the dry ground in the gloom of wasteness and desolation, children of fools, driven out of the land. Of all these extremes they are content only to know: they have themselves attained the golden mean of restful serenity, as far from the glitter of life as from its stains.

So, for all its simplicity, it is a stately life that is lived by these patriarchs in the land of Uz. For the young there are rounds of feasting on ceremonial days; sisters lend their presence to their brothers, for their joy is not sensuous indulgence but festal mirth. The old also have their days of observance, marked by solemnity and ritual offerings. As brothers and sisters are in the world of

youth, so in mature life is the relationship of friends. Visits of ceremony are exchanged between these friends, and they behave with formal dignity of manners; it is an elementary instinct of order that leads Job's visitors to move together in their weeping, and rending their garments, and casting dust upon their heads; they sit down on the ground "for seven days and seven nights" before they can break in upon the silent majesty of grief. The speech of these patriarchs is sparing because it is so weighty: pointed words of wisdom, inherited riches of tradition multiplied by long brooding and observation; if there is occasion for more, it takes the shape of a formal curse or ritual oath of innocence. Their moral principles are as fixed as the laws of nature; if one is violated, it is as if a rock were removed out of its place. Their veneration is for antiquity, for tradition uncorrupted from without. The greatest of them feels that he is but of yesterday; no disputant can be expected to resist a cause supported by one "much older than his father"; they or their fathers have received wisdom from "those to whom the land was given, and no stranger passed through it." The greatest sensation of the poem, short of the supernatural climax, is when the aged have to endure, in astonished silence, youth breaking in to plead nervously for a view of truth separated by but a hair's breadth from their own. Thus, amid the various ideals which men have formed for themselves, the ideal of the patriarchs is the stable life: a

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life in league with the very stones of the field, that can laugh at destruction and dearth; a life of substance increasing in the land, that there may be no lack of relief for the distressed and hospitality to force upon the stranger: for what use is there in wealth but this? While the wicked are snatched away before their time, their own life is to reach its end with the stateliness of a shock of corn carried in in its season. Only with this last hope can they stave off the one thing inevitable, dark horizon bounding the light of their life — the thought of Sheol, into which every man must at last go down to return no more, a land of darkness without order, where in secret isolation he must abide, half consciously wasting from flesh to shade, stranger to all that has succeeded to his place, enduring to himself what pain there may be of flesh, what mourning of spirit.

Life in this land of Uz is a life of poetry; but it is poetry without books. Not a hint is to be found of named poets or quoted works. Job speaks of writing in a book in the same breath with writing on the rock; for inscriptions, or the indictment of an adversary, writing may be appropriate, but it never occurs to the speakers in this story to associate it with poetry. The floating literature of oral speech, in which the foundations of the world's poetry were gradually fashioned, is here seen in full sway. Moreover the people of our story are in close touch with the fountain of poetry — external nature. Violent things of nature have been within their experience: lightning

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bolts that destroy Job's whole wealth of sheep in a moment, winds from the wilderness laying low a hall of feasting, earthquakes, monsters of sea and land, to that remotest monster on the horizon of the imagination—the swift, whirling serpent that whirls round the earth and at times invades it, or darkens the sun in eclipse till pierced by the might of God himself. And the things of everyday nature make imagery for the poem: the rush, the flag, the spider leaning on his web, the flower cut down, the fallen tree, the landslip, the water wearing the stones. Nay, so saturated are the speakers with nature sympathies that they seem to pass beyond imagery; it is more than a fashion of speech when Job says that his steps are washed with butter and the rock pours him out rivers of oil, that his root is spread out on the waters, that God in his anger lifteth him up to the wind, and causeth him to ride upon it, and dissolveth him in the storm.

Above all, the life of the patriarchs is a life filled with God. Though the language of the poem is Hebrew, and the God worshipped is the God of the Hebrews revealed under his various names, yet we have not here the Hebrew religion as we know it in the rest of the Old Testament. Whatever 'the land of Uz' may be in geography, in essence its people are the worshippers of the invisible God from whom originally Abraham went forth, first of missionaries, charged with the work of founding a people who should uphold the worship of the unseen God against

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nations of idolators, until in his seed all nations of the earth should be blessed. Meanwhile, the patriarchs have maintained the worship of the invisible God at home. Throughout the whole work there is no mention of idols; the only false religion the most daring impiety can conceive is to offer homage to the fairest works of the Creator in the lights of heaven. Like Melchisedek, who gave his blessing to Abraham while the chosen people was yet unborn, like Balaam testifying from without Jehovah's care over his own, so these patriarchs worship Israel's God outside the ranks of Israel; if Abraham was the Friend of God, Job is before the hosts of heaven pronounced God's Servant on earth. Here then we see the religion of the Bible as a religion without a Law, without a Temple, with no national ritual, with nothing in which the modern mind can recognise a Church. The only revelation these patriarchs know is the vision vouchsafed to the individual worshipper; or rarely, at long intervals, "an angel, an interpreter, one among a thousand" raised up to tell the meaning of some strange experience. Their creed, as rehearsed in heaven, is to fear God and eschew evil. Their sense of God is as deep seated as their very consciousness: when Job's wife, in momentary distraction, bids him renounce God, it comes as an impulse to suicide. Their elementary feelings are fresh, and the religious sense in them is overpowering awe. It makes their whole life one of hallowed restraint: the besetting God numbers their

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steps, they "make a covenant with their eyes," they dread lest they may for a moment walk with vanity; with more than the sensitive conscience of a Greek chorus they will not curse an enemy, lest they may be asking for his life. Divine providence they conceive as an enlargement of their own ideals, redressing the wrongs of the poor, taking the crafty in their counsels; mercy too mingles with judgment, and he who maketh sore bindeth up. Sickness, earthquake, and every human event is fraught with meaning. The Divine presence fills the universe, from the council of the holy ones on high down to the shades shivering beneath the seas; while in the nature that comes between it is the Divine hand alone that stretcheth out the north over empty space, and hangeth the earth upon nothing. And at times there is a more awful sense of his nearness:

Lo, he goeth by me, and I see him not:
He passeth on also, but I perceive him not.

For the Tempest is the Presence passing through the startled earth, shrouded in the clouds with which he closeth in the face of his throne and the thick darkness cast under his feet. The craving to enter into that Presence is for Job religious ecstasy.

In such an atmosphere as this the story is to move, which shall first exhibit human suffering that is unique,

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and then concentrate upon this suffering light from successive points of view.

The Prologue introduces us to the Court of Heaven, and presents the Lord surrounded by his council of holy ones. Two days of the Lord are represented, days of ceremony and ritual observance,—so it would seem from the recurrence of formal phrases. The sons of God pass in review before the throne, and are questioned as to the provinces of the universe which they have in charge. Among them comes ‘the Satan.’ Most unfortunately, the omission in English versions of the article has led the popular mind astray on this incident. Unquestionably in this passage, and the precisely similar passage in *Zechariah*, the word is the title of an office, not the name of an individual. The margin of the Revised Version gives ‘the Adversary’; the word expresses that he is the adversary of the saints in the same way that an inspector or examiner may be considered as adverse to those he inspects or examines. It is easy to understand how such a title should pass over to form the name of an individual—the Adversary of God, Satan the prince of Evil. In the present case he describes his office as the inspection of earth: “going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it”: he uses just the language applied in *Zechariah* to the ministering Spirits who carry out the divine decrees in our world. He appears on the scene among the sons of God; and there is nothing to distinguish his

reception from the reception of the rest. As other sons of God may have one or another of the 'morning stars' in their guardianship, so the Adversary is the Guardian Spirit of the earth.

The Lord instances Job as his perfect servant on earth. The Adversary, according to his function, indicates the impossibility of judging on this point, since Job's life is wrapped in a prosperity that would make the worship of the heart indistinguishable from an interested lip service, to be abandoned as soon as the prosperity were withdrawn. Those who come to this work with associations of the other 'Satan' not entirely dismissed see in the attitude of the Adversary here personal malignity, or a sceptical doubt as to the possibility of disinterested worship. I can see neither. That there is no malignity is evident from the absence of any expression of divine displeasure, an absence the more marked from the fact that in the precisely similar scene in *Zechariah* a too urgent Adversary is rebuked by God. For the other suggestion, it must be remembered that the question raised by the Lord is nothing short of perfection on earth: in regard to so high a state the smallest doubt must be pressed. No one would see a sinister motive in a scientific experimenter, who revised his plans because his experiment was shown to be one degree short of being exhaustive. If it be objected that the idea of scientific experiment is out of harmony with the situation, I would ask what else is implied