

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE MYSTERY OF JOB.

BY THE REV. F. R. MONTGOMERY HITCHCOCK, D.D.

THE Book of Job is to many a mystery, a sealed book the burden of which is sorrow, the mystery of which is pain. But if we approach the problem of the sufferings of Job, we shall find that an all-important question is involved in the solution offered, and that many a useful lesson is to be drawn from the dialogue.

The book was written most probably during the period of the Captivity or even later. Some have held that it was composed during the time of the Hebrews' sojourn in the land of Goshen. Jewish tradition represented it as the work of Moses. Delitzsch held that it was composed in the time of Solomon. Ewald and Renan would give a later date, somewhere between the captivity of the Northern and that of the Southern tribes. But Davison, Driver, Margoliouth and Cheyne would place it after the Exile, and with the greatest probability. For although the age described is patriarchal, the subject matter is comparatively new. The figure of Job, or Iyyob, which means either "ill-treated one" (from *ayabh*) or "converted one" (from *yubh*), as he should be called, is old-world, and his surroundings are described in antique colours. Rich in flocks and herds, he offers primitive sacrifice as the head and priest of his family. The coin that is offered him by his friends is a *kesita*,¹ a primitive piece of money mentioned in Genesis.² The musical instruments named by Job in his speech,³ harp and pipe, are the simple ones of Genesis iv. 21. The word "Yahweh" is avoided in the drama,⁴ El and Eloah being used instead. But Professor Davison regarded this as "a patriarchal disguise," and says: "The author is a true Israelite, and betrays himself to be so at every turn, however wide his sympathy be with the life of other peoples, and however great his power of re-animating the past." Moreover, the life of the Arab chief is the same to-day as it was two thousand years ago; and the picture of the desert sheik conversing solemnly about God with his three friends at the door of his tent is not unfamiliar to those who have seen or read of the habits of that race. Besides this there are certain features in the book which point to the later date. There are here and there allusions to the law of Moses, its pledges;⁵ its vows;⁶ its landmarks,⁷ and its judicial procedure.⁸

Moreover, the state of society which is depicted is not the primitive life of the patriarch, but the settled life of the community. The author, too, was a great observer. His illustrations are taken from history, the natural world, astronomy (evidently gathered from Chaldean sources,) and social customs. He was

¹ xlii. 11.

² xxxiii. 17.

³ xxi. 12.

⁴ It occurs in xii. 9, and in Prologue and Epilogue.

⁵ xxii. 6; xxiv. 9.

⁶ xxii. 27.

⁷ xxiv. 2.

⁸ xxxi. 9-11.

evidently versed in the Psalms, to which there are numerous references in this poem. The author had also a reflective mind. The problem of pain and suffering perplexed him. In the young days of the world, when men did not think much or long, suffering was regarded as retributive. Then it was observed that the righteous suffer. But how is this just, if suffering is penal? This is the problem the author set himself to solve, and he did it in a sustained poem of literary merit and finish without, indeed, the rugged force and exaltation of the Song of Miriam, but still original and logically arranged. The poet had evidently abundance of material ready to hand for illustration. And the developed ideas of morality, the *inwardness* of the thoughts of the speakers, their deep insight into the counsels and character of God, and the conception of Satan,¹ so new to the Jews and suggestive of the influence of Persian dualism, if not also the references to Rahab, Leviathan, and sea-monsters, mythological creatures of Babylonian origin,² all point to a period after the Babylonian Captivity. After their return to their native land their thoughts were turned perforce to the moral government of the world, and especially to the problem of suffering, which supplied the Greek tragic poets with the subject of their dramas, Æschylus holding the penal and Sophocles the educational theory of pain and sorrow.

As has ever been the case, men sought consolation in "divine philosophy" (Plato) when everything else had been taken from them. To the penal aspect of the problem of pain the Jews in our Lord's day were distinctly partial. But as the Master learned obedience and was perfected by the things He suffered, so must all men be educated by troubles and sorrows. This was the moral lesson which an unknown poet tried to inculcate, however indistinctly and unsatisfactorily, some centuries before.

With regard to the poem itself, its structure is dramatic, but it is a drama of suffering, not of action, a drama moving in dialogues, not in scenes, in arguments, not in deeds. Job is the central figure. He is no myth, for we find his name coupled with Noah and Daniel in Ezekiel.³ Around his fate is woven the net of cir-

¹ Satan appears in Zech. iii. 2, as "the Satan" or Adversary of Joshua, the high priest, where he is rebuked by Yahweh; in 1 Chron. xxi. 1, it is Satan (without article) that tempted David, whereas in 2 Sam. xxiv. 1, it was Yahweh that tempted him. In Job also the article is used. After the Babylonian Captivity the word "Satan," which had been applied in previous writings to any adversary, e.g., David was the satan or "adversary" of the Philistines (1 Sam. xxix. 4); an angel was the satan or "adversary" of Balaam (Num. xxii. 22), came to be used of an evil personality hostile to God and man. The evolution of Jewish Satanology was largely due to the influence of Persian dualism, from which their deeply rooted monotheism restrained the Jewish theologians. The Asmodæus of Tobit, the personification of evil, is the Æshma Dæva of the Persian religion. In the Book of Enoch there are a number of Satans, evil angels. In the *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* there is a further development of the idea of Satan, who is identified with the Serpent of Genesis iii. The Jewish treatises in the Talmud have the same ideas.

² These recall the Tiāmat of the Babylonian Creation story.

³ xiv. 14.

cumstances and chain of arguments that form the nucleus of the drama. For the question upon which the dialogue turned was whether his suffering was a punishment or a discipline. Well known is the record of Job's prosperity, adversity and trial. Wondrous pitiful is the story. Deprived of all he had, wealth, love, power and health, his fortune taken from him, his children killed, his body a mass of putrefying sores, and his wife a blasphemer who bids him renounce God and die. Yet "for all this did not Job sin with his lips."¹ Here is the sublimity of pathos, and this pathos was intensified when his three friends, hearing of his misfortunes, came to mourn with him; but when they saw him, they knew him not, so strangely disfigured was that noble form by a loathsome malady, and then those stern sons of the desert, those austere wise men, lifted up their voices and wept. "So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him, for they saw that his grief was great."²

At last, moved by this deep, unspoken sympathy, Job's heart gathered strength, and he cursed the day of his birth and wondered why his life was prolonged in torture. Then the eldest of his friends, Eliphaz of Teman, took up his parable.

He began by expressing his surprise that Job, who had comforted others, should himself give way under affliction. Then he advised his fallen chief not to yield to despair, but to trust in God.

"Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent?
Or where were the righteous cut off?"³

And then in thrilling words the speaker tells of his vision.

"Now a thing was by stealth brought to me,
And mine ear received a whisper thereof.
In thoughts from the visions of the night,
When deep sleep falleth on man,
Fear came upon me and trembling.
Then a spirit passed before my face:
The hair of my flesh stood up:
It stood still, but I could not see the form of it.
There was silence, and I heard a voice:
Shall mortal man be just before God?⁴
Shall a man be pure before his Maker?"⁵

Such was the vision of God in the weary vigils of the man. Then wisely and well did he argue that no man can claim immunity from suffering, and at the same time he pointed out that goodness is the character of God, and therefore there is hope in the future, because there is a certain happiness for the man the Lord corrects.

"Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth.
Therefore, despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty.
For He maketh sore, and bindeth up;
He woundeth, and His hands make whole."⁶

But Job did not receive this advice in a good spirit. His sufferings are too severe to be compared with ordinary pain. And he exclaims when finally wearied by expostulations and innuendoes

¹ ii. 10.

² ii. 13.

³ iv. 7.

⁴ or "more just than God."

⁵ or "more pure than his Maker."

⁶ v. 17.

of his self-righteous and "miserable comforters," "Man cometh up like a flower and is cut down. He fleeth as it were a shadow, and continueth not."¹ Would that there were another life possible. And yet there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again.² After expressing the hopelessness of immortality, he finds a gleam of hope breaking upon his soul, and he cries: O that God would appoint him a set time, and remember him after His wrath was past! "If a man die, shall he live? All the days of my service would I wait until my relief came. Thou wouldest call, and I would answer Thee."³

Once more Eliphaz replies to Job, this time in a more authoritative tone, and accuses him directly of sinfulness, which is the secret cause of his malady, evasion and hypocrisy. "Thy mouth uttereth iniquity," he said, and proceeds with the bitter harangue:

"Why doth thine heart carry thee away?
And what do thy eyes wink at,
That thou turnest thy spirit against God,
And lettest such words go out from thy mouth?
What is man that he should be clean?
Behold, He (God) putteth no trust in His saints;
Yea, the heavens are not clean in His sight.
The wicked man travaileth with pain all his days;
The congregation of hypocrites shall be desolate."⁴

In short, Eliphaz urged Job to repent, and although appearances might be against him Job declares that there is One Who holds him innocent, his Redeemer, He Who will redeem his character from this cruel imputation, harder to bear than all his sufferings, He Who will deliver him from this sea of trouble, He Who will reveal Himself to him after death. Notice how the personal aspect of the resurrection is emphasized in the words, "Whom I shall see *for myself*."⁵

We cannot fail to notice the different stages in Job's growing faith. His mind was dark at first, and clouded over by affliction; his soul was oppressed with doubt, and his heart was chilled to the core by the unsympathetic attitude of his friends. And yet, through all this dark night of tumult, tempest, passion and despair, we can discern the star of faith in the goodness of God shining brighter and ever brighter upon his troubled spirit, until at last he gave utterance to that grand confession of faith (although he used "redeemer" (*goel*) in the sense of vindicator).

"I know that my Redeemer liveth,
And that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth;
And though this body shall be destroyed,
Yet without the flesh shall I see God." (xix. 26.)

Although he has learnt this, still he cannot yet understand the anomalies and inequalities of life, the apparent success of the wicked and his own misfortune, godly, pious, and nobly generous as he has been. He has not yet learnt, but he is soon to learn, that it is for a wise purpose that the wicked are allowed to prosper, while the righteous are afflicted. They who are continually pros-

¹ xiv. 2.² xiv. 7.³ xiv. 13, 14.⁴ xv. 13-34.⁵ xix. 26.

perous and successful, whose lives are pleasant and happy, very often forget God in the hour of their wealth. While those He loves, God chastens, in order to bring them nearer to Himself, moulding, as it were, their souls into shape by His Divine Hand, which often seems too heavy for man to bear, and yet can be borne and even kissed by the true son.

But Job had to learn this lesson in his own experience, and so has every son of man. While his friends reasoned falsely, obscuring, as they did, the discipline of suffering, denying the inequalities of life, the seeming prosperity of the wicked, and the apparent misfortune of the righteous, they cast discredit upon the government of God, which they sought to defend, by this method of contradiction. They teach us one important lesson: that "God does not need our ignorance," His cause is not to be advocated by ignorant defenders. For He will punish those who cover up the problems and deny the enigmas of life, no matter how righteous their motive may be.

Persisting in their refusal to regard Job as an innocent man, they actually charge him with crimes of inhumanity and tyranny:

"Is not thy wickedness great,
And thine iniquities infinite?
For thou hast taken a pledge from thy brother for nought,
And stripped the naked of their clothing."¹

Of these things they warned him to repent, because for these he was now suffering retribution in the form of tribulation. God is great and God is just, was the burden of their argument. "Yes, He is, I know well," answered Job. "But is He just to me?" And they could not answer him.

Then once more Job made a survey of his circumstances. The once proud chief to whom princes gave ear, the once wealthy judge in whose presence the young men stood, is now had in derision of those younger than himself, a very scorn of men, and his prosperity had been turned into calamity.² And yet he has not lived a wicked life, he has been sincere, just and pure, staunch to his principles and true to his God.³ The wicked, indeed, suffer miserably in mind and fortune, but in him there has been no wickedness. Would that God would answer him and tell him why He has afflicted him, and that his adversary had written a book.⁴

The words of Job are ended, and his friends do not answer, but sit silently looking on the ground, because he was righteous in his own eyes. Hereupon a younger friend, Elihu, came forward. He had been standing by listening to the discourse with much displeasure, because the friends had not been able to answer Job and because Job justified himself rather than God.

After waiting for some moments to see if his elders would speak, but observing that they still held their peace, he addressed them. Strong and bold and full of inspiration⁵ were the words that fell from his lips. God is not unjust to Job, he said, He is not deaf to his cry. In many ways God speaks to man. By visions in

¹ xxii. 5-7.² xxix.³ xxx.⁴ xxxi. 35.⁵ xxxii. 18.

the night He averts him from an evil purpose, by the chastening influence of sickness He checks his wild career, and He is ever ready to restore the penitent. Therefore God does not afflict a man unjustly. For surely God will not do wickedly, neither will the Almighty pervert judgment. God does, indeed, listen to the cry of the oppressed, but not when it is merely wrung from them, when there is no faith, no real submission to the Divine Will, no humble return to God, no early seeking of the Lord.

“ But none saith, Where is God my Maker,
Who giveth songs in the night;
Who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth,
And maketh us wiser than the fowls of heaven.”¹

The oppressed cry, but not in faith, and so there is no answer to their lament. Still, God is merciful to the poor, and keepeth watch over the righteous. “ He openeth the ears of kings to discipline, and commandeth that they depart from iniquity.”² And addressing Job, Elihu said :

“ Even so would He have removed thee out of the strait,
Into a broad place where there is no straitness;
But thou hast fulfilled the judgment of the wicked.”

Thou hast thwarted the gracious counsel of the living God by rebelling against His chastening hand. Learn to submit and yield. Dare not to reproach or challenge Him Whose works are so wonderful to behold. “ With God is terrible majesty ; the Almighty, we cannot find Him out. He is excellent in power, and in judgment and in plenty of justice : He will not afflict. Men do therefore fear Him. He respecteth not any that are wise of heart.”³

And so Elihu ended his words with the very sentiment that Job had expressed when in a softer and more pious mood :⁴

“ Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom ;
And to depart from evil, that is understanding.”

It is to be noted that the Elihu speeches are not generally considered to be part of the original poem, but even as an interpolation, they are a valuable addition to the poem.

And then, as in the Greek tragedies, the *Deus ex Machina* appears, and in a speech of wonderful eloquence and majesty convinces Job of his error and removes his discontent. For the place was shaken by a great whirlwind, and the voice of Yahweh, condescending to reason with His creature, was heard :

“ Who is this that darkeneth counsel, (My Divine plan)
By words without knowledge ? ”

Dost thou understand in the very smallest degree the great wonders of My hands in the earth, in the heavens, and in the depths of the sea, or canst thou read My ordinances, the principles by which I govern all things, by which I say to the sea :

“ Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further.”⁵

¹ xxxv. 10-14.

² xxxvi. 10.

³ xxxvii. 24.

⁴ xxviii. 28.

⁵ xxxviii. 11.

Then was Job humiliated in the dust by the transcendent majesty of God revealed to him in this sermon of nature. His mood of anger was overpast, and now that God had granted him the occasion of vindicating himself, he had nothing to say but, "I am vile."¹ Thus Job recovered himself in the presence of God, while the dread voice still pursued the theme of God's righteousness, and in a tone of irony inquired :

"Wilt thou condemn Me, that thou mayest be righteous?
Hast thou an arm like God?"

Assume the majesty, glory and beauty of God, and govern the world. If thou canst do that, I will confess that thy right hand can save thee. Why, even Behemoth (elephant), one of My creatures, is a marvel of strength and power to such as thee.²

In such a wise did the great Creator deign to reason with His creature, bringing him to a sense of his presumption, and showing him how wisely everything has been ordained and arranged for the moral and spiritual education of rebellious man. And the creature, now penitent, confessing his inability to understand and his audacity in complaining, said: "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in sackcloth and ashes."³ And God accepted his repentance, and also his intercession on behalf of his friends.

Thus Job learned the lesson of life—submission to the Almighty Will of God and rest in the everlasting arms. It is said that the issue of the drama is evaded. The problem "Why do the righteous suffer?" is not solved, for it is insoluble if this life is regarded as the "be-all" and "end-all." And it is urged that the arguments attributed to the Almighty might silence but would not convince, and yet in the drama they reduce Job to a condition of sorrow, for they teach him his place in the world and his impotence in the presence of the Creator; and they make him realise somehow that One Whose wisdom, power and goodness are so manifest in the natural government of the world is not likely to make a mistake in its moral government. Job being made to feel the want of another life, if only to vindicate his character before God, is helped to rise above the problem that has vexed his soul and feel that it is better for him to have suffered than not to have suffered, seeing that his sufferings have brought him into closer touch with the source of his own life and the fountain of his happiness.

It is the light the Cross of Christ, in all its glory and its shame, throws upon the problem of suffering, that enables us to approach that mystery from a higher standpoint than either Job or the Psalmist, and to see the moral purification that is wrought out in pain and the spiritual sanctification of sorrow. The conclusion of the drama, the increased prosperity of Job, is distinctly Oriental, and offends the Western mind which, under Christian influence, does not identify worldly advancement with true success.

¹ xl. 4.

² xl. 1-15.

³ xlii. 6.