

CHAPTER I

THE BOOK OF JOB

MANY who have never read *Job* have caught something of its spirit as they have listened to the Burial Service of *The Book of Common Prayer*. Three times *Job* is quoted:

The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the Name of the Lord (1: 21),

and,

Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay (14: 1f);

there is also the triumphant note taken up as well in Handel's *Messiah*,

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another (19: 25ff).

Great writers and theologians have hailed it as a poetic masterpiece. Carlyle's words may serve as an example*:

I call it, apart from all theories about it, one of the grandest things ever written with pen. One feels, indeed, as if it were not Hebrew; such a noble universality, different from noble patriotism or noble sectarianism, reigns in it. A noble Book; all men's Book! It is our first, oldest statement of the never-ending Problem—man's destiny, and God's way with him here in this earth. And all in such free flowing outlines; grand in its sincerity, in its simplicity; in its epic melody, and repose of reconciliation . . . Sublime sorrow, sublime reconciliation; oldest choral music as of the heart of mankind;—so soft, and

* *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, p. 49 in Centenary Edition.

great; as the summer midnight, as the world with its seas and stars! There is nothing written, I think, in the Bible or out of it, of equal literary merit.

A catena of similar opinions may be found in Strahan, p. 28f.

For maturer men and women who are familiar with the Bible there are few Old Testament stories that exercise a stronger and more perennial attraction than that of Job. This is not because of the poetry of the book, though unfortunate is the man who has not felt the music and poetic power of some of its chapters. It is not even because of the effect made on him by the book as a whole, for the number of those who have intelligently read the whole book is small. It is rather that when life loses the first simplicities of youth we increasingly feel its mysteries, that of suffering being perhaps its greatest. As the Lord leads us in strange paths of pain and loss, or when our eyes are opened to glimpse something of the anguish around us, we feel that even if we cannot understand all in the book of Job, it does indicate an answer to these problems.

There are two main reasons for the lack of detailed knowledge and understanding of *Job* among Bible students. The former derives from the fact that it is poetry of the highest order. Tennyson could say that it was "the greatest poem of ancient or modern times." The effort of mind and heart needed, if we are to enter into the depths of great poetry, is not one that most associate with the study of the Bible. The second is the inadequacy of the Authorised Version. Davidson, no mean or biased critic, says (p. lxxviii), "Of the English Versions the A.V. appears at its worst in this book. It is frequently obscure and several times it misses the meaning entirely . . . The R.V. has done much to make the book intelligible to English readers."

Though this present attempt to grasp and display the message of *Job* is based on the R.V., no more modern rendering has been despised, whether taken from a translation of the Bible or from a commentary, if it has brought out the meaning more clearly. The R.S.V. has proved especially helpful.

We may perhaps add a third and more subtle reason for our difficulty in understanding and appreciating *Job*. From Greece our civilization has learnt to think in general terms and abstract conceptions. The world of the Old Testament thought, as does the Western child today, in concrete terms and of particular cases.

We talk vaguely of the problem of suffering; the Old Testament deals with Job's 'Why?' We feel that to reach the truth we must strip a problem of its 'accidentals'; the Old Testament presents Job as a figure in the round, detailing apparently all the accidentals of his life. Closer study shows that it is wiser and more subtle than that. All that is needed to make Job a real man for the writer's generation is retained; that which would make him an alien to the reader is normally passed over, but for all that the "accidentals" are an essential part of the book.

Unfortunately, however, there is an immeasurably greater gulf between us and the writer's generation than there was between them and Job. We are in danger of being so occupied with the exotic details of life and thought in the land of Uz, details which still live on there, that we fail to realize how modern Job and his questionings, his friends and their obtuseness are. That is why so much in this exposition is devoted to stripping the characters of their Eastern garments, that they may speak to us in the language of today.