

JOB, GOD'S WITNESS¹

By

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JOB is not a witness to God by the same title and in the same way as Abraham, David, Isaias or St Paul, for Job is a poetic creation like Oedipus or King Lear. Job did perhaps exist, just as did many of Sophocles's or Shakespeare's characters. But of the man Job, of the old Edomite sheik who lived at the time of the Patriarchs, the Bible tells us almost nothing. Job comes into the sacred books as the creature of imagination and of a poet's dream. The man whose voice is heard behind the voice of the hero is the author. For Job is not only the fictitious character of a drama, he is witness to a religious crisis in the Jewish soul. He utters the believer's cry of confidence in God. What he says is inspired by God. As such his grandiose figure, even though it be imaginary, which bears within itself the secrets of one of the noblest of Jewish minds, ought to find a place amid the Saints, Prophets and Sages who constitute the company of God's witnesses.

But Job is not a Christian hero. Strictly speaking he is not even a Jewish hero, for he is generally believed to have been an Idumean living well before Moses and without the advantage of any revelation properly so-called. What lesson can Christians draw from meditating on these cries of anguish, when they have the Gospels set before them?

If we compare Job's grief with its protestations to that of Violaine in Claudel's *L'Annonce faite a Marie*, the difference is striking. Both are suffering practically the same evils; they have incurable diseases, Job elephantiasis, Violaine leprosy. In both cases their life is nothing but long and unmerited torture. But what joy in the welcome given to suffering by Violaine! How she understands and accepts it!

Man is priest, but it is not forbidden to woman to be victim,
 God is exacting and does not allow any creature's candle to be
 lighted

Unless any slight impurity is thereby burnt away,
 Its own, or that with which it is surrounded; like the charcoal
 in the censer which, when fanned into flame . . .

Mighty is suffering when it is as voluntary as sin. . . . (Act III,
 Scene 2).

It is hard to suffer and not to know for what purpose.

¹ Being the seventh chapter of *Job* (Editions du Cerf) translated by K. Pond.

But what others know not of, I have learnt and I want you to know it with me. . . .

Happy is he who suffers and knows for what purpose. (Act IV, Scene 3).

What separates Christians from Job, then, is the whole essence of the Gospel message relating to suffering: faith in the resurrection of the dead and in God's glorious kingdom beyond the grave. This faith is so deeply anchored in the heart of Christians that they need to make an effort before they can understand and recognise that it was entirely lacking not only in Job but in the man who created Job. The latter did believe in a life beyond the grave but one which was gloomy and pitiful even for the righteous. The drama of Job, then, is intelligible only in the measure in which the Christian who reads it abstracts from his belief in the central dogma of the Cross which sets human suffering in a true light. The knowledge of this dogma would have rendered Job's protestations purposeless.

Then, too, appreciation of the meaning of life is very different in Job's mind and in that of a Christian. It is quite true that Job is a just man who is looking for God's grace and goodwill. But this divine blessing does not form a bond of love between God and his soul. He knows nothing of grace as a Christian understands it. For him, the divine favour is expressed by those very goods of Mammon, the enjoyment of which, according to the Gospel, rightly entails the risk of their proving an obstacle to divine grace. For Job the divine reward is not the pure love of God; it consists of his own sons and daughters, new flocks, fields with abundant harvests, oil and wine, above all of public recognition of his worth, of the young man's respectful silence when he enters the municipal assembly. Job only understands success here on earth. And this is very liable to shock the Christian conscience, for it sees in it temptation. One would prefer the disillusionment of the writer of Ecclesiastes, whose soul is not so easily satisfied. So much the more so in that Job does not appear to be aware that disinterested virtue so much as exists. In this respect he is infinitely below a St Francis of Assisi or St John of the Cross in greatness. He is not even so great as the good man whom Plato represents in the *Republic* as suffering undeservedly, a type of which Socrates, who is shown in the *Phaedo* as dying without a murmur, is a supreme example.

Finally, the Christian mind is likely to be shocked by Job's protestations, even though it excuses him for not knowing the dogma of original sin. Job is an Idumean and, even if he were a Jew, such a dogma would hold scarcely any place in his spiritual life. But proud of his righteousness as he is, he would seem to be the very image of

the pharisee. He is no hypocrite, but he is not humble. It must not, of course, be forgotten that he is an imaginary personage. In practice the contemporaries of the author of Job did acknowledge their sins to Yahweh when stricken down by disease. But for a poet to have been able to conceive the idea of a character who boasts so loudly of his innocence, it was absolutely necessary that the action should take place in a period in which moral consciousness was not yet very highly developed. A Christian in times of suffering would not dare to make Job's protestations his own, because he is not innocent. The more holy he is, the more does he come to realise he is a sinner because his sanctity enables him the better to discover in himself those imperfections which set him so far apart from the sanctity of God. The cry of Isaias before Yahweh: 'Woe is me . . . because I am a man of unclean lips' touches us more closely than Job's 'I am innocent'.

Job, then, is not a Christian hero and no useful purpose would be served in dissimulating what separates us from him, for it is nothing less than the cross of Christ. And yet the book of Job is inspired on the same authority as the Gospels or the epistles of St Paul in which the latter boasts of his sufferings. Job, then, is a witness of God whose word must always be received with the deepest respect. In what sense is he a witness?

Job is the witness to the presence of a just God in the world. Job's cry of protest is that of the faith of a believer and that is great enough and rare enough to deserve a Christian reader's interest. Throughout the book, deprived as he is of the light of redemption and of the Gospel, which alone would suffice to enlighten him to the full, Job loses neither hope nor faith. The intensity of his torture is only possible precisely because of the incomplete nature of that faith. Job has not received the full light. But, in the face of everything, in spite of the obscurities of his faith, he clings to it. The arguments of the theology of his time are shown to be inconsistent. He nevertheless gives credence to God. In spite of the flat denial which God's justice seems to receive, Job never calls it fundamentally into question; in spite of certain bold remarks which are directed solely against the narrowness of his friends' theology, his final words are a juridical 'appeal' to the tribunal of God. Job refuses to admit an 'absurd' world or one which is governed by a sort of all-powerful fate, which is the same thing. Job is God's witness in the face of his own incomprehensible suffering. And that is very fine and very moving. It is absolutely necessary for christians to realise, behind the light of the Gospels, how deep the anguish of their ancestors in the faith could be. Men who lived before the time of the redemption needed greater

heroism than we do not to let their confidence die out, they who could not even have any idea of the nature of the light brought by Jesus.

A comparison between Job's imaginary suffering² and that of the great pagan figures of his time will enable the originality of the sacred drama from the religious point of view to be more clearly perceived.

If with Dhorme we date Job somewhere in the years between 450 and 400 B.C., the author was a few score years younger than Aeschylus; he was a contemporary of Socrates and Sophocles and was somewhat older than Plato.

Now, like the drama of Job, Greek tragedy is entirely taken up with human suffering. If the Bible puts Job before us, on the Attic stage are presented *Prometheus Unbound*, *Oedipus Coloneus* and Euripides's *Heracles*.

Crucified on the rock, Prometheus utters his complaint in terms which recall the accents of Job. Is he not tortured by the order of Zeus, the highest of the gods?

Would that in chains beneath the world,
 Beneath Hades, where dwell the dead,
 To Tartarus the unplummeted,
 He had in rage this body hurled,
 That neither man might gaze on me
 Nor God, as now when, pang by pang,
 A blown leaf in the wind I hang,
 And they that hate me laugh to see.

(Gilbert Murray's translation: *Prometheus Unbound* 1. 152-9).

To the chorus leader of the Ocean nymphs, who for all that was a being of passion, who bids him avow his fault, the Greek hero replies like Job to his friends:

'Tis well for them whose feet touch not the mire
 To chide and counsel the afflicted. (*ibid.* 1. 267-8).

As to Ocean, he plays the rôle of Job's friends. He says:

. . . Away, O sufferer, cast
 Thine angry mood, and seek some road at last
 To free thee from these bonds. My words, I know,
 Will seem as children's lore, learnt long ago;
 To list to them is but part-punishment,
 Prometheus, of a tongue too turbulent!
 Thou art not humble yet; nor by the pain
 He sends thee, softened. Nay, thy heart is fain
 For more affliction still! Friend, wouldst thou learn

² Imaginary in the sense that it is by no means certain that Job was an historical personage.—Tr.

My rede, thou wilt not stretch thy foot to spurn
 Against the goad. Stern-hearted is the king
 Who rules us, and abides no questioning,

(*ibid.*, 1. 318-326).

And elsewhere:

Thou takest thought for others in their need
 Far better than thyself. (*ibid.*, 1. 339-40).

But despite natural and striking similarities between these two suffering heroes who protest against their sufferings, there are two differences in what they are enduring. The first is that Prometheus is immortal; the second is that for him there is no problem, for he knows, and everyone knows, that Zeus is unjust and is taking his revenge. When crucifying him Hephaistos says to him:

. . . Many a groan and cry shall utter there,
 All fruitless: Jove's heart listeth not to prayer.

(*ibid.*, 1. 38-39).

And M. Mazon³ remarks: 'The Prometheus trilogy taught men that the God of justice had only become just after the lapse of centuries; his first acts of violence had, in provoking further violence, retarded for a long time the reign of peace; by clemency alone had he obtained the submission of the last rebel. This was tantamount to saying: the justice after which men aspire is not a power which exists outside themselves and is ready to answer their first call, it belongs to them themselves to bring it into being and to make it grow'. (*Aeschylus*, pp. 158-9). The immense distance which separates Prometheus from Job, the Greek from the Jew, from the religious point of view here comes into view.

Exteriorly Oedipus himself resembles Job. When he appears with his eyes put out the chorus welcomes him:

O sorrow, lamentable for eyes to see!
 Sores of all past ills encountering me!
 What frenzy, O wretch, is this that came on thee?
 What Deity was it that with a leap so great—
 Farther than farthest—sprang on thy sad fate?
 Woe is me, woe is me for thee—unfortunate!

(*Oedipus Tyrannus* 1. 1297-1302, tr. by Sir
 George Young—Everyman edition, p. 167).

It is true that Oedipus has offended the gods, but without knowing it. He has been the victim of a heavenly machiavellianism of which the Jews had no conception. In *Oedipus Coloneus* the hero, like Job, protests his innocence to Creon:

³ The French translator of *Prometheus*.

Since for myself I know you cannot find
 Any reproach of wrongfulness in me,
 That could have doomed me to commit these wrongs
 Against myself and mine; (*ibid.*, 1. 965).

In his little book on *Sanctity* Père Festugière has described at length the figure of the Greek hero and his attitude in the face of death, suffering, ill fortune and trials sent by God. Taking as his point of departure the instance of Euripides's Heracles, the type of the just man who suffers, he discerns in Greek reflection upon the problem of the just man suffering, the presence 'of two conceptions of God which do not agree'. On the one hand that of gods who are jealous of human happiness, of the mighty god, mightier than man. On the other, that of the good and perfect God who is present in our heart. 'The drama of Greek thought, adds Père Festugière, is the eternal drama of human thought. . . . Is the God who makes us suffer the same as the God who represents our ideal?'⁴ This is the drama of Job, too. If, as has been seen, he appeals from God to God, it is because there is in point of fact, if not a dualism in his conception of God, at least two dogmas of his faith which seem to him to be in contradiction: the power of God and his justice. He appeals from the power of God which is torturing him to his justice which will acquit him. And if Greek thought has eulogised the hero who submits without a murmur to the arbitrariness of a god who is both mighty and unjust, it also came to recognise in suffering, as Père Festugière shows, the divine hand of Providence, a Providence which rejoices at the testimony rendered to it by the just man in his suffering. The author of Job has, as it were, introduced all these developments into his drama, in which suffering is alternatively envisaged as incomprehensible severity on God's part or as a trial through which the righteous man passes victoriously.

But whereas for the Greeks this dual conception of God went hand in hand with duality of theological thought: the mighty gods who imposed their decisions were those of mythology and the just God was the God—entirely spiritual—of the philosophers, for Job it is the same God who is in turn envisaged as the mysterious author of suffering and as the Just One *par excellence* who is the final refuge of the wretched. Job therefore reacts very differently from the Greek hero.

At the same time the author of Job does come fairly close to Plato. If the latter, albeit with honour, expels poets from his *Republic*, he does so because he sees in them the bards of a mythology which extols the injustice and passions of the gods. Plato indeed affirms

⁴ Festugière, *La Sainteté*, p. 57.

that the poets have lied in attributing injustice to the gods. If they were really unjust they would not exist. 'Nor let us', he says, 'suffer them (the poets) to attempt to persuade our youth that the gods can create evil; and that heroes are in no respect better than men. For, as we said formerly, these things are neither holy nor true, for we have elsewhere shown that it is impossible that evil should proceed from the gods'. (*Republic*, Bk. III. Eng. tr. by T. Taylor, p. 68).

But Plato's god, like Aristotle's, is not a Providence who is directly concerned with man. He is a wholly spiritual God whom man approaches by intellectual effort and by contemplation. In the *Republic* the good man who suffers does not turn to him for help.

It is recognised, of course, that the case, put before Socrates by Glauco in the *Republic*, of a good man deprived of everything except his goodness, encounters the very same argument as the drama of Job. But, whereas Job recognises that it is the hand of Yahweh which is striking him, Glauco's hero suffers as it were in a vacuum, being simply handed over to the brutality of the wicked. 'The just man, being of this disposition, will be scourged, tormented, fettered, will have his eyes burnt out, and lastly, having suffered all manner of evils, will be crucified; and thus you see that he should not desire the reality but the appearance of justice'. (*ibid.*, Bk. II, p. 38).

As to the wicked man, Glauco is in agreement with Job in demonstrating that ' . . . he will both in private and in public surpass and exceed his adversaries; and by this means he will be rich, and serve his friends and hurt his enemies: and he will amply and magnificently render sacrifices to the gods, and will honour the gods and such men as he chooses much better than the just man. From whence they reckon that it is likely he will be more beloved of the gods than the just man'. (*ibid.*, Bk. II, p. 38).

In the face of this suffering of the good man of the Greeks, in which everything takes place on the human plane of moral heroism preached by Socrates, Job testifies to the essential unity of the God who causes us to suffer. The two are identical. But in what way are they identical? How can it be that God puts us into positions in which we strive to have recourse to his justice as it were against him? It is the mystery of divine Wisdom expressed in this short poem, which is perhaps the highest point of the drama:

But Wisdom whence can it be drawn?

Where is the cradle of understanding?

Man knoweth not the way to it, it is

Not to be met with in the land of the living.

The drama of Job bears witness to the inscrutable mystery of God.

Translated by K. POND.