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THE BOOK OF JOB
AN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH

by

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There have been many interpretations of the Book of Job. Early religious commentators and many present day critics view it as a story in which Job learns that man cannot know the reason for his suffering and must accept God's ways as impenetrable. This view implies that man is natively guilty and can be delivered through grace and the acceptance of man's fate. Writers like Jastrow, Kallen and Jung feel that God is lacking in grace and is amoral and indifferent. Paul Weiss calls attention to God's callousness in permitting Satan to kill Job's flock and children who are not involved in the trial. Terrien sees Job as the "Poet of Existence" because man cannot solve the problem of evil but he must have faith. Through suffering, he travels beyond the ignorance and the arrogance of religion. In the end, "existence is fulfilled when man is aware, not of his ultimate concern but of becoming the concern of the ultimate."

Slochower in "The Hebrew Myth of a Chosen God" (1951) sees Job's suffering as symbolic of the history of the Jews. Job is rehabilitated because he insists on making his own choice and is, to this extent, his own instrument of salvation. In Slochower's words, the Hebrew God living through his dialogic relation to man is himself re-created through man's quest and questioning which constitute his "life". The Jews, exiled, ostracized and hunted, chose this God and like Job are still fighting back.

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In a paper written in 1958, Slochower sees Job's suffering as a psychic process of rehabilitation analogous to psychoanalysis, and God, the friends, and Elihu as varying aspects of Job's developing ego. God redeems Job at the end "because he refused to accept an irrational authority, because he has insisted on maintaining his own ways without losing faith in a substantive principle".

The thesis of this paper is that:

- 1) Job, because he had the unconditional love of God, brought to the trial and suffering a deep sense of worth and integrity and the courage to question ultimate authority. This he did even under the pressure of the common attitude represented by his friends that God is just and man must be guilty.
- 2) The second and most important argument of this study is that in an existential sense good and evil, health and disease, life and death are inherent in life itself and an essential part of it. The universe is not just or unjust, and man is not guilty or innocent - he simply is. He suffers loss and disease not because he is guilty or bad and happiness and health are not rewards for righteousness and goodness. Job is not accused of being guilty - neither by Satan nor by God. He is simply thrust into life and forced to a direct confrontation with himself and with the world. This forces him to a critical evaluation of God and of himself.



3) The third point is that to blame God or oneself for misfortunes is to give an explanation to something man never understood; It is also an attempt to make oneself important. Man can accept God's perfection and his own limitations and even primitive man did. There is also the knowledge of and the resignation to the inevitability of death from the earliest days of man's history. There is and has been though, the rejection of and a protest against pain and the feeling of being unimportant in the universe.

4) And the fourth and final point of this paper is that Job is rewarded because he insists on man's right to protest and question even what he cannot change. Though man is limited, he is endowed with an intelligence that transcends his finiteness and which forces him to be critical and restless. And it is through this conflict that man achieves identity.

The story of Job is an existential statement of man's rights in relation to authority. This myth supports and confirms the thesis in modern psychiatry that unconditional love in early childhood would make man whole and give him a sense of integrity and of worth. It describes the process of growth observed in analysis in which through suffering and loss, man gains understanding of himself, of the significant people in his life, and of the world around him. The Book of Job shows the necessity for a direct confrontation with another and with oneself and the acceptance, respect, understanding and expression of all feelings - including anger as a



precondition to being. It demonstrates the power and the strength that love gives - the power to see and to test reality, the belief in and the demand for reasonableness and fairness; indignation against and rejection of cowardice and of deception. We also see how responsible love makes both the giver and the receiver. The giver must care and respect the needs of the receiving one; he must be fair; he must not humiliate nor hurt through the giving; he must not deceive, take advantage of or use the other; he can and should expect reciprocal responsibility and respect but he must not obligate nor create guilt in the other.

Job is throughout what we strive for in a successful analysis - a complete person. He got what all men yearn for and need but never get - unconditional love. It is a love that is perfect because it came from God - but requires no perfection from the receiver. It lets him be and accepts him for what he can become. It is the love of the myth, of all folklore and the fairy tale. The consistent theme is its life-giving power and the freedom and joy that accompany it.

Man depends on mother for love, and because she is human her love can never be unconditional nor perfect. It is conditioned by her own limitations as a human being and by her own existential situation.



The Job myth expresses also man's great need for security and freedom from anxiety. Writers like Sullivan, May, Fromm and Ribble and the vast experience in clinical practice have shown that we can only be free from anxiety when we can throw off the fear that, if we are ourselves in a full existential sense, we will not encounter the disapproval of the "loving one".

Job in the Bible is a man who enjoyed for many years God's love and blessings. He is a righteous man "who turned away from evil". He, indeed, responded to this love - he was wise and generous, kind and understanding. He was a good father but humble before God: For after each feast of his sons he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said: "It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts."

Job's life was sheltered and as Satan said to God: "Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land."

Sheltered and protected, Job is still dependent like a child and without knowledge of his resources and of his strength. Knowledge of self comes with loneliness and separation from mother; with loss and denial. Having basked in the love of God, Job meets



the death of his children and the loss of his wealth with deep sorrow and continued faith. He says: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." But the ultimate test of strength and of faith is disease that threatens life itself, makes it burdensome and cuts one off from all others;

Though Job's wife remains with him, neither she nor his friends, who come to comfort him, can really appreciate the depths of his despair. His wife tells him to curse God, and his friends, each in turn, demand that he acknowledge that because he is human and helpless he has no right to question God's authority and must welcome his suffering as deserved punishment and acknowledge that he must be guilty.

A deep sense of worth and self-love makes man cherish and value life, and the realization that it is finite and fleeting gives it even greater meaning and value. What we love and cherish we must protect and fight for, and Job in the most dramatic and courageous way, fights for his life. The whole gamut of human emotions comes forth in all its richness, dignity and complexity in this struggle for survival. It ranges from despair and a rejection of life, indignation, sarcasm and bitter anger at God to a demand for an explanation. It is the old and everlasting cry for justice, clarity and structurization. It is the acknowledgement and admission of man's helplessness before the ultimate authority;



a full recognition of God's omnipotence and power. It is also an insistence that power carries with it responsibility and that it has no right to be arbitrary with those who trust it and need it. It is the proclamation of man's right to object to meaningless suffering that makes life a burden; that makes one wish for death and annihilation, and that humiliates and absorbs all energy. Passive resignation to fate, which we see in Oedipus, is rejected by Job. God created life and knows everything and therefore is also responsible. From the friends he asks only that they identify and accept his lot as theirs because they, too, are human. He is bitter and angry at their smugness and their righteousness. He rejects their passive conviction that God must be right and man guilty and accuses them of cowardice and deception. The consistent belief in the presence of the unconditional love, based on the tangible experience of the earlier years, gives Job the conviction of his innocence and the unshaken belief that his life is "blameless". For only in the actual experience of love can there be such strength and such clear knowledge of responsibility.

In the long period of helplessness and dependence, the child has to accept and make many compromises and carries into adult life deep and lasting doubts of his own worth and lovability. Since survival in the early years of life depends so much on mother's approval and acceptance, it is difficult later on to discern and differentiate between what is inherently right because it is an expression of one's own human needs and what is made right



by others. In the Book of Job this is made clear - life is given and is finite. It is one's right and responsibility to value it and be responsible for it. One must protect it by rejecting injustice, deception, cowardice. One must believe in it and respect it - but never at the cost of integrity and abdication of human rights. In chapter 27, Job's last magnificent statement of his position reads as follows:

"As long as my breath is in me,
and the spirit of God is in my nostrils;
my lips will not speak falsehood,
and my tongue will not utter deceit.
Far be it from me to say that you are right;
'till I die I will not put away my
integrity from me.
I hold fast my righteousness, and
will not let it go;
my heart does not reproach me
for any of my days."

And again in chapter 13:

"Behold, he will slay me; I have no hope;
yet I will defend my ways to his face.
This will be my salvation."

Throughout the book, Job acknowledges God's omnipotence and perfection and accepts man's limits and finiteness. In chapter 14 he says:

(1) The quotation from chapter 13, "Behold, he will slay me; I have no hope;" is the reading of the Revised Standard Version (RSV). This rendering, doubtlessly correct, is based on a marginal note to the consonantal Hebrew text made by the Masoretes. By far the more familiar rendering of the passage to English readers is that of the King James or Authorized Version (AV), "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." It is interesting that the reading of the AV is precisely the reverse of the author's meaning and is practically the only verse the ordinary layman quotes from the book of Job!



(2)

"Man that is born of woman
is of a few days, and full of trouble.
He comes forth like a flower, and withers;
he flees like a shadow, and continues not.
And dost thou open thy eyes upon such a one
and bring him into judgement with thee?
Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?
There is not one.
Since his days are determined,
and the number of his months with thee,
and thou hast appointed his
bounds that he cannot pass,
look away from him, and desist,
that he may enjoy, like a hireling,
his days."

In personalizing God and in believing that every act pleases or angers him, man has attempted to escape the anxiety and the resulting loneliness and to deny the indifference of the universe. In making God into the good or bad parent, man has translated anxiety into fear and succeeded in changing the unknown into the known. For we can be angry at something or someone but we cannot protect ourselves from the unknown. This is symbolized in the Bible story by Job's demand to see God.

(2) The cryptic verse quoted from chapter 14 is probably a late gloss on the Hebrew text. Compare the rendering of the American Revised Version in the marginal note in loc., "Oh, that a clean thing could come out of an unclean! not one (can)." Charles Gore's "A New Commentary on Holy Scripture," p. 325 (Job 14:4), reads, "the meaning is that 'original sin' prevents all from attaining absolute righteousness, and therefore God owes forbearance to all."



"Who is this that hides counsel
without knowledge?"

Therefore I have uttered what I
did not understand,
things too wonderful for me,
which I did not know.

'Hear, and I will speak;

I will question you, and you declare to me'."

For at the end he has to accept the fact that both the wonderful things and the sea monster are all parts of God's creation; and, that through he can get his wealth back and even have it doubled, and prestige and status with it, the children that died can never return. The new life cannot be fitted into the old like "The new wine cannot be put into old wineskins." (Mathew 9)

The children that are born ~~to~~ him are the same in number and in sex as the ones that died but they cannot substitute for them. Perhaps the reward at the end is not a reward at all but another form of acceptance of the unacceptable?



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