

## *On the Sense of Righteousness in Men, and their Discovery of a Redeemer*

EVERY thoughtful reader of the book of Job must have been struck by two characteristics of it, which seem, at first sight, altogether inconsistent. The suffering man has the most intense personal sense of his own evil. He makes also the most vehement, repeated, passionate, protestations of his own righteousness. It cannot be pretended that he defends his innocence as far as men are concerned, but that he confesses himself guilty in the sight of God. On the contrary, he appeals again and again from men to God. He calls for His judgment. He longs to go and plead before Him. There would have been no need of clearing himself before a human tribunal. His friends do not, as it has been customary to say, attack him. They try, in their way, to console him. They are as much astonished at the vehemence of his self-accusations as they are shocked at his self-righteousness. They are quite convinced that God is ready to forgive those who make their prayer to Him. That is what they would do, if they had fallen into Job's calamities. The ancients, who were much wiser than he or they, have assured them that it is the right course. Why does not the stricken man take it? Why does he indulge in such dreadful wailings, which must be offensive to the Judge who has afflicted him? Above all, how dares he talk, as if a man might be just before God? How could he, who complained that he possessed the sins of his youth, nevertheless declare, that there was a purity and a truth in him, which the Searcher of all hearts would at last acknowledge? What did this contradiction mean? How could he justify it against all their precedents and arguments?

He could not justify it at all. The contradiction was there. He felt it, he uttered it, he found in it the secret of his anguish. He could only tell his friends: 'Your precedents and your arguments do not clear it away in the least. I knew them all before. I could have poured them out upon you if you had been in my case. But when one is brought face to face with suffering, they prove to be mere wind. These words of yours buzz about me, torment me, sometimes leave their stings in me, but they have nothing to do with me. They do not show me where I am wrong and where I am right. I am before a Judge who does not appear to recognise your maxims and modes of procedure. Oh! that I might order my cause before Him!'

Nor was it only the self-righteousness of Job which shocked Eliphaz, and Bildad, and Zophar. Their theory of the nature of pain was also thoroughly outraged by his language. I do not see any proof that they thought it merely a judgment from God for his transgressions. They would have been quite willing to call it, as we do, a merciful visitation. What offends them is, that Job groans under it as if it were an evil, that he seems to speak of it as if it came from an enemy. How can this be? Did not God send it? Is not all this suffering permitted, even ordained, by Him? What possible right can a poor creature, a worm of the earth, have to remonstrate and complain that anything is amiss?

Again it is clear that the friends have the advantage. Job cannot at all explain how it is that pain should seem to him so very intolerable, and yet that it should be from God. It is the secret he wants to discover. But the demands for submission which his friends make upon him are not the least helps to the discovery. He cannot satisfy these demands; he cannot do what they tell him to do. He must and will cry out. He is sure that all is not right, let them pretend to think so, as much as they will. This pain, however it may have come to him, is an evil. No one shall force him to belie his conscience by saying that it is a good.

It does not appear from the story that, in either of these points, Job grows into more consent with their opinion, as his discipline becomes more severe and his experience greater. His confidence that he has a righteousness, a real substantial righteousness, which

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no one shall remove from him, which he will hold fast and not let go, waxes stronger as his pain becomes bitterer and more habitual. There are great alternations of feeling. The deepest acknowledgments of sin come forth from his heart. But he speaks as if his righteousness were deeper and more grounded than that. Sin cleaves very close to him; it seems as if it were part of himself, almost as if it were himself. But his righteousness belongs to him still more entirely. However strange the paradox, it is more *himself* than even that is. He must express that conviction, he does express it, though he knows, better than any one can tell him, how much it is at variance with what he had been thinking and saying the moment before.

So also of the suffering. He has wonderful intuitions, ever and anon, of the mercy and goodness of God. He believes that He is trying him, and that He will bring him forth out of the fires. And yet, why does this happen to him? What is it all for? He will not cheat God and outrage His truth, by uttering soft phrases which set at nought the conviction of his heart. There is that about him from which he feels that he ought to be delivered, an anguish of body and soul, which he cannot reconcile with the goodness he yet clings to and trusts in.

There comes a moment in the life of Job when these two thoughts, the thought of a righteousness within him which is mightier than the evil, the thought of some deliverance from his suffering which should be also a justification of God, are brought together in his mind. He exclaims, '*I know that my Redeemer liveth; in my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another.*'<sup>1</sup> He expects that this

<sup>1</sup> The force of this passage, as I understand it, is not in the least affected by the question whether the word 'Redeemer' should be exchanged for 'the Avenger of Blood'. I do not quote Job to prove a future state, or anything relating to a future state. The idea of an Avenger is inseparably connected with that of a Redeemer; he who believes there is one, believes there is the other. I make this remark in especial reference to an eloquent article on the book of Job, which has appeared in the *Westminster Review*, since the first edition of these Essays was published. To a great part of that article I must object, as containing what seems to me a wrong statement of facts. I cannot find, as I have explained more at large in my Sermons on the Old Testament, that the Jewish Scriptures exhibit that theory about Prosperity and Adversity

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Redeemer will stand at the latter day upon the earth. But he evidently does not rest upon an expectation. It is not what this Redeemer may be or may do hereafter he chiefly thinks of. He lives. He is with him now. Therefore he calls upon his friends to say whether they do not see that he has the root of the matter in him.

At length, we are told, God answers Job out of the whirlwind. He shows him a depth of wisdom in the flight of every bird and in the structure of every insect, which he cannot dive into. He shows him an order which he is sure is very good though he is lost in it. Then he says, 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' A wonderful conclusion follows. God justifies the complaining man more than those who had pleaded so earnestly for His power and providence. They are forgiven when *he* prays for them. And the last days of Job are better than the beginning.

The early passages in the book of Job respecting Satan seem to anticipate what I said was especially New Testament theology. They do so only, I believe, because the story is more simply human, less Jewish, than any in the Old Testament. Job is represented as living outside of the limits within which the posterity of Abraham was confined. No words are used to identify him with them, or to show that he possessed any of the privileges with which their covenant and history invested them. We have here, therefore, what is at least meant to be a history of human experience. Whether it is biographical or dramatical, or, as I conceive, both, this must be the intention of it. Job is shown, and we are shown, by an *experimentum crucis*, what in him is merely accidental, what belongs to him as a man. Christendom has received the book in this sense. Doctors have taken pains to illustrate it,

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which the Reviewer attributes to them. Every one of the heroes of the history, Joseph, Moses, David, is a sufferer. The chosen people is a suffering people. But this difference between us does not affect the Reviewer's interpretation of the text to which I have alluded. I am quite content that he should demolish any formal argument which has been deduced from it; its practical and spiritual significance become thereby the more apparent.

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and have left it much as they found it. Plain, suffering men have understood it with all its difficulties much better than the most simple tracts written expressly for their use. You will see bed-ridden women, just able to make out the letters of it, feeding on it, and finding themselves in it. You will hear men who regard our Theology as a miserable attempt to form a theory of the universe, expressing their delight in this one of our theological books, because it so nobly and triumphantly casts theories of the universe to the ground. How it squares with our hypotheses they cannot imagine, but it certainly answers to the testimony of their hearts.

And I believe most clergymen, most religious persons, who have conversed at all seriously with men of any class, from the most refined to the most ignorant, in any state of mind, from that of the most contented Pharisee to that of the lowest criminal, have another test of the authenticity of the book as a record of actual humanity. They hear from one and all, in some language or other, the assertion of a righteousness which they are sure is theirs, and which cannot be taken from them. They may call themselves miserable sinners; some of them may feel that they are so; some may tremble at the judgment which they think is coming upon them for their sins. But in all there is a secret reserve of belief, that there is in them that which is not sin, which is the very opposite of sin. When you tell them that the feeling is very wrong, that 'God be merciful to me' is the only true prayer, that God's law is very holy, that they have violated it, and so forth—they will listen—they may assent. From prudence or deference to you they may suppress the offensive phrase, or change their tone. Those will not be the best and honestest who do so. The man who cries, *Till I die you shall not take my integrity from me*, and who makes his teacher weep for the fearful deceitfulness of the human heart, may be nearest, if the Bible speaks right, to the root of the matter—nearest to repentance and humiliation. But be that as it may, the fact in each case is nearly the same. Each man has got this sense of a righteousness, whether he realizes it distinctly or indistinctly, whether he expresses it courageously or keeps it to himself.

Not less true is it that each man has that other conviction which Job uttered so manfully, that pain is an evil and comes from an

enemy, and is contrary to the nature and reason of things; however from a stoical maxim, or a sense of duty, or a habit of patience, he may submit to it; however much, to please his teacher or to get rid of him, he may assent to phrases which appear to affirm an opposite doctrine. The witness of the conscience—of the whole man—on this point, is too strong for any cool, disinterested reflections. It is no time for school distinctions about soul and body. Both are confounded in one mortal anguish.

And when the man sends forth a bitter cry towards heaven, when he expresses his faith that he has a Deliverer somewhere, it is not a Redeemer for his soul that he asks, more than for his body. It is from the condition in which he finds himself that he cries to be set free; he feels that he has a kind of right to be set free from it. To be as he is, is not, he thinks, according to nature and order. He asks God, if he asks at all, to show that it is not according to His will.

If we did believe that there is a divine process, such as the Book of Job describes to us—if we might take that book as an inspired history of God's ways to men—we should not surely stop at this point of the application. We should suppose God was really answering his creature and child out of the whirlwind; and by wonderful arguments, drawn, it may be, from the least object in nature, from the commonest fact of the man's experience, or from the whole Cosmos in which he finds himself, addressed to an ear which our words do not reach, entering secret passages of the spirit to which we have no access, was leading him—the instincts and anticipations of his heart being not denied but justified—to lay himself in dust and ashes. When a man knows that he has a righteous Lord and Judge, who does not plead His omnipotence and His right to punish, but who debates the case with him, who shows him his truth and his error, the sense of Infinite Wisdom, sustaining and carrying out Infinite Love, abases him rapidly. He perceives that he has been measuring himself, and his understanding, against that Love, that Wisdom. A feeling of infinite shame grows out of the feeling of undoubting trust. The child sinks in nothingness at its Father's feet, just when He is about to take it to His arms.