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## **Job and Religious Naïvety**

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*The Expository Times* 2003 114: 421

DOI: 10.1177/001452460311401212

The online version of this article can be found at:

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beyond human comprehension and control; only the divine mind can cope with it.

This seems a dusty answer. It has been used in the service of an obscurantism that takes all reasoning out of believing, and it also seems to downgrade the love of learning. But perhaps we should distinguish two ways of knowing the unscalability of a mountain. The lazy non-climber stays on the plain, looks up and sees how high the mountain is. The energetic climber struggles up and up, scaling one false summit after another, then sees the peak still towering high above her and realizes that she will never reach it. The non-climber could be said to know the unclimbable height, but only the climber really knows it. Job's knowledge that the meaning of what happens is beyond human comprehension is that of the energetic and exhausted climber who has struggled to understand, not that of the obscurantist lazing on the plain. Nonetheless, for someone longing to understand, it seems cold comfort to be told that such things are beyond human understanding. If this is the message of the story of Job, where is the good news in it?

What seems like a let-down is really a liberation. Job's insight, confirmed by modern knowledge, is that the universe is so exceedingly complex and subtle that it contains much that is, or appears from our perspective, to be random and without rhyme or reason. Things just happen and we know only their 'hap' with its sheer surprise. What's more, the world is full of risk and danger and our life in it is exposed and vulnerable. To know this, though scary, is a liberation. It is a liberation both from guilt, the tendency to blame ourselves for whatever goes wrong, and from complaint, always blaming someone. Of course there are *some* connections between sin and suffering, *some* patterns of cause and effect. Sowing does lead to reaping, with violence breeding violence, mistrust fostering mistrust, generosity generating good will, and so on. We do have a wide range of creative choice and are not the slaves of fate. We can understand much and affect much. But there is much that we cannot comprehend or control, and that has no pattern or order which is or ever will be accessible to us. So we have to accept that things just happen to us for which there is no accounting, including those that are far from welcome. We do not live a charmed life and cannot control its pattern by being good or having faith or praying or in any other way attempting to get on the

divine side of the divine-human divide in comprehension and control of the universe.

This is not only a liberation from groundless guilt and pointless complaint; above all, it is a release out of security and into trust. For it is only when the security of misplaced reliance on the patterns we discern in life is undercut, that we are free for faith in God. We, including the very religious, tend to rely on what we understand, putting our faith in the patterns we descry; but, even if we regard these as the lineaments of God's action, the shape of God's providence, to rely on *them* is not to trust in God. If the nature of God's control of the universe were comprehensible to us, that God would not be God. It is when we know that we cannot know what will happen to us or the meaning of what does that we are in a position to discover God as totally trustworthy. When the ways of God are known to be unknowable, the Godness of God begins to be known – and we are surprised by joy. For in that unforeseen and unforeseeable revelation, through a kind of death we come alive to God; dying, behold we live. Then we are able to say

'I walk secure and blessed in every clime or coast,  
In name of God the Father and Son and Holy Ghost.'

26th October: Trinity 19

## JOB AND RELIGIOUS NAÏVETY

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Job 42:1–6, 10–17

One of the greatest concerns I have regarding contemporary religious belief is what I perceive to be the increase in what I shall call 'religious naïvety'. 'Why single out naïvety as a danger?' you might well ask. 'After all, those who are naïve in their beliefs harm no one, apart possibly from themselves.' A so-called simple faith has indeed been lauded many times in the past. Yet is naïvety in religion so innocuous? May I suggest that it can be damaging both to those who hold such a standpoint as well as to those who come into contact with it. Nowhere is this more true than when a person has to confront the difficult issue of reconciling a belief in a God of love with the suffering of humanity, in particular

when that suffering is undergone by the innocent. One often hears explanations for such suffering, offered from a Christian perspective, which are woefully inadequate to meet the enormity of the situation or so misleading as to cause offence and even distress or disillusionment. It appears, therefore, that we can reach a position whereby being naïve in one's religious attitudes is to be equated with being simplistic.

We need, however, to illustrate what we mean by 'naïvety' in this connection. Let us take, for example, the following statement from the Psalms:

'I have been young and now have grown old,  
But never have I seen the righteous forsaken  
Or their children begging bread'. (37:25 – REB)

How out of touch with reality this psalmist with his ostrich-like views reveals himself to be! Had he had such a secluded existence that the realities of everyday life had not affected him or his family in any harmful way? Of course, he was only reflecting a view found extensively in the rest of the Old Testament and promoted especially by the Deuteronomist. That doctrine as enunciated by him claimed that the Israelite righteous, whether as individuals or as a nation, were bound to succeed in this life, and especially so in a material sense, whereas the other side of the coin proclaimed that misery and destruction would sooner or later befall all the unrighteous. This was precisely the view propounded *ad nauseam* by the so-called 'Comforters' of Job. They responded insensitively to the suffering Job with these clichés of their time, and indeed as the dialogues between him and them proceeded they added insult to injury by insisting that suffering on the scale he was undergoing must be the result of gross sinfulness.

It is no simple matter to try to make of the various parts of the Book of Job a coherent whole: indeed, it may be impossible to do so. The two passages from chapter 42 of the book allotted for today's lectionary well illustrate this point. The final verses (vv. 10–17) present us with a successful conclusion to the book as a whole. Thus the Job of the Prologue (chapters 1–2) appears to have come victoriously through the tests imposed upon him by Satan, the tester and examiner of people's religious motives, and is rewarded not only by the restoration of his fortunes, but also by a doubling of his initial wealth. And so we may conclude that Job and his family 'all lived happily ever after'. But that would indeed represent

a verdict on the outcome of all Job's sufferings imbued with naïvety. Surely it indicates an ending more in line with the traditional way of thinking promoted by the comforters, which is not really worthy of the depth of thought and passionate feeling exemplified over the very many verses attributed to Job himself in the body of the book.

There Job agonized time and again about the nature of God:; indeed, at times he came near to blaspheming as a result of the temerity with which he charged the Almighty with dealing unfairly and insensitively with him in his sufferings. During the course of the argument he even parodied the Eighth Psalm, by suggesting that far from lavishing care and bestowing authority upon him as a human being, the Lord sought persistently to seek for weaknesses in him and to undermine his integrity (7:17–21). Ultimately, Job reached the end of his tether, having seemingly failed in his efforts to get God to respond to his pleas for justice and fair play. And then finally the Lord appeared to relent and delivered two lengthy speeches out of the whirlwind. The first dwelt on the remarkable and varied wonders of creation and the second was wholly devoted to describing what appear to be two mythical creatures, Behemoth (recalling the hippopotamus, possibly) and Leviathan (probably relating to the crocodile).

Job's response to this barrage from the Almighty seems on the surface to be somewhat unexpected, following as it does his own repeated complaints against him. The first time he acknowledged that silence on his part had to be his proper disposition, but then the second time he expressed himself more fully (42:1–6), yielding in submission to the Almighty. He confessed that he had spoken about things that he did not fully comprehend. However, we believe he did not confess in v. 6 that he had sinned thereby, thus negating all he had maintained about his own righteousness in the rest of the book. It was because he had spoken in ignorance that he was repentant. Hitherto his experience of God had been at second-hand, but now a new experience came into his ken, namely that of personally knowing the Lord. By coming to a fuller and profounder knowledge of God, he also acquired a better understanding of himself. He experienced this real communion with God in the midst of his sufferings. Surely here we have a depth of response on his part. Thus Job was encouraged to look beyond himself and his own condition in seeking to achieve a fairer judgment on

humanity's place within the created order. Given the limitations of human knowledge and understanding, especially in contrast to the immeasurable wisdom of God, which the poem about Wisdom in chapter 28 of the book illustrates in a remarkable way, there is always the danger for the sufferer to become too introverted and selfish with the result that his or her perspective on life becomes too narrow.

One implication of the Lord's praise of Job and his chiding of the comforters is that naïve, simplistic answers just will not suffice in the face of the calamities and tribulations people have to suffer. As the American poet, Robert Frost, wrote in a passage addressed to Job:

'... I have no doubt  
You realize by now the part you played  
To stultify the Deuteronomist  
And change the tenor of religious thought.'<sup>1</sup>

There is also here a strong recognition of the mystery of life in relation to suffering. Mystery is a word we need not fear employing at times: it certainly need not represent a 'cop-out', an avoidance of difficult problems by a convenient recourse to the concept of mystery. Indeed, in the context of our Christian faith, mystery is a concept we should embrace more often. It may be suggested that the author intended his readers to comprehend the fact that there may not be a satisfactory answer to the

problem of the suffering of the righteous, or at least an answer which can be comprehended by human beings in their mortality.

Undoubtedly, the most sublime element in the book is that Job reached satisfaction, an inner peace, without gaining a knowledge of every aspect of life. Job's final cry 'is a cry of enlightenment (42:5), though not of intellectual enlightenment. The revelation is spiritual; Job is satisfied, not because he has seen the answer to his questions, but because he has seen God'.<sup>2</sup> Francis I. Andersen has summed up the problem posed by the book in this way: 'This is the persistent problem, the real problem of the book: not the problem of suffering, to be solved intellectually by supplying a satisfactory answer which explains why it happened: but the attainment of a right relationship with God which makes existence in suffering holy and acceptable.'<sup>3</sup>

'Never has this book', wrote Rabbi Gordis, 'been more relevant than in our age, when man's suffering has exceeded his wildest nightmares, in this, the most brutal of centuries.'<sup>4</sup> He was, of course, writing about the twentieth century, but nothing we have experienced so far of the new millennium encourages us to believe this century will be any better.

<sup>1</sup> J. W. McKay, 'Elihu – A Proto-Charismatic?' *ExpTim* 90 (1978/9), p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Leicester: IVP, 1976), on Job 9:32.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation, and Special Studies* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), p. xi.

<sup>4</sup> 'A Masque of Reason' in *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (paperback edn: London, 1967), p. 449.

### Coming Next Month

**N**EXT month brings us to a new volume of the Journal. Fittingly, it is headed by the Expository Times Lecture for 2003, which was given this year by Professor Robert Davidson of Glasgow. Invited to speak on any aspect of *The Exposition of the Old Testament*, he chose Ecclesiastes (Koheleth) as the focus of his lecture, which was heard with rapt attention and much appreciation by the large audience. Readers will be similarly enthralled by his deep insights into this controversial book.

One small change in the form of the Journal is effected next month. The editorial, which I have valued as a means of commenting on the coherence of the contents or reflecting on a selected theme, is being dropped, in order to maximize the space for articles, sermons and reviews. This does not rule out editorial comment like this present note, but space is at a premium and it is right to give priority to the central concerns of the Journal.