

Masterpieces of Hebrew Literature

X. The Source of Wisdom

Read Job 28 : 12-28.

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THIS selection of verses from the Book of Job is not only notable in itself, but it is also notable because it gives us our introduction in this series of literary studies to one of the most interesting divisions of Hebrew literature, namely, the Jewish "Hokhmah" or "Wisdom Literature," comprising the canonical books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and the extra-canonical or apocryphal books of "The Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach" (Ecclesiasticus) and "The Wisdom of Solomon." This great branch of Israel's literature was the product of a class of "wise men" who are quite distinct from the prophets, or historians, and its contents present among the literature of the Jewish people, the closest counterpart therein found to what is known among other people as philosophy.

"Wisdom" with the Hebrews, however, was not exactly synonymous with philosophy as we understand the term. It is rather a series of more or less deep reflections upon practical aspects of life—sometimes, as in Proverbs, a searching out of practical maxims for the governance of life; sometimes, as in Ecclesiastes and Job, a wrestling with great soul-problems that have ever cried out for solution, and are crying out still.

Of this body of Wisdom Literature, the Book of Job is undoubtedly the most splendid specimen. Indeed, it is not only a Hebrew masterpiece, but it is without question one of the world's masterpieces, and from some standpoints the most notable book ever written. One may not readily agree that it is *par excellence* the world's masterpiece, but few will hesitate to agree with Prof. R. G. Moulton when he says: "If a jury of persons well instructed in literature were impelled to pronounce upon the question what is the greatest poem in the world's great literature, while on such a question unanimity would be impossible, yet I believe a large majority would give their verdict in favor of the Book of Job."

The author of this remarkable book was undoubtedly "a man of superb literary genius, and of rich, daring, and original mind." For splendor of imagination, poetic strength and beauty, intellectual daring and pure spiritual fervor, his book has never been surpassed, while the remarkable skill that he shows in the handling of the various verse-forms throughout the long poem is beyond praise. The pity is that so few of us have even seriously sampled the beauties of the book. It has been given to us only recently in translation and in *édition de luxe*, as Fitzgerald gave us the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, it would have had a more splendid run by far than that popular work of the Persian poet, but, being a part of our commonplace Bible, only a few devoted souls have themselves mastered it, or feed upon its beauties and its strength.

We cannot take space in this article to sketch its plan or outline its contents. It will be sufficient to say that it wrestles in a strong and striking way with the great and yet unsolved problem of human suffering—particularly with the suffering of the righteous.

It is more to the purpose in this literary study to notice that the *uniqueness of the book* is borne testimony to in the fact that literary students are completely at a loss to classify it. It has been called a *poem* (Prof. Gennep calls it "The Epic of the Inner Life"), a *didactic poem*, a *lyrical drama*, a *per-*

sonal character drama, etc., etc. The fact of the matter is that it is one and all of these, i.e., that it belongs to a class by itself, by reason of the remarkable way in which it embodies elements of literary forms usually found dissociated from one another. As an acute critic remarks, the author "produced, not a drama, nor a didactic poem, nor any composition of conventional form or shape, but—the Book of Job, which is a law unto itself." Our extract then, or more properly the whole twenty-eighth chapter of Job (for verses 12 to 28 cannot be separated from the earlier verses), can only be viewed as a *masterpiece within a masterpiece*—a beautiful arch in a stately temple, an apple of gold in a basket of silver. As a eulogium of wisdom, "for beauty and depth of thought and for richness of imagery, it deserves well to be compared with Paul's panegyric of charity in the famous thirteenth chapter of first Corinthians." One admiring writer declares that Job in this chapter is unconsciously carving for himself a monolith with an ineffaceable inscription.

The chapter forms a part of Job's long closing speech in answer to the criticisms of his friends before the young controversialist Eliphaz intervenes in the discussion. Because of the somewhat abrupt breaks in thought between chapters 27 and 28, and again between chapters 28 and 29, it has been concluded by some critics that our chapter—28 is not integral to the book, but is an after addition.

That is a somewhat precarious conclusion, but nevertheless these very evident breaks in thought warrant us in considering our chapter apart from its context, and as having a character of its own. Prof. Moulton calls it a *sonnet*, by which of course he does not mean that it conforms to our English sonnet form of fourteen lines, but that its thought, like that of all sonnets, is cut to a recognized verse pattern. Structurally the chapter (not verse 12-28 alone) consists of three parts, the strophe (verses 1-11), the antistrophe, (verses 12-23) and the conclusion, (verses 24-28). The verses are for the most part complete illustrating the simplest form of parallelism:

"Surely there is a mine for silver,
And a place for gold which they refine."

But it will be noticed that both in the strophe and the antistrophe, the monotony of the couplet form is broken up by the introduction of two double triplets. Thus, verses 3 and 4:

"Man setteth an end to darkness,
And searcheth out the furthest bound
The stones of thick darkness and of the shadow of death.
He breaketh open a shaft away from where men sojourn;
They are forgotten of the foot that passeth by;
They hang far from men, they swing to and fro."

Similarly verses 17 to 19 form a double triplet.

The key to the understanding of the chapter is the fact that the pronoun "he" which occurs so frequently throughout the earlier verses does not refer to God but to man. The chapter indeed sets forth both the glory of man's power and the limitations of it. The earlier verses in several places celebrate the triumph of man's mastery and insight.

"He setteth an end to darkness
And searcheth out the furthest bound

The stones of darkness, and the shadow of death.
(Verses 3 and 4)

He putteth forth his hand upon the flinty rock;
He overturneth the mountains by the roots.

He cutteth out channels among the rocks;

And his eye seeth every precious thing.
He hath the streams that they trickle not.

And the thing that is hid bringeth he forth to light.

(Verses 9 to 11).

But man never gets at the source of wisdom. The place of gold, of silver, of precious stones he knows, and the rocky ribs of the earth are no barriers to his search, but he cannot lay his hand upon the storehouse of wisdom. "Where is wisdom to be found?" is the insoluble problem for him.

One thought therefore, runs through the whole poetic composition, namely, that wisdom cannot be reached by man as he can reach other things. The central thought, however, gets a variety of statements and poetic adornments.

First, verses 1-11.—The precious metals and jewels have each a place where they may be found and where men do find them in spite of all the difficulties that bar approach to their secret storehouses.

Second, verses 12-23.—Wisdom cannot so be found, for it has no place of rest like the gold and the silver, on land or in sea; moreover, it is not a purchasable commodity—silver and precious stones of the finest cannot be exchanged for it. Even death and the grave do not render up the secret of its dwelling-place. Only God knows where it abides.

Third, verses 24-28.—He knows it because His view is all embracing. "He looketh to the ends of the earth." As Creator and Governor of the universe He compasses all wisdom. But the only wisdom open to man is the wisdom of fearing God—the wisdom that God imparts.

"Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding."

The *superb imagery* of the chapter has been referred to already. It really would repay extensive study but we can only point out a few illustrations. Think of the condensed beauty of the statement as describing the financial results of labor in the mine.

"As for the earth, out of it cometh bread."

Or consider how felicitous a description of the dark gallery of the mine the following is:

"That path no bird of prey knoweth,
Neither hath the falcon's eye seen it;
The proud beasts (sons of pride) have not trodden it.

Nor have the fierce lions passed thereby."

Could anything be more striking than the metaphor "sons of pride" for proud beasts?

Or look again at the striking beauty of the personifications:

"The deep saith, 'It is not in me';
And the sea saith, 'It is not with me.'"

How deathless this sentence has proved to be:

"The price of wisdom is above rubies;" and what matchless poetry the poet indulges in when he daintily describes the Creator as looking to the ends of the earth and seeing under the whole heavens.

"To make a weight for the wind,"

or meting out the waters by measure: "When he made a decree for the rain
And a way for the lightning of the thunder"