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ARCHIVES

BRIEF STUDIES

THE THEME OF THE BOOK OF JOB

Like other books of Scripture, the Book of Job presents difficulties to the interpreter. It is almost unique, however, among Biblical books in this, that interpreters have not been able to agree on the basic issue of the book as a whole. They continue to ask: What is the central thought that gives the whole cohesion? What is the core question that is debated with vehemence and scintillating brilliance by the various speakers? What is the question of faith that the author wants to answer?

A significant contribution toward a solution of this problem is made by a recent German commentary on the Book of Job. It is the thirteenth volume of a projected exposition of the entire Old Testament with the title: *Die Botschaft des Alten Testaments: Erläuterungen alttestamentlicher Schriften für Freunde und Verächter der Bibel ausgelegt*, Calwer Verlag, Stuttgart. Magister Hellmuth Frey is the editor. The exposition of Job is done by Dr. Helmut Lamparter and is entitled *Das Buch der Anfechtung* (261 pages; 12.50 D.M.).

The author devotes the major portion of the introduction (pp. 7 to 22) to the basic question of the theme of the Book of Job. He rejects three views that are commonly held and then presents his own.

1. The book does not intend to present a theodicy. The situation described by this term arises when man challenges or seeks to understand the justice and providence of God in permitting the righteous to suffer and the wicked to prosper. Such a theodicy is indeed a part of the framework of Job. But it is not the central theme of the whole debate.

Two factors make this clear: This question is not the point of departure of the book, nor does it receive an adequate answer at the end.

The dialog begins in heaven between God and Satan. In a theodicy, on the other hand, the problem of God's justice arises on earth in the reflections of the believers (cp. Psalms 49 and 73) or in a discussion of this problem by such as are troubled by the riddle of God's providence. In Job the point at issue from the very outset is a controversy between God and Satan. It is a test of power between God and Satan for the complete allegiance of man.

Lamparter also finds that the sum total of the book is not a satisfactory answer to the questions posed in a theodicy. In the end the problem remains the same puzzling enigma that it was from the

beginning. The Lord indeed answers Job out of a whirlwind and points to His superior power and wisdom as reflected in the creation and preservation of the world. But thereby God in effect denies Job the right to raise the question of a theodicy, which is supposed to be the topic of the whole book. Job repents and submits to God. But the only reason given for such a submission is that Job is forced to tell himself: Who am I to argue with God?

2. Nor does the Book of Job seek to answer the question of a deeper meaning of suffering. The author does not want to demonstrate that every misfortune of the righteous is merely a testing of his faith. Job rejects this answer to the problem. And justly so, says Lamparter, because the suffering of Job is too intense to be satisfied with this "cheap comfort" (*billigen Trost*). "A 'testing,' the dimensions of which would make an immediate execution an act of mercy by death, is no testing any longer" (p. 10).

3. He also rejects the suggestion that the Book of Job does not intend to be an exhaustive discussion of the problem of evil but merely wants to give practical instruction as to "how one is to bear misfortune purely and correctly" (Schlatter). Such a view is not in keeping with the intensity of the debate, the profundity of thought, and the grandeur of the structure.

4. Lamparter believes that the book deals with all three of the above topics but that none of them is the basic issue of the book. Its problem has a deeper and wider implication. In its entirety it represents a significant phase in the unfolding of God's *Heilsplan* (plan of salvation). Job is a witness to Christ, and the import of the book as a whole is Messianic. The following factors in the structure of the book lead to this conclusion.

We must remember again that the action of this "drama" begins before Job is exposed to suffering. The controversy is between God and Satan regarding Job.

What is the point at issue? God points to Job as devoted to Him: "a perfect and upright man, and one that feareth God and escheweth evil." Satan, on the other hand, claims that Job deep down in his inmost being is a tool in his hand and does his bidding. Basically Job's professed allegiance to God is love of self, and thus he is in Satan's orbit of influence. "Doth Job fear God for naught?" is Satan's challenging question. He is confident that he can prove that Job's apparent love of God is in reality camouflaged self-love.

The result of this test would be far-reaching if Job, this paragon of righteousness, turns out to be a minion of Satan. Then his revolution

against God has succeeded; he has deprived God of the allegiance of mankind; God's purpose in creating man that he might glorify Him has miscarried: man, even the best, does Satan's bidding and not God's.

"Thus the problem is stated that agitates the author of the Book of Job in his innermost soul. It is wider in compass than the suffering in the faith of an individual; it embraces a cardinal theme of Holy Writ: Will God remain victorious over the power of Satan? Put more precisely: Where is the Just One, really and wholly just, in whom this satanic power is brought to naught? Is it Job, and — if it should not be he — where is he to be found?" (P. 13.)

Obviously Job is not that wholly Just One. He has failed to stand the test of serving God "for naught." His demand for an answer from God regarding his plight proves it. By his repentance in dust and ashes (ch. 42:6) he admits it.

Job therefore is not an idealized character. He is true to life. Every believer whose faith in God falters in the throes of affliction can take comfort in the portrait of this "perfect and upright" man. God sustains him when his eyes of faith grow dim; He helps him overcome his doubts; He forgives and blesses him.

But the central issue of the book from its introduction, throughout its architectonic structure and in its conclusion, is the demonstration "that there is no just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not." In this sense Job's suffering is of a "vicarious nature" (*hat stellvertretenden Charakter*, p. 19). If he had succeeded in evincing an unalloyed love for God, others might take courage to follow his example. But Satan wins the argument; mankind belongs to him in spite of the best efforts of the noblest because none loves God with all his heart. Who will break Satan's grip on the hearts of men? "To raise this question and to keep it a live issue, that is in reality the task which is allotted to the Book of Job as a part of the whole of the Old Testament covenant Scriptures. In this sense we can say . . . that Job is a witness of Jesus Christ." (P. 20.)

Is the whole drama, then, a test of strength between the powers of good and evil? No, the author is not indulging in a dualistic speculation. He nowhere intimates that he is trying to harmonize the existence of an anti-God power with the omnipotence of God. Nor is it a conflict between two equals for the survival of the stronger. No line of the book suggests that Satan could in any way jeopardize the existence of God or free himself of God's control. God has him in leash. It is only with God's permission that he can lay hand on Job, and He determines the extent of his tormenting authority. It is not God's

omnipotence that needs vindication. But God does not employ force to gain the devotion of His creature. He made him with the ability to choose whether he wants to serve God. Only a voluntary and free devotion redounds to the glory of the Creator. Can man as man glorify God, or is God compelled to give up mankind as a failure and relinquish him to Satan — that is the question.

But does not Satan play far too insignificant a role in the book to make the theme revolve about him in his controversy with God? In reply to this objection Lamparter points out, in the first place, that the satanic action does not cease when he no longer appears "in person." Certainly, Job's wife is a human devil in her advice to her husband. And do not Job's three friends play the role of Satan's spokesmen? Is it accidental that these three comforters turn out to be his tormentors? It is they who raise the question "Why?" which Job had heretofore avoided. Is their comfort not the injection of satanic logic? To be sure their thoughts are vested in religious and pious phrases. If they had lived today, no doubt their speech would have been studded with Bible passages. It would be a fatal mistake to underestimate the cunning of Satan by denying that he has also this trick in his bag. He is at his best when he changes himself into an angel of light. He quoted Scripture when he tried to seduce the Son of God. As Satan's henchmen the three friends torture Job's soul and succeed in bewildering him to the point where he accuses God of being his enemy. Satan's attack to prove his original contention continues — more insidious and successful because the more disguised and subtle.

But why does Satan, then, not put in an appearance at the end of the book? Lamparter replies that his failure to do so is entirely in keeping with the fundamental plan of the presentation. It is by design that the dialog between God and Satan is not resumed and developed into an impressive finale. The final struggle for mankind is yet to come. It is as if two protagonists after a hot skirmish part without exchanging words, neither admitting defeat. It is the express purpose of the book to leave the issue undecided. It is designed to point forward to that Just One, who served God "for naught" in the depths of hell's pain without murmuring or complaint; who was obedient unto death in perfect and selfless devotion to God; who took up the struggle with the Serpent and crushed his head. Behold "My Servant . . . Mine Elect . . . in whom My soul delighteth" (Is. 42:1).

To test the validity of Lamparter's view the book should be read with his theme in mind. It has several factors to recommend it. The various strands of the action can be braided into one strong cord without leav-

ing loose ends. It contributes directly to the one purpose of the Old Testament Scriptures: the expectation of the Savior from sin and Satan. It also enhances the majestic sweep of a piece of literature that has always been recognized as one of the most sublime in the Old Testament.

In closing, a word should be added regarding Lamparter's book as a commentary. It is not a technical word for word, verse by verse, elucidation of the text. The author comments on thought sections of the book presented in his own translation. One cannot help being impressed with the devotional character of these expositions. Job's problem has not only been analyzed in the detachment of an impersonal theory, but the writer knows from experience whereof Job speaks. His treatment of the text is constructive. He suggests a limited number of emendations, and in a few instances the sequence of the lines is rearranged. As a commentary it should be a very valuable aid to the pastor or teacher in presenting the Book of Job to a Bible class.

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