

William Blake and The Trying of Job

A S A BOOK of the canonical Bible, Job is unique. It focuses on the mind of its subject, in depth. It has been described as the first recorded psychological study and is often cited in academic courses as the first instance of existentialism in literature.

The subject of Job is both timeless and peculiarly modern in that it seeks to discover the *why* of events. And invariably, humans are most likely to demand that events account for themselves when they are the agents of suffering.

Suffering may involve hurt to one's physical person, the impairment of health or bodily function, the loss of vitality and the enduring of pain. A soul-delving "why?" is not typically aroused by injury or by acute illness. One has been clumsy, inadvertent, or distracted and thus breaks a bone, bruises tissue, or punctures the flesh. One catches a "bug" and is incapacitated for a longer or shorter time. A chronic illness, long and imperceptible in forming, particularly in the advanced stages when it consumes the consciousness and time of the sick person, has more potential for galvanizing the mind to seek some causal explanation. Loss of property may have unsettling, disorienting effects. Dire and long-term misfortune may induce bitterness, despair, and even prompt death-wishes.

Suffering is the special province of Saturn (Satan) and it is Satan who boasts that God's righteous son Job is pious only because he is prospering. It is easy, the Adversary says, to be good when one is materially thriving. Remove the material benefits, the wealth



Watercolor, William Blake (1759-1827), Plate 1 from *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, the Butts Set (1805-06 and 1821-27), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City

Job and His Family

Job and his family at the narrative's beginning. In the margins of the engraved version of this image Blake has written: "The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life." Accordingly, the sun is setting, the moon is rising. Job's book is open to the letter of scripture. The children are kneeling dutifully around the parents, spirits quelled. The foreground lambs are asleep.

and health of God's servant, and He will see a different Job. So claims the sinister one in the forecourt of heaven.

God agrees to the testing. Why? Our well-being is to be based not on what we have, but on who we are and on Who we recognize as our life's Source. Which means that we must possess faith and knowledge: knowledge that persists in the presence of what purports to be contrary evidence; faith that sustains us when the testimony of our eyes and thoughts leave us feeling persecuted, misunderstood, or forgotten.

The Old Testament God is transcendent, past knowing. Why should, how could, one presume to know the mind of the One Who is Creator of the Universe? If the High Priest, but one from the entire nation of God's chosen, is permitted to commune with Jehovah once a year, where does that leave the rest of Israel? Busy in the courtyard burning up their

sins and washing away their impurities.

Job does not lack for sympathizers and diagnosticians. Sympathy for another's misfortune assumes that their condition warrants pity, calls for a fellowship of condolence and grieving. In its riper forms, this response may well undermine the sufferer's distress by suggesting that either it is unjustified or that it is exclusively pathetic; that is, it has no redeeming value. The diagnostician accepts the malady as a given and wants to propose strategies of palliation, even delivery from the negative state. But what is a malady to the world may be a symptom incident to transformation and spiritual renewal, a step toward becoming better by getting worse.

Job proves no easy prey for the Adversary. Neither the loss of property nor the catastrophic death of his children evokes a turning against God: "Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). Job's response is nothing short of heroic.

But then Satan strikes closer to home—Job's own body is smote with boils. His wife sees his wretched state and herself goads him to "curse God and die." Job yet holds onto his integrity: "We receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (2:12) These indeed are admirable words and evince great strength of character.

Now, however, come the witnesses to Job's misfortune and misery. This is more than he can bear. His own friends' distress at his plight fans the embers of his self-pity and sense of injustice into a blaze of bitterness and invective: "After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day" (3:1 ff). Is it not curious the effect that well-meaning sympathy can have on our self-pity? We have an audience, allies, fomenters even, whose presence encourages a display. And outrage is a show of strength, albeit negative, a standing up for ourselves, impotent though we be.

Job's friends *cum* therapists give him doses of philosophy, theology, and psychology. He elicits some commiseration and receives some condemnation. He gets both because he wants a sufficient reason for his



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Job Is Rebuked by His Friends

At this point in the narrative Job continues to feel unjustly beset by tribulation. Blake has depicted his three interlocutors as strongly accusative.

predicament, to have answered not "Why?" but "Why me?" Suffering and catastrophe are all about us in the world, but until they visit us personally, we, necessarily, are more or less detached from them. But what purpose do they serve? They show and serve the cosmic law of cause and effect. They serve the one who is the subject of their occurrence. They serve to hurt and hound one out of complaisance and dull-wittedness, or to direct one away from the better to the best. They serve to reveal God's wisdom and goodness. They teach acceptance, humility, optimism, and ultimately, thanksgiving.

Implicit in that last word is the insight of William Blake into the Job ordeal, and the English mystical poet and visionary artist details this insight in a masterful way that makes his illustrations a canticle not simply to God's justice, but His love, and the harmony of His creation.

At the outset Job is pictured in his prosperity, but he has been merely the *recipient* of the earth's and God's bounty. He has not penetrated creation with his spirit and given forth of his person with knowledge that manifests the grace of his God. Job has been industrious and in another age might have been a civically-responsible burgher or a modern capital-

ist whose charitable donations are prompted by knowing they are tax deductible.

The intellectual observation that what the Lord gives the Lord can take away is light years from the living experience of this reality. One becomes a different person upon experiencing the soul-centered truth that material poverty and physical plenty are two poles of one condition which is extrinsic to spiritual integrity, and until one can meet all worldly vicissitudes with patience and equanimity, indeed, with unflinching good nature, one is yet spiritually green and needs further ripening.

Job's response to his misfortune is typical and predictable. Expressed in contemporary terms: "I will not consent to this suffering until you can convince me that it is warranted or merited. And, quite frankly, I don't think that is possible." The resistance, the anger and nonacceptance of a negative condition are *part of* what we suffer. They preexist and have, in a sense, invited it. While founded in one's prior acts, present difficult circumstances invite us to become accomplished sufferers, tutoring us for future prospering. Moreover, they may have no karmic cause that is being neutralized but could be either a voluntary service to assume the suffering of another or the experience of transition (described as growing pains) to a new mode of consciousness.

The genius of William Blake pictorially translates Job's soul pilgrimage in strongly evocative images. First we see him as a pious father and successful business man, then shocked by the devastating loss of first property, then children, then health. His affliction is nearly absolute. His desolation is unqualified.

The book of Job describes what each human encounters in the course of his evolution—the experience of ultimate crisis. One can reach a point of darkness and despair where he may say "better not to have been than to be, better nothingness than this something worse than nothing." The consciousness that contracts to and is fixed at this existential ground zero makes of the Job character a prototypic human in a dark phase of initiatory becoming—where one is bereft of all that seems of value and not an iota of



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Then the Lord answered Job out of the Whirlwind

After Job and his advisors vent their views, the Spirit of God, borne on a prePentecostal wind, opens the divine perspective.

redeeming grace seems even a theoretical possibility. This state of affairs, this state of mind, is just that—a static thought, a saturnian straight jacket which the soul knows most acutely when it tries to resist its perceived condition, to "get out of it."

What then does one do? In a sense, one doesn't do. From this poor but sufficient strategy comes the phrase "the patience of Job": Know what you experience, allow it. Let it be. Allow also that you are not identical with what you experience. This too shall pass and you shall emerge from this compression, this claustrophobic dark cocoon of hopelessness, your paralysis of grief.

It is said at the book's outset that Job was perfect. So is it said of a baby. It is also said that he was upright. So too are trees. A strong wind will prove if the tree is sufficiently deep-rooted (in Job's case, grounded in God) and flexible to bend in the strong winds (of adversity) and remain standing.

Finally, all moralizing about suffering must fall silent in the experience of it and one gets to prove the worth of what one knows. Well-meaning explanations may even ring hollow and seem to have no value other than as fleeting distractions from one's misery: "Ye are all physicians of no value" (13:4). At

this nadir of consciousness one says, “I am a burden to myself.” With this realization does one consciously take up the cross, for it is not just the physical body. It is all the jarring intersections of a finite, fractured world, the crossing of the desire and etheric currents which make possible consciousness itself. Our crosses are congenital. Our acceptance and the deliberate bearing of them is voluntary.

For a period of time Job persists in asserting his righteousness. His misery is “not for any injustice in mine hand” (16:17). “I cry aloud of wrong” (19:7). He is ready to suffer privation, but the degree of his affliction is disproportionate to any possible transgression. “Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together” (6:2). Finally, “These three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes” (32:1).

Our righteousness is not our ticket to a trouble-free life. God is not bought by our good deeds. One comes to a place where no worldly wisdom is wise enough, no well-meaning counsel sufficient explanation for one’s enigmatic suffering. One can but say that it is. And in so saying, a new kind of unadorned truth can emerge. One may now begin to relent, and in time, will fully capitulate, ceasing to hold on to even a ragged shred of protested righteousness. Matters subtly or even suddenly change, for one has modified what is experienced because the experiencer has himself changed. This is how locks are broken, bars bent, walls felled, doors thrust wide open and light comes to illumine dark places.

Eventually, Job can admit, as if he were a former Pharisee, “I put on righteousness, and it clothed me” (29:14), not as an intrinsic part of his identity, but as an accoutrement, as body insignnia, religious chevrons. Finally, when he and his friends are talked out, more vulnerable to incursions by the Spirit of Truth, the Lord answers Job out of the whirlwind. He sets the proper perspective on matters: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare if thou have understanding....Canst thou bind the



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The Vision of Christ

By titling the engraved version of this image, “I have heard thee with the hearing of the Ear but now my Eye seeth thee”, coupled with other quotes from the New Testament written in the engraving’s margins, including “He that seeth me hath seen the Father”, Blake suggests that Job, as integrated Ego (male-female), has an initiatory vision of the preincarnate Christ.

sweet influences of Pleiades or loose the bands of Orion?...Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom?...Doth the eagle mount up at thy command?” (39, 40)

Job comes to a kind of epiphany and can say, “Behold, I am vile: what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth” (40:4). Here is wisdom: stop talking to myself and start listening to God. Following upon what one hears comes healing. After the self-loathing is remorse. There is none righteous, no, not one. Now can God’s glory be seen as truly devastating to the blind pride of self-conceived worth. “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” Now Job does not *suffer* in dust and ashes but *repents*; that is, changes his mind. “And the Lord turned the captivity of Job” and gave him “twice as much as he had before” (42:10). Now what he has is different from what he had before—more, but less. The material extent of his estate has increased, but he values it less. What is now most precious is a true knowledge of God and a humble valuation of himself (his righteousness was as dust). Now God is all his song.

Old Testament man suffered, as it were, alone, heroically, not yet having the example, strength, and

aid of the One foretold by Isaiah—the Man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, in Whose mouth was no guile, Who was led as a lamb to the slaughter, Himself spotless and without blemish. Job was no reprobate. Nor was he fickle in his faith. But we all have our limit, at least we do if we must suffer without apparent cause. Christ’s sacrifice gives *all* suffering cause. In fact, it becomes the Christian saint’s answer to prayer, that he might suffer for Christ, knowing that it is for the release from His earthly incarceration and God’s greater glory. Job had not this cause and reached his limit, as Satan predicted. But his was “ignorant suffering.” When God finally enlightened him, Job had a change of self-perception, a change of heart, and again proved himself one of God’s faithful.

So how does Blake represent Job’s transformation to a ennobled spirit and an enlightened mind? He and his family (esoterically all his creative faculties) are attuned and in concert, praising creation and lauding the Creator. At the outset, unused talents, creation-affirming spiritual instruments, were hanging on the tree of life, unused. Suffering awakened Job to their existence, as the energy posited in his worldly possessions and the comfort and complaisance they engender, was released and redirected to activate spiritual principles and awaken latent powers.

Blake’s Job becomes a kind of Christian Apollo. The music of the spheres is refigured in the family of man’s microcosmic faculties, and he becomes himself a hymn, a paean to the Master Musician Whose Word tunes and turns the heavens.

In an antitype to the first design in Blake’s series of twenty-one engravings, true prayer now replaces its travesty. The melodious etheric instruments are taken down from the tree of life and the enforced, suffocating piety of the first illustration changes to authentic enthusiasm as all the participants assume active attitudes (Job now is literally “upright”!) and praise the Lord. Job has passed through rational materialism to an understanding of the spirit of God within himself. The material church, with its divisive



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Job and His Family Restored to Prosperity

Spiritually enlightened and materially blessed, Job now worships God in active thanksgiving, not in creed-constrained piety. The family of lambs is correspondingly awakened, the church is gone, along with the sin-convicting book of law, spiritual faculties “make music,” and the sun also rises.

creeds and pall of laws, is gone. The luminaries have reversed their positions. The setting sun now rises. The moon of the old dispensation now sets.

Job’s new life-giving faith in God’s wisdom and goodness now constitutes his health and his inestimable and incorruptible wealth, for it is the earnest of Christ, as the personing of God’s love dwelling in him, bringing light and rightness to all places and processes in creation.

Satan’s test becomes Job’s blessing. God uses the Adversary as the bearer of gifts to Job. Strange mode of delivery, you say, and a ghastly wrapping to a goodly treasure. As the world sees it, yes. In Christian terms, one dies with Christ to share in his victorious eternal life. One becomes intimate with suffering that the spirit’s mettle may be fired to infrangible strength and indued with a brightness that dispels all forms of mental darkness. In time one is rendered completely impervious to all of life’s reversals and mutations. Then the soul lives uninterruptedly in the Spirit’s sun. □

—C. W.