THE BOOK OF JOB AND ITS MODERN INTERPRETERS

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THE Book of Job and its meaning forms a subject to which audiences at the Rylands lecture series are not strange. In particular, my distinguished predecessor, Professor H. H. Rowley, in about the last year of his tenure of the chair at Manchester delivered, and later published, a very thorough study entitled "The Book of Job and its Meaning". To this we may add by way of a postscript that in the new series of The Century Bible there recently appeared a full commentary on Job from his pen, published posthumously in 1970 and therefore perhaps—unless other such works are still in the publishing pipeline—his very last contribution to Old Testament scholarship. To return, however, to his Rylands lecture—this was, as was all of his work, a very able and judicious survey of the subject, with painstaking annotation and widespread reference to all currents of scholarly opinion; it covered the ground, and offered a conspectus of then current opinion about Job, in a way which in comprehensiveness far exceeded what I shall attempt here. It is not my purpose to offer an equal and balanced survey of present-day scholarship about Job, which one might hope to set alongside Rowley's masterly review. Nor shall I even endeavour to bring his work up to date by listing and discussing the contributions which have been added to Job studies in the last decade or so.

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1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 10th of February 1971.
3 See my short review in JOURNAL OF SEMITIC STUDIES, xvi (1971), 103 f.
Though this could well be useful, it is not to my taste to do it, for I do not think that the listing and summarizing of a score of articles, however useful it may be, makes a lecture. My main purpose will rather be to look at the Book of Job in itself, to talk about its inner development and its literary significance, and here and there to introduce into this exposé some analysis of the recent trends in scholarship. Questions of detailed interpretation must necessarily be left out; though the whole is the sum of its parts and the detail of each part must affect our understanding of the whole, we have to trust that at the present level of discussion obscurities in the detail of each part may nevertheless average out, and that we can at least discuss the general effect of the whole without being forced to feel that we are talking nonsense.

Now our starting point and general perspective is this: that we shall in the first place, and so far as is possible, talk about the book as it now is, and leave to a secondary position questions about hypothetical earlier forms of it. We may here quote from one who is, characteristically, a general critic of literature rather than a technical Old Testament scholar. Northrop Frye writes (with particular reference to the meaning of the monster Leviathan):

I am trying to make sense of the Book of Job as we now have it, on the assumption that whoever was responsible for its present version had some reason for producing that version. Guesswork about what the poem may originally have been is useless, as it is only the version we know that has had any influence on our literature.¹

I do not say that this opinion can be accepted for just any kind of study. Some elements or aspects of the present version may have taken their present form not purposely but by accident; and though the present version is the one which has had influence

on our literary tradition, this is not entirely decisive for any study of the book in its oriental and Israelite context. But in spite of these qualifications we shall here lay less emphasis on the origin of the book and more on its effect, the impact which it may have on the reader now that the book is already there. In passing we may notice, as something of a sign of the times, that in past decades biblical studies, largely historical and developmental in their interest, have tended to diverge from the general appreciation of literature as practised by modern critics, but that very recently attempts have been made to bring them closer together. But in any case, even when we put our purpose in this way, we have to leave room in our minds for certain historical questions: we may have to think about the literary effect which the book would have had in an earlier version, and we certainly have to consider the possibility that some large speeches have come to be lost from the text, or have been added later, or—most confusing of all—have been ascribed to the wrong speaker. Such possibilities must be at least in the back of our minds; but our first and deliberate task is to understand the book as it now is.

Now the general structure of the Book of Job can be stated simply enough. There are four sections: first (and also last), the prologue and epilogue, which have similar style and material; second, the conversation of Job with his friends; third, the speech of Elihu; and, fourth, the speech of God. Now a little more detail about each.

The prologue is in prose, and begins in heaven. God points out to Satan—"the accuser" (the Hebrew reader would be conscious of the meaning, which is made plainer by the article)—the blameless virtue of Job, and Satan argues that this is just because God takes care of Job, protecting him in his possession of a fine family and great wealth. God therefore permits Satan to arrange the destruction of this favourable environment, on condition that Job himself should be left untouched. Thus family and wealth are destroyed in a series of catastrophic blows;

1 In particular see F. Alonso-Schökel, Estudios de poética hebrea (Barcelona, 1963); M. Weiss, The Bible and Modern Literary Theory (in Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2nd edn., 1967); W. Richter, Exegese als Literaturwissenschaft (Göttingen, 1971).
but Job does not turn against God. The Lord gave, he says—in the first of the many memorable sayings of the book—and the Lord hath taken away; blessed is the name of the Lord. We now pass to the second stage of the prologue. Satan appears before God a second time and God points out how Job had been unmoved in his righteousness in spite of the disasters he had suffered. Satan argues that, if Job were attacked in his own person, he would turn against God and curse him: a man will willingly give anything up, so long as he himself is immune. With divine permission, therefore, Satan now afflicts Job with a painful disease. He sits in the dungheap, scratching his sores. His wife invites him to curse God and die, but he refuses: "shall we receive good at the hands of God, and shall we not also receive evil?" Thus, it says explicitly, Job “did not sin with his lips”. With this, something is ended, something is recognized as fact; there is a pause, and a new element enters. Job’s three friends come to “comfort” him, but they are so appalled by his suffering that for seven days they say nothing.1 This is the end of the prologue.

The epilogue at the end of the book (42. 7–17) is in the same prose style—unlike the verse of the remainder—and clearly belongs together with the prologue. One character who was central there, however, now appears no more, namely Satan; nothing is said about him or about what has become of him. God expresses anger against the three friends of Job, because they did not (in the conversation, about which we have still to speak) speak rightly about God as Job had done. To Job, on the other hand, God restores all that he had lost, plus a good deal more: he ends up with 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, other livestock, and a large family, and he lives to see four generations of youngsters flourishing before he himself dies, obviously happily, “an old man, and full of days”—a fine fulfilment for a life in biblical times.

As we have just seen, the prologue showed Job still obediently

1 A recent article by N. Lohfink, “Enthielten die im Alten Testament bezeugten Klageriten eine Phase des Schweigens?”, *Vetus Testamentum*, xii (1962), 260-77, explores the background of this silence and suggests that it was a normal element in funerary custom.
submissive to God's will, even if it meant unexplained suffering. But the dialogue begins by showing a much less submissive and accepting sort of Job, a much more self-reliant and defiant character—which is one main reason why some critics have felt that the Job of the prologue is a different person from the Job of the main central poem. In the poem, if he does not begin by cursing God explicitly, he does begin by cursing his own life—the day he was born, the night he was conceived, everything about his life, since he would be much better off dead, or else never to have lived.

The dialogue or conversation between Job and his friends is by any account the central element in the book. It is a highly formalized conversation, to begin with at any rate. Job speaks, and friend 1 replies; Job answers, and friend 2 comes in; Job speaks again, and friend 3 enters the lists. This makes up round one, and round two has exactly the same pattern. All are formal speeches, from about 20 up to about 50 verses in length; there in no interrupting, no cut-and-thrust of argument. Eventually (ch. 21) we start on a third round, but here something seems to go wrong. Friend 1 answers (that is, Eliphaz, ch. 22), but to friend 2 (Bildad, ch. 25) our present text ascribes only a short speech of six verses, and thereafter we have a long speech by Job (26-31). It has been widely acknowledged that people seem to be saying the wrong things here and that part of what is ascribed to Job should belong to the third-round speeches of friends 2 and 3. In particular, chapter 27, assigned in the text to Job, ends up with a standard assertion that the wicked are surely and invariably punished, just the doctrine which has generally been central to the argument of the other three. Though precise reconstruction cannot be agreed upon, we may thus suppose that there was a third round of speeches from each of the characters, ending up at about the end of chapter 27. Chapter 28, which here follows, is commonly regarded as a quite separate poem: its theme is the value of Wisdom, the difficulty of finding it, its comparability with gold and precious stones, and finally the intrinsic connection between wisdom and the fear of God. Is it meant to be spoken by Job? Or is it perhaps a sort of editorial comment on the whole—perhaps, as has been
suggested, something like the observations of a Greek chorus, inserted in the course of development of a drama, and here anticipating in some way the later speeches of God? In any case, from here we proceed fairly clearly, with a final speech of Job (chs. 29–31). At some length Job paints a moving picture of the honour he used to have, contrasts it with the calamity which has now fallen upon him, and insists on his own innocence. We shall later add some further remarks about Job's conversation with his friends; but meanwhile we have come to the third main stage.

Now (ch. 32) the three friends abandon argument with Job because he was "righteous in his own eyes". There now appears another character altogether, and one previously unmentioned: Elihu, doubtless the first example in all literature of what has more recently come to be known as the "angry young man". He is angry at Job because he thought he was in the right, angry at the friends because they did not succeed in refuting him. Because he was young, he had modestly waited to hear the wisdom of the others; but eventually his own frustrated idealism boiled over and he had to speak. And speak he does, all 159 verses of it. Without shilly-shallying, he lays all the facts on the line: God is greater than man; God does not do anything wrong; evil necessarily brings its own retribution: God is the maker of the universe, and does not care about those who are wise in their own conceit. The trouble with Job, therefore, is simple: it is sheer ignorance, compounded with stubborn rebelliousness.

To this tirade Job makes no reply; indeed, it is not quite clear that he is even listening. Nothing more is said about Elihu in the rest of the book. His speech is followed by the speech or speeches of God, introduced with the words "and then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind", rather as if Job had just been speaking and Elihu had never been there at all. This peculiar disconnection of the Elihu speech from all that goes before and after is one main reason why scholars have thought that it was a late addition to the book: it refers, for instance, to the conversation, but the conversation does not refer to it, and it also seems to anticipate some things which are said again just afterwards in the speeches of God.
These speeches of God are the last major element (38-41). In essence the first speech is an appeal to God as the creator, to the strange and wondrous character of the universe as made by him; it implies the consequent impossibility that a mere and mortal human might argue with God. Was Job there, it asks, when the universe was created? Does he know its secrets? Does he understand light, or death, or the heavenly constellations? Does he control the doings of the animal world, the wild goat, the wild ass, the ostrich, the hawk, the warhorse? The Almighty then points the moral of this in one short verse, which perhaps means:

He who disputes with the Almighty, let him answer that!

(exact details are uncertain). In any case, it produces an immediate submission from Job, who confesses how slight and insignificant he is, and promises to say nothing more. It is rather interesting that there is still no confession of sin, such as would be suggested by the traditional "Behold, I am vile" of A.V. It is rather the "I am of small account" of R.S.V., or the "I who carry no weight" of N.E.B.

We now have another speech from God, beginning with the same introduction ("Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said"). This speech faces (in 40. 7-14) more directly the matter of Job's tendency to assert his own righteousness; from this theme, however, it quickly goes on to a long description of the two great monsters Behemoth and Leviathan, a specially long description being given to the latter. Some scholars think that these are magniloquent descriptions of real animals like the hippopotamus, the crocodile or the whale; others think that they are mythical beasts. The fineness of the imagery (though some critics indeed feel that it is not so very good at this point) should not disguise the fact that the speech does not directly face the questions discussed in the dialogue, such as why Job was suffering, what he had done wrong, or why man must have inexplicable futility and pain in his life. But though for us it seems not to answer these questions, it seems to answer them for Job; for he says in reply, in the last poetical verses of the book (42. 1-6), that he despises himself and repents in dust and ashes. After that there follows the epilogue in prose,
already described, telling of the restoration of the prosperity and good fortune of Job.

Now, if we ask what scholars are doing to elucidate the many problems of this fascinating but also difficult book, it may be useful to distinguish several distinct operations which are being carried out. The first of these is linguistic research into the vocabulary of Job and its grammatical usage. The book contains many unusual words and idioms, and every attempt to explain any of these makes a difference on the impression made by the whole. Modern times indeed have seen two or three sweeping attempts to solve the linguistic problems of the book by means of one great theory about its language. Quite a long time ago, for instance, it was suggested that the original language was not Hebrew but Arabic; and in recent years this position was reasserted by the late Professor A. Guillaume. Guillaume maintained that the language was "impregnated through and through with Arabic" and that one could "read it as though it were an Arabic work".1 An equally drastic theory was that of the eminent Israeli philologist, N. H. Tur-Sinai, who maintained that the book was written in Aramaic and that the more difficult parts of it were later translated into Hebrew, but often mistakenly; in cases where such mistakes took place, we can often from the unsuitable current Hebrew text reconstruct what the original Aramaic was and thus arrive at the correct meaning.2 But neither of these two sweeping linguistic solutions, the Arabic and the Aramaic, has found more than minimal support among scholars, and they are likely to remain as highly individual and idiosyncratic theories, occasionally fertile in suggestion but not generally accepted or even taken very seriously.

A third, and a more likely, linguistic approach, which has now become more common and more fashionable, works in a more eclectic way: it is not supposed that the book is actually in any language other than Hebrew, or that it has been translated from any such language, but an attempt is made to give new

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explanations to Hebrew words on the basis of our knowledge of cognate Semitic languages. At present the strongest current of such study is that which derives from researches in Ugaritic, and to a lesser extent in Phoenician and other North-west Semitic languages. The English reader of the Bible can now get some idea of the Book of Job, as it appears to those who are working in this manner, from two modern translations: firstly, M. H. Pope's version with notes in *The Anchor Bible* (New York, 1965), and secondly the rendering in *The New English Bible*, which—we may suspect—incorporates many of the linguistic suggestions made over the years by Sir Godfrey Driver in a long series of detailed notes.

This linguistic approach, then, is one of the main ways in which work on the detail of the book is being done; and it generally complements or supplements the more traditional work of textual criticism. Just because it is both detailed and technical, however, it is not suitable for fuller discussion within this lecture, and I propose to go on to a second approach.

This second approach is through the study of comparable works in other ancient cultures, along with other works of the Wisdom literature or the Wisdom tradition within the Old Testament itself. Comparative study has not as yet brought to light an actual pre-Hebrew Job from which the present book was developed, but it has shown that certain precedents for the Book of Job, in respect both of form and of content, did exist.¹ There is, for instance, a work called *The Babylonian Theodicy* which has several striking similarities. In form, it is a dialogue between a sufferer and a friend; it is formally organized, with eleven lines to every speech; and in each speech every line begins with the same sound, indeed with the same cuneiform sign (a number of biblical poems are acrostics, and in the long Psalm 119 each verse of each section begins with the same sign). Job, however, is not an acrostic; but we have already noted the formal organization of the conversation, though its speeches vary in length while those of the Babylonian work are constant.

Another small point: the names of the speakers are not indicated in the Babylonian poem, which makes it possible to surmise that they were not marked in Job at an earlier stage, hence some confusion when they came later to be put in. As for subject-matter, here again there is common ground; for the sufferer complains that the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper, and the friend tends to argue, conversely, that things are about as well as they can be expected to be, and that evil-doers do, by the course of nature and the will of the gods, run into disaster and punishment. The date is near the end of the second millennium, say 1400–1000 B.C.

Another poem, now usually called by its Accadian name *ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, used often to be called "the Babylonian Job". It is not a dialogue, but it includes a bitter depiction of suffering and illness, with a marvellous restoration to well-being at the end. In one section the sufferer complains, much in the style of Job, that all this trouble would have been intelligible if he had been a bad man, but that for a religious and moral person like himself it makes no sense; how can one understand what the gods will? An even earlier parallel is the Egyptian document "A Dispute over Suicide"; this again is a dialogue, but between a man and his soul, and like Job it begins and ends in prose, having its central part in verse.

These instances are enough to show that in the ancient near east there had traditionally been a certain current of literature of a pessimistic and questioning kind, which dwelt upon suffering and injustice and voiced the questions raised about the order of the world by the experience of them. None of these works has a form identical with that of Job, but nevertheless certain intelligible connections and similarities can be discerned. Thus the study of Babylonian and Egyptian parallels provides a support to our studies in Job, but cannot be expected to solve for us its questions; we do not know how far Job has followed in the line of his oriental predecessors or how far he has adopted their forms in order to express something different.

Finally, within the Old Testament itself, though there is no close parallel to Job, something can be learned by trying to place Job and its ideas as against other books, especially those of the
"Wisdom literature" like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and also as against other materials which show similar thoughts or similar literary forms, such as parts of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, of Isaiah 40-66, and those Psalms of lamentation which stress the helplessness of man, the multitude of his enemies, and the apparent remoteness and remissness of God. When scholars try to estimate the date of the book of Job, it is usually on these grounds, plus some indications from the language of the book, that their decision is made.

The third kind of operation which biblical scholars have practised is the attempt to discover which parts of the book are more "original" and which have been added later, or, in other words, the attempt to reconstruct earlier and later stages in its development. This commonly—though not quite necessarily—implies an up-valuing of the "original" form of the book and a corresponding devaluation of the later additions. Since there is no manuscript evidence for an earlier version, the reconstruction rests entirely on considerations of what fits what, on how one element makes sense in relation to another, and therefore ultimately on questions of literary taste and interpretation.

That there are roughnesses and inconcinnities in Job as it stands is beyond doubt. For instance, we have ourselves noted the probable confusion at the end of the third round of speeches in the dialogue, and the way in which the Elihu speeches seem detached from what precedes and follows. What is more questionable is the hopefulness of attempts to reconstruct the original or earlier stages, not because reconstruction is in principle wrong in any way but because it produces so little agreement. Thus, at that point at the end of the third round of speeches, scholars have produced a bewildering variety of suggestions: Rowley in his lecture devoted a footnote a full page long to the mere listing of proposals, about eighteen or so in number, and these he regards as only "a few examples". And this does not

1 This devaluing tendency is sometimes visible in the terms used; for example Rowley repeatedly uses the word "reject" for the judgement that a passage is a later addition. Thus in his Bulletin article referred to, p. 189 (cf. From Moses to Qumran, p. 164), we read that some scholars have "rejected" the speeches of God, and cf. repeated use of the same term in the new commentary, e.g. pp. 15-18.
include those more radical reconstructions, according to some of which the original Job consisted of only a few chapters out of the present 42. Thus, in general, all reconstruction of an earlier form of Job is much less certain than, let us say, the historical source-criticism of the Pentateuch, where a general broad solution has at least succeeded in attracting the broad assent of a large number of competent scholars. Attempts at reconstruction of an original Job, though in principle quite justifiable, do not seem to have repaid the effort which has gone into them, and the very number of them, by a law of diminishing returns, has tended to reduce the credibility of each new one.

Moreover, of all the various elements in Job, there are two which, more than any other, have in the minds of scholars been detached and considered to be non-original: these are the poem about Wisdom in chapter 28, and the speech of Elihu. But even among those who share this opinion it is widely conceded that these passages belong to the same general milieu and world of ideas; indeed, many go so far as to say that they were written by the same man as the rest of the book, but added after it was already complete. And this brings us back to our starting point, where we agreed that the understanding of the text as it is is our central task.

The fourth mode of understanding Job is by taking it as part of the general appreciation of literature. The modes of understanding which have been already discussed—the linguistic, the comparative, the analytical or reconstructive—are the modes in which professional biblical scholars have excelled; emendation of texts, identification of new lexical elements, comparison with other documents, separation out of non-original passages—these are the operations for which the technical and historical training of the biblical scholar has equipped him well. The more literary and aesthetic appreciation of Job is an aspect in which traditional biblical scholarship has been less developed.¹

¹ Some of the best work done within biblical scholarship has been done by scholars who also have a fine literary sense, such as S. Terrien. For some instances of estimates by general literary scholars see, in addition to the work of N. Frye already cited, D. D. Raphael, The Paradox of Tragedy (London, 1960), some parts of Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Book of Job: A Collection of Critical Essays (ed. P. S. Sanders, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), and R. B.
Now scholars and critics agree in saying that the Book of Job is a great work and a profound work. Moreover, among the biblical books it is the one which most clearly lends itself to interpretation simply as literature, as fiction if you like. Not only is it a great work, one has also to register that it is a tolerably successful work, which under the circumstances is perhaps harder to achieve. Its literary effectiveness is by no means easy to analyse: the reader sometimes finds it hard to know how one part fits with another, and thus has to bracket out one part when reading another; yet the book remains readable and makes some considerable impression when it is read. Its general atmosphere can fairly be described as tragic in character; and this is so even when we take into account the epilogue, for there are many true tragedies in which things come out well in the end, virtue and fidelity being rewarded and right being all the more triumphant for having passed through a stage of questioning and doubt. It can fairly be called tragic when a man is deprived without reason of all that makes life meaningful to him, when the ultimate resource of his values—in this case God—appears to be against him, and when he is in fundamental conflict with the whole setting of social wisdom and convention in which he has grown up, a setting represented by the three friends and Elihu.

If we may now follow a little farther the comparison between Job and the literary genre of tragedy—for such comparisons are of interest even though we know that they cannot be pressed far—we begin by noting the absence of action in Job. The main action, such as it is, lies on the margins of the book, in the prologue and epilogue; and within this framework the only action is that of speaking and listening. After Job’s initial calamity and the arrival of the friends, only one real change of situation takes place, namely Job’s final submission to God (40. 4–5; 42. 1–6). The real movement lies in the alternation of action.

Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (Yale, 1959). The volume edited by Sanders includes portions of Raphael’s and of Sewall’s work, and Gilbert Murray’s essay “Prometheus and Job”.

1 Cf. Gilbert Murray’s remark: “The course of thought in Job, though often sublime, is not on the whole lucid, a fact which has led critics to conclude that it is a good deal interpolated. But the main lines can be made out.” See his “Prometheus and Job”, in Sanders, op. cit. p. 58.
speakers. Not only are there practically no events within the story, other than the progression of the speeches, but the speeches themselves do not contain reports of events—events occurring offstage, as it were, which change the situation and are elsewhere a common way of reconciling cataclysmic events with the dramatic unities of time and place. This type of reporting is found in the prologue, where messengers bring a stream of bad news to Job, but not in the main body of the book. Its absence is striking because in ancient Hebrew style generally the reporting of great events, for instance acts of God, is very common. In this book, however, even the speeches of God contain no new events; the one event to which they give attention is one which is past and which in substance is presumably common ground to all parties, namely the creation of the world. This does not function as a new event, a new action in the sense of dramatic action, but as an accepted past event from which the full and proper conclusions have not yet been drawn by the parties concerned. But if the reporting of external action is largely confined to the prologue and epilogue, this also gives us a way to understand the function of these short sections; for it is doubtful if the succession of speeches could make good sense without some framework of situation and events to accompany it. This also helps to make sense of the fact that the prologue and epilogue are in prose, for it is a common characteristic of Hebrew writing that the narration is basically in prose, just as prose is used also for the introduction of speakers who themselves speak in verse, contrary to the usage of some comparable literatures, such as Greek epic.¹

If a story is to be good, it has to move in some way, and much of the movement in the Book of Job seems to come from the entry of new persons and the passage from one speech to another. No one, reading the prologue, would guess that Satan will not reappear later or even be referred to again—not even in the epilogue, otherwise so similar to the prologue; no one, going through the conversations between Job and his friends, would

guess that Elihu, until now entirely unknown, would appear, or that he would try to oppose both Job and the three friends; no one knows that Elihu in turn will be heard of no more; and there is nothing in the logic of the development up to this point to make one sure that God will speak, or that when he does he will say the sort of thing he does say. It is often said that the epilogue "spoils" the book; and this sense can perhaps be rephrased as a feeling that it gives up the attempt to sustain a movement and returns to the starting point, miraculously resurrecting everyone or rather replacing them with equivalents plus interest.

If Job contains movement created by the passage from one speaker to another, is there also progression in the argument? In the most important stage of it, i.e. the conversation between Job and the three friends, it is sometimes said that the argument becomes increasingly bitter, which would be understandable psychologically; but it is not quite clear that events really took this course. Job himself, who ironically was later regarded as a man of saintly patience, seems to have lost confidence in his friends after hearing only the first speech of the first among them and accuses them of treachery, of being unreliable guides like the unpredictable watercourses of the desert—all this long before there has been time for a careful exploration of the problem of suffering, or indeed of any problem at all.

This point verges on another question: how far can one say that the appeal of Job comes from characterization? The answer seems to be that this varies from point to point. Satan is still something of a character in embryo; when Job was written, Satan had his great future still long before him, and no one would have known that he was to become one of the world's greatest literary figures, rivalling even God in importance. The character of Satan is already well marked, with its persistence in looking for trouble and its scepticism of the motives of even the best people; but in Job it does not develop, because it does not figure in the story as a whole. The three friends of Job might perhaps present a better ground for characterization through a contrast between their personalities; but one must doubt whether this has been a primary interest of the writer. From one scholar we
hear of the "dry, professorial [!] arrogant tone in which Eliphaz affirms his thesis, and the very personal accents, imbued with pathos, in which Job makes his reply"; and the German writer Eissfeldt maintains that "Eliphaz as the eldest sets forth this conviction [that suffering is punishment for sin] with caution and with the utmost consideration for Job's feelings, whereas Zophar as the youngest rushes in as if wielding a cudgel, while Bildad treads a middle path." But while these differences may indeed well be there, they are far from obtrusively there, and to me the three friends seem to remain rather anonymous figures, furnished with no introduction and no background, whose ideas are mostly orthodox and somewhat faceless. In all the discussion Job never tries to insert a wedge between his opponents by pointing out contradictions in idea or in manner between one and another. In a way Job himself speaks out of experience, defying theory, while the friends stick to received doctrine and thereby deprive themselves of the possibility to present much individual character. Thus, though perhaps theologically or ideologically the friends form a balance against Job, in a more literary sense they act as a foil for Job. For certainly something is done to make a living person out of Job: we see this in his initial cursing of his own life, in his demand to have a confrontation with God, in his refusal to admit that God is fair, in his insistence that God does not protect the innocent and, most personally of all, in the nostalgia (ch. 29) for the days of his past prosperity and social acceptability. By contrast, one of the disappointing things is that the final submission of Job, after the speeches of God, is neither adequately prepared nor provided with psychological detail, and thus fails to offer a satisfying peripeteia.

Another place where some psychological characterization can be found is in the delineation of Elihu. His speech is more clearly character-related than those of any of the other three friends. It has often incurred the censure of critics for being dull, bombastic and repetitive, but this could itself be regarded as a worthwhile dramatic point, that a man who starts out claiming to transcend both points of view ends up with only another rehash of current communis opinio; and certainly, as I have already

suggested, there is much reality in the picture of his youthful zeal and self-confidence (32. 6-22). Finally, God himself is not well characterized, and in his speech talks not of himself but of the things he has made. This touches on a familiar feature of the Jewish-Christian tradition, namely that the literary characterization of deity has been difficult because of the transcendent and non-anthropomorphic nature of God, sharply distinct from the position in Greek culture, where the clearly defined personalities of individual gods made deity a field for the study of character on a plane similar to the human. In sum then we can say that the Book of Job contains some worth-while characterization but that this cannot be taken as the centre of its own distinctiveness as a work of art.

As for ideas, it is clear that Job, with its long course of argument, gives a thorough airing to some of the antinomies which developed in the Hebrew tradition, and especially in the Wisdom movement, which in its earlier course considerably emphasized the idea that virtue brought its reward in the form of prosperity. The Bible has two books, Job and Ecclesiastes, which in different ways do something to question this position. But it is in any case a mistake to look on Job as a philosophical dialogue from which there is supposed to emerge an "answer" to the problems propounded. Job himself shares some of the ideas of his friends (now his opponents); they were all wise men from the same background. The speeches of God, which should constitute the ideological climax, make no attempt to answer the questions originally discussed, e.g. whether and why the innocent suffer, whether God has a purpose in tormenting man—unless the answer is that, if one understands the greatness of the creator, one will not ask these questions; and even if this is what is meant, I do not think we can say that it is made very plain.

Moreover, along with some other modern critics I doubt whether the "problem of suffering" is the central theme of the Book of Job. This problem, the conflict between the idea that virtue has its reward and the fact that the virtuous can suffer, is certainly present and is used in the drama. But one cannot help wondering whether the questioning of traditional views of
this kind can have been the purpose of the work. Even as far
back as 1000 B.C. people can hardly universally have held the
opinion that the innocent are kept safe and the wicked are always
punished with quite the simple tenacity of the friends of Job;
in fact, the disputing of this idea was not an uncommon theme of
ancient literature. Thus the writer is not trying to challenge an
idea which in his day was unquestioned, but using an idea, of
the limitations of which people even then were somewhat aware,
as part of a dramatic setting the centre of which lies elsewhere.

Two particular assumptions may be mentioned. Firstly,
there is no idea of suicide as a release from personal suffering
and moral tension. Suicide was known in the ancient east—
compare the Egyptian dialogue mentioned above—and is some­
times heard of in Israel: the first Israelite king, Saul, committed
suicide, or at least got someone to kill him, which is not quite
the same thing; but in any case it was decidedly marginal to the
culture, and was never built up, as it was by the Stoics in the
Roman Empire, into a basic form of individual protest against
the present world order. It is taken for granted that, though
Job finds his life hateful and says that death is better, it is
psychologically impossible to take the practical step of bringing
about death. Secondly, and this is part of the same point, there
is no idea of finding a resolution to the conflict in another life,
in rewards after death, in a transition to a new world yet to come.
Thus it is assumed that this present life is the only decisive good
for man, and Job's despair is just because this one good thing
has been made a horror. Though he does not "curse God",
the preference for death is itself something verging on the
blasphemous.

We must here conclude this much too hasty survey of some
aspects of a complicated book; and I would like to do this by
calling attention to one passage which seems to be of crucial
importance but is too often neglected, since it comes very near
the end, where the tension of the book is already ebbing away.
In 42. 7 God expresses his anger against the three friends of Job
because they have not spoken rightly about me [i.e. God] "as
my servant Job has done". Is this not after all in a way the
keystone of the whole book as it now stands, the foundation of
its paradoxical character? It adds a whole new dimension which, if the verse were not there, would be entirely absent. If it is not there, our final impression is of a God who overwhelms Job with his mighty speech, the speech of the creator about what he has made, and who brings Job thus to silence, to submission, and to repentance. But when it is there, we have yet one final paradox to come: the God who has done all this aligns himself in the last instance with Job and says that what Job had said of God was "right" (Hebr. r'k'na). It was this passage which in the later interpretation of the book led towards the impression of a pious and orthodox Job, and in the atmosphere of that period of interpretation this is very understandable. But for us who see the Job of the dialogue as a much more rebellious and unorthodox mind, what does it mean that God in the end ranges himself with, and not against, such a man?

It is of course quite possible to say, as many commentators do, that the verse of which we are speaking was written only for a different Book of Job and one in which the hero had spoken quite differently. This may indeed be so. But it leaves us with the task of understanding the book as it now is. Whether we have here the different aspects of one man's vision or the subsequent combination of the writings of two men, the effect upon the reader is profound. Though Job did not have the last word, though he had to listen to the speech of God and humble himself before its impact, it was he, as is revealed in the end, and not any other of the speakers of the book, who "spoke rightly" about God. Is not this, for all the difficulties we may have in interpreting it, still the profoundest thing which this great book has to say to its readers?