The Problem of Job: An Eastern Response

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The Book of Job is one of the best-known of the Bible. This paper brings an Eastern perspective to bear on it by exploring what might be the central focus of the book. By adopting a comparative perspective and examining Job in relation to various Hindu and Buddhist texts, we argue that a koan-like theme of the "relevance of irrelevance" is at the root of Job's experience.

Any attempt at a comparative exegesis of Job runs the risk of foundering in two ways: textually and hermeneutically. The book has been subjected to textual criticism and some scholars have suggested that it is a composite work rather than an integral whole (Pope 1965; Dhorme 1967: VII; Westermann 1981). There is also a wide diversity of opinion regarding the hermeneutical issues involved in this famous work. There are, in other words, different interpretations about the nature of the problem in Job (Glatzer 1969; Ricoeur 1967:321; Jung 1958:358; Polzin and Robertson 1977, etc.) We propose to solve these difficulties in the following way. There is an increasing tendency to treat the Book of Job as a single document, at least in the context of literary and philosophical research as distinguished from strictly philological studies (Frye 1957: 189; Glatzer 1969:4). This first approach is adopted here in the absence of a consensus on Job's composite parts, even if its composite character is generally accepted among textual scholars (Andersen 1976:55). At the hermeneutical level, this paper focuses on the following four possible

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relationships between: (1) God and humans; (2) God and the universe; (3) God and suffering; and (4) God and rationality, both morality and rationality being fundamental expressions of order, like the universe itself.

Attempts to relate the story of Job to Eastern perspectives are not new, but earlier efforts have not been fruitful (see Andersen 1976; 25–26). In examining each of the four major standpoints mentioned earlier, let us see what light, if any, the East may have to shed this time.

God and Humans

One idea suggested early in the book is that of God testing humans or, rather, allowing them to be put to the test. Indeed, such is the wager of God with Satan. From this point of view, it is useful to recall that Job's suffering is not genuine but contrived; it is contrived by Satan and therefore it is not genuine in the sense of being the result of his own action. This immediately makes Karma, the standard Hindu explanation of suffering (Herman 1976), inapplicable and we must therefore look elsewhere for a similar perspective on suffering. It is perhaps to be found in the story of *Nārada*, "the model devotee" (see Zimmer 1962:32):

> Through prolonged austerities and devotional practices, he had won the grace of Vishnu. The god had appeared before the saint in his hermitage and granted him the fulfilment of a wish. "Show me the magic power of your *Māyā*," *Nārada* had prayed, and the god had replied, "I will. Come with me," but again with that ambiguous smile on his beautifully curved lips.
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> From the pleasant shadow of the sheltering hermit grove, Vishnu conducted *Nārada* across a bare stretch of land which blazed like metal under the merciless glow of a scorching sun. The two were soon very thirsty. At some distance, in the glaring light, they perceived the thatched roofs of a tiny hamlet. Vishnu asked: "Will you go over there and fetch me some water?"
>
> "Certainly, O Lord," the saint replied, and he made off to the distant group of huts. The god relaxed under the shadow of a cliff to await his return.

We are next told how *Nārada* leaves the company of Vishnu and approaches the hamlet to fetch a pitcher of water. As soon as he knocks at the first door, however, he forgets the purpose of his visit. He enjoys the hospitality of the family and falls in love with their daughter. He marries her and has three children. After the death of the father-in-law he becomes the *paterfamilias* and lives a pleasant existence as a prosperous householder. Twelve years pass. In the twelfth year the village is hit by a

flash flood; his wife and children are carried away by the strong current as he tries to save them. Finally:

> Unconscious, *Nārada* was stranded eventually on a little cliff. When he returned to consciousness, he opened his eyes upon a vast sheet of muddy water. He could only weep.
>
> "Child!" He heard a familiar voice, which nearly stopped his heart. "Where is the water you went to fetch for me? I have been waiting more than half an hour."
>
> *Nārada* turned around. Instead of water he beheld the brilliant desert in the midday sun. He found the god standing at his shoulder. The cruel curves of the fascinating mouth, still smiling, parted with the gentle question: "Do you comprehend now the secret of my *māyā*?" (33–34).

It should be noted that here, as in the case of Job, the model devotee is put through a series of trials which result in his coming face to face with the glory of God. It is true that *Nārada* is on more friendly terms with Vishnu than Job is with Yahweh and that the Hindu term *māyā*[1] conveys a sense of not merely power but magical creative power as well, whereas Yahweh's account of his own creative power is elemental rather than magical. But once the orientations of the tradition are taken into account and subtracted, the structural similarity between the two stories is apparent. In both cases, a series of trials and tribulations (in one case contrived by Satan, in the other by God) provide a deeper experiential understanding of the irreducible mysterious element in the relationship between God and humans.

God and the Universe

The problem of Job, if it is to be treated as something not just particular to Job but as an illustration of a more general problem, leads to the question of God's relationship to the universe. The basic question here is: Do we live in a morally just universe, in a well-ordered universe?

This is a dilemma faced by the Hindu hero Arjuna on the eve of the battle of the *Mahābhārata*. The occasion gives rise to the *Bhagavadgītā*. On the face of it, Arjuna's dilemma does not seem to be similar to that of Job. Arjuna recoils from the prospect of killing his kinsmen in a fratricidal

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1. A vexatious word to render into English and one with multiple uses in the Hindu religious tradition. In the present context it is useful to recall Zaehner's comment: "The word '*māyā*' has practically entered the English language in the sense of 'world illusion.' This is unfortunate, for even for *Śankara*, the first and greatest of the Indian monists, *māyā* only means illusion from the point of view of Absolute Reality which is One without a second. Empirically it is real" (1966, 183).

struggle. Job questions the just disposition of Almighty God. A little probing, however, reveals much greater convergence between the two situations, for Arjuna has been placed in his situation by a series of apparent injustices, beginning with the loss of his kingdom in a dice game and ending with the refusal of his rival, and the rival of Arjuna's four brothers, to honour the arrangement made at the end of the game (Basham 1954, 408).

If we view the context of the *Gītā* in this light, the remarks made by R.C. Zaehner in the course of his commentary on *Bhagavadgītā* (volume 1) become relevant. Regarding Arjuna's state of mind, he says:

> As far as he can see (and just now he has something of the moral fibre of his elder brother, Yudhishthira) he is merely being asked to initiate mass slaughter and to shirk the moral consequences with an unruffled conscience. His doubt persists, nor will it dissolve until Krishna shows him the awful majesty of God whose ways it is futile to question, just as Yahweh did to Job in the Old Testament (1968, 20).

Job would not curse; Arjuna would not kill. Job has no need to curse after the encounter with God; Arjuna overcomes his compunction to kill in due course *after* Krishna has revealed himself as Time:

> Gazing upon your mighty form with its myriad mouths, eyes, arms, thighs, feet, bellies, and sharp, gruesome tusks, the worlds [all] shudder [in affright]—how much more I!
>
> Ablaze with many-coloured [flames] you touch the sky, your mouths wide open [gaping], your eyes distended, blazing: so do I see You and my inmost self is shaken: I cannot bear it, I find no peace, O Vishnu!
>
> I see your mouths with jagged, ghastly tusks reminding [me] of time's [devouring] fire: cannot find my bearings, I cannot find a refuge; have mercy, God of gods, home of the universe! (Zaehner 1966, 308–309).[2]

And just as Job sees "things too wonderful for me, which I knew not" (Job 42:3), Arjuna exclaims: "Things never seen before I have seen and ecstatic is my joy" (*Gītā* XI:45). The end of the tortuous agony in the world is reached by Job and by Arjuna at the high point of their crisis, not by locomotion, not by lucubration, not by resurrection, not even by meditation, but by the Revelation of God.

God and Suffering

Emil G. Kraeling remarks that the book of Job is (Glatzer 1969, 212) "more than a theodicy: it offers yet another solution to the greatest of all

2. The translations correspond to *Bhagavadgītā XI*: 23–25, also XI: 26–32

problems—that of its dissolution" (Glatzer 1969, 212). When confronted with the majesty of God, Job's perspective on his own suffering is radically altered; it is too trifling a matter to be raised in the cosmic context.

An Eastern perspective on Job is also provided by an incident in the life of Svami Vivekananda. The incident occurs when his family was in dire financial straits and he was undergoing a spiritual crisis brought on by his contact with *Rāmakṛṣna.* When in 1881 his father suddenly died of a heart attack, his situation became desperate. At this point, *Vivekānanda* (then called Narendra) requested *Rāmakṛṣna* to intercede on his behalf with the Divine Mother to "remove his poverty":

> Sri Ramakrishna bade him pray to Her himself for She would certainly listen to his prayer. Narendra entered the shrine of Kali. As he stood before the image of the Mother, he beheld Her as a living Goddess, ready to give wisdom and liberation. Unable to ask Her for petty worldly things, he prayed only for knowledge and renunciation, love and liberation. The Master rebuked him for his failure to ask the Divine Mother to remove his poverty and sent him back to the temple. But Narendra, standing in Her presence, again forgot the purpose of his coming. Thrice he went to the temple at the bidding of the Master, and thrice he returned having forgotten in Her presence why he had come. He was wondering about it when it suddenly flashed in his mind that this was all the work of Sri *Rāmakṛṣna,* so now he asked the Master himself to remove his poverty, and was assured that his family would not lack simple food and clothing (quoted in Nikhilananda 1942, 59).

Narendra's triple amnesia when face to face with the Divine is reminiscent of Job's attitude after his encounter with God. There are, of course, differences in the accounts: Narendra goes to the Goddess, God comes to Job; in the case of Job it is his own suffering which is involved, while in the case of Narendra it is as much his family's suffering as his own. But, like Job, Narendra in asking for his family's poverty to be removed "uttered what he understood not." There were things *too wonderful* for them to behold when face to face with God and both forgot their own worries. Their problems are, in the end, solved through divine mediation, though Narendra's on a more modest scale than Job's. But the real experience lay, not in the fulfilment of the wish, but in the vision of God.

God and Rationality

Philosophers have argued that the answer given by God to Job's question, from a rational point of view, is a *non sequitur.* His suffering remains unexplained. He asks for an explanation of his misery; he gets a proclamation of God's glory.

And yet from another Eastern perspective—that of Zen Buddhism—it can make sense. Nonsense makes sense inasmuch as it suggests that the ultimate answer may be nonrational in essence. There is no doubt a great gulf between the theism of the Book of Job and the non-theism of Zen Buddhism, but the parallel is a matter of structure, not subject matter. One hesitates to say it is one of style and not substance for the style may be of substance here. Is God's response to Job a koan? Is it the response of a Zen Master? Job is whining about his miseries and suddenly he beholds the glory of God.

A few koans from a selection by D.T. Suzuki might convey a flavour of the approach being suggested:

> A monk asked Tung-Shen, "Who is the Buddha?" "Three *chin* of flax."
>
> Chao-chou answered, "*Wu*" (*mu* in Japanese) to a monk's question, "Is there Buddha-nature in a dog?" *Wu* literally means "not" or "none," but when this is ordinarily given as a koan, it has no reference to its literal significance, it is "Wu" pure and simple.
>
> When Ming the monk overtook the fugitive Hui-neng, he wanted Hui-neng to give up the secret of Zen. Hui-neng replied, "What are your original features which you have even prior to your birth?"
>
> A monk asked Chao-chou, "What is the meaning of the First Patriarch's visit to China?" "The cypress tree in the front courtyard."
>
> When Chao-chou came to study Zen under Nanch'uan, he asked, "What is the Tao (or the way)?" Nan-ch'uan replied, "Your everyday mind, that is the Tao."
>
> A monk asked, "All things are said to be reducible to the One, but where is the One to be reduced!?" Chao-chou answered, "When I was in the district of Ch'ing I had a robe made that weighed seven *chin*" (Barrett 1956, 134–135).

The Book of Job thus may be reduced to the following koan:

> Job: Why am I suffering?
> God: Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

The spiritually clarifying and sometimes therapeutic, and even on occasion salvific, quality of an abrupt alteration of perspective is at work in both the situations. It is achieved in a koan with cryptographic density and in the Book of Job with lateral but not irrelevant eloquence.

The problem of suffering, then, may not be susceptible to rational explanation. On examination we at once notice that there is no room in the koan to insert an intellectual interpretation. The intellectual knife, so to speak, is not sharp enough to cut the koan open and reveal its contents. For the koan is not a logical proposition but the expression of a certain mental state (Barrett 1956, 137). In this way, we can claim that God

put Job in a certain mental state. The three friends of Job—Eliphaz, Bildad and Zopher—all try to rationalize a situation which is existential and therefore must be met not merely with reason, which is just one element in the human personality, but with the full force of the entire personality, just as "the entire personality, mind and body, is thrown out into the solution of the koan"(Barrett 1956, 136).

Having explored these four dimensions of the Book of Job, we conclude that an Eastern perspective of the text highlights the "relevance of irrelevance." In relation to God and humans, the danger of the human being distracted through the irrelevant is highlighted; in relation to God and the universe, the human is reduced to her or his virtual irrelevance; in relation to suffering, the realization of its divine irrelevance becomes a felt experience; and in relation to rationality, the irrelevant is used to force an experiential answer out of our being.

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