

A MODERN JOB¹

AN ESSAY ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

BY J. V. NASH

DEEPLY imbedded in the heart of religion, the problem of evil has from time immemorial perplexed the profoundest thinkers. Looking out upon the world, with its imperfections, its pain, and its misery, many have sighed with Omar Khayyam:

“Ah Love! could you and I with Him conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart’s Desire!”

Christian theologians such as Cardinal Newman, viewing the same scene, have perceived on all sides evidences of “a great aboriginal calamity”—the dire results of a Fall, and the visitation of divine wrath upon man.

And yet, God is holy and God is good. How is the spectacle of widespread evil, of undeserved suffering, to be morally reconciled with the existence of a good as well as an all-powerful God? How can infinite good tolerate, much less create, evil? Here we are thrust upon the horns of a dilemma. Either God cannot or will not abolish evil. If the first, He is not omnipotent; if the second, He is not good.

It is obvious, of course, that this problem is one which affects most vitally the theistic religions, the religions which center about the cultus of an anthropomorphic deity. A non-personal deity presumably has no will, and so cannot be charged with responsibility for the existence of evil or reproached for not interfering to prevent it.

But if, at the helm of the universe, there be a superhuman Mind, omnipotent, all wise, and all loving, the Creator and the Governor

¹ By Etienne Giran, with an introduction by Archdeacon Lilley, authorized translation by Fred Rothwell. Chicago and London: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1916.

of the world. that Mind must have willed the world to be ordered as it is. How, then, can it be that the world is so full of sin, wretchedness, and injustice? A whole series of baffling problems merge into one, that of *Theodicy*, or divine justice. *Si Deus bonus est, unde malum?*—If God is good, whence comes evil?

The commonest solution of the problem of evil has been found in some form of dualism; i. e., the setting up of a principle of evil at war with the principle of good. Such was the conception of the warfare between Ormuzd and Ahriman in Zoroastrianism. The dualism of ancient Persia has powerfully influenced other religions. Thus in Judaism and in Christianity we have Satan bringing sin into the world and waging warfare against the Almighty.

But dualism is not a satisfying solution of the problem. To be sure, the evil deity is destined to go down in final defeat, but in the meantime he flourishes and challenges the rule of God. If God is almighty, it must be by His indulgence that Satan is permitted to exist and fill the world with evil. So we are confronted again with the old dilemma.

Various means have been sought of avoiding this dilemma. While evil is indeed very real, may it not be that it is, after all, relative rather than absolute, and that in some mysterious way it may be necessary for the attainment of high spiritual values? Despite all the evil and suffering, may it not be that "all things work together for good?" Such is the philosophy to which Tennyson has given beautiful expression in *In Memoriam*:

"Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood.

That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete."

Browning, with his optimistic exuberance, could exclaim (probably just after a hearty breakfast): "God's in His heaven: all's right with the world." This, however, is little more than a gesture; since even after breakfast in a beautiful Italian palace, a moment's serious reflection must convince one that whether God is in His heaven or

not, all is certainly not right with the world. A world's woes cannot thus be waved away.

The greatest work of literature dealing with the problem of evil is undoubtedly the Book of Job, which is at the same time the supreme literary masterpiece of the ancient Hebrews, whatever its original sources may have been. It has been truly called "the epic of the inner life."

The story of Job may be presumed to be so familiar that we need not dwell upon it. Let it suffice that here we have worked out the lofty ethical concept of virtue for its own sake, not as a mere form of spiritual merchandising whereby man agrees to be good, for a price, the price being the reward of material prosperity. Job's faith is cruelly tested; yet in the midst of unmerited suffering he does not falter: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

In *A Modern Job: An Essay on the Problem of Evil*, the ancient drama is re-enacted in a modern setting. The late Dr. George Burman Foster, it is said, spoke of this book in terms of warmest admiration, as the best presentation he knew of the basic problems of religion.

Here we have the same *dramatis personae*, set down in contemporary life. The modern descendant of Job tastes of abundant prosperity and then falls into extreme adversity. His three friends, of the same names as their prototypes, come to console him.

Urged by Eliphaz to return to the God of his fathers and bow to His inscrutable will, Job replies that his fathers and he himself served different gods, one after another, and he goes on to say: "Now I see the vanity of my childish worship. God! Which God wouldst thou have me serve?" And he enumerates the different concepts of God in the Old and New Testaments. He will no longer serve a God who "is a monstrous enigma, whose crimes cannot be veiled behind His unfathomable mystery."

Eliphaz asserts that God has willed that suffering should be, because of man's rebellion; and he sees in Adam, even admitting the latter's legendary character, a "mighty symbol"—in Christ a "second Adam," who has vanquished pain and death and reconciled man and God.

But this does not appeal to Job. "Who is this God of thine," he asks, "that His wrath is so terrible and implacable?" For himself, he adds: "I will have none of this salvation obtained from an avenging God by the blood of an innocent victim. I prefer his wrath!" As for testing his faith, why should an All-Knowing God

need to learn by experiment how far His creatures can be tempted? Eliphaz emphasizes the disciplinary value of suffering, but Job sees no good in it: "Pain is depressing and evil; if God willed its existence, He willed an evil thing. . . . One does not destroy men's happiness, ruin their homes, break their hearts, take away all hope—slay them for the purpose of teaching men to live."

Part II opens with the second friend, Bildad, taking up the discussion. He admits that he himself was for a long time perplexed by the problem of evil. He even lost his faith and for a time ceased to pray. It was through contact with Christ that he "regained serenity of soul, acquiring the certainty that God does not will evil, and that human suffering is not his doing." Then comes the startling confession that he has been forced to abandon the doctrine of God's omnipotence. "I have made my God greater," he says, "I have made Him a moral God. Most ardently would He free mankind from suffering; he is ever working with this end in view, but he has not won the victory. He has not yet attained to omnipotence in this world." In short, Bildad has sacrificed God's omnipotence to save His goodness.

Eliphaz is horrified by this throwing overboard of Omnipotence. "How desperate," he explains, "is the decision at which thou hast arrived. It is almost the suicide of God!" Bildad retorts by asking why, if the orthodox Christian God is all-powerful, He does not annihilate Satan—by permitting him to flourish, does He not wink at evil?

Job smiles ironically. Perhaps Bildad, he thinks, is in a worse plight than he himself. Who knows that his finite God will not be ultimately worsted? But this does not daunt Bildad. "I am burning," he says, "with the ambition to compass the triumph of my God. Henceforth, I regard the task set before conscious humanity as a divine work. God is by my side, struggling with me, weeping with those who weep, and suffering with those who suffer, marching alongside those who have valiantly determined to win perfect freedom. He is the conscious effort towards good, the active will working within us, intelligence, goodness, and love pregnant with life, but he has not yet overcome the forces of death. His repulses and failures vex him sorely."

In that paragraph we have a suggestive foreshadowing of Mr. H. G. Wells' finite deity, as described in "God the Invisible King."

As for the Cross, Bildad believes that if it manifests God's powerlessness, "it also shows his unfathomable love." Verily, "Christ

came to save God." But Bildad believes firmly in the ultimate victory of his God, who, he says, is praying to man for his help in overcoming evil.

Job ironically regrets that he is so lacking in imagination that he cannot hear God praying. And he adds, grimly, that God's voice in prayer will have to rise pretty high to be heard above the cries of human suffering.

Part III introduces the third counsellor, Zophar, who points out that both Job and the other two speakers have proceeded on the assumption of the miraculous intervention of God in human affairs. "Are you certain," he asks, "He ever intervenes at all in human affairs? For my part, I am convinced there is no such thing as a miracle." His Christian faith, he protests, is not based upon miracle.

But if God never intervenes, suggests Job, have we not the old dilemma again: either He cannot or will not?

Zophar, however, sees God's will as eternal and unchangeable: it "cannot be bent to suit our pleasure," and it is not merely "the benevolent worker of our desires, the supplier of our whims." Our trouble is that we conceive of God in an anthropomorphic sense: we invest Him with our own limited and relative will which, instead of being perfect and therefore unchangeable, is always under the obligation of deciding for some particular alternative. We project our own imperfections into God.

Zophar's God is not the God of creed or book. He believes in God, not because commanded by authority or persuaded by revelation, but because he feels His presence. "He lives without appearing to live. He is so indefatigably active that He seems not to be acting at all. He wills with so immutable a will that He seems not to will. . . . Nor is my God localized at some particular spot in the world: He is present throughout the universe, permeating the tiniest of infusoria and reaching to the most distant of invisible stars. He is everywhere, in everything."

Job returns again to the old charge in another form: "Whether He intervenes or not, He created the world; if He is not responsible now, He was in the past." Zophar, however, will have nothing to do with origins. Substance, he thinks, may be eternal. Nor did God create the world in the traditional sense of the word, for that would have implied a change of will and therefore imperfection.

Here Bildad registers a protest. Such a God, to him, is a stony-eyed Sphinx, "congealed in His own perfection."

Zophar seizes the opportunity to point out that the Father of Jesus was just such an unchangeable God, "who maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth His rain on the just and on the unjust." In this "lofty impartiality he sees "the characteristic of divine love," for, "ever the same, God lives in the soul of all, alike of those who know Him and of those who know Him not. He allows Himself to be found even by those who do not seek Him."

Zophar sees in evolution the explanation of the mystery of suffering. As life developed, sensations, some pleasant and others unpleasant, were recognized. The achievement of conscious sensation was a day of triumph: "That day humanity came to birth." Sensation is the source of all progress, while feeling, in the moral life, corresponds to sensation in the physical domain. "It rejects that which offends or wounds it, and seeks after those things that are in conformity with its own nature."

"Dualism once more," sighs Job.

May it not rather, answers Zophar, be merely the dual aspect of some inscrutable unity? There is a restless spirit within man forever resisting the blind forces of nature and spurring him upward and onward. Man is continually "hitching his wagon to a star." In this pursuit of the ideal, Zophar sees man's response to the summons of God. "The ardent longing for justice, brotherhood, and peace, the desire with which the masses are filled to realize the future city—whether aware of it or not—is the slow realization of the Kingdom of God."

Through it all, the will of God remains unchanged; it manifests itself to us under the aspect of irrevocable laws, and our wills are gradually learning to conform to these laws. This is not fatalism, he insists. On the contrary, these laws are the guarantee of moral freedom, of order and harmony. By means of them, man, through the disciplined forces of spirit, will gain the victory over the blind forces of matter.

In the meantime, suffering certainly exists, but do not blame God. "Accuse none," he says, "but those who are responsible for it: men! Yes, men who, encased in the armor of egoism, in the peace and quiet of their own seclusion, watch the famished crowds pass along."

It is man, not God, who has not yet attained to omnipotence. "Omnipotence can come only through the attainment of holiness and truth, of absolute perfection." So he thanks God that man, in his present imperfect state, is not omnipotent—the whole world would be swept by fire and sword. "Is it not by a provident arrange-

ment of God that base-minded—, jealous beings like ourselves are condemned to impotence? Man deludes himself by thinking he can increase his power by violence, by bigger guns, and the like. "True power is creative, and only love can create." Only through love shall we conquer evil. "Man will truly live only when his existence becomes life in God, manifested in humanity. Then, the destructive powers that men discover will become powers creative of beauty and harmony, truth and divinity. Man is still powerless, but he is on the way that leads to omnipotence. In him there is a god seeking himself, a god who is gradually realizing His own divinity. It is this human god who is to transform the world."

As sin and misery are caused by men, so they must be abolished by men, through the development of brotherly love and social conscience, realizing that we are one body, all of whose members suffer when one suffers. "It is not for God to abolish the springs of suffering and poverty, or vice and corruption: it is for us to do all this!" And likewise, through his mastery of science, man will overcome the adverse forces of nature.

As we work to these great ends, we shall be fulfilling God's plan. He is ever at our side: "He is with all who valiantly engage in some noble work. We are God's workers." Prejudice and Pharisaism must go; men must seek justice in all things, but they must "set even above justice a spirit of brotherly compassion."

Zophar goes on to explain how Job's own personal misfortunes were caused by the ignorance and stupidity of men, not by God.

All this, he tells us, is not setting up a new religion. It is merely substituting a different point of view. "In former times it was believed that the will of God must be modified in order to ameliorate the lot of mankind; nowadays it is beginning to be understood that it is the will of man that must be modified." As for those who are now suffering, Zophar would comfort them with the assurance that God does not will their distress; he would point to them the example of Christ, and strengthen them with the knowledge of their true divine nature; that if they must suffer, it will be "not as creatures manufactured by any kind of a potter, but as human beings aware of their greatness, as gods advancing towards the one God."

This is not catering to man's pride; rather, he thinks, it is building up the sense of human dignity. "Priests, reverend pastors and mandarins like to see men on their knees, in suppliant posture, stammering their feeble prayers. My God likes to see them valiant, strenuously progressing, free alike from boasting and from mean-

ness of every kind, with head erect and soul in harmony with body. It is His will that we should be men, not a flock of bleating sheep. All the worse for those professing Christians by whom this truth has not yet been understood; they shall be scattered, like wisps of straw, to the four winds of heaven."

Elihu, in the person of Job's old servant, brings the drama to a close. A simple minded man, he cannot determine which of the speakers has voiced the truth. "Still," he adds, "I feel that all three love God with all their heart, seek after Him with all their soul, and desire to serve Him with all their strength. And this, to my mind, is the whole of religion" Their differences, he believes, ought to make them humble. "Besides," concludes Elihu, "it is not in the adoption of any particular doctrine that Christianity consists. Fidelity to Christ does not depend on the firmness of a man's belief. If such were the case, what would become of simple-minded, ignorant men like myself, whom your discussions fill with confusion and perplexity?" To the simple mind of Elihu, all philosophy and religion is summed up in the divine admonition: "Beloved, a new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another!"

It is not known whether the modern Job, like his ancestor, was rewarded with the vision of God, whether his misfortunes were miraculously replaced by new and greater blessings, or whether he died content, "old and full of days." We rather suspect, however, that his philosophy of life was much enlarged and improved.

As a discussion of the subject of evil in its modern aspects and as a contribution to ethics, this little volume is invaluable. No better statement of the changing points of view toward age-old religious problems could be wished.