

Written between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, the Book of Job is not Jewish in origin and is set in the land of Uz, an obscure country far from Israel. However, it poses a question very basic to the Judaism of the time – and to every religion of every time. The question is one of the most fundamental concerns of all: Why is there evil in the world? Why is there suffering? Job was apparently an innocent, sinless man who was nevertheless subjected to prolonged and undeserved suffering. His friends told him that he must be a sinner who is paying for his sins; they have passed into the English language as ‘Job’s comforters’.

The Jews of Jesus’ time had a problem in this respect, because most of them did not believe in an after-life; belief in an after-life came very late, so if ‘rewards’ and ‘punishments’ were to come, they had to come in *this* life. Or God himself would be unjust. This is why Jesus’ disciples once asked: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” Because it was believed that punishment for a parent’s sins could

be visited on the child. So therefore: if a person suffered in this life – since there was no life to come – it was because he was a sinner, or his parents or grandparents were. It is a tragically twisted understanding of life which Jesus refuted more than once – but it enabled the pious Jew to blame the human being for his suffering rather than God, which would have been unthinkable. The theological attempt to ‘justify’ God in the face of evil and suffering is known as ‘theodicy’. The Book of Job is a very early work of theodicy and – although a great masterpiece of biblical literature – not a very appealing one.

Basically, when Job asks God why he has afflicted him even though he has not sinned, God’s answer is: ‘Because I can.’ At one point he declaims:

“Do you give the horse his might? Do you clothe his neck with a mane? Do you make him leap like the locust? His majestic snorting is terrifying. He paws in the valley and exults in his strength, he goes out to meet the weapons. He laughs at fear and is not dismayed, he

does not turn back from the sword. Upon him rattle the quiver, the flashing spear, and the javelin. With fierceness and rage he swallows the ground, he cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet.” (39:19-24)

This is not acceptable to the contemporary religious mind. But there is something we really need to remember here: the Old Testament, including the Book of Job, is not about God: it is about the development of a people’s *understanding* of God. We should read the Book of Job in an awareness that this is not actually what God is like – it is what the ancient author *thinks* he is like. And that this thinking is an attempt to explain the existence of evil and suffering.

The problem of evil and suffering in the world is the problem of love: if love is to exist, there must be free will, because love cannot be commanded or obliged or legislated for. Love must be freely given, received and returned, or it is not love but coercion. And where there is free will there is the possibility of suffering, because the love offered can be refused. The Book of Job also

suggests that God *tests* us through suffering – that we are proved, refined and tested by it, like gold in the fire. As if God were toughening us up. Personally, I find this idea offensive – what would it say about the suffering of children, for instance? Yes, there is much suffering in this life and, with grace, we can grow stronger and wiser through it – but God does not inflict it on us for that purpose. Would you treat your children like that? Yet there are people who think God treats *his* children like that.

How would you protect a child of yours from suffering? You could put it in a room as soon as it was born, keep it from ever leaving, feed it and nourish it, educate and care for it in every possible way, but never let it leave that room. Your child would never get sick, would never have any illness or disease, never have its heart broken, never be tired or hungry or depressed. It would never know any suffering because you would have isolated and insulated against all suffering. But would your child love you? Not in the least. Because it

would grow up to know that it was your prisoner. God does not want us to be *his* prisoners.

Freedom makes both love *and* suffering possible. Beyond that, who can say? I certainly can't. I look around, as we must all do, and I cannot fathom why sometimes things should be as they are. All I can do, in a vague and shadowy way, as in St Paul's mirror, darkly, is to recognise that love and suffering will always be in each other's presence. Then I think of the greatest book of love in all the Bible, the 'Song of Songs'. There we read:

"For love is as strong as death (...) Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it. For love is as strong as death."

And I tell myself that love is also stronger than any suffering that walks in its shadow.