

The Religious, Social and Moral Life of the Patriarchal Days as Depicted in the Book of Job

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Abstract—The book of Job, one of the earliest books of the Old Testament, gives us a glimpse of the social life and history of the people of Uz and its neighbouring places during the days of the patriarchs. It has sporadic mention to the religious, social and moral life of the people of that time. Their abundant knowledge of diverse arts and sciences is astonishing. The religious beliefs like offering sacrifices, praying for each other and possessing a clear understanding about God are depicted in this book. The social evil of the time namely plundering of pastoral wealth and ostracizing people with certain ailments are evident. The unique way of mourning by rending the garments is one of their common practices. Besides these, the moral and ethical values of the people are also echoed throughout this book. The book is a sure proof of the knowledge of these people in the commercial practice of barter system, science of astronomy, mining, hunting, writing and so on. Above all it bears testimony to the righteous life of one of the richest men of that time Job, and his unwavering faith even amidst the traumatic and triumphant phases of his life.

Keywords: Old Testament, patriarchal, sanctification, kriaah, barter, retributive justice, precession, wobble, mineralogy, stylus.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Book of Job, one of the earliest books of the Old Testament of the Bible, is a masterpiece in itself hailed for its literary beauty and insights. It comprises too many genres and it is difficult to place it under a single genre. It may look as a poetic work or drama. Various genres are woven into the speeches and an understanding of the background of each genre gives the wholesome meaning. Written in a tripartite pattern, the book begins with a Prologue in chapters one and two. This is followed by the poetic part, the debate between Job and his friends from the chapters four to twenty seven. The book is wrapped up by an Epilogue in chapter forty two. The poetic part or the debates between Job and his friends form the crux of the book. It is full of literary beauty and artistic creativity. However, the 42 chapters of this book give us a glimpse of the culture and history of the people of Uz and its neighbouring places during the days of the patriarchs. It has sporadic mention to the religious social, moral and domestic life of the people of that time. Their abundant knowledge of diverse arts and sciences is astonishing.

The locale of the Book of Job is the land of Uz, which has been identified to be in the south of Edom and west of Arabia, extending to the borders of Chaldea. "Uz was evidently a fertile and flourishing agricultural pastoral land. . . . It was a country characterized by the natural beauties of broad, open agricultural and grazing fields, mountain

ranges, wadies and towns. Natural and primitive conditions and customs prevailed where men, unspoiled by the complexities of the civilized life of state and city, found themselves confronted with God where He was revealed in His handiwork"(Carter 14). The book bears testimony to some of the activities and beliefs of the patriarchal times, with Job as its central character.

Job is considered to be a greatest man in the East, during his time and the chief among his tribes. Among the Nomadic people of the East it was customary to estimate wealth in terms of livestock, especially the female animals and Job possessed them in multifold. The first chapter of the book specifies that Job had thousands of sheep, camel besides oxen and female donkeys. Though Job was bestowed with abundance of wealth, his heart was pure before God. He was a pious man to the core. Even at a time when there were no priests or temples or commandments this man led a very spiritual and righteous life.

II. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In the patriarchal society, the father who is the head of the family is the authoritative ruler and family priest who performs religious ceremonies before God. Job 1.5 states that Job purified his children early in the morning by offering sacrifices of burnt offerings. This was a kind of sanctification and dedication of children to God. Job performs this prayer for his off-springs diligently. Burnt offering finds a place in the first and final chapters which bring out the view that sacrifices were in vogue from Abel's time on through Job's time. The "Jewish Publication Society of America sets Job in patriarchal times. . . . Job's offering private sacrifices without the mention of priests nor of central shrine affirms it" (Dake 155). As these spiritual aspects are traced, the book reveals Job's knowledge of the many traditions and revelation of God. He adhered to the doctrines of his fathers. "Job and the people of Uz knew their God by a variety of names which expressed the character and attribute of God like Elohim, one supreme being, El, the strong one-the Almighty...Eloah, the living God...and Adonai-Lord" (Dake 451). The book also portrays God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Besides, Job states that God created man and put his breath in him. Truly, the God of Job is omnipotent in His ways. He has authority over the sun, the sea and all created things. His powerful actions surpass the understanding of the human brain. He has absolute sovereignty over everything. Job possessed a clear understanding of this Almighty God and remained faithful and devout.

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The Book of Job also reveals the strong faith of a true man of God amidst heart-rending trials and affliction. Job, the greatest man in the east plunges into unimaginable and inexpressive depths of agony, sorrow and suffering. He loses his cattle, his servants and his 10 children. Yet his faith in God is strong and he retains his spiritual balance. He understands that God who is the giver of all good things has every right to take it back. Rather than cursing God, he praises his name. After this he undergoes physical pain when he is smitten with a bodily affliction from his head down to his feet. He is afflicted thoroughly but even amidst such indescribable affliction, the godliness and righteousness of Job neither wavers nor wanes. He never speaks against God. His wife grieves him and his friends accuse and deepen his mental anguish. Yet Job exhibits formidable faith and longsuffering. He is ready to trust God at any cost. Job reveals the truth that God moulds his chosen people in the furnace of suffering. Job does not see his sorrows as a judgment but as a refining process. The only weakness of Job is his self-righteousness. At last he gets rid of that also when he considered that he is nothing. When self is totally annihilated the Lord answers him through the whirlwind. Job admits his failure and folly and rises up purer and nobler than ever. The last chapter has a remarkable reference to prayer. God expects Job to pray for his friends a selfless prayer and when Job prays for his friends he is restored from his captivity and the Lord blesses him double fold. The truth that forgiveness brings healing is attested in this book.

III. SOCIAL EVIL AND STIGMA

The Book of Job throws light on one of the social evils of those far off days of pastoral wealth. Stealing cattle by raiding marauders was a common feature in that time. The cattle of Job fall a prey to these wicked men. To quote: "And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses were feeding beside them"/ "And the Sa-be'ans fell upon them, and took them away" (Job 1. 14,15). Calamities strike Job in a series. He loses his wealth and his children are also killed. Before Job could mourn for these irreparable losses, he is struck with sore boils from head to foot. Job is visited by his friends who wish to alleviate his pain and agony through their presence. This event being a custom of the society is worthy of mention. His friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are dumbfounded on seeing the magnitude of Job's suffering. They weep out their hearts and also rend their garment. Rending of garments is an ancient tradition of mourning over the death of a family member. Even Job rends his garments when his children are killed. "This is known as Kriah. 'Kriah' is a Hebrew word meaning 'tearing.' It refers to the act of tearing one's clothes or cutting a black ribbon worn on one's clothes. . . . Kriah is an ancient tradition." ("Kriah"). It is interesting to note that even when Job is alive his friends rend their garments. Wayne Blank opines that "the custom [of rending the garments] was also done as a symbolic removal of authority" ("Tearing of Garments").

When disease and distress push Job to a despicable condition, he is literally ostracized. People who have held him in high esteem so far spit on him to express their contempt. His diseased body never moves them to

sympathize with him. On the contrary they assume that he has been punished by God for some sins committed by him. Some kind of sickness is associated with sins. So Job's sickness is considered as a blemish and he is a blot to the society. He is the target of all their accusations, contempt and derision. Even children and young men, and people of the lower stratum of society insult him. He is shorn of his glory, power and reverence. Such was the social milieu of Job's time.

IV. MORAL PHILOSOPHY

The ethical value of the book is evident in the words of almost all the characters in this book. Charity, justice, hospitality and many such virtues are held in high esteem by these people. Job's friends even go to the extent of accusing Job of violating such good virtues. They are of the misconception that Job has been punished by God for not being humane. They believe in the theory of retributive justice that goodness will be rewarded but wickedness will be punished. Bildad a friend of Job sermonizes that "the light of the wicked goes out" (Job 18.5) and this accounts for the symbolic idea conveyed. In oriental countries "light" is considered as an emblem of flourishing life and which when extinguished becomes a symbol of calamity and death. Another exciting tradition of these people is found in the last chapter of the book of Job. When a person is restored from a deadly sickness and gets a new lease of life, the entire community throngs to the person's house with gifts which would reimburse him somewhat for the loss incurred during the calamitous period. Job is comforted by everyone and ". . . every man also gave him a piece of money, and everyone an earring of gold" (Job 42.11). They have the belief that health and healing is the outward sign of moral blessing.

V. TRADE AND COMMERCE

The Book also highlights the commercial skills of these people. Job 2.4 says, "Skin for skin" and "Terrien thinks that these words of verse 4 meant 'a hide for hide' and that they were a familiar expression used in barter" (Carter 35). Jevons also opines that, ". . . there is abundant evidence that furs or skins were employed as money in many ancient nations. They serve this purpose to the present day in some parts of the world . . . a statement clearly implying that skins were taken as the representative of value among the ancient Oriental nations" (iv). In this book the implication is that, in order to save one's life a man would give up all the skins he owns.

VI. COSMOLOGY AND ASTRONOMY

The book bears tremendous references to cosmology and astronomy. "Huffman says that Job reviews God's omnipotence in a way so masterly that it has surprised the greatest astronomers and students of nature" (Carter 42). Even in those days of yore, there seems to have been a significant knowledge in these sciences. The book propagates the great cosmic truth that the earth hangs on

nothing in the space. Job 26.7 speaks as to how the Almighty “stretcheth out the North over the empty place and hangeth the earth upon nothing”. The knowledge about clouds retaining waters and pouring out as rain is noteworthy.

Job Chapter 9.7,8 testify the creation of the stars by the Lord Almighty. Here Job speaks of Arcturus, connected with the constellation the Great Bear, Orion commonly known as the Giant and Pleiades, in the constellation Taurus which speaks of the writer’s knowledge in astronomy.

Rad Smitt gives a thought provoking observation in his comment that:

The Book of Job contains the most explicit astronomical observations in the Bible. The Constellation of Orion is mentioned, as is the open cluster of the Pleiades in Taurus. Of particular interest is that Job mentions he could see the brilliant “mansions” of the Southern Hemisphere. If you go to Israel you cannot see these constellations. There appears to be a direct conflict between the Biblical passages, and scientific fact. However, because the Book of Job was written about 700 years before the common era, it is scientifically necessary to factor in the 2700 years the Earth has ‘wobbled’ since the time the Book of Job was written.

‘Precession’ is the astronomical term to describe the circle the North Pole draws across the heavens during the course of 26,000 years. It is this slow ‘wobble’ of the Earth that causes other stars than Polaris to be the North Star. 13,000 years ago Vega was the closest bright star to the Pole. Ancient buildings from 7,000 B.C.E have been unearthed that had their entrances still aligned to Vega. Applying the effects of the Earth’s precession to the text of The Book of Job the bright stars of the Southern Celestial Hemisphere rise clearly into view from Israel as the Earth’s axis slowly tips to the south. (“Biblical Astronomy”)

Some astronomical studies of Agnes Clerke highlight the best warranted biblical star names as mentioned in the Book of Job:

Kimah, the Pleiades;
The Kesil, Orion;
Ash, or Ayish, the Hyades;
Mezarim, the Bears (Great and Little);
Mazzaroth, Venus (Lucifer and Hesperus);
Hadre theman — “the chambers of the south” —
Canopus, the Southern Cross, and a Centauri;
Nachash, Draco. (“Astronomy in the Bible”)

VII. MINING AND METALLURGY

This oldest book of the Bible has overwhelming references to mining operations in Chapter 28. Working in metals was one of the earliest trades known to man and the book underscores the wisdom and skills in mining operations in those ancient times. Such a rich knowledge of mining is quite awesome. He remarks that precious stones like sapphire and gold are wrought from the earth.

Albert Barnes presents a vivid report about the skills of these people thus:

The idea here is that man had evinced his wisdom in finding out the mines of silver and working them. It was one of the instances of his skill that he had been able to penetrate into the earth, and bring out the ore of the precious metals, and convert it to valuable purposes. . . . One of the most

striking proofs of skill is to be found in the places where the precious metals are purified, and worked into the various forms in which they are adapted to ornament and use. . . . One of the instructive uses of the book of Job is the light which it throws incidentally on the state of the ancient arts and sciences, and the condition of society in reference to the comforts of life. . . . Society was so far advanced as to make use not only of gold and silver, but also of copper and brass . . . and consequently the mention of iron. . . of separating it from the earthy portions in which it is found. The book also refers to the cutting of river beds in rocks in verse 10 and verse 11 points out their knowledge in the construction of dams when Job says, “He dams up the streams from trickling”. (“Notes on the Bible”)

Job’s knowledge of precious stones embellishes the 28th Chapter where he mentions about the gold of Ophir, silver, onyx or sapphire, crystal, coral or quartz rubies and also the topaz of Ethiopia.

VIII. DIVERSE ARTS AND DOMESTIC LIFE & RESULTS

The knowledge of writing and engraving seems to have been in vogue as seen in Chapter 19.23, 24. “Even though the Book of Job is dated to the patriarchal period (2100-1800 B.C.) still, Job refers to writing and material on which one writes. Writing with an iron pen upon stone and lead is clearly described, lead a soft material could be inscribed with an iron stylus. Soft clay was also a material used to write upon preserving the words of the writer” (“How was the Bible Written?”). Job 9.25 refers to “swift runners” who are evidently men on foot employed to convey important messages in ancient times. Some other modes of travel found are caravans and swift ships mentioned in Job Chapters 6 and 9 respectively

The Book of Job records the existence of houses built of clay in Job 24.16. Sun dried bricks have been used as building material in many parts of the East in ancient times as per the opinion of the commentators. Farming also finds mentions in various chapters. Safeguarding the gleaned grains even amidst the briars and brambles, from robbers is a unique feature and Eliphaz another friend of Job touches upon this idea of stealing grains in Job 5.5. Chapter 24.6 speaks of collecting fodder in the field and gleaning, verse 11 mentions the pressing out of oil and treading on wine presses. Weaving seems to have been a practice as seen in chapter 7.6.

Hunting which is one of the earliest arts bears reference and various methods of the same are recorded in chapter 18. There are also plenty of references to military arts. Job 6.4 mentions poisoned arrows and there are also references to shields, bows, sling stones and iron weapons like spear, dart or javelin in various chapters. This book also mentions some customs and practices. Job 25.30 refers to the “washing with snow water”. It is the opinion of the critics that this verse recalls the ancient belief “that snow water possessed particular virtues for the cleansing and whitening of the skin” (Dake 528). Yet another oriental etiquette is to be hospitable. Job justifies his righteousness by proclaiming



his hospitality especially to the poor. Besides these, pledging of things, even garments have been a practice as implied by Job 22.6. Music seems to have had a place in the lives of these ancient people and there are references to musical instruments like tambourine, harp, flute and also singing and dancing which are found in Job Chapter 21.

Though the book of Job belongs to the ancient world, still it speaks volumes to all generations. "That the author of Job was a mastermind with a thorough understanding of the philosophy, cultural anthropology, physical geography, mineralogy and the fauna of the day and country, as well as an astute student of human nature", (Carter 12) finds ample evidence. It is something very marvellous to note that the above facts make this antique literature "conspicuous for its revelation of the theological and intellectual culture of the patriarchal age" where "important doctrine is found therein, in addition to scientific truth only fully discovered in our time" (Lockyer 110). Thus the book of Job gives a comprehensive and descriptive picture of the religious, social and moral life of the people of the patriarchal age and deepens our understanding of this oldest Old Testament book which remains unsurpassed.

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