

Moses attained a transcendent position as the repository of the Law of God. Like its divine source, the Law was eternal and capable of universal application. Hence the canonization of the Pentateuch marked not its petrification but the commencement of a new era of vital interpretation that was to produce the Talmud at the end of a thousand years.

Almost equally sacred was the second section of Scripture, the Prophets. This section, which had two divisions, included the historical books from Joshua to Kings and the great collections of prophetic utterances bearing the names of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and "the Twelve." These books, too, served as the starting-point of an elaborate process of interpretation which continued for nearly a millennium. This literature comprises such radically different works as the Pesharim or commentaries on the prophetic books by the Dead Sea sectarians; the treatises of the Alexandrian philosopher, Philo; the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament; and the varied and innumerable rabbinic Midrashim.

We have traced, albeit briefly, the origin and development of two mighty spiritual currents in the life and thought of the Hebrew people. In the period of the Second Commonwealth, which followed the return from the Babylonian Exile, no Jew could be immune to the power and influence they exerted. The author of Job was no exception. The basic ideas and attitudes of the Torah and the Prophets had an important role in molding his spiritual growth and outlook. The specific evidence of his familiarity with these classic sources of his people's faith will be considered later.¹² But he himself was neither a priest nor a prophet, neither a scribe nor an apocalypticist. For the author of Job, the decisive influence came from the third intellectual current of ancient Israel, that of *Hokmah* or Wisdom. This third strand in the pattern of Jewish religious and cultural creativity must now engage our attention.

IV

Wisdom and Job

AS WE HAVE SEEN, the Law, which was the province of the priest and later of the scribe, and the Vision, which was the experience of the prophet and later of the apocalypticist, did not exhaust the range of spiritual activity in ancient Israel. A third strand was supplied by *Hokmah* (Wisdom), which was cultivated by the sage (*hakam*) or the elder (*zaken*). This discipline was more inclusive and more concrete than is suggested by the honorific and rather abstract term, "Wisdom."

Hokmah may be defined as a realistic approach to the problems of life, including all the practical skills and technical arts of civilization. The term *hakam*, "sage" or "wise man," is accordingly applied in the Bible to all practitioners of the arts. Bezalel, the skilled craftsman who built the Tabernacle and its appointments in the wilderness, and all his associates, are called "wise of heart" (Exod. 28:3; 35:31; 36:1). Weavers (Exod. 35:25), goldsmiths (Jer. 10:9), and sailors (Ezek. 27:8; Ps. 107:27) are described as *hakamim*.

Rabbinic Hebrew undoubtedly preserves an ancient usage when it applies the term *hakamah* to the "midwife," upon whose skill life and death depend. The women skilled in lamentation (Jer. 9:16) and the magicians and soothsayers with their occult arts are similarly described as "wise" (Gen. 41:8; I Kings 5:10-12; Isa. 44:25; Jer. 9:16). Skill in the conduct of war and in the administration of the state (Isa. 10:13;

29:14; Jer. 49:7) are integral aspects of Wisdom, for the successful management of affairs—in war and in peace, at the royal court and in the confines of the individual family—requires a realistic understanding of human nature, the exercise of practical virtues, and the avoidance of at least the major vices.

Above all, Hokmah refers to the arts of poetry and music, both vocal and instrumental. Song in ancient Israel was coextensive with life itself. Harvest and vintage, the royal coronation, the conqueror's return, courtship and marriage, all were accompanied by song and dance.

This relationship between song and Wisdom was so close that often no distinction was made between the two. Thus, in I Kings (5:10–12) we read: "Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was in all the nations round about. And he spoke three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five."¹ Ethan and Heman are the eponymous heads of the musical guilds mentioned in I Chronicles, chapter 15, verse 19, to whom Psalms 88 and 89 are attributed. First Chronicles ascribes these guilds of singers to the Davidic age and traces their genealogy back to Korah, the contemporary of Moses.² Today the tradition is no longer dismissed as an unhistorical, artificial "throwback" of a later institution to an earlier age. There is growing evidence in Ugaritic sources of musical and other guilds connected with the temple cult.³

Since improvisation was often the rule, no line was drawn between the composer and the poet, the instrumentalist and the singer: all were part of Wisdom. Thus, in Psalm 49 (vss. 4 and 5) we read:

My mouth shall speak Wisdom,
My heart shall meditate⁴ understanding.
I shall turn my instrument⁵ to a parable,
I shall begin my riddle with the lyre.

All the material aspects of Hokmah, as embodied in art, architecture, and the manual crafts, disappeared with the destruction of the physical substratum of ancient Hebrew life. All that has remained of Wisdom is its incarnation in literature, which has survived, only in part, in the pages of the Bible. The Wisdom writings are concerned not only with the practical arts of living, but also with the development of a sane, workable attitude toward life as a whole, without which proficiency in the technical skills will avail men little. To convey the

truths of Wisdom, a specific literary genre came into being, the *mashal*, or (less frequently) the *bidah*.⁶

The term *mashal*, derived from a Hebrew root meaning "represent, resemble, be similar," develops a variety of related senses. Its most common meaning is "proverb," a short, pithy utterance expressing some observation on life and human nature. Reasoning from the known to the unknown, the *mashal* frequently depends on analogy to make its point:

As a door turns on its hinges,
So does a sluggard on his bed.

[Prov. 26:14]

The term is also applied to somewhat lengthier literary compositions such as the allegory, parable, or fable. It also refers to more extensive collections of proverbs⁷ or poetic utterances,⁸ in which poetic comparisons or philosophical reflections are common.

The *bidah*, or "riddle," is a term which appears much less frequently and is more restricted in meaning.⁹ In several passages where it occurs it is defined by some scholars as "an enigmatic, perplexing saying."¹⁰ A more satisfactory rendering would be "an utterance on a mysterious theme." This would explain its application to oracles or psalms dealing with such ultimate issues as the fate of the cruel Chaldean foe, the suffering of the righteous, or God's ways with His people.¹¹

These literary techniques were not ends in themselves. Basically, Wisdom was an intellectual discipline, concerned with the education of upper-class youth in Israel. It is highly probable that the *hakam* was a professional teacher¹² whose function was to inculcate in his pupils the virtues of hard work, zeal, prudence, sexual moderation, sobriety, loyalty to authority, and religious conformity—all the elements of a morality aimed at achieving worldly success. When necessary, Hokmah did not hesitate to urge less positive virtues on its youthful charges, such as holding one's tongue and distributing largesse as aids in making one's way. In brief, this practical Wisdom literature represented a hard-headed, matter-of-fact, "safe-and-sane" approach to the problems of living.

The discovery and elucidation of ancient oriental literature has made it clear that Hebrew Wisdom was not an isolated creation in Israel. On the contrary, it was part of a vast intellectual activity that had been cultivated for centuries throughout the lands of the Fertile Crescent—Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Babylonia. Everywhere its basic

purpose was to prepare youth for success in government, agriculture, commerce, and personal life. These branches of oriental Wisdom were older than biblical Hokmah, the Fertile Crescent countries having attained political and cultural maturity long before Israel. Naturally there are many adumbrations of biblical Wisdom in oriental literature, as well as many illuminating parallels. These similarities have been noted by scholars who, flushed with the natural excitement of discovery, have sometimes displayed more enthusiasm than caution in postulating borrowings. While the extant remains of Babylonian and Egyptian Wisdom rarely reach the level of Hebrew Hokmah, they are invaluable in supplying a general background and in shedding light on particular details.

The Hokmah of the biblical sages, unlike the Torah of the priests or the Vision of the prophets, usually made no claim to being divine revelation. It was, of course, self-evident that the source of Hebrew Hokmah, as of every creative aspect of man's nature, was God. Thus when Isaiah described the ideal Davidic king who would govern in justice and wisdom, he sees "resting upon him the spirit of the Lord," which is defined as "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge, and the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:2).

Nevertheless, some of Wisdom's more fervent disciples went even further. They sought to win for Wisdom a status almost equal to that of Torah and Prophecy by endowing her with a cosmic role. In composing hymns of praise to Wisdom, the Hebrew sages were able to draw upon motifs found in Semitic mythology.¹³ Thus a Mesopotamian text of the late second millennium B.C.E. describes the goddess Siduri Sabito as "goddess of wisdom, genius of life." Albright, in calling attention to this reference, suggests that she was a prototype of a Canaanite goddess of Wisdom. In the Aramaic *Proverbs of Ahiqar*, emanating from the sixth century B.C.E., a passage reads:

Wisdom is from the gods,
And to the gods she is precious,
Forever her kingdom is fixed in heaven,
For the lord of the holy ones has raised her up.¹⁴

Passages such as these inevitably suggest comparison with Hebrew poems. In the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom is pictured as dwelling in a temple with seven pillars (9:1) and as declaring,

Ages ago I was poured out, at the first,
Before the beginning of the earth.

[Prov. 8:23]

The present Book of Job contains a magnificent "Hymn to Wisdom" (chap. 28), in which Hokmah is endowed with cosmic significance and is virtually personified.¹⁵ Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), in the first half of the second century B.C.E., also personifies Wisdom:

I have come forth from the mouth of the Highest,
And like the vapor I have covered the earth;
I have made my abode in the heights
And my throne on a pillar of cloud.

[Ecclus. 24:3-4]

The Book of Enoch pictures Wisdom as homeless among men and therefore returning to the abode of the angels (42:1-2).

But the similarity in language, interesting as it is, is far less significant than the fundamental difference between the Hebrew poets and sages, on the one hand, and the pagan writers, on the other. For the biblical and post-biblical authors the personification and glorification of Wisdom is mythology, not religion; it is poetry, not truth. To heighten the vividness and power of their compositions they utilize the resources of their Semitic inheritance, as Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton invoke the gods of Greece and Rome; but like the later writers, they do not believe in these echoes of a dead past.

In their most lavish paeans of praise to Wisdom, the Hebrew sages do not attribute to her any independent existence, let alone the status of a goddess or a divine being. She is indubitably the creation of God, His plaything, His companion, His delight, perhaps even the plan by which He fashioned the world, but nevertheless, completely God's handiwork, as is the entire cosmos:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
The first of His acts of old.
Ages ago I was poured out, at the first,
Before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
When there were no springs abounding with water.

Before the mountains had been shaped,
 Before the hills, I was brought forth;
 Before He had made the earth with its fields,
 Or the first of the dust of the world.
 When He established the heavens, I was there;
 When He made firm the skies above,
 When He established the heavens, I was there;
 When He drew a circle on the face of the deep,
 When He made firm the skies above,
 When He established the fountains of the deep,
 When He assigned to the sea its limit,
 So that the waters might not transgress His command,
 When He marked out the foundations of the earth,
 Then I was beside Him, as His ward.¹⁶
 I was daily His delight, frolicking before Him always,
 Rejoicing in His inhabited world and delighting in
 the sons of men.

[Prov. 8:22-32]

All wisdom comes from the Lord
 And is with Him for ever.
 The sand of the seas, and the drops of rain,
 And the days of eternity—who can number them?
 And the height of the heaven, and the breadth of the earth
 and the deep—who can trace them out?
 Before them all was Wisdom created,
 And prudent insight from everlasting.
 The root of Wisdom, to whom has it been revealed?
 And her subtle thoughts, who has known them?
 One there is greatly to be feared,
 The Lord sitting upon His throne;
 He Himself created her, and saw, and numbered her,
 And poured her out upon all His works;
 Upon all flesh, in measure,
 But to those who love Him, without limit.

[Ecclus. 1:1-10]

In Palestinian Judaism, where the study and interpretation of the Torah ultimately produced the Mishnah and the Midrash, Wisdom was equated with the Mosaic Law. This idea is clearly set forth by Ben Sira, who indites another extended "Paeon to Wisdom" (chap. 24) and then cites verbatim the verse in Deuteronomy (33:4):

All these are the book of the covenant of the All-high God,
 The Torah which Moses commanded to us,
 The inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.

[24:23]

The same identification of Wisdom and the Torah is expressed in the apocryphal Psalm 152, long known in a Syriac version.¹⁷ The Hebrew original has now been discovered at Qumran and may emanate from the same period as Ben Sira.¹⁸ In rabbinic thought the equation became virtually axiomatic and is part of the Jewish liturgy to the present day.¹⁹

In the Diaspora, outside of Palestine, where Greek ideas were more influential, Wisdom was given a more philosophic interpretation. In the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon the spirit of the Lord and Wisdom are explicitly identified and are taken to encompass both the creation of the natural world and its moral government (1:6; 7:24).²⁰

In some circles, the earlier personifications of Wisdom were taken literally and served as the point of departure for a complex development. Of the various forms which this concept assumed, the most notable was the Philonic doctrine of the *Logos* or the Divine Word, which became the demiurge or instrument by which God creates and governs the universe. It is only a further step to conceive of the Divine Word as the intermediary between God and the world, even as a distinct "person" or "aspect" of the divine nature.

Thus the process has come full circle. The independent god or divine being who first appears in an early though far from primitive mythology, reappears, in vastly transformed guise, in a later, highly sophisticated theology. But for all the writers of the Hebrew Bible, whether priest, prophet, or sage, such doctrines were totally outside their purview. Had they been able to conceive such ideas at all, they would have rejected them as vitiating the Unity of God. In any event, it must be remembered that these later developments took place long after the Book of Job was written.

To revert to biblical Wisdom, it is to be expected that in an ancient society in which religion permeated every aspect of life, the effort would be made to give Hokmah a supernal position in the divine plan. Thus it could claim a status not too markedly inferior to God's revelation embodied in the Torah or His communication with the prophets. Basically, however, the claim of biblical Hokmah to authority rested on its pragmatic truth. The teachers of Wisdom insisted that the

application of human reason and careful observation to all the problems of life "worked," that it brought men success and happiness. Its origin might be in heaven, but its justification was to be sought in the lives of men on earth:

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;
By understanding He established the heavens;
By His knowledge the deeps broke forth
And the clouds drop down the dew.
My son, keep sound wisdom and discretion;
Let them not escape from your sight,
And they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck.
Then you will walk on your way securely and your foot will not stumble.

If you sit down, you will not be afraid;
When you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
Do not be afraid of sudden panic
Or of the ruin of the wicked when it comes;
For the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot
from being caught.

[Prov. 3:19-26]

I have counsel and sound wisdom;
I have insight; I have strength.
By me kings reign
And rulers decree what is just.
I love those who love me,
And those who seek me diligently find me.
Endowing with wealth those who love me
And filling their treasuries.
For he who finds me finds life
And obtains favor from the Lord;
But he who misses me injures himself;
All who hate me love death.

[8:14, 15, 17, 21, 35, 36]

The Bible regards King Solomon as the symbol of Wisdom and attributes to him the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, as well as the Song of Songs. Though this tradition is not to be taken literally, neither can it be dismissed as valueless. It reflects the established historical fact that King Solomon's reign was marked by wide international contacts and internal prosperity which contributed to the flowering of culture in general and to the intensive cultivation of Wisdom in particular.

The roots of Hokmah, as the extra-Hebraic parallels make abundantly clear, are pre-Solomonic. The Bible has preserved some precious examples of early Wisdom literature. The unforgettable "Parable of Jotham" (Judg. 9:7 ff.), which compares the would-be king to a sterile thorn bush, must go back to the primitive democracy of the age of the Judges.²¹ It could not have emanated from a later period, when the monarchy was well established and regarded as legitimate. In I Samuel, chapter 24, verse 13, David quotes "an ancient proverb" (*meshal hakkadmōnī*), "Out of the wicked cometh forth wickedness, but let not my hand be upon thee." The prophet Nathan's moving parable of the poor man's lamb (II Sam. 12:1 ff.), with which he indicts his royal master, David, constitutes another valuable remnant of ancient *meshal* literature.

A particularly significant passage for the development of Wisdom is to be found in II Samuel, chapter 14. Here we have a "wise woman" (*ʿishāh hākhāmāh*) whom Joab calls, and probably pays, to present an imaginary case to King David. She possesses dramatic skill as well as literary inventiveness. Thus she prepares herself for the role of a mourner (vs. 2) and then presents her suit for the king's decision. When David pronounces judgment, she confesses that her fictitious case was a *meshal*, a parable of the king's relationship to his son Absalom, the murderer of Amnon. Finally, she climaxes her appeal for the king's forgiveness by a reference to the melancholy brevity of human life, thus going beyond practical Wisdom to its more philosophical aspect: "For we must surely die and be like water poured out on the ground, which is not gathered up and which no one desires" (vs. 14).²²

The Book of Kings preserves another parable which is post-Solomonic—that of Joash, king of Israel, in which he contemptuously dismisses Amaziah of Judah as a thistle by the side of a cedar (II Kings 14:9).

The various collections in the biblical Book of Proverbs emanate from different periods. Yet it is being increasingly recognized that the individual apothegms, which often cannot be dated, are largely derived from the First Temple period, and in part, at least, may go back to Solomon's reign, as several headings indicate (Prov. 1:1; 10:1).

As we have noted, the Babylonian Exile and the Return witnessed the decline and disappearance of prophecy and ushered in a new phase of oral interpretation of the Torah. It was then, in the early centuries of the Second Commonwealth, that Wisdom reached its

golden age, largely because of a basic shift in the primary concern of religious faith and thought.

While the Torah and the prophets were divergent in substance and temper, they were agreed in placing the nation in the center of their thinking. Both were concerned with the weal or woe of the entire people and called for the fulfillment of God's will, which the priest found embodied in the Law, and which the prophets saw expressed in the moral code. To be sure, it was the individual who was adjured to obey, but only as a unit of the larger entity, his destiny being bound up, indeed submerged, in the well-being of the nation. This concern with the group was a fundamental aspect of traditional Semitic and Hebrew thought.

The individual, however, could never be completely disregarded. His personal happiness and success, his fears and his hopes, were by no means identical with the status of the nation. The people as a whole might be prosperous and happy while an individual was exposed to misery. On the other hand, even if the nation experienced defeat and subjugation by foreign masters, the individual would still seek to adjust himself to conditions and to extract at least a modicum of happiness and success from his environment. This recognition of the individual plays an enormous role in the Torah. Being a practical code of life it necessarily had to deal with man's problems and conflicts, as its civil and criminal ordinances abundantly attest.²³ Increasingly, too, the prophets, whose basic concern was the ideal future of the nation, became concerned with the happiness of the individual: "Say of the righteous that it shall be well with him; for they shall eat the fruit of their doings. Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him; for the work of his hands shall be done to him" (Isa. 3:10-11). With the later prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the problem of individual suffering becomes a central and agonizing element of their thought.²⁴ Fundamentally, however, Torah and prophecy remained concerned with the group, its present duties and its future destiny.

It was the decline of faith in the fortunes of the nation, coupled with the growth of interest in the individual and his destiny, that stimulated the development of Wisdom. Wisdom was not concerned with the group, but with the individual, with the realistic present rather than with a longed-for future.

Wisdom's eminently practical goals for success in the here and now appealed principally to those groups in society which were least dissatisfied with the status quo—the government officials, the rich mer-

chants, the great landowners, whose soil was tilled by tenant farmers. These groups were concerned less with the will of God than with the way of the world. This was true even of the high-priestly families among them, whose prestige and income derived from their position in the hierarchy of the Temple. The goal of upper-class education was the training of youth for successful careers. These needs were admirably met by the Wisdom teachers who arose, principally, if not exclusively, in Jerusalem, the capital city.

Nearly two decades ago I called attention to the striking resemblance between the Wisdom teachers and the sophists of classical Greece, who performed a similar function for the upper-class youth of Athenian society, teaching them the practical skills needed for government and business.²⁵ There were, of course, far-reaching religious and cultural differences between Greece and Israel. These differences dictated different roles for the Greek sophists and the Hebrew *hakamim*. For example, while the art of public speaking was intensively cultivated in Greece, it was not a conscious discipline in Israel, at least so far as extant sources indicate. All the more striking, therefore, are the similarities between the two groups. The semantic development of the Greek *sophia* closely parallels that of the Hebrew *hokmah*. The basic meaning of the Greek word is "cleverness and skill in handicraft and art"; then, "skill in matters of common life, sound judgment, practical and political wisdom"; and ultimately, "learning, wisdom, and philosophy."²⁶ The adjective *sophos* bears the same meanings, as descriptive of sculptors, and even of hedgers and ditchers, but "mostly of poets and musicians."²⁷ The substantive *sophistes*, "master of a craft or art," is used in the extant literature for a diviner, a cook, a statesman, and again for poets and musicians.²⁸ From Plato's time onward, its common meaning was that of a professional teacher of the arts.²⁹

The most illuminating parallel lies in the division of the Wisdom teachers into two numerically unequal groups, a process evident everywhere in Egypt and Babylonia as well as in Israel and Hellas.³⁰ Most of the exemplars of Wisdom were hard-headed, realistic teachers of a workable morality, intent on helping their youthful charges attain successful careers. Among the oriental Wisdom teachers, however, were some restless spirits who refused to be satisfied with these practical goals.

In the relatively extensive remains of Egyptian Wisdom, which bear the name *sboyet*, "instruction," two literary types are included:

"discourses on worldly prudence and wisdom intended merely for schools"; and "writings far exceeding the bounds of school philosophy."³¹ Babylonian Wisdom exhibits the same division between "practical maxims" and "meditations on the meaning of life."³²

In Greece, too, a small number of thinkers were unwilling to limit the scope of their thought. Though they derived from the sophists, "the wise," they adopted the less pretentious name of "lovers of wisdom," or "philosophers," with perhaps a touch of Socratic irony. Their contempt for the sophists (with whom, however, they had many affinities) parallels the rejection by the Hebrew literary prophets of any identification with the popular prophets from whom they emanated, as in Amos' scornful denial, "I am no prophet nor a member of the prophetic guild!" (Amos 7:14).

In Israel, both types of Wisdom are clearly marked. From the practical-minded teachers of youth emanated the short maxims of the Book of Proverbs, as well as the longer essays of Ben Sira, who makes explicit reference to the *bet hamidrash*, or "academy," in his call, "Turn to me, ye fools, and tarry in my house of study" (Ecclus. 51:23). These two books are the principal Hebrew repositories of the "lower" Wisdom, practical in goal, conventional in scope.

For a few bolder spirits within the schools of Wisdom these practical goals were not enough. They had been trained to apply observation and reasoning to the practical problems of daily life, but the more fundamental issues intrigued them: the purpose of life, man's destiny after death, the basis of morality, the problem of evil. When they weighed the religious and moral ideas of their time by these standards, they found some things they could accept, but much that they felt impelled to reject as either untrue or unproved. Hence the higher or speculative Wisdom books are basically heterodox, skeptical works, at variance with the products of the practical school.

As well as we can judge, no violent antagonism existed between the teachers of practical Wisdom and those who ventured into uncharted waters. In part, at least, the reason lies in the fact that these more original thinkers continued to pursue the calling of professional teachers of practical Hokmah. That conditioning would affect their style and thought ever after. In sum, both the conventional and the unconventional teachers of Wisdom spoke the same language, reflected the same environment, and shared a common outlook. The epilogue in Ecclesiastes (12:9 ff.) testifies to this conventional activity of the unconventional author of the book.³³

In seeking to penetrate the great abiding issues of suffering and death, these rare Wisdom teachers were unwilling to rely on tradition and conventional ideas. When they insisted on applying observation and reason to the ultimate questions, they courted tragedy—but achieved greatness.

Like so many rationalists since their day, they found unaided human reason incapable of solving these issues. Some, no doubt, finally made their peace with the traditional religion of their time. But others, tougher-minded, refused to take on faith what reason could not demonstrate. Consequently, their writings reveal various degrees and types of skepticism and heterodoxy. Several of these devotees of the higher, speculative Wisdom were able to transmute the frustration and pain of their quest into some of the world's greatest masterpieces, notably Job and Koheleth (Ecclesiastes). Smaller in compass and frequently enigmatic in content is the fragment imbedded in the Book of Proverbs and ascribed to Agur ben Yakeh (Prov. 30).³⁴

Koheleth, the skeptical observer of life and man's pretensions, was keenly aware of the problem of injustice in society. He reacted far more strongly than one might have expected in view of his upper-class orientation. Primarily, however, his malaise was intellectual in origin: he was troubled by man's inability to discover ultimate truth—the real meaning of life and the purposes of creation.³⁵

The author of Job, on the other hand, though by no means inferior in intellect, possessed a far deeper emotional nature and a greater capacity for involvement in the joy or misery of his fellow men. He was roused to indignation, not by man's intellectual limitations in a world he had not made, but rather by man's suffering in a world into which he had not asked to be born. The result was a work of grand proportions, the writing of which probably spanned his lifetime. He attempted to grapple with the crucial questions with which the psalmist, prophet, and poet alike had wrestled for centuries and which remain the greatest stumbling blocks to religious faith: Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? Why is there evil in a world created by a just God?

The Book of Job represents the supreme achievement of Hebrew Wisdom. In form and approach, as well as in background and content, its affinities with both conventional and unconventional Wisdom teaching are striking.

When the full scope of biblical Wisdom is kept in mind, it is clear that by virtue of its literary form Job belongs in this category. It ob-

the author's choice of an upper-class figure as his hero. In order to exhibit the tragedy of human suffering, the poet has selected a man of great prosperity who is hurled to the lowest depths of misfortune, rather than a member of the lower classes who has suffered a lifetime of poverty and misery. It may, of course, be argued that this contrast between Job's earlier prosperity and his later calamities makes for a more dramatic plot. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Book of Job poses the problem of evil in the form most likely to confront a member of the upper classes. And the evidence goes much further. We have perhaps the only reference in later biblical writings to a multiplicity of wives in one family in the passage, "his widows will not weep for him" (27:15).³⁹ Polygamy was always restricted to the rich, who alone could afford the luxury. In Job's moving Confession of Innocence (chap. 31), which represents the code of conduct of a Jewish gentleman, it is obviously a patrician who speaks. He takes pride in the consideration he shows the poor, the widow, and the orphan. Unlike the crasser members of his class he is deeply sensitive to the truth that both he and his slave are fashioned alike by God. Nor has his wealth ever tempted him to arrogance. Job reveals a wholly admirable quality in his insistence:

Have I ever concealed my transgressions like Adam,
Hiding my sin in my bosom
Because I stood in fear of the crowd
And the contempt of the masses terrified me—
So that I kept silence and did not go out of doors?

[Job 31:33 f.]

Yet in this moral courage and scorn for the mob there is at least an echo of the pride of the wellborn and well-circumstanced.

At every turn, the author himself, and not merely his hero, gives evidence of an upper-class environment. The poet's wide familiarity with various geographical locations—mountain and desert, sea and plain—points to his being widely traveled, an activity possible only for the rich in ancient times. His reference to the papyrus ships (9:26) and his colorful descriptions of the hippopotamus (40:15 ff.) and the crocodile (40:25 ff.) do not prove that the author was an Egyptian,⁴⁰ but they do show that he had visited the land of the Nile. Similarly, his vivid depiction of hail, ice, and snow, suggests a knowledge of the north.⁴¹

Because of his knowledge of agriculture and medicine, astronomy

and anatomy, mining and warfare, Pfeiffer concluded that "the author was the most learned ancient before Plato."⁴² This range of knowledge and experience, which recalls that of Shakespeare, is, of course, a tribute to his curiosity and intellectual powers, but it would have been denied him had he been poor.

It is in the area of religious thought that the poet's upper-class orientation is particularly clear. In this regard, the use of divine names is highly instructive.⁴³ In Egyptian and Babylonian Wisdom the individual names of gods do not totally disappear, but they yield increasingly to general descriptions of "God" or "the Gods." The names of individual deities are generally retained only in traditional apothegms or in contexts concerned with the attributes of a specific god.⁴⁴

The use of divine names in Hebrew Wisdom is similar. In the lower Wisdom books like Proverbs, JHVH, the national name of the God of Israel, occurs exclusively in the oldest collections (10:1–22:16; 25–29), which are probably pre-Exilic. Yet even here, when JHVH does occur it is often in stock phrases like "the fear of JHVH," "the blessing of JHVH," "the abomination of JHVH," "the knowledge of JHVH."⁴⁵ The later collections in Proverbs use JHVH much less consistently. In Ben Sira the general term, 'ēl ("God"), is used in half the cases. The use of JHVH here is apparently to be attributed to the author's identification of the God of Israel with the world creator, so that the specific national name has become divested of any particularistic character.

In the higher Wisdom books the name JHVH is avoided with such consistency that it cannot be accidental. In Koheleth, 'elōhīm is the exclusive designation of the Deity.⁴⁶ In the poetic sections of Job, the specific name of JHVH is almost completely rejected in favor of the general terms, 'ēl, 'elōah, 'elōhīm, šaddai.⁴⁷ Only in the prose narrative, which is a recasting of an ancient folk tale, does the traditional name JHVH occur. In avoiding local or national divine names in favor of the general designations, the higher Wisdom writers were seeking to express their concept of God in the broadest and most universal terms.

The upper-class orientation of Job emerges again in the treatment of the book's basic theme—the problem of suffering. Fuller consideration will be given to this issue later. Here it suffices to note that Wisdom writers could not shut their eyes to the inequities of the present order. At the same time, as representatives of the affluent groups in society, they did not find the status quo intolerable.

The lower classes, ground by poverty and oppression at the hands of domestic and foreign masters, were tormented by the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. Holding resolutely to their faith in God, they were nevertheless unable to see divine justice operating in the world about them. Their solution to this agonizing problem was the espousal of the doctrine of a future world where the inequalities of the present order would be rectified. Thus, the idea of life after death became an integral feature of pharisaic Judaism and of Christianity.⁴⁸

The teachers of Wisdom, on the other hand, felt no need to adopt these new views. The sages of the conventional Wisdom schools continued to maintain the old view of collective retribution here and now, where the sins or virtues of the fathers determine the destinies of the children.⁴⁹ The idea of a future life is not so much as mentioned in Proverbs, probably because the material is comparatively early. However, by the time of Ben Sira, in the second century B.C.E., the doctrine of an afterlife had achieved such wide currency that it could no longer be ignored. The sage therefore explicitly negates this belief (Ecclus. 10:11): "When a man dies, he inherits worms, maggots, lice, and creeping things."⁵⁰ His grandson, who translated the book into Greek, gives the passage a pharisaic interpretation by having it affirm judgment after death: "Humble thy soul greatly, for the punishment of the ungodly is fire and worms."

The unconventional sages, the authors of Job and Koheleth, are too clear sighted and too sensitive to overlook the manifest instances of undeserved suffering and undeserved prosperity in the world. Yet neither of them accepts the pharisaic solution of a life after death, although both are familiar with it.

Koheleth dismisses the idea of an afterlife with a shrug of the shoulders:

Furthermore, I saw under the sun that in the place of judgment there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, wrong. I said to myself, "Both the righteous and the wicked, God will judge, for there is a proper time for everything and every deed—over there!" I said to myself concerning men, "Surely God has tested them and shown that they are nothing but beasts." For the fate of men and the fate of beasts are the same. As the one dies, so does the other, for there is one spirit in both, and man's distinction over the beast is nothing, for everything is vanity. All go to one place, all come from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows whether the spirit of man rises upward

and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better for man than to rejoice in his works, for that is his lot, and no one can permit him to see what shall be afterwards.

[Eccles. 3:16 ff.]

Whatever you are able to do, do with all your might, for there is neither action, nor thought, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave towards which you are moving.

Though man does not know his hour, like fish caught in an evil net, like birds seized in a snare, so men are trapped in an hour of misfortune, when it falls upon them suddenly.

[9:10, 12]

Job lacks the tough-mindedness of Koheleth. He cannot pretend to be indifferent to the hope for an afterlife. He wishes he could accept it as true, but he sorrowfully comes to the conclusion that the renewal of life after death is not given to men:

For there is hope for a tree—
If it be cut down, it can sprout again
And its shoots will not fail.
If its roots grow old in the earth
And its stump dies in the ground,
At the mere scent of water it will bud anew
And put forth branches like a young plant.
But man grows faint and dies;
Man breathes his last, and where is he?
As water vanishes from a lake,
And a river is parched and dries up,
So man lies down and rises not again;
Till the heavens are no more he will not awake,
Nor will he be roused from his sleep.

Oh, if You would hide me in Sheol,
Conceal me until Your wrath is spent;
Set a fixed time for me, and then remember me!
If a man die, can he live again?
All the days of my service I would wait,
Till my hour of release should come.
You would call and I would answer You;
You would be longing for the work of Your hands.
For then You would number my steps;

You would not keep watch over my sin.
 You would seal up my transgression in a bag,
 And You would cover over my iniquity.

But as a mountain falls and crumbles
 And a rock is moved from its place,
 As waters wear away stones
 And a torrent washes away the earth's soil,
 So do You destroy man's hope.

[Job 14:7-19]

It is in their reaction to the problem of evil that the social background of the authors of Job and Koheleth is most clearly revealed. The fact that they did not accept the nascent idea of life after death has usually been attributed to the general conservatism of the Wisdom writers. This explanation is, however, totally inadequate, for we should then have expected to find in Wisdom an adherence to the older doctrines of the "day of JHVH," as expounded by Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, or the conception of the "End-time," as developed by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Actually the Wisdom writers, whether conventional or not, accepted neither the older nor the newer views that ran counter to their group associations. Neither the hope for a Messianic era on earth nor the belief in an afterlife is echoed in their writing. Nowhere in the entire literature do we find the prophets' faith in a dynamic world. The Wisdom teachers are pre-eminently guides to the status quo, in which they anticipate no alteration. Whether they accept contemporary society as fundamentally just, as do the conventional Wisdom writers, or have doubts, as does Koheleth, or are passionately convinced that justice and truth are trampled under foot by God and man, as does Job—they do not contemplate any serious change in the structure of society.

The clear-cut social conservatism of Wisdom literature as a whole sheds light on several hitherto unexplained characteristics of Proverbs, Koheleth, and the Wisdom Psalms.⁵¹ Our present concern is with Job, which reflects the same point of view, indirectly but unmistakably. In the dialogue, the Friends frequently give extended descriptions of God's power (5:9 ff.; 25:2-6; 26:6-14).⁵² In response, Job also gives elaborate pictures of divine power, but with a significant difference: while the Friends stress the beneficent and creative functioning of the Almighty as revealed in the gift of rain (5:10), the discomfiture of the wicked (5:12 ff.), the glories of the heavens (26:2-3), and the mys-

teries of creation (26:5 ff.), Job emphasizes the negative and destructive manifestations of God's power.⁵³ God moves the mountains, makes the earth tremble, and shuts up the sun and the stars that they give no light (9:5 ff.).

The same spirit permeates Job's description of God's might in chapter 12: God destroys beyond rebuilding and imprisons men so that they cannot escape; he withholds water to cause drought and pours it forth in flood; nations are exalted only to be destroyed (12:14, 15, 23). The rest of Job's description is to be understood in the same light—as evidence of God's destructive power:

He leads counselors away stripped,
 And of judges He makes fools.
 He opens the belt of kings
 And removes the girdle from their loins.⁵⁴
 He leads priests away stripped
 And the mighty ones He confuses.
 He deprives counselors of speech
 And removes the discernment of the elders.
 He pours contempt on princes,
 And looses the girdle of the strong.
 He reveals deep secrets from the darkness,
 And brings the blackest gloom to light.
 He makes nations great, and then destroys them.
 He enlarges nations, and forsakes them.
 He removes understanding from the people's leaders
 And leads them in a pathless waste astray.
 They grope in the dark without light,
 And He makes them stagger like a drunkard.

[12:17-25]

There is a striking contrast in spirit between Job's picture of social transformation and the descriptions found elsewhere in the Bible of God's power to transform conditions so that the proud are abased and the humble exalted.⁵⁵ These hymns are intended as paeans of praise:

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
 And the hungry have ceased (to starve),
 While the barren woman has borne seven,
 And the mother of many has languished.
 The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
 He casts down and raises up.

[I Sam. 2:5, 7]

He raises the poor from the dust
And the needy from the dung-hill,
To seat him among the princes,
The princes of his people.

[Ps. 113:7-8]

Job's description has nothing in common with such pictures of social change. The salient difference lies in the fact that the psalmists who praise God's greatness depict both aspects of the change—the fall of the mighty and the rise of the lowly. Similarly Eliphaz, who extols God's power (5:11): "He sets the lowly on high, and the afflicted are raised to safety." Job, however, describes only half of the picture—the decline of the powerful—because he is arraigning his Maker as a destructive force.

Nor is Job's attitude similar to that of the prophets. They saw in the collapse of these elements of society the deserved punishment of a sinful people (e.g., Amos 6:1 ff., 7 ff.; Isa. 3; Mic. 3) and the necessary prelude to a reconstructed social order (Isa. 1:24-28; 5:8-17; and often). But for the author of Job, as for the Wisdom writers in general, a transformation of the social and political status quo meant catastrophe.

In conclusion, we have seen that Hebrew Hokmah is one element in the cultural and spiritual activity of the Hebrew genius during its most creative era. The Book of Job represents the high-water mark of biblical Wisdom, embodied in a unique literary genre of extraordinary power and originality. The author's roots lie deep within his people and his class; yet the specific *locus standi* of the poet impugns neither the truth nor the relevance of his insights for every manner and condition of men. For his masterpiece is endowed with two qualities which know no limits of time or space, nation or class—a sensitivity to human suffering and a love of truth.

V

Job and Near Eastern Literature

WE HAVE BRIEFLY TRACED the history and development of the three principal strands in the pattern of ancient Hebrew religion and culture. Two of them, the Law and the Prophets, undoubtedly constituted important elements in the background of the author of Job. Basically, however, it was the third, Wisdom, with which he was most closely identified and to which he contributed his unique life work.

It is clear that he was familiar with the lower Wisdom, which was concerned with practical success in life. The sages expressed their realistic teachings principally through the *mashal* or proverbial utterance. They also used rhetorical questions to buttress their ideas with analogies from practical life. Both these literary forms are found in Job, where they are utilized by all the disputants in the argument.¹ As is the case with the other great exemplar of unconventional Wisdom, Koheleth, it is not always possible to determine whether the author of Job is citing an earlier saying or creating an original utterance.

Basically, however, the Book of Job belongs to the category of higher Wisdom, which was speculative in temper, unconventional in approach, and concerned with ultimate issues. High if not highest on the list was the problem of man's suffering in a world created and

governed by a good God. This was an issue of universal human importance, and Job was not the only one in Israel, nor the Israelites the only people, to agonize over the mystery of evil.

That the Book of Job has deep roots in the Hebrew tradition has long been taken for granted. But that the Hebrew heritage itself has roots, as well as countless points of contact, in the culture of the ancient Orient, is a modern discovery.

Until a century and a half ago the Bible was virtually the only remaining document of its world and time. Since Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, however, oriental archaeology has, with rapidly increasing momentum, brought to light thousands of artifacts in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia. We now possess tangible evidence which enables us to reconstruct much of the life of the Fertile Crescent before, during, and after the biblical era. Even more important have been the discovery and the deciphering of various languages and literatures of the ancient Near East—Egyptian, Sumerian, Akkadian, Canaanite, Hurrian, and Hittite. As a result, the Bible no longer stands in splendid isolation. Yet the investigation of the religious, ethical, and legal literature of the ancient Near East has set into bolder relief the greatness of Israel's achievement. At the same time, a knowledge of the background from which Israel sprang, and against which it lived and created, has served to illumine untold aspects of Hebrew life and thought.

This is particularly true of biblical and non-biblical Hebrew Wisdom literature.² As we have noted, Wisdom is the least national and the most broadly universal element in the cultural heritage of ancient Israel. Unlike the Torah, it is not interested in the preservation of the historical traditions of the Jewish people or their particular forms of ritual. Unlike prophecy, it is vitally concerned, not with the national destiny of the Hebrew nation, but with the individual, his hopes and fears, the pitfalls he encounters along the path of everyday life, and the qualities he needs for success. These issues were no different for the Hebrew than for the Egyptian, the Syrian, or the Babylonian.

In each of these culture spheres there were a few searching spirits troubled by the ultimate issues—the purpose of existence, the destiny of man, the uncertainties of life, the problem of suffering, the nature of death. Here, too, the divergence among men would tend to be rooted in varying temperaments and personal experiences rather than in national differences. More than any other phase of Hebrew culture, biblical Hokmah was rooted in its oriental milieu.

It must be confessed, however, that the complex relationship between Israel and its neighbors has often been misconceived. As a modern thinker has pointed out, "the history of ideas is to be understood in terms of a dialectical development in which men react against the views held by their predecessors and correct any one-sidedness in these views by going to the opposite extreme that, alas, is equally one-sided."³ As a natural reaction against the previous isolation of the Bible, and under the impact of the wealth of discoveries of modern archaeology, scholars have all too often gone to the opposite extreme, tending to see in every instance of similarity, real or alleged, an example of Hebrew borrowing from Babylonian, Egyptian, or Ugaritic sources. This is, of course, highly questionable methodology. The mere existence of similarities does not prove dependency unless there is an unusual sequence of thought or some striking and exceptional feature common to the two documents being compared. These conditions do obtain with regard to the Egyptian *Maxims of Amenemope*, which is dated from the tenth to the seventh centuries B.C.E. The work bears a striking resemblance to an entire section in the Book of Proverbs (22:17–24:22) and is accordingly regarded by most scholars as the direct or indirect source for the Hebrew work.⁴

In general, however, no such clear-cut evidence of relationship can be established. In the first instance, it must be kept in mind that Hebrew Wisdom drew upon the same ancient sources and fundamental concerns which agitated the sages of Babylonia and Egypt. Moreover, these basic human concerns would tend to produce similarities in outlook, mood, and form of expression. Finally, and most important, this common oriental heritage was subjected to a far-reaching process of "creative assimilation." The Hebrew genius adopted those elements in the surrounding culture which it found valuable, modified what was potentially useful, and rejected what it recognized as fundamentally alien. Hence, the similarities are often illuminating with regard to details, but it is the differences that go deeper and are more significant. A balanced study, therefore, of the extra-biblical parallels to Wisdom literature must reckon with the elements in common as well as with the divergencies that set Hebrew Wisdom apart from, and above, its oriental counterparts.

Since Job belongs to the higher, speculative Wisdom, we are not concerned with the more extensive remains of the lower, practical Wisdom in Egyptian and Babylonian literature.⁵ To be sure, the organic connection between the two aspects of Wisdom means that

each can shed light on some feature of the other. Thus the Egyptian *Instruction of Ani*, written toward the end of the Empire, is of interest because of its dialogue form: a father gives advice to his son, who answers respectfully, expressing the fear that he cannot measure up to the father's high standards.⁶

In the higher speculative realm, Egyptian literature contains several meditations and complaints against suffering, whether induced by the gods, or, more commonly, caused by the cruelty and oppression of men. To this genre belongs the *Admonitions of Ipu-wer* (end of the First Kingdom, circa 2300–2050 B.C.E.), which consists of six poems depicting the collapse of the established order and the transfer of power and wealth to upstarts.⁷ The approach here is "prophetic": a scribe apparently musters up courage to charge the king with the maladministration of justice. This theme, as we have noted, reappears in biblical Wisdom as well and is particularly prominent in Job.⁸ *The Dispute With His Soul of a Man Tired of Life* also reflects the despair induced by the breakdown of society.⁹ The most popular work in this genre is the highly rhetorical *Complaint of the Peasant*, which narrates an alleged tale of oppression and fraud perpetrated upon a salt-field dweller in the Wadi Natrun, west of the Delta.¹⁰ The moving *Song of the Harper* (Middle or New Kingdom) is concerned with the transitoriness of existence and urges the enjoyment of life. It is written in a rhythmic form and in a spirit that recalls both the Hebrew Ecclesiastes and the so-called "Babylonian Koheleth,"¹¹ though no direct relationship exists.¹²

With regard to Babylonian Wisdom literature, it cannot be determined whether it was originally less extensive than its Egyptian counterpart or whether the fewer remains are purely a matter of accident. Nonetheless, even these fragments exhibit both aspects of Wisdom—practical instruction and philosophical "laments."¹³ Lambert categorizes them along slightly different lines as "practical advice on ethics and works dealing with intellectual problems."¹⁴

The first category of practical guidance is exhibited in various proverb collections which stress experience and common sense almost exclusively.¹⁵ On the other hand, several works blend religious and ethical motifs with practical considerations, like the biblical Book of Proverbs. To this group belong the so-called Babylonian *Book of Proverbs*,¹⁶ which goes back to the third or second millennium B.C.E., and the much later *Abiqar Romance*, which was one of the most popular and widely diffused books in the ancient Orient.¹⁷

Again, our present concern is with writings in the second category, that is, complaints on the limitations of life, which fall into the sphere of the higher Wisdom. The first work in this genre is the poem *I will praise the Lord of Wisdom*, which has been called the "Babylonian Job."¹⁸ Lambert argues forcefully that this epithet is a misnomer: "So long as knowledge was restricted to the second tablet such a description was justified. Seen now in a more complete form, it will not bear the title so readily. Quantitatively speaking, the greater part of the text is taken up by a description of Marduk's restoration of his ruined servant, and only a small part with an effort to probe the reason for the suffering of the righteous."¹⁹ In the poem the author describes the ills he has suffered and complains of the misfortunes which have come upon him though he has been innocent of wrongdoing. He has violated no rituals and has been punctilious in paying honor to the gods. The interpreters of dreams and oracles have been unable to help him. He is driven to the conclusion that man cannot know the designs of the gods, and to an even more radical surmise—that man's conception of good and evil differs from that of the gods! The Babylonian poet declares:

What man thinks good, for god is evil!
What in his heart is wrong, for his god is good!
Who can learn the will of the gods in heaven?
Where has purblind man learnt the way of a god?

[Tablet II, ll. 34–37]

Then comes a description of his physical suffering, followed by a sudden transition to confidence, to which we shall return:

My ill-wisher heard it, and his countenance shone (with joy);
They brought the good news to the woman who was my
ill-wisher, and her spirit was delighted.
But I know the day when my tears will come to an end,
When among the protecting deities their divinity will show
mercy.

[Tablet II reverse, ll. 52 ff.]

After several unclear lines and a lacuna, the text describes the sufferer's restoration to health and divine favor.

A particularly intriguing example of Babylonian Wisdom is afforded by the *Pessimistic Dialogue of a Master and a Slave*.²⁰ The text con-

sists of a series of paragraphs in which the master declares his intention to follow a given course of action, like visiting the palace, taking a meal, going hunting, facing his enemy, or building a house. In each case, the slave obediently agrees that it is wise. Then the master abruptly announces the decision to do the opposite and the slave again encourages his lord in the new activity. Finally, the master announces that since the same fate overtakes the public benefactor and the self-seeking individual, he will kill both his slave and himself. Again the slave seems to agree by recalling either man's incapacity to understand the world or, more likely, man's inability to escape the world and the universal law of mortality.

Who is so tall that he can reach up into heaven?
Who is so wide that he can embrace the earth?

But when the master modifies his plan and decides that only the slave must die, the latter gives an ironic and decisive answer:

"No, slave, I will kill you and send you ahead of myself."
"How indeed would my master survive me for three days?"

Prior to 1954, virtually all scholars regarded the text as a serious presentation of a pessimistic outlook on life. Yet they were struck by the "playful fashion," the "burlesque tone," and the "low irreverence" reflected in the composition.²¹ Bohl therefore suggested that it was a skit written for the Babylonian "Saturnalia" and describing a reversal of social status, which, he assumes, took place on a day during the New Year festival.²² Sutcliffe makes the plausible suggestion that it was not intended to be a serious discussion on the absence of values in life, but rather "a parody or jocose presentment of the obsequious slave," who agrees to every whim of the master except that of his own (i.e., the slave's) demise.²³

Lambert, on the other hand, suggests that "the writer was in earnest, but owed his outlook to his emotional state. The whole atmosphere of the text, he believes, is reminiscent of contemporary Western adolescents, particularly those of high intelligence. Extensive study has revealed that many bright youths have sudden changes from exuberance to brooding depression and that suicide is often in their thoughts, though rarely acted upon."²⁴ I do not find this theory convincing. There is no warrant in the text for this alleged alternation of moods from exaltation to depression. Moreover, according to this view, there

is no real need or function for the slave, who is in fact given the last and decisive word in the dialogue. I therefore prefer Sutcliffe's interpretation of the composition as a humorous presentation of an obsequious slave. It remains a striking fact that the *Dialogue* is a highly effective piece, though its precise meaning is unclear—very much like some examples of contemporary literature!

A third composition (fifteenth or fourteenth century B.C.E.), which has been described as the *Complaint of a Sage over the Injustice of the World*, is today generally referred to as a *Dialogue about Human Misery*. It has aptly been called the "Babylonian Koheleth."²⁵ The poem is an acrostic preserving the poet's name, a practice not attested in the Bible, but frequent in medieval Hebrew poetry. It is written in the form of a dialogue between the sufferer and his friend, thus recalling in rudimentary fashion the structure of Job. Unfortunately, the text contains many lacunae that make it difficult to follow. The themes treated apparently include such ideas as the following: death destroys love and joy (ll. 12 ff.); even the rich and the powerful cannot presume upon the abiding favor of the gods (ll. 60 ff.); the decrees of God are incomprehensible (ll. 80 ff., 220 ff.); murder and violence are triumphant in human affairs (ll. 215 ff.). The author urges joy (ll. 21 ff., 246) and closes with a petition to the gods for help. Here, too, the speaker protests that he has presented the prescribed sacrifices. Perhaps the boldest thought in Babylonian Wisdom is the idea—on which both the sufferer and his friend agree—that the injustice of the gods makes men prone to lie and to oppress their fellows.²⁶ In his bitterness he threatens to surrender his piety:

Let me forget the votive gifts of the god, trample upon ritual prescriptions.

Let me slaughter the bullock . . . eat. . . .

[ll. 135–36]

This brief conspectus of Egyptian and Babylonian higher Wisdom is sufficient to indicate that biblical Hokmah did not arise in a vacuum. Even without this concrete evidence, the high level of achievement represented by its major works, Job and Ecclesiastes, would suggest a long period of gestation and development. A masterpiece emerges not at the beginning of a movement, but at its culmination.

There are many points of similarity between Job and these extra-biblical writings: the exposure to illness and other misfortunes, the

mystery of the suffering of the pious, the uncertainty of life, the unknowability of human destiny, the lack of correspondence between virtue and well-being. All these are universal elements of human experience, however; their presence in two distinct literary compositions does not necessarily prove a relationship of dependency.

It is noteworthy that such stylistic features as the presence of dialogue, the citation of proverbs, and the use of quotations in debate are met with in oriental as well as in Hebrew Wisdom. They constitute part of the literary tradition of oriental Wisdom as a whole, and again, do not constitute evidence of direct borrowing.

One of the most famous passages in Job needs to be discussed in this connection. After pleading with his friends for pity and voicing a passionate wish to have his words permanently engraved on a monument, Job cries:

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
Though He be the last to arise upon earth!²⁷

[Job 19:25]

No matter how the enigmatic second line is interpreted, it is striking that the formulation of the first has two analogues in the extant extra-biblical literature, in Ugaritic and in Egyptian. In a Ugaritic liturgical text which has described the death of the god Aliyn Ba'al, the worshiper triumphantly announces the rebirth of his god:

And I know that the powerful Baal lives;
Existent is the prince, Lord of the earth.²⁸

The idea of a dying god coming back to life is obviously appropriate to the Canaanite worshiper.²⁹ For the Hebrew poet the notion was totally meaningless, since his God was not a nature deity whose life fluctuated with the seasons, but a God who ruled over nature and stood above it. Job is contrasting his own brief and tragic life, in which he has found no vindication, with the Eternal God at whose hands he will ultimately be justified.

In the Babylonian poem, *I will praise the Lord of Wisdom*, the poet describes the hatred of his foes and then calls out:

But I know the day when my tears will come to an end,
When among the protecting deities their divinity will show
mercy.³⁰

Here we have the sudden change of mood from despair to confidence which is particularly striking in the passage we have cited from Job. Unlike the Babylonian poet, however, Job looks forward to his moral vindication, not to his physical restoration. Moreover, the Babylonian poet does not invoke his god as do Job and the Ugaritic worshiper.

The biblical passage thus shares points of similarity and of difference with the Ugaritic and Babylonian texts. What all three literatures have in common is the triumphant affirmation: "I know." Whether the usage existed as a fixed liturgical form or is simply coincidental cannot be determined. In any event, there is no likelihood of direct borrowing by the Hebrew poet; at most, we have here another element common to the ancient oriental culture sphere.

Of much greater significance than these similarities of detail are the far-reaching differences between Egyptian and Babylonian Wisdom writings, on the one hand, and the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, on the other. Basically, they reflect the divergence between the pagan outlook of the oriental world and the ethical monotheism of Hebraism. For the ancient world, the gods were primarily personifications of the forces of nature or of human instincts. Undoubtedly the "great gods" of Egypt and Mesopotamia developed ethical attributes, but these remained secondary to their role as nature deities. In oriental religion, therefore, human suffering was often attributed to the intervention of evil spirits, against whom incantations were to be invoked. Frequently a man's misery was attributed to the unexpected caprice or the incomprehensible anger of the gods. Their hostility could be aroused by envy, by lust, or by simple *Schadenfreude*, the impulse to cruelty.

Whether the Mesopotamian gods are described as amoral or immoral may, perhaps, be a matter of semantics. What is clear is that they are far removed from the uncompromising moral character of the God of Israel. Hence, even in the most sophisticated examples of oriental Wisdom, the ethical motif was secondary, when it was not altogether lacking.

As we have seen, some Babylonian thinkers who wrestled with the problem of evil enunciated the idea that there was a lack of correspondence between the moral standards of the gods and those of men. While this early and highly original adumbration of the doctrine of the relativity of ethics may be congenial to some modern thinkers it was utterly out of the question for the Hebrew sage, for whom the ethical character of God and the ethical imperative for man were indivisible. The Hebrew world view was unforgettably expressed by the

prophet Micah, "He has told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord your God requires of you, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8, 9).

Similarly, it would be impossible for a Hebrew thinker to conceive of the idea that God is responsible for man's sinfulness or even his proclivity to sin. That man is free to choose the right is the bedrock of biblical ethics. The lawgiver in Deuteronomy enjoins: "Behold I have placed before you today life and the good, and death and the evil. . . . Life and death have I placed before you, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life, so that you may live, you and your children" (Deut. 30:16-19; cf. 11:26 ff.). This thrice-repeated injunction is echoed throughout the Hebrew Bible by prophet and sage alike.

In Job, Eliphaz denies that God's world order is the source of evil and places the blame squarely at the door of man:

Indeed, misfortune does not come forth from the ground,
Nor does evil sprout from the earth.
It is man who gives birth to evil. . . .

[Job 5:6-7]

In all his bitter denial of the Friends' position, Job never contravenes the moral responsibility of man. It is only that he demands the same standard of his God.

For the same reason the oriental Wisdom writers indite complaints of their suffering but do not hurl challenges to the gods in the name of justice. The ringing cry of Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Gen. 18:26), which might well serve as the motto for the Book of Job, and in somewhat muted form for Ecclesiastes as well, finds no echo in Egyptian and Babylonian Wisdom. The burning conviction that man's suffering in the world is an affront to the goodness of God was possible only to a Hebrew. For him alone, the essential nature of God resided in His ethical character. Indeed, the Hebrew saw both nature and history through the prism of ethical consciousness.

It has been noted that Mesopotamian literature reveals a philosophy of history. Not unlike the biblical historians, the *Weidner Chronicle* ties the weal or woe of various rulers to their loyalty or disloyalty to the gods. The differences from the prophetic philosophy of history are, however, far more striking than the similarities. For the Babylonian chronicler, the success or failure of the rulers depended upon

whether they provided or failed to provide fish-offerings for the Esagil temple in Babylon.³¹

Another striking illustration of the deep chasm separating the Hebrews from their Semitic kinsmen may be seen in the varied interpretations of the ancient Semitic tradition of a primordial flood. According to Babylonian mythology, the flood was brought upon mankind because men made so much noise on earth they disturbed the repose of the gods. Utnapishtim, the favorite of the gods, is ordered to build a ship "when their heart led the great gods to produce the flood." He is instructed to deceive his fellow men about his plans and to lull them into inactivity with fair promises:

Ea opened his mouth to speak,
Saying to me, his servant:
"Thou shalt then thus speak unto them:
"I have learned that Enlil is hostile to me,
So that I cannot reside in your city,
Nor set my foot in Enlil's territory.
To the Deep I will therefore go down,
To dwell with my lord Ea.
But upon you he will shower down abundance,
The choicest birds, the rarest fishes.
The land shall have its fill of harvest riches.
He who at dusk orders the husk-greens,
Will shower down upon you a rain of wheat.'"³²

The biblical account attributes the flood in Noah's day to the moral corruption of the human race:

And the earth was corrupt before God,
And the earth was filled with violence.
And God saw the earth,
And behold, it was corrupt;
For all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.

[Gen. 6:11, 12]

It is characteristic of the Hebraic ethos that rabbinic legend declares that Noah's long process of building the Ark was intended to arouse his sinful contemporaries to repentance before disaster struck.³³ Nowhere is there any suggestion that Noah attempted to deceive his sinful contemporaries. Like every page of the Hebrew Bible, the account of the flood is drenched in morality.

This profound difference in outlook leads to other important divergences between biblical and non-Hebraic Wisdom. The Egyptian and Babylonian writers protest their innocence of infractions which are primarily ritual in character. This is true even of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which reveals a high degree of ethical sensitivity.³⁴ In Egyptian religion, before a deceased man is admitted to the realm of the blessed, he must declare his guiltlessness by reciting a long catalogue of offenses from which he is free. These include murder, sodomy, theft, dishonesty in business, and other ethical sins. But the protestation of innocence in the *Book of the Dead* also includes many ritual infractions.

In Job, on the other hand, violations of ritual law play no part whatever. As the argument waxes hot, Job is accused by his friends and passionately defends himself against charges of *ethical* misconduct. His *apologia pro vita sua* reaches its crescendo in the great "Confession of Integrity" (chap. 31), which is significant not only for its ethical sensitivity and for the sins it includes but also for the ritual transgressions it omits.

In sum, it is clear that oriental Wisdom literature is invaluable in supplying the background for Job and in shedding light on countless details of the book. There is, however, no direct contact between Job and the earlier exemplars of oriental Wisdom; Job remains unique not only in Hebrew literature but in the literature of the world.

VI

The Tale of Job

THAT THE BOOK OF JOB is cast in a unique literary form is obvious at first glance from the prose tale which serves as the framework for the poetry. The first two chapters of the book, which describe the series of calamities that befall Job, serve as a prologue to the poetic dialogue, which itself contains several sections. Following the debate by the various protagonists, the prose narrative is resumed (42:7-19): Job's fortunes are restored and indeed increased. After the passion and the agony, all ends in serenity and peace.

Since the Book of Job is part of the Bible, it was taken for granted by both the Jewish and the Christian traditions that the hero was a historical figure. Only two talmudic sages, one anonymous, the other the well-known third-century rabbi, Resh Lakish, ventured to declare that "Job was never created, nor did he ever exist, but is simply a parable."¹ Even this utterance was transmitted with a slight textual variant to read, "Job was created solely to serve as a parable."²

Apart from this dissenting voice the historicity of Job was not questioned. Since the tradition possessed no authentic recollection of a man named Job, a variety of dates was proposed, all based upon slight verbal similarities between passages in Job and other biblical works. The dominant view among the rabbis was that he was a contemporary of Moses.³ Other rabbinic views assigned Job to the age of the patriarch Jacob (making him the husband of Jacob's daughter Dinah), to the