

G. K. Chesterton's 1916 Reflections on the Book and Wounds of Job

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An unknown text

Through the prompt kindness of a vivid-souled Catholic priest, who is also a contemplative Maronite monk in Massachusetts, I recently received an undated, eleven-page text written by G.K. Chesterton and entitled “Introduction to the Book of Job.” It was, moreover, a text that I had never before read, nor even known about. Furthermore, since this transmitted version of the undated text also had some unexplained ellipses in it, as well as an alluringly succinct Epigraph—“**Man is most comforted by paradoxes**”—I started to wonder about the occasion of the essay's first appearance and thus proceeded to do a little more research, which led to some additionally illuminating discoveries.

During the deep trials of World War I, in 1916—some two years before his own brother Cecil was to die on the battlefield of a disease contracted near the very end of the War—G.K. Chesterton wrote a nineteen-page Introduction (pp. ix-xxvii) to a much longer and illustrated text of 102 pages from the Old Testament, in an Anglican “authorized version” of that spiritually challenging book entitled: *The Book of Job: With an Introduction by G.K. Chesterton & Illustrated in Colour by C. Mary Tongue.*¹

Before swiftly sending me his own electronic version of that Chestertonian Introduction, Father Michael Gilmary had teasingly told my family during our personal visit with him and with Father Robert: “**Wait until you see the ending!**” Coming from a priest like him, that was certainly an inspiring invitation! However, I promised to read the entire Introduction from beginning to end, without first “peeking at the end,” and also to do it at once as soon as we would receive his transmission after our return home. His text was waiting for us upon our arrival. Was that not but another expression of philosophical and theological *Eros*!?

In fidelity to my word, I first attentively read Father Michael's gift to us, and then subsequently re-read, now even more attentively, the full and original 1916 text which I had discovered, from which text—which, perhaps significantly, contains no Epigraph—I shall henceforth quote in this little essay and commentary.²

1 (London: Cecil Palmer and Haywood, 1916), 102 pp. and 42 Chapters, with G. K. Chesterton's Introduction being on pages ix-xxvii, as already indicated. The Library-of-Congress Call Number for this relatively rare book is: BS 1413 C5.

2 For convenience, the page citations to this 1916 text will be placed above in the main body of this essay, in parentheses.

The Book of Job – a philosophical riddle

G.K. Chesterton begins his Introduction, six years before his grateful reception into the Catholic Church, with the following searching and modest words:

*The Book of Job is among the other Old Testament Books both a philosophical riddle and a historical riddle. It is **the philosophical riddle that concerns us** in such an introduction as this; so we may dismiss first the few words of general explanation **or warning** which should be said about the historical aspect. Controversy has long ranged about which parts of **this epic** belong to its original scheme and which are interpolations of considerably later date. Doctors disagree, as is the business of doctors to do; but upon the whole the trend of investigation has always been in the direction of maintaining that the parts interpolated, if any, were the prose prologue and epilogue and possibly the speech of the young man who comes in with an apology at the end. I do not profess to be competent to decide such questions. But whatever decision the reader may come to concerning them, there is **a general truth** to be remembered in this connection. When you deal with any ancient artistic creation [even as in the Medieval, Old French Epic, The Song of Roland] do not suppose that it is anything against it that **it grew gradually**. (ix—my emphasis added)³*

An architectural analogy

Then, Chesterton brings an architectural analogy to his assistance, that he may further convey an implication of this slow fruitfulness:

*The Book of Job may have grown gradually just as Westminster Abbey grew gradually. But the people who made the old folk poetry, like the people who made Westminster Abbey [or Châtres Cathedral], did not attach that importance to the actual date and the actual author, that importance which is entirely the creation of **the almost insane individualism** of modern times. We may put aside the case of Job, as one [also] **complicated with religious difficulties** [as in the case of Moses].... The creation of the tribal epic was **to some extent** regarded as a tribal work, like the building of the tribal temple.... Remember that this old world which made these old poems like the Iliad and Job, always kept the tradition of what it was making [like the desirable and loyal transmission of the Depositum Fidei, with solicitous integrity].... But let us remember that there was more unity in those times in a hundred men than there is unity now in one man. The city was like one man. Now one man is like a city in civil war.... We may say of the scholarly [historical] riddle that the book [of Job] has **unity in the sense that all great creations have unity; in the sense that Canterbury Cathedral has unity**. (ix-xi—my emphasis added)*

The perceptible unity of Old Testament Books

So, too, is it the case, says Chesterton, that “the same unity is broadly true of what I have called the philosophical riddle [of the Book of Job].” (xi) But howso? For, he adds:

³ After the 1918 death of his brother, Cecil, G.K. Chesterton consented to write, already in 1919, an Introduction to another Epic: namely, the Charles Scott Moncrieff translation of the Old French Epic, The Song of Roland. As we shall later see, that four-page Introduction was also very moving and enduringly incisive, piercing the heart also by its evocative implicitness.

*There is a real sense in which the Book of Job stands apart from most of the books included in the [assumed Anglican-Protestant] canon of the Old Testament. But here again those are wrong who maintain that the Old Testament is a mere loose library; that it has not **consistency or aim**. Whether the result [of such philosophic unity] was achieved by some supernal spiritual truth, or by a steady [Hebraic] national tradition, or merely by an ingenious selection in after times, the books of the Old Testament have quite **a perceptible unity**. (xi-xii—my emphasis added)*

Lacking understanding

Chesterton will now gradually introduce us to his reflective understanding of the “consistency,” “aim,” and quite “perceptible unity” of the Old Testament:⁴

*To attempt to understand the Old Testament without realizing this **main idea** [of purposive unity] is as absurd as it would be to study one of Shakespeare's plays [e.g., “the history of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark” and of “Hamlet's procrastination”—xii] without realizing that the author had any philosophical object at all....So speak the Bible **smashers** [like “Iconoclasts”], who are unfortunately always at bottom Bible **worshippers** [“Bibliolaters” ardently defending “Sola Scriptura” as if they did not have their own, and perhaps corrupt, “traditions”]. They do not understand **the special tone and intention of the Old Testament**; they do not understand **its main idea, which is the idea of all men being merely the instruments of a higher power**. (xii—my emphasis added)*

Now our Chesterton will surprise us again, and by way of an unmistakably apt warning about “reading history backwards” (in H. Belloc's own words)—even though, as Saint Augustine argued, one must finally read the Old Testament **through** the New Testament, as well as be attentive to the Old Testament's intentional and clarifying prophetic Typology. Thus, Chesterton says:

*Those, for instance, who complain of the atrocities and treacheries of the judges and prophets [and other such seemingly and merely “negative examples”] have really got a notion in their head that has nothing to do with the subject. **They are too Christian**. They are **reading back into the pre-Christian scriptures a purely Christian idea—the idea of saints, the idea that the chief instruments of God are very particularly good men** [like Job himself, perhaps?]. This is a deeper, a more daring, and a more interesting idea than the old Jewish one. It is **the idea that innocence has about it something terrible which in the long run makes and re-makes empires and the world**. (xii-xiii—my emphasis added)*

The common-sense idea

On the premise that “contrast clarifies the mind,” we may now also see how Chesterton understands the divinely purposive, contrasting conduct of many characters in the Old Testament:

*But [in contrast to the “purely Christian idea”] the Old Testament idea was what may be called **the***

⁴ It must be remembered throughout this commentary, however, that The King James Version of the Bible, the one that Chesterton was then using, does not contain seven books that are in the Catholic Vulgate Version of the Old Testament, some of which are warmly humane, quite beautiful and moving to the human heart, namely these seven books: Tobias, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 Machabees, and 2 Machabees. These omissions might well have influenced Chesterton's overall perceptions of the atmosphere of the Old Testament, but I am not competent to judge this matter.

common-sense idea, that strength is strength, that cunning is cunning, that worldly success is worldly success, and that Jehovah uses these things **for His ultimate purpose**, just as He uses natural forces or physical elements. He uses the strength of a hero as He uses the strength of a Mammoth—without any particular respect for the Mammoth. I cannot comprehend how so many simple-minded sceptics have read such stories as **the fraud of Jacob** and supposed that the man who wrote it (whoever he was) did not know **that Jacob was a sneak** just as we do. **The primeval human sense of honour** does not change so much as that. (xiii—my emphasis added)

Indeed, such “simple-minded sceptics”—who are often, it must be said, “Christians”—even “fancy that the patriarchs must be meant for patterns [paragons or positive exemplars]; they fancy that Jacob [Israel] was being set up as some kind of saint; and in that case I do not wonder that they are a little startled.” (xiii-xiv) But, adds Chesterton emphatically, “That is **not the atmosphere** of the Old Testament at all.” (xiv—my emphasis added)

At this stage of his own non-Catholic Christian life, Chesterton then discloses to us his deep and haunting sense both of the atmosphere and of “the central idea” of much (but not all) of the Old Testament:

The loneliness of God

The central idea of the great part of the Old Testament may be called **the idea of the loneliness of God**. God is not the only chief character of the Old Testament; God is properly the only character in the Old Testament. **Compared with His clearness of purpose all the other wills are heavy and automatic**, like those of animals; **compared with His actuality** all the sons of flesh are shadows.⁵ Again and again **the note** is struck, “With whom hath he taken counsel?” [Isaiah 40:14] “I have trodden the wine press alone, and of the people there was no man with me.” [Isaiah 63:3] All the patriarchs and prophets are merely His tools or weapons; **for the Lord is a man of war**. He uses Joshua like an axe or Moses like a measuring-rod. For him Samson is only a sword and Isaiah only a trumpet. **The saints of Christianity** [by contrast] are supposed to be like God, to be, as it were, little statuettes of Him. The Old Testament hero is no more supposed to be of the same nature as God than a saw or a hammer is supposed to be of the same shape as the carpenter. (xiv—my emphasis added)

Something of the beasts

Looking back to what he has just presented, Chesterton employs the following words by way of summary conclusion:

This is the main key and characteristic of the Hebrew scriptures **as a whole**....[and despite “innumerable instances of...rugged humour, keen emotion, and powerful individuality which is never wanting in great primitive prose and poetry”—xv]. **Nevertheless the main characteristic remains**; the sense **not merely** that God is stronger than man, **not merely** that God is more secret than man, **but that He means more, that He knows better what He is doing, that compared with Him, we have something of the vagueness, the unreason, and the**

⁵ Earlier on this page Chesterton had more dubiously (even exaggeratedly) said: “The heroes of the Old Testament are not the sons of God, but the slaves of God, gigantic and terrible slaves [like Samson?], like the genii, who were the slaves of Aladdin.” (xiv)

vagrancy of the beasts that perish....We might almost put it thus.The book [i.e., the Old Testament] is so intent upon asserting the personality of God that it almost asserts the impersonality of man. Unless this giant comic brain had conceived a thing, that thing is **insecure and void**; man has not enough tenacity [hence perseverance] to secure its continuance. “Unless the Lord build the house their labour **is but lost** that build it. Except the Lord keep the city the watchman watcheth **in vain**.” [Psalm 127:1] (xv—my emphasis added)

Let God use His tools

After this framing preparation and general consideration of most of the portions of the Old Testament, Chesterton will now lead us to the exceptional and enduringly challenging Book of Job:

Everywhere else, then, the Old Testament positively rejoices in **the obliteration** [sic] of man **in comparison with the divine purpose**. The Book of Job **stands definitely alone because the Book of Job definitely asks, “But what is the purpose of God? Is it worth the sacrifice even of our miserable humanity? Of course it is easy enough to wipe out our own paltry wills for the sake of a will that is grander and kinder? But is it grander and kinder? Let God use His tools; let God break His tools. But what is He doing and what are they being broken for?”** It is **because of this question** that we [now] have to attack as a **philosophical** riddle the Book of Job. (xv-xvi—my emphasis added)

The desire to know what is

After giving his opinion on certain matters of religion, irreligion, and philosophy, Chesterton will comment on the Book of Job, specifically as well as generally; for, he says:

Fundamental human religion and fundamental human irreligion are **both at once** old and new; philosophy is either eternal or it is not philosophy....The modern habit of saying “Every man has a different philosophy; this is my philosophy and it suits me”; **the habit of saying this is mere weak-mindedness**. A cosmic philosophy is not constructed to fit a man; a cosmic philosophy is constructed to fit a cosmos. A man can no more possess a private religion [much less “the god of your own choice”] than he can possess a private sun and moon.The **first of the intellectual beauties** of the Book of Job is that **it is all concerned with this desire to know the actuality; the desire to know what is, and not merely what seems**. (xvi-xvii—my emphasis added)

A modern take on Job

With his characteristically charming speculations about how a “Modern” would have (or would still now) write the Book of Job, Chesterton thereby sharpens another clarifying contrast:

We should probably find [in the Modern's proposed text] that Job and his [superficial and somewhat smugly self-assured] comforters **got on quite well together** by the **simple** operation of referring their differences to what is called **the temperament**, saying that the comforters were **by nature** “optimists” and Job **by nature** a “pessimist.” **And they would be quite comfortable, as people can often be, for some time at least, by agreeing to say what is obviously untrue**. (xvii—my emphasis added)

Demanding an explanation from God

Chesterton adds that, if the word means anything, “then emphatically Job is not a pessimist”; and “Job does not in any sense look at life in a gloomy way.” (xvii) Moreover,

*If wishing to be happy **and being quite ready to be happy** constitute an optimist, Job is an optimist [though, admittedly, sometimes a “perplexed, exasperated, outraged, insulted” optimist!—xvii]. He wishes the universe to justify itself, **not because he wishes it to be caught out**, but because he really wishes it to be justified. He demands an explanation from God, but he does not do it at all in the spirit in which [the MP politician John] Hampden [d. 1643] might demand an explanation from [the English King] Charles I. He [Job] does it in the spirit in which a wife might demand an explanation from her husband whom she really respected. **He remonstrates with his Maker because** he is proud of his Maker. He even speaks of the Almighty as his enemy, **but he never doubts**, at the back of his mind, that his enemy has **some kind of a case** which he does not understand. In a fine and famous blasphemy [while simultaneously **contending with, and yet trusting**, God!] he says: “Oh, that mine adversary had written a book!” [Job 31:35] It never really occurs to him [,however,] that it [God's Book] could possibly be a bad book. He is **anxious to be convinced**, that is, he thinks God could convince him....He **shakes** the pillars of the world and **strikes insanely** at the heavens; he **lashes** the stars, **but it is not to silence them; it is to make them speak.** (xvii-xviii—my emphasis added)*

The abiding, unmistakable ethos of Job himself is twofold, and it is even, Chesterton might say, an adventurous and resilient paradox: namely, **to contend and to trust**.

When next speaking of “the **official** optimists, the Comforters of Job,” Chesterton says that, on the contrary, “the comforters of Job may [truly] be called pessimists rather than optimists”; for “All that they really believe is **not** that God is good but that God is **so strong** that it is **much more judicious** to call Him good.” (xviii—my emphasis added) We can feel and taste in this considered and sincere “censure” Chesterton's own graciously restrained irony.

The error of the evolutionary optimist

Speaking, analogously, of “the vital error of the evolutionary optimist” (xix) of his own time, Chesterton adds an insight still timely as well as arguably timeless:

*They [like Job's superficial Comforters] will keep on [rather facetiously or glibly] saying that everything in the universe fits into everything else; **as if there were anything comforting about a number of nasty thing all fitting into each other.** We shall see later how God in the great climax of the [epic] poem turns this particular argument altogether upside down. (xix—my emphasis added)*

God the sceptic

Anticipating his further reflections on God's someone abrupt entrance near the end of the poem, Chesterton says that there, for sure, “is struck the sudden and splendid note which makes the thing [the divine entrance, as well as the poem] as great as it is.” (xix) For, throughout the story, all the human characters, and “especially Job,” had been “asking questions of God,” but when God enters, He does not simply answer those often profound questions. Rather,

By **a touch truly to be called inspired**, when God enters, it is to ask a number more questions on His own account. In **this drama of scepticism** God Himself takes up the rôle of sceptic. He does what all the great voices defending religion have always done. He does, for instance, what Socrates did. **He turns rationalism against itself**. He seems to say that **if it comes to asking questions, He can ask some questions** which will fling down and flatten out all conceivable questioners. The poet **by an exquisite intuition** has made God **ironically** accept a kind of controversial equality with His accusers. He is willing to regard it **as if** it were a fair intellectual duel: "Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me." [Job 38:3] The everlasting [even] **adopts an enormous and sardonic humility**. He is quite willing to be prosecuted. He only asks for the right which every prosecuted person possesses; **He asks to be allowed to cross-examine the witness** for the prosecution. And He carries further the correctness of the legal parallel [i.e., the legal method]. For the first question, essentially speaking, which He asks is the question **any criminal accused by Job** would be entitled to ask. He asks Job who he is. And Job, being **a man of candid intellect**, takes a little time to consider, and comes to the conclusion that he does not know. (xix-xx—my emphasis added)

Routed by higher scepticism

With his irrepressibly paradoxical humor, Chesterton further considers "the speech of God" and "the first great fact" (xx) we are properly to notice about it! For, this "culmination of the inquiry" also is such that

*It represents all human sceptics **routed by the higher scepticism**. It is this method, used sometimes by supreme and sometimes by mediocre minds, that has ever since been **the logical weapon of the true mystic**. Socrates, as I have said, used it when he showed that **if you only allowed him enough sophistry** he could destroy all the sophists. Jesus Christ used it when He reminded the Sadducees, who could not **imagine** the nature of marriage in heaven, that **if it came to that** they had not really **imagined** the nature of marriage at all. In the [further] break up of Christian theology in the eighteenth century, Butler [the Anglican Bishop Joseph Butler, d. 1782] used it, when he pointed out that **rationalistic arguments could be used as much against vague religion as against doctrinal religion**, as much **against rationalist ethics as against Christian ethics**. It is **the root and reason of the fact** that men who have religious faith have also philosophical doubt, like Cardinal Newman, Mr. [Arthur] Balfour, or Mr. [William H.] Mallock. These [latter authors] are the small streams of the delta; the Book of Job is the **first** great cataract that creates the river [even the river of philosophical scepticism]. (xx-xxi—my emphasis added)*

Being sceptical about one's own scepticism

Without using the concept nor the name, "Pyrrhonian Skepticism," Chesterton nevertheless suggests it modestly as a way to lead to some humility, by way of being sceptical about your own scepticism:

*In dealing with **the arrogant asserter of doubt**, it is **not** the right method to tell him to stop doubting. It is rather the right method to tell him **to go on doubting**, to doubt a little more, **to doubt every day newer and wider things in the universe, until at last, by some strange enlightenment, he may begin to doubt himself**. (xxi—my emphasis added)*

Something too good to be told

After considering that “first fact touching the speech” of God, who comes in at the end, “not to answer riddles, but to propound them,” Chesterton addresses “the other great fact, which taken together with this one, makes the whole work religious instead of merely philosophical.” (xxi) Moreover, it is another “fine inspiration” and “great surprise which makes Job suddenly satisfied with the mere presentation [by God] of something impenetrable.” (xxi) Indeed,

*The enigmas of Jehovah seem darker and more desolate than the enigmas of Job; yet Job was **comfortless before** the speech of Jehovah and **comforted after** it. He has been told nothing, but **he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told.** The refusal [or reticence?] of God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. **The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of men.** (xxii—my emphasis added)*

The panorama of created things

Chesterton now has his third consideration—called also “the third fact”—to present to us, that it may shed more light as to the meaning of the Book of Job:

*Thirdly, of course [!], it is **one of the splendid strokes** that **God rebukes alike the man who accused, and the men** [the “Comforters”] **who defended Him**; that He knocks down pessimists and optimists with the same hammer. And it is in connection with the **mechanical and supercilious** comforters of Job that there occurs **the still deeper and finer inversion** of which I have spoken....God will make man see things, if it is only against the black background of nonentity [non-being, non-existence, nothingness]....He [then] **unrolls** before Job **a long panorama** of **created things**....**The whole is a sort of psalm or rhapsody of the sense of wonder** [the Latin “mirandum,” or the Greek sense of “thaumumazein”]. **The maker of all things is astonished at all the things He has Himself made** [as Christ, the Incarnate God Himself, later expressed His own “mirandum” at the Faith of the Roman Centurion!]. This we may call the third point. **Job puts forth a note of interrogation; God answers with a note of exclamation.** (xxii-xxiii—my emphasis added)*

When the sons of God shouted for joy

As to a fourth point he would make and emphasize, Chesterton touches upon the epic poet’s nuances which are also hints of hope and joy:

*Lastly [as a proposed fourth fact], the poet has achieved in this speech [of God], with that unconscious artistic accuracy [also] found in so many of the **simpler epics**, another and much more delicate thing.... [H]e has contrived to let fall here and there in the metaphors, in the parenthetical imagery, **sudden and splendid suggestions that the secret of God is a bright and not a sad one**...like light seen for an instant through the cracks of a closed door. It would be difficult to praise too highly, **in a purely poetical sense**, the instinctive exactitude and ease with which these more optimistic [or truly “hope-full”] insinuations are let fall in other [sterner or threatening] connections. For instance, where Jehovah, with devastating sarcasm, asks Job where he was when the foundations of the world were laid...[also then still] mentions **the time when the sons of God shouted for joy** [Job 38:4-7]....[and He hints, or implies, that] they must have had something to shout about....Or, again, when God is speaking of snow and hail ..., He speaks of them as **a treasury that He has laid up***

against the day of battle—a hint of some huge Armageddon **in which evil shall be at last overthrown**. (xxii-xxiv—my emphasis added)

Throughout the Book of Job as Chesterton perspicaciously felt them, hints of hope were to be found “breaking through [the] agnosticism like fiery gold round the edges of a black cloud.” (xxiv-xxv)

Imposing a paradox

Preparing us also, in 1916, for his later words about the new 1919 translation of the Old French Epic, *The Song of Roland*, Chesterton has some further-illuminating and polite instruction to impart, suggesting thereby even that God is a subtle artist Himself:

*Those who look superficially [or superciliously!] at the barbarian origin of the epic [the Book of Job] may think it fanciful to read so much artistic significance into its casual similes or accidental phrases. But no one who is well acquainted with great examples of semi-barbaric poetry, as in the Song of Roland, or the old ballads, will fall into this mistake. No one who knows what primitive poetry is, can fail to realize that while its conscious form is simple some of its finer effects are subtle. The Iliad contrives to express the idea that Hector [the Trojan Hero] and Sarpedon [the Lycian Warrior, and a Trojan Ally] have **a certain tone or tint of chivalrous resignation**, not bitter enough to be called pessimism and not jovial enough to be called optimism; Homer could never have said this in elaborate words. But somehow he contrives to say it in **simple** words. **The Song of Roland contrives to express the idea that Christianity imposes upon its heroes a paradox: a paradox of great humility in the matter of their sins combined with great ferocity in the matter of their ideas.** In the same way the Book of Job must be credited with many subtle effects....And of these by far **the most important** remains **even yet** to be stated. (xxv—my emphasis added)*

Making successful men good

Now as he approaches his evocative conclusion Chesterton speaks graciously also of the Jews:

*I do not know, and I doubt whether even the scholars know, **if** the Book of Job had a **great effect or had any effect** upon the after development of Jewish thought. But **if** it did have an effect it **may** have saved them from an enormous collapse and decay. Here in this Book [of Job] **the question is really asked whether God invariably punishes vice with terrestrial punishment and rewards virtue with terrestrial prosperity.** **If** the Jews had answered that question wrongly they **might** have lost all their after influence in human history. **They might have sunk even down to the level of modern well educated society.** For when once people have begun to believe that prosperity is the reward of virtue **their next calamity** is obvious. If prosperity is regarded as the **reward** of virtue it will be regarded as the **symptom** of virtue. Men will leave off **the heavy task** of making good men successful. They will adopt **the easier task** of making our successful men good.. This, which has happened throughout modern commerce [hence finance] and journalism, is the ultimate [sic] Nemesis of **the wicked optimism of the comforters of Job.** If the Jews **could** be saved from it, the book of Job saved them. (xxv-xxvi—my emphasis added)*

Man most comforted by paradoxes

How deft and courteous Chesterton is in his own sincere uses of the subjunctive mood.

Indeed, as this urbane witness adds:

*The Book of Job is chiefly remarkable, as I have insisted throughout, for the fact that it does not end in a way that is conventionally satisfying. Job is not told that his misfortunes were due to his sins or a part of any plan for his improvement. But in the prologue we [also] see Job tormented not because he was the worst of men, but because he was the best. **It is the lesson of the whole work that man is most comforted by paradoxes.** (xxvi-xxvii—my emphasis added)*

The paradox of the best man in the worst fortune

Has Chesterton nothing more to say or hint at—after this additionally surprising last summary sentence?

Yes, he now goes even further, leading us now into another unfathomable and irreducible mystery; and he also benevolently assumes that his 1916 audience will readily grasp his biblical and theological allusions, to include an understanding of Biblical Typology and the Fulfilling New Testament Antitypes, a premise which is, regrettably, not likely to hold today:

*Here is **the very darkest and strangest of the paradoxes**; and it is by all human testimony **the most reassuring**. I need not suggest what a high and strange history awaited **this paradox of the best man in the worst fortune**. I need not say that in the freest and most philosophical sense there is one Old Testament figure who is **truly a type** [as would be discerned in the scholarly understanding of Prophetic Typology]; or [I need not] say what is **pre-figured in the wounds of Job**. (xxvii—my emphasis added)*

We may now, however, at least much better be able to contemplate with love the Wounds and the Whole Passion of the Lord. The deftly gracious and evocatively implicit words of G.K. Chesterton make us, therefore, even more grateful to him, once again. For, we may still not forget the first time we unexpectedly read the simple words of depth he once used to convey the mystery of suffering and the mystery of liberty:

*Will made the world; Will wounded the world; the same Divine Will gave to the world for the second time its chance; the same human Will can for the last time make its choice.*⁶

6 G.K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), p. 236. This passage comes from his essay entitled “The Outline of Liberty,” which to be found in its entirety on pp. 233-237. The gracious, charming rest of the paragraph which begins with the above-quoted words is, as follows: “That is the real outstanding peculiarity, or eccentricity, of the peculiar sect called Roman Catholics. And if anyone objects to my limiting so large a conception to Roman Catholics, I willingly agree that there are many who value it so much that they ought to be Roman Catholics. But if anyone says that it is not in fact and history bound up with the Faith of Roman Catholicism, it is enough to refer him to the history and the facts.” (p. 236)

CODA

The Song of Roland

Three years after G.K. Chesterton's 1916 Introduction to the Book of Job, he published his four-page Introduction to a new translation by Captain C.K. Scott Moncrieff of *The Song of Roland*.⁷

Reading these words written shortly after the 1918 Armistice will fittingly complement, I believe, Chesterton's earlier treatment of the Book of Job, especially in his sense of mystery and paradox, and his accent on the reality of loss and the heavy burdens of duty. And the wounds of Roland and of Charlemagne will remind us of the wounds of Job.

The spirit of the Jongleur

Chesterton unexpectedly begins his new Introduction to the *Song of Roland* with a vivid image of a jongleur⁸ and soon comes to consider his paradoxical actions, especially in the context of a live battle:

*Most of us remember reading, in the school histories of our childhood, that at the Battle of Hastings [in 1066, during the initial Norman Invasion], Taillefer the Jongleur went **in front of the Norman Army throwing his sword in the air and singing the Song of Roland**....The jongleur must at least have selected extracts of favorite passages, or the battle would have been unduly delayed [!]. But the tale has the same moral as the translation [of "the noble and rugged epic"]; since both have the same inspiration. The value of the tale was that it did suggest to the childish mind, **through all the deadening effects of distance and indifference**, that a man does not make **such a gesture with a sword** unless he feels something, and **that a man does not sing unless he has something to sing about**....In short, the value of the tale was that **it hinted that there is a heart in history, even remote history**....This [innermost sense of "chivalry," fittingly "spurred on by vassalage"] is a type of the truths that historical literature [like the Song of Roland] ought to make us feel....We might [also] have learned, for instance, what a Jongleur was; and realised that this one [at the Battle of Hastings] may have had feelings as deep or fantastic as the Jongleur [later] celebrated in the twelfth century poem, **who died gloriously of dancing and doing somersaults before the image of Our Lady**; that he was of **the trade taken as a type by the mystical mirth of St. Francis**, who called his monks the Jugglers of God. A man must read at least a little of the contemporary work itself, before **he thus finds the human heart inside** the [vassal's] armour and the monastic gown; the men who write the philosophy of history seldom give us the philosophy, **still less the religion**, of the historical characters. And the final example of this [principle, or fact] is something which is **also illustrated by the obscure minstrel** [Taillefer] who threw up his sword as he sang the Song of Roland [about the heroic chief of Charlemagne's own elite Rearguard trapped in*

7 Charles Scott Moncrieff, *The Song of Roland: Done into English, in the Original Measure* (London: Chapman & Hall, LTD., 1920)—Second Impression: First Printed November, 1919—Reprinted [in 1920] with Alterations. G.K. Chesterton's Introduction is to be found on pp. ix-xii. Captain Moncrieff's final work is dedicated to his three intimate and collaborating friends and combatant comrades who fell in World War I: Philip Bainbridge; Wilfred Owen; and Ian Mackenzie. G.K. Chesterton's Introduction makes an understated allusion to others who also fell and died in the War, to include his own older brother, Cecil.

8 Broadly speaking, a "jongleur" (Old French "jogleor") is a kind of professional storyteller, or bard, who recites literary works; and he is also sometimes, not only a court poet, but even an itinerant medieval entertainer proficient in a variety of engaging things: juggling, acrobatics, music, and the oral reading of poetry.

the Pyrenees of Spain], **as well as by the Song of Roland itself**...For these [incomplete historians] it is well to note, in the real Norman story [or, in “the Norman adventure”], that **the very bard in front of their battle line was shouting** [epic poetic passages from] **the glorification of failure. It testifies to a truth in the very heart of Christendom, that even the court poet of William the Conqueror was celebrating Roland the conquered.** (ix, xi—my emphasis added)

Warfare – the life of man on earth

Looking poignantly back to the final scene of Roland's isolation and heroic death, Chesterton then presents us with his final elegiac paragraph—which, in the end, brings us back to the recent past and to an evocative sense of loss, as well as of the unending combat for the good. For, as the Book of Job has also earlier told us: “*Militia est vita hominis super terram.*” (Job 7:1)—“Warfare (chivalry) is the life of man upon the earth.” Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Laude Novae Militiae* (In Praise of the New Chivalry)! In Praise of the New Knighthood of Christ (circa 1128-1131), that is.

First speaking of the interior and exterior wounds of Roland and of Charlemagne in the conclusion of the *Song of Roland*, Chesterton tests us, too, and trenchantly says:

*That high note of forlorn hope, of a host at bay and a battle against the odds without end, is **the note on which the great French epic ends.** I know nothing more moving in poetry [not even the book of Job] than that strange and unexpected ending; that splendidly inconclusive conclusion. Charlemagne the Christian emperor has at last established his empire in quiet; has done justice almost in the manner of a day of judgment, and sleeps as it were upon his throne with a peace almost like that of Paradise. And there appears to him the angel of God crying aloud that his [martial] arms are needed in a new and distant land, and that he must take up again the endless march of his days. And the great king [recalling Job himself] tears his long white beard and cries out against his restless life. The poem ends, as it were with a vision and vista of wars against the barbarians; **and the vision is true. For that war is never ended, which defends the sanity of the world against all the stark anarchies and rending negations which rage against it** for ever. That war is never finished in this world; **and the grass has hardly grown on the graves of our own friends who fell in it.** (xii—my emphasis added)*