

JOB

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Introduction

A woman reading the Bible for the first time might wonder whether the book of Job would be worth her while. It appears to be another of those books in which men do all the talking. In fact, the only time a woman ventures to make a comment, she is silenced with the criticism that she talks like a fool. It would be a great mistake, however, for women to ignore the book of Job. When one reads it closely, some surprising things appear. What Job and his friends are debating turns out to include some important issues that feminist theology has been raising in recent years: the significance of personal experience as a source of religious insight, the importance and difficulty of solidarity among those who are oppressed, a critique of traditional models of God, and the relationship between human existence and the whole of creation.

Composition and Structure

Dates for the composition of Job have ranged from the tenth century B.C.E. to the second century B.C.E., although most scholars assume that the book was written during the early postexilic period, perhaps during the fifth century. As elusive as the date is the question of what kind of literature Job is. While it is usually associated with the wisdom books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Sirach, Job is unique within biblical literature.

The book of Job has a curious structure. The first two chapters, which introduce the characters and set up the plot, are written in a "once upon a time" style, almost like that of

a fairy tale. In these chapters Job appears as the traditional character of patient endurance, bearing his misfortunes with complete acceptance. In chap. 3, however, both the style and the character of Job change dramatically. The simple prose is replaced with beautiful but highly demanding poetry, and Job, no longer patient, begins to speak bitter, almost blasphemous words. From chap. 4 through chap. 27 Job and his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, argue with one another about the meaning of Job's misfortunes and what light they shed on the character of Job and of God. A poem on the inaccessibility of wisdom (chap. 28) provides an interlude before Job takes up his speech again to challenge God directly (chaps. 29–31). Although one expects God's response to follow immediately, instead there occurs the long speech of a fourth friend, Elihu, who has not previously been mentioned (chaps. 32–37). In all probability these chapters are a later addition to the book, provided by someone who thought he could do a better job of answering Job than the three friends. In the opinion of most subsequent readers, he does not. The climax of the book occurs in the speeches of God from the whirlwind and Job's response to them (chaps. 38:1–42:6). What is initially puzzling about the divine speeches is that they do not address Job's questions directly but are mostly concerned with an elaborate description of the created world. At the end of the speeches, however, Job retracts his accusations against God. The ending of the book (42:7–17) returns to the simple prose of the first chapters as it describes Job's restoration.

Religious Issues in Job

In the opening chapters Job's perfect character becomes the occasion for a disagreement between God and the *satan*. Not to be confused with the later Jewish and Christian figure of the devil, the *satan* in Job is a member of God's heavenly court whose functions are rather like those of a prosecuting attorney. The *satan* raises questions about the motivation of Job's piety, suggesting that Job is pious because God has blessed his life abundantly and that if all his blessings were suddenly destroyed, he would curse God. To determine the motivation of Job's piety, God permits two sets of disasters to befall Job: the loss of his possessions and his children, and the loss of his health. The notion of a wager in heaven at Job's expense is, of course, quite outrageous, but to dismiss the book as unworthy would be to miss an important experience. The book of Job is rather like a parable in that it tells its frankly outrageous tale for the purpose of disorienting and reorienting the perspectives of its readers.

The initial question of the book is whether truly disinterested piety exists. Job's behavior and responses in chaps. 1–2 seem to affirm that his piety is offered without expectation of reward. But once the friends arrive and Job

breaks the sympathetic silence of their presence with his harrowing curse on the day of his birth (chap. 3), the issues quickly become more complicated. Though all of them are ignorant of the events in heaven, Job and his three friends assume that his misfortunes come from God. The friends essentially understand Job's sufferings as either a punishment from God or a disciplinary warning. In either case they urge him to adopt a penitent and humble attitude, and they assure him that God will restore him if he turns to God in trust. But Job, who knows that he has not been guilty of any conduct that would warrant such punishment, cannot accept their advice. To do so would be to destroy his own integrity. Because he suffers without being guilty, Job can only conclude that either some enormous mistake has been made about him or, more disturbingly, that God is not a just god but rather a monstrous tyrant. The book had begun as an inquiry into the motives of human piety. Through the compelling speeches of Job it becomes an examination of the character of God. But God's response to Job once again reframes the issues, challenging the whole set of assumptions that Job and his friends had made the basis of their argument and offering a radically different model of God, creation, and human existence.

Comment

Women Characters in the Book of Job

Although they have only "bit parts," Job's daughters and his wife have long intrigued readers and commentators. Job's daughters seem to have a status within the family that is more prominent than what is typically assumed about the position of daughters in ancient Israel. Perhaps it is the author's way of underscoring the exceptional nature of everything that has to do with Job. In describing the cycle of banquets held by the seven sons of Job, the narrator specifically mentions that the sons would invite their three sisters to join the festivities (1:5). More intriguing is the note about the three daughters born to Job after his misfortunes. The narrator gives the names of each: Jemimah ("Dove"), Keziah ("Cinnamon"), and Keren-happuch ("Box of eye shadow"). Not only are they said to be exceptionally beautiful, Job gives them an inheritance among their brothers (42:14–15). That their inheritance is mentioned suggests that

it was not a customary practice. Later interpreters were fascinated by the mention of the daughters' inheritance. The *Testament of Job*, a Jewish writing from the first century B.C.E., speculates that Job gave his daughters golden sashes with mystical properties that allowed them to understand and speak the language of the angels.

It is Job's wife, however, who is of most interest as a female character. Her words to Job are radical and provocative: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die" (2:9). What she says echoes God's assessment of Job as one who persists in integrity (2:3b), but the course of action she urges would end the wager on the *satan's* terms (2:5). There is an ambiguity in her words, however, that is seldom recognized, one that revolves around the thematically crucial word "integrity." The term "integrity" (*tummah*) denotes a person whose conduct is in complete accord with moral and religious norms and whose character is one of utter honesty, without guile.

Job's wife's disturbing question hints at a tension between these two aspects of the word. Her question could be understood in two different senses. She could be heard as saying: "Do you still persist in your integrity (=righteousness)? Look where it has gotten you. Give it up, as God has given you up. Curse God, and then die." Or she could be understood as saying: "Do you still persist in your integrity (=honesty)? If so, stand by it and say what is truly in your heart. Curse God before you die." However Job has understood her words, his reply, criticizing her in the strongest terms ("you speak as any foolish woman would speak," 2:10) has generally set the tone for her evaluation by commentators from ancient times to the present.

There have occasionally been more sympathetic interpretations of her motives both among ancient and modern writers. The Septuagint gives her a longer speech in which she talks movingly of Job's sufferings and of her own. In the *Testament of Job* she is clearly a figure of pathos, whose sufferings and humiliations as she tries to provide for her ailing husband are vividly described. Even in these treatments, however, she remains a foil for the morally superior Job, who corrects her understanding. By making Job's wife a more sympathetic character, both the ancient writers and the modern commentators who follow their lead patronize her. Her words become "excusable," and consequently it is not necessary to take them seriously. What gets overlooked in this approach is that Job's wife is the one who recognizes, long before Job himself does, what is at stake theologically in innocent suffering: the conflict between innocence and integrity, on the one hand, and an affirmation of the goodness of God, on the other. It is the issue with which Job will struggle in the following chapters.

The honesty and religious radicalism of Job's wife have not been entirely overlooked, at least in modern literary rewritings of the story of Job. Robert Frost ("A Masque of Reason") portrays her as a sharp but rather shrewish proto-feminist. He hints at her "heretical" stance by naming her Thyatira, the city from which John's opponent, "Jezebel," came (see Rev. 2:20-25). In Archibald MacLeish's well-known play *J.B.*, it is Sarah, J.B.'s wife, who first understands and then expresses the humanistic, postreligious vision of the play.

Sarah: You wanted justice and there was none—Only love.

J.B.: [God] does not love. He Is.

Sarah: But we do. That's the wonder.*

Both in the original Hebrew book of Job and in many of the retellings of the story, Job's wife is the prototypical woman on the margin, whose iconoclastic words provoke defensive condemnation but whose insight serves as an irritant that undermines old complacencies.

Experience and the Critique of Tradition

It is interesting that Job's outburst against his wife is the last thing he says for some time. Apparently not acknowledging the presence of the three friends who come to comfort him, Job sits in silence for seven days. When he finally speaks in chap. 3, his words sound distinctly like those of his wife. Though he does not exactly curse God, he curses the day of his birth. Though he does not die, he speaks longingly of death. In the chapters that follow, his persistence in his integrity—both his moral righteousness and his honesty—motivates his angry, iconoclastic words. His wife's troubling questions have become his own.

In an ironic reversal Job's disturbing words provoke a defensive reaction from his friends, just as he had rebuked his wife. They attempt to recall him to reason, that is, to the received traditions that are accepted as common sense within their community. The friends' response to Job takes a variety of forms but is largely a variation on a few themes. Their fundamental conviction is that God acts in accordance with justice, treating persons as they deserve. At first they urge Job to steadfastness. Since he is basically a good man, he can rest assured that his misfortunes are but temporary, for God always protects the righteous from utter destruction (4:6-7; 5:19-22). Indeed, Job should even rejoice at his misfortunes, because they are the reproof and discipline of God (5:17), designed to alert him to hidden faults before they become fatal (33:15-18). In any event Job should not be astonished if God seems to treat him as unrighteous and impure; all creatures, even the angels, are so before God

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(4:17-21). Of course, as Job persists in what they perceive as his obstinacy, his friends gradually become convinced that Job is in fact a wicked man. Since only a sinner could talk as he does (15:4-6), they are warranted in charging him with serious moral offenses (22:2-11).

What is of interest to a feminist reading of Job is to notice the sources of authority upon which the friends ground their confident assurance that they know what is true. They appeal to common sense, what "everybody" knows ("Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?" 4:7), confident that their perceptions are the same as Job's ("See, we have searched this out; it is true. Hear, and know it for yourself," 5:27). Sometimes they cite anecdotal evidence ("I have seen . . .," 4:8; 5:3). Or they may argue deductively from what they assume are universally agreed principles ("Far be it from God that he should do wickedness. . . . For according to their deeds he will repay them. . . . Of a truth, God will not do wickedly . . .," 34:10-12). The friends buttress their own arguments with the weight of tradition ("For inquire now of bygone generations . . . for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing. . . . Will they not teach you and tell you . . .?" 8:8-10). Even the transcendent authority of revelation is invoked ("When deep sleep falls on mortals . . . a spirit glided past my face. . . . There was silence, then I heard a voice . . .," 4:13-16).

The friends' sources of authority are powerful ones, not to be discounted lightly. Where, then, does Job find the basis to contest their construction of reality? Although his arguments are sophisticated and varied, Job holds his ground for a single fundamental reason. He knows that his friends' common sense and their traditions, their rationality and their revelations are inconsistent with his own experience. For Job, to hold fast to his integrity means to insist on the validity and authority of his own experience, even when it seems to be contradicted by what all the world knows to be true.

What is at stake between Job and his friends should sound familiar to women. The sense of what is normative in a society—its highest values, its ideal of human nature, its notions of God—has been constructed largely on the basis of male experience. Women who have found that their experience is inconsistent with or not adequately described by these norms have often tended to discount their own experience. Where women's lives do not

fit the patterns of male experience, women are frequently judged to be defective or inferior. It has been one of the tasks of feminist thought to encourage women to hold fast to the integrity of their own experience.

To be sure, Job and his friends are not engaged in a debate about men's and women's experience. But what is important for feminist thought is that the issue of different sources of authority is explicitly raised in this book in such a way as to authenticate the crucial role of personal experience in the critique of received tradition. Although Job's own perceptions are incomplete and in need of correction, it is the friends and not Job who are rebuked for failing to speak truly (42:7).

The Moral World of Biblical Patriarchy and the Problem of Solidarity

For the author's purposes it was necessary that the hero of the book be a character at the top of the social order. The hero must be one who quite literally has everything to lose. It is scarcely surprising, then, that Job is depicted as a patriarch rather like Abraham, the wealthy and respected head of a large household with many dependents.

Readers are accustomed to thinking of Job as a universal character, at least as "everyman" if not "everywoman." Although it is certainly possible to gain insight into the human condition in general from the book, it is important to remember that Job experiences his suffering precisely as a patriarch. Without his really being aware of it, his sense of identity, his expectations about the world and his place in it, and even his image of God had all been shaped by his status in a particular social and moral order. When his world is shaken by the suffering he undergoes, it becomes possible to see something of the dimensions and the limitations of that world.

The term "patriarchy" is a problematic one, because it has been used in so many different contexts and for so many different purposes. It is not only a matter of male-female relationships but a whole set of social and moral arrangements in which authority resides primarily with older males. In Israel the basic social unit was the household, within which the senior male had considerable authority over its members. The social values of biblical patriarchy were what one could call paternalistic. Within the village or larger social

area, wealthier men also had responsibilities for those who could not provide for themselves and were subject to exploitation: traveling strangers, the poor of both sexes, but especially women and children who had no male to provide for them. In return for this patronage the patriarch received their loyalty and respect. Even more important, the patriarch received honor from his peers.

Maintaining the social order was also part of the responsibility of the senior males. Not only were they responsible for justice within their own households, but when issues of a broader community nature arose, the senior males would meet at the city gate to take counsel together and to adjudicate disputes (see, e.g., Ruth 4; Jeremiah 26). The prosperity and the dignity of these men were generally seen as divine approval for the proper fulfillment of their social responsibilities. Indeed, to a significant extent the biblical image of God is drawn from the model of the patriarch.

When Job's three friends come to comfort him, they form a group of society's most privileged members who are trying to make sense out of a disturbing disruption in their world. As they grope for an explanation, the three friends attempt to account for the way in which prosperity and loss, good and bad fortune, are distributed. It is not surprising that the three friends are convinced that people essentially get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Apparent discrepancies, such as Job's misfortunes, are merely temporary. Although they are not aware of it, their complacency about the order of their society is rooted in large measure in their own privileged position. They simply cannot see injustice in the world.

Job, however, has been shocked out of his own previous complacency by the wholly undeserved suffering he has experienced. Gradually he begins to see things from a different perspective, from the perspective of others who suffer. In a powerful speech in 24:1-17 Job describes the desperate condition of the very poor who are without food, shelter, or adequate clothing, exploited by those who hire them or lend to them and subject to repeated violence. Job draws particular attention to the plight of the widow and the orphan, for, then as now, women and children make up a disproportionate number of the poorest of the poor. Here Job stands in solidarity with all the wretched of the earth.

Readers who find Job's speech in 24:1-17 so moving are often disconcerted by his next

speech in chaps. 29-31. As he sums up his experiences and challenges God to confront him, Job no longer orients himself according to the suffering of the poor. Instead, as he speaks, he is very much the proud patriarch. It is a valuable speech, however, for anyone who wishes to understand the moral world of Israelite patriarchy. In chap. 29 Job recalls the days when all was well with him, contrasting them in chap. 30 with the misery of his present existence. In chap. 31 he challenges God through a series of oaths in which he vows to accept terrible curses upon himself if he has committed any of the sins he enumerates.

What Job remembers most fondly is the honor and deference he received from his peers. When he went to the city gate, not only would the young men withdraw before him; the elders would rise and stand, as everyone waited silently for Job to speak (29:7-10, 21-25). The reason Job commanded such respect did not have to do with wealth and power as such, but with the fact that he exercised his authority in order to bring relief to the weak: "I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper. . . . I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. . . . I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy. . . ." (29:12-16). Even in the nobility of Job's words, however, it becomes evident why true solidarity with the oppressed is an impossibility for Job. The moral world of ancient patriarchy was an essentially paternalistic and hierarchical one. It placed a high value on alleviating the distress of the poor and weak, but for the most part it could not conceive of the fundamental changes in the organization of society that would prevent the powerlessness and destitution that so often struck the widow and the orphan. This is not to accuse Job individually of moral failure; rather, it is to recognize the limitations of the very moral world that formed him.

An even less attractive face of patriarchy's moral world appears in the following chapter. The paternalism expressed in chap. 29 is an apparently benevolent form of hierarchical social relations. But social resentment lurks in even benevolent hierarchies, to be unleashed, as Job discovers, when a previously high-ranking member of the social order falls on hard times. "But now they make sport of me, men who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock. . . ." (30:1, 9, RSV). Job's scathing contempt for these lower-class people takes the form of mocking their poverty: "Through want and hard hunger

they gnaw the dry and desolate ground. . . . They are driven out from society; people shout after them as after a thief. In the gullies of wadis they must live, in holes in the ground, and in the rocks" (30:3, 5-6). Job's former solidarity with the poor seems to have evaporated before his perception that his honor—the most precious possession a man could have in his moral world—has been trampled by those without honor.

Similarly, Job's great oath in chap. 31 is a virtual catalogue of the values of ancient Israel's patriarchal society. Job swears that he has never engaged in deceit for the sake of greed (31:5-8) nor overvalued wealth (31:24-25). He has respected the daughters and wives of other men (31:1-4, 9-12). Within his own household he has upheld justice (31:13-15), and never has he taken legal advantage of the powerless (31:21-23). He has been generous to the poor (31:16-20), hospitable to the stranger (31:32), responsible to his land (31:38-40). He has not engaged in idolatry (31:26-28), nor exulted over his enemies' misfortune (31:29-31), nor hidden his own transgressions (31:33-34). But for all the genuine nobility of this inventory of moral values, a modern woman cannot but feel aghast at the oath Job takes in defense of his sexual integrity: "If my loins were seduced by a woman and I loitered at my neighbor's door—let any man take my wife and grind in between her thighs!" (31:9-10, trans. Mitchell, p. 73). Job's words are in keeping with the patriarchal perspective that saw a woman's sexuality as the property of her husband and an abuse of it as an injury to the husband rather than to the woman herself (see the commentary on Leviticus).

Although modern readers are critical of the proprietary view of women in Job 29-31 and of the way concern for honor tends to translate into social resentment and contempt, there is little indication that an ancient audience would have so reacted. For them, chaps. 29-31 would have presented Job in the noblest possible terms—a model patriarch. He is, as God has described him, a man who "fears God and turns from evil" (1:8).

Models of God

There is one important respect in which Job's patriarchal assumptions are put in question by the book. Job's mounting frustration with God comes from his expectation that God should

behave toward him as Job behaves toward his own dependents. Job had envisioned God in his own image, as a sort of divine patriarch. It is a model of God drawn from the highest and best that ancient Near Eastern culture could imagine. Job had expected God to be benevolent and paternal, but above all Job had expected God to be just, intervening directly to vindicate righteous conduct and punish wickedness. Repeatedly, Job's language has turned to legal metaphors as he imagines coming before God (chaps. 9-10; 13; 16; 19; 23). Job knows how he has conducted himself in the seat of judgment (29:12-17) and when he heard complaints within his own household (31:13-15). Despite his own recent inexplicable experiences, he clings to the belief that God will yet vindicate him, if he can summon God to judgment.

The radicalness of the book of Job lies in this: the rejection of Job's model of God as inadequate. The God who meets Job in chaps. 38-41 is not the great patriarch Job had anticipated. That the book remains a difficult challenge to modern readers is an indication of the extent to which the model of God as patriarch still prevails.

Whereas Job's speeches were oriented to themes of rights and injustices in the human realm and to a God who should see that justice is always done, God speaks of the ordering of creation: the foundation of the earth; the birthing of the sea; the ordering of day and night; and the mysteries of water in its myriad forms of snow, hail, rain, frost, and dew. Already in this section there is a hint of the strategy by which God attempts to reorient Job. Although tradition spoke of the giving and withholding of rain as a response to human conduct (e.g., Amos 4:7-8), here God speaks of the rain that falls in the desert where no human lives (38:25-27).

Job's categories have been too narrow, his conception of God hopelessly anthropocentric. That is to say, both Job and his friends had assumed that God primarily *reacts* to human conduct, a view of the world that puts the individual human being at its center. God's education of Job continues as God turns to speak of the animals for whom God has provided (38:39-39:30). These are not domestic animals but wild ones—the lion, the raven, the mountain goat, the wild ox, the ostrich, and so on. God quite evidently delights in their very wildness and their freedom from human use—another implicit criticism of

Job's exclusively anthropocentric views. Images of birth, nurture, and vitality abound. This is, however, an unsentimental view of the natural world in which food for the lion's cubs and the eagle's nestlings means the shedding of blood.

Job's categories of rights and wrongs and his conception of God as a larger version of himself are simply inadequate to encompass the vision God shows him. The egocentricity of Job's view is underscored in the concluding speeches as God describes the wondrous legendary creatures Behemoth and Leviathan (chaps. 40–41), reminding Job that Behemoth is one of God's creatures as well as Job and that Leviathan too is a creature proud, fearless, and magnificent (much as Job had presented himself in chap. 31).

For all the beauty of the divine speeches, many readers are disturbed by the fact that God's reply does not directly address Job's questions. Truly, God does not tell Job how to think through the issues of suffering and oppression—that remains a human task. What God has done by ignoring Job's way of posing the question is to illumine the inadequacy of Job's starting point, his legal model of rights and faults and his image of God as the great patriarch. From Job's perspective, innocent suffering had to imply the injustice of God. The divine speeches hint at a different perspective. Moral and theological thinking after Job 38–41 has to begin with a new image of God and a new image of the world that can be glimpsed in these speeches. This new image is one of God as a power for life, balancing the needs of all creatures, not just humans, cherishing freedom, full of fierce love and delight for each thing without regard for its utility, acknowledging the deep interconnectedness of death and life, restraining and nurturing each element in the ecology of all creation. It is a description of God and the world that has strong points of contact with contemporary feminist thought.

Job's verbal response to the divine speeches, though somewhat enigmatic, is certainly a retraction of his earlier accusations and an embrace of this new vision of God (42:1–6). His trust in a new understanding of reality is given concrete expression as this previously isolated and alienated sufferer reestablishes relationships. Not only is he reconciled with God, he also prays to God for his friends, receives his brothers and sisters, and becomes a father to ten more children (42:7–17). Women may regret that nothing is explicitly said about Job's wife, but her own outspoken integrity, as much as her husband's, remains a model for those who seek truth.

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