

"I Had Heard of You . . . But Now My Eye Sees You": Re-Visioning Job's Wife

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ABSTRACT

Job's wife has suffered a long history of unjust marginalisation. The few words she utters in her brief appearance in the book of Job have largely been heard negatively by many commentators of the text, who have either vilified or simply ignored her as a result. Accordingly, she has come to be seen as a minor character who is mostly irrelevant to the interpretation of the book as a whole. By contrast, William Blake's artistic exposition of the book of Job imaginatively sees Job's wife in a radical new light. His re-visioning of her invites a fresh consideration of her presence and influence within the book as a whole. The references to Job's wealth, social status, children, daughters and his agonised outburst at the start of the poetry section all point to the pervasive influence of Job's wife within the book. The picture that emerges is of a woman of strength and insight who shaped the lives of her husband and children in significant ways, drawing them into a transformed perspective of the world in which the beauties and ambiguities of life can be celebrated. Such a re-visioning of Job's wife enables a fresh hearing of her words, in which she emerges as a key character in the interpretation of the book. Indeed, she can be seen as none other than the forerunner of God as she courageously sows the seeds of a bold new understanding of faith that will be fleshed out in the divine speeches in all its vibrant, stirring glory, and will finally lead to Job's transformation.

A INTRODUCTION

If the book of Job were made into a movie, it's unlikely that many leading actresses would line up to audition for the part of Job's wife.¹ Hers could hardly be described as an illustrious role. It is the shortest of all the speaking parts in the book – just six words in the original Hebrew.² She makes the briefest of appearances that spans a mere two verses, and then exits the set never to

¹ In similar vein, Carol Newsom evocatively imagines a theatrical production of the book of Job. See Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 259-260.

² The Septuagint adds to the words of Job's wife, in what Clines describes as "...an example of the midrashic tendency to provide details about minor characters and to elaborate brief speeches." See David J. Clines, *Job 1-20* (WBC 17; Dallas: Word, 1989), 53.

be heard of or mentioned in the book again.³ And what she does say is summarily dismissed by Job as the sort of utterance that could be expected of "any foolish woman" (2:10).⁴

This marginal place given to Job's wife within the text has been entrenched with her continued marginalisation by commentators of the text. Many of these, following the example of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar (2:11-13), simply ignore Job's wife.⁵ Their silence confirms the judgement that she is largely irrelevant to the message of the book as a whole. Others enlist her as a cohort of Satan.⁶ Augustine described her as the "devil's assistant" (*diabolic adjutrix*) and Calvin called her "Satan's tool."⁷ Thomas Aquinas and John Chrysostom shared the view that the devil spared Job's wife so as to use her as a scourge to afflict him more acutely.⁸ Gerald West says it well when he references the "...long history of interpretation in which Job's wife has been severely battered."⁹ It is telling that even within many feminist and gendered readings of the OT in which the oft-neglected stories of women in the OT are recovered and redeemed from the male-centered interpretations to which they have often been subjected, Job's wife is conspicuous by her absence.¹⁰

³ The reference to further sons and daughters being born to Job (42:13) assumes the presence and participation of Job's wife, though she is not mentioned explicitly. There is a tradition that asserts that these children were born to another woman whom Job married following the death of his first wife. See F. Rachel Magdalene, "Job's Wife as Hero: A Feminist-Forensic Reading of the Book of Job," *BibInt* 14/3 (2006): 242. Job does make two passing references to his wife in the poetry section of the book - in 19:17 when he says, "My breath is repulsive to my wife" and in 31:9-10 when he says, "If my heart has been enticed by another woman. . . then let my wife grind for another, and let other men kneel over her."

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all chapter and verse references are from the book of Job, and all scriptural citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

⁵ Clines, *Job 1-20*, xlix.

⁶ An enduring anachronism in the interpretation of the prose narrative is the rendering of the Hebrew *hassātān* with the proper noun Satan, a figure that emerged only in later Jewish and Christian theology. In the book of Job *hassātān* is a member of the heavenly court, a subordinate of Yahweh and one who acts under Yahweh's authority. See Clines, *Job 1-20*, 20.

⁷ Clines, *Job 1-20*, 51.

⁸ Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Text, Translation and Notes* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1965), 22.

⁹ Gerald O. West, "Hearing Job's Wife: Towards a Feminist Reading of Job," *OTE* 4 (1991): 107. For an example of a relatively recent, crassly misogynist assault of Job's wife see the vitriolic attack by Victor Sasson, "The Literary and Theological Function of Job's Wife in the Book of Job," *Bib* 79 (1998): 86-90.

¹⁰ See, for example, Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998); Alice Bach,

More sympathetic readings of Job's wife have emerged more recently. Some commentators have read her words as being motivated by pity for her husband. Terrien suggests that she was compassionately proposing a "...theological method of committing euthanasia."¹¹ Alden suggests that, in the light of her own suffering and pain, readers should "...not be too hard on her."¹²

West takes this further with an impassioned appeal for a reading of the book of Job that will seek to hear the cries of despair, agony, pain, frustration, rejection, confusion and outrage that are all part of this woman's untold story.¹³ He does not purport to do a feminist reading of Job on the grounds that he is a male¹⁴ which begs the question whether feminist readings, by definition, are the exclusive purview of women. Alice Bach writes:

Turning the text on its head is what feminists do. Any time *any* reader reads against the grain of the text, reads with a suspicious eye toward how the narrator wants you to read, you are performing a feminist reading. Focusing on the presence or absence of women in the text makes the reading a gendered one, not the eyes of a woman reading the text.¹⁵ [My emphasis, R.S.]

However West's reading may be characterised, his appeal to hear Job's wife not just as an incidental character in somebody else's [a man's] narrative but as a person in her own right with a compelling story of her own to tell, resonates with the concerns of a feminist hermeneutic that seeks to recover the place of women in a male-dominated world.¹⁶

The intention of this paper is to pursue a reading of Job's wife that seeks to recover her place within the male-dominated landscape of the book as a whole. As such, imaginatively **hearing** her own story of suffering and pain is not enough. What is needed is to **see** how her story intersects with Job's, and how her influence ultimately contributes to Job's transformation.

Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader (New York: Routledge, 1999); J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993); Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2005).

¹¹ Cited in Clines, *Job 1-20*, 51.

¹² Robert L. Alden, *Job* (NAC 11; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 66.

¹³ West, "Hearing Job's Wife," 119.

¹⁴ West, "Hearing Job's Wife," 107.

¹⁵ Alice Bach, "Man's World, Woman's Place: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (ed. Alice Bach; New York: Routledge, 1999), xxvi.

¹⁶ Bach, "Man's World," xiii.

B HEARING AND SEEING

One of the climactic moments of the book occurs when Job, in response to the divine speeches, says to Yahweh:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you. (42:5)

Repeatedly through the dialogue with his friends Job sought a hearing with God (cf. 9:16; 13:3, 22; 19:7; 23:3-6.) Yet, at the conclusion of the poetry section, in the final words of Job recorded in the book, he attests that the decisive shift occurred for him not through what was heard, but through what was seen. Naturally, being a literary text what the book of Job records are the *words* of Yahweh, amongst many other words. But these words, which by definition are heard, evoke for Job a visionary experience in which he comes to "see" God, the world and his own life in a whole new way.

In similar vein, it could be said that Job's wife has been heard of by the hearing of the ear, but until our eyes *see* her, the fullness of her richly nuanced personhood and the significance of her place and purpose in the book will be lost.¹⁷

C SEEING JOB'S WIFE - THE EXPOSITION OF WILLIAM BLAKE

¹⁷ In her masterful work *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, Newsom argues eloquently and persuasively for a reading of the book of Job that takes seriously the generic character of the various elements that make up the book as a whole. Hearing the diverse voices that make up this polyphonic text in their own right requires a careful assessment of the distinctive genres in which these voices occur. Accordingly, the characterisation of the genre of the prose tale is a critical issue in assessing the place and purpose of the characters within it, not least of which is Job's wife. The failure to do so could result in rhetorical functions being attributed to characters that are anomalous to the generic function of the texts in which they appear. For instance, if the prose tale is read as a straightforward didactic narrative, within such a generic framework the characters all play their parts in a mechanical, stylized and unambiguous way. See Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, 41-47. As such, a nuanced reading of Job's wife would be incongruous with the intentions of this generic form. Alternatively, if the prose tale is read as a subversive didactic narrative, the door is opened for more nuanced readings of the role and function of different characters. In her earlier commentary on the book of Job, Newsom states that "The literary genius of the prose tale is that one genuinely cannot say whether it intends to be a straightforward didactic tale. . . or . . . a subversive didactic tale." See Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections*, (ed. Leander E. Keck, Fred B. Craddock and C. Clifton Black; vol. 4 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 361.

In 1826 William Blake published a series of twenty-one engraved prints illustrating the book of Job.¹⁸ The series offers an unparalleled visual commentary of the book as a whole, expounding themes and scenes from both the prose and poetry sections. A startling feature of this opus is the manner in which Job's wife is portrayed. In eighteen of the twenty-one illustrations, Job's wife is by his side.¹⁹ When the messengers tell Job his misfortune (1:13-19), she is there. When Job is inflicted with boils (2:7), she is there. When the friends arrive to comfort Job (2:11-13), she is there. When Job curses the day of his birth (3:1-3), she is there. And so it continues. When Job is rebuked by his friends, and castigated by Elihu, and finally answered by the LORD out of the whirlwind (38:1), his wife is there. Indeed, as Job is drawn into a vision of the cosmos through the divine speeches, and is shown Behemoth and Leviathan (40:15-41:34), his wife is there to share this revelation that is given him. And in the depictions of Job's restoration (42:7-17), his wife is a central figure.

The simple fact of the presence of Job's wife in every aspect of the unfolding drama of the book, as Blake interprets it, is remarkable in its own right. But Blake's portrayal of Job's wife goes beyond a formulaic rendering of an ever-present, faithful wife – as if she were merely a mechanical appendage or obligatory placeholder in the narrative. No. She is portrayed with a full range of emotions and responses that conveys that she is a complex person in her own right who is an active (albeit silent) participant in all that is taking place.

We see her disposition of serene devotion when the initial peace and prosperity of Job's household is described.²⁰ We see her heart-rending anguish when the horrific news of the messengers is received. We see her sorrowful concern as Job leans against her for support on the ash heap. We see her hiding her face when Job cries out in despair, cursing the day of his birth. We see her looking on with incredulous disbelief as Job's friends point accusing fingers of

¹⁸ There is an additional engraving in the series that serves as a title page, making a total of twenty-two engravings in the collection as a whole. These engravings originated from an earlier set of watercolours on the same theme produced by Blake in 1806. The watercolours of 1806 were subsequently copied and recoloured in 1821, forming a second set. The entire collection of engravings and watercolours can be viewed online. See Wikipedia Contributors, "William Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job," n.p. [cited 27 January 2013]. Online: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Blake%27s_Illustrations_of_the_Book_of_Job.

¹⁹ Of the three illustrations in the collection where Job's wife is not present, one is a depiction of Job's sons and daughters being overwhelmed by Satan in which Job himself is absent (cf. 1:18-19), one is a depiction of Job's evil dreams (cf. 7:14), and the third is a depiction of Job and his three daughters (cf. 42:13-15).

²⁰ A telling detail of this first engraving is that there is an open book on each of the laps of Job and his wife. If these books are a reference to God's Law, then Blake would appear to be making the assertion that Job's wife read and studied the Law in her own right. She is presented here as Job's companion and his equal.

rebuke at him. We see her clenching her hands and hiding her face as Elihu launches into his diatribe. We see her eyes wide open in wonder as the LORD speaks out of the whirlwind. We see her hands pressed gently together in a gesture of prayer, and her tranquil face uplifted to God whose hands extend over her and Job in benediction. We see her playing a stringed instrument alongside Job as their restored family makes music together in the final engraving of the series.

The wide range of emotion exhibited by Job's wife underscores the point that she was not just a casual bystander to what was going on, but was intimately and personally involved with all that Job was experiencing. Indeed, it could be argued that she exhibits a richer range of appropriate emotion even than that which Job himself displays. In a majority of the illustrations Job is depicted with a very similar countenance that could be described as a mixture of raw grief and the numbing shock of the proverbial "deer caught in the headlights." The impression is created that Job has been anaesthetised by his pain, whereas his wife feels it, and holds it. The point should not be overstated, especially given the eloquence and passion of Job's speeches in the book which refute any suggestion that he was paralysed by his pain. But at the very least, the nuanced responses of Job's wife, as portrayed in Blake's illustrations, make the case powerfully that she was as fully present to the *meaning* of the unfolding drama as could be humanly expected.

There will be those who will dismiss Blake's interpretation of the place and purpose of Job's wife as nothing more than the fanciful construction of an overly-active artistic mind that has no foundation within the text itself. Certainly, Blake's capacity to see Job's wife throughout the story is a function of his artistic imagination. But like all good imaginative interpretations it invites readers of the text to return to the text and re-read it with eyes and ears attuned to the shadows and echoes of Job's wife that are there, that might previously have been missed.

D SEEING JOB'S WIFE IN THE TEXT

The only explicit reference to the presence of Job's wife in the book is found in 2:9-10, where her brief speech to Job and his response is recorded. I will return to this speech of hers later. But apart from this explicit reference, are there other traces of the presence and influence of Job's wife that can be identified in the text? I will consider five possibilities: Job's wealth; Job's social status; Job's children; Job's daughters; and Job's first speech in the poetry section.²¹

²¹ Methodologically, much of what follows could be described as a "behind-the-text" reading which focuses on the sociological world that lies behind the text. See Gerald O. West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), 24.

1 Job's Wealth

In the opening verses of the book Job is described as a man of considerable wealth, possessing large numbers of sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys and servants. Significantly, his wealth is described in largely agrarian categories, locating him firmly within an agrarian economic milieu akin to that of early Israel.²² Such agrarian economies within the ancient Near East were highly labour-intensive, making large families a critical economic requirement.²³ The reproductive capacity of Job's wife therefore had a direct bearing on his economic wellbeing. Indeed, immediately prior to his material wealth being described, we read in 1:2 that Job had no fewer than ten children. In the context of an agrarian economy akin to that of early Israel, this detail had significant economic implications for Job and his entire household, for which his wife, as child-bearer, was directly responsible.

In her discussion on the role of women within the domestic economy of early Israel, Carol Meyers makes the point that a woman's contribution to a family's domestic economy was not limited to the crucial role of child-bearer, but "... involved all aspects of economic life: in producing, transforming and allocating resources."²⁴ If the agrarian domestic economy of early Israel provides any basis for understanding Job's domestic situation, then we can conclude that Job's wife played a direct and immediate part in the building of Job's wealth.

The text, however, attributes Job's fortune to God. This is made explicit in the epilogue where we read that "... the LORD restored the fortunes of Job" (42:10). In the prologue, the connection between Job's wealth and God is more

²² The attempt to locate precisely the book of Job within a specific geographic and historical context is not my concern here. The geographic location of the land of Uz (1:1) is not certain, with various suggestions having been made that it lay either to the south or to the northeast of Israel. See Newsom, *The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections*, 344. What is clear is that a non-Israelite locality is presupposed, strengthened by the use of the foreign-sounding name "Job." Newsom writes, "Job's archaic name and foreign homeland help to establish a sense of narrative distance, which facilitates the presentation of Job as a paradigmatic figure." See Newsom, "Introduction," 345. Yet, Job is presented as a servant and devotee of Yahweh (1:8, 20-21), inviting the Israelite audience to identify with him, albeit from a distance. As such, although the exact geographic and historical context is indeterminate, a broad correspondence between the social contexts of Job's world and that of early Israel can be assumed as far as the rhetorical function of the text is concerned.

²³ Carol Meyers, "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Alice Bach; New York: Routledge, 1999), 37.

²⁴ Meyers, "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel," 39. See further the wisdom hymn in Prov 31:10-31, which celebrates the virtues of a capable wife whose sphere of influence and authority extends to many dimensions of the economic wellbeing of the household.

ambiguous, with a possible causal link being suggested between Job's piety and his prosperity.²⁵ However God's part in the creation of Job's initial prosperity is understood, this need not negate the role of Job's wife in that project, for she could be seen as one of the instruments that God used. Similarly, the restoration of Job's economic fortunes in the epilogue, whilst explicitly attributed to God, need not exclude the agency of his wife. (Another aspect of Job's restoration – the birth of more children [42:13] – assumes the agency of his wife. This will be discussed below.)

It could therefore be concluded that the references to Job's wealth – both in its initial creation and final restoration – point to the presence, influence and unique contribution of Job's wife. If Job's prosperity is understood as the blessing of God, then by implication his wife should rightly be seen as an instrument of God's blessing. A far cry indeed from Augustine's assessment of her as the devil's assistant!

2 Job's Social Status

The description of Job's considerable wealth in the first few verses of the book concludes with the assertion in 1:3 that he was ". . . the greatest of all the people of the east." His greatness should not be understood purely in economic terms, but should be seen as a measure of his considerable social standing, of which his material wealth was but a part.

By his own designation, he was one who was highly respected in the community as a person of authority, who championed the cause of the poor and the needy.

When I went out to the gate of the city,
 when I took my seat in the square,
 the young men saw me and withdrew,
 and the aged rose up and stood. . .
 because I delivered the poor who cried,
 and the orphan who had no helper. . .
 I chose their way, and sat as chief,
 and I lived like a king among his troops,
 like one who comforts mourners. (29:7-8, 12, 25)

Even Eliphaz, who through the course of the human dialogue (chs. 3-27) will grow increasingly antagonistic towards Job, begins his opening speech by acknowledging the supportive, authoritative role that Job assumed within the community:

²⁵ Newsom makes the point that the first word of 1:2 (the conjunction *wē*) could be translated "and so," establishing a direct causal relationship between his piety (and by extension God) and his wealth. See Newsom, "Introduction," 345.

You have instructed many;
you have strengthened the weak hands.
Your words have supported those who were stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble knees. (4:3-4)

Job's stature within his community points to the presence and positive influence of his wife in at least two ways. Firstly, the very fact that Job had the capacity to extend himself within the wider social sphere as an elder within the community is evidence of the stability and economic well-being within his own household. Simply put, Job was free to exercise civic responsibility because his subsistence needs and those of his household were being adequately attended to. The wisdom hymn in Prov 31:10-31 offers a compelling insight in this regard. In lauding the virtues of a capable wife, which include her oversight of the household's economic activities, the hymn makes this reference to the husband of such a wife:

Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land. (Prov 31:23)

In an earlier paper exploring the male-female balance in ancient Israel, Meyers considers the three basic societal activities of procreation, production and protection and the energies invested in each by both men and women in pre-monarchic Israelite society.²⁶ When males were required to invest more energy in the activities of protection – for instance, going off to battle in times of war – this necessitated a greater investment in the activities of production on the part of women. A different way of understanding this is that as women invested themselves more fully in the activities of production, this enabled the males to expend more energy in the activities of protection.

The male-dominated activities of protection were not limited to warfare, but included the just ordering of the wider community in general and the protection of the poor and marginalised in particular. This is a role that Job seems to have played with distinction within his community. His capacity to do so was in no small measure a consequence of the support and succour offered him by his wife.

Secondly, Job's eminent social status reflects on his wife in that it speaks of his credibility in the eyes of his community, a credibility in which she was positively implicated and to which she made a singular contribution. Job's

²⁶ Carol Meyers, "Procreation, Production and Protection: Male-Female Balance in Early Israel," *JAAR* 51/4 (1983): 569-593.

standing and authority within the community would surely have been compromised were his wife regarded as being even of questionable repute.²⁷

3 Job's Children

The most obvious implicit referent to Job's wife in the book must surely be Job's children – for they are, of course, her children too.²⁸ This simple observation is especially significant given the reference in 42:13 to further sons and daughters being born to Job. This presupposes the agency of Job's wife, thereby establishing her presence at the end of the story and not just at its beginning. Before considering the significance of these children in the epilogue, the first set of children needs to be examined for the clues they provide for seeing Job and his wife more clearly.

The children in the prologue represent for Job a source of existential anxiety over which he tries to exercise some measure of control. The first thing we learn about these children is their appetite for a party (1:4). Viewed positively, Job's sons exhibit a remarkable degree of harmonious mutuality in which their sisters are intentionally included in their times of shared festivity. Given the common OT theme of conflict between brothers (for example, Cain and Abel in Gen 4; Jacob and Esau in Gen 27; Absalom and Amnon in 2 Sam 13; Adonijah and Solomon in 1 Kgs 1-2),²⁹ Job could well give thanks for his sons and daughters' ability to get along and their capacity for celebration. However, he doesn't see it that way. For Job, his children's festivities are a source of deep anxiety that threaten the very foundation of his world.³⁰ It is telling that the first words of Job recorded in the book are these: "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed³¹ God in their hearts" (1:5). As a precau-

²⁷ For a treatment of the themes of honour, shame and social status in antiquity from a gendered perspective see Zeba Crook, "Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited," *JBL* 128/3 (2009): 591-611.

²⁸ See footnote 3 above concerning the tradition that the further children born to Job (42:13) were those of a second wife.

²⁹ See Newsom, "Introduction," 345.

³⁰ The precise occasion and character of these feasts are unclear. Newsom suggests that "... what is referred to here is a cycle of banquets lasting several days, hosted by each son on the occasion of his birthday." See Newsom, "Introduction," 345. If correct, this adds weight to the positive dimension of their celebration, and stands in sharp contrast to Job cursing his birth day in 3:1. If these were birthday celebrations, it begs the question why Job was not invited. Maybe he was but refused to attend. Maybe he just wasn't that much fun to have around at a party.

³¹ The Hebrew word that is translated here as "cursed" is in fact the word "blessed" (*bārak*) which is used euphemistically, thereby introducing a note of ambiguity into the very notion of blessing. There are seven occurrences of this word in the prose narrative (1:5, 10, 11, 21; 2:5, 9; 42:12), requiring the reader to decide when it is being used literally or euphemistically. See Newsom, "Introduction," 346.

tion and a safeguard, he would sacrifice burnt offerings on their behalf whenever their days of feasting were over (1:5).

The contrast between the dispositions of Job and his children could not be more marked. Job, who has already been identified as "blameless and upright" (1:1), seems to operate out of a worldview characterised by the fear of giving offence, even unwittingly, to God.³² Consequently, there is a sense of strict control that he exercises over every aspect of his life.³³ This control is evident, not only in his acts of piety on behalf of his children, but especially in his response following the news of the calamities that had befallen him (1:20-22).³⁴ His children, by contrast, seem unconstrained by such religious sensibilities. They exhibit a remarkable proclivity towards feasting and merriment, unfettered by their father's anxiety on their behalf.

The question arises – how is this distinction between Job and his children in the prologue explained? Are these children of his hedonistic reprobates exhibiting the rebelliousness of adolescence, or worse, a callous, obstinate indifference to the faith of their father? Has Job failed in his paternal responsibility to raise morally upright children who honour him with their obedience? Such possibilities gravitate against the tenor of the narrative tale which seeks to make the point that the sufferings that befell Job were not the result of any wickedness or inadequacy – neither his nor his children's. If his children's festive behavior cannot be explained as rebelliousness or wickedness, then the most likely alternative is that they were operating out of a radically different worldview from that of their father. A worldview unregimented by rigid rules and the fearful consequences of breaking them, but free to risk delight, to celebrate the pleasures of being alive and of being family together.

How would such a worldview have been formed within them? The most plausible explanation is that this was a consequence of their mother's influence. She was the one whose very body brought them into the world and who nursed them at her breast. In a very direct way, the life that was in them was nurtured

³² Job's concern for his children was not simply that they might curse God, but that they might curse God in their hearts (1:5). This introduces the possibility of them unthinkingly or even unconsciously cursing God.

³³ The numbers of his children (ten, in the ratio of seven to three), his sheep and camels (ten thousand, in the same ratio of seven to three), and his oxen and donkeys (one thousand), 1:2-3, are clearly symbolic numbers suggesting completeness and perfection. See Newsom, "Introduction," 345. It could be argued that such a precise estate points to a deep need to exercise control.

³⁴ Vogels characterises Job's actions and words in 1:20-22 as empty, conventional rites and superficial, formulaic religious responses, rather than the authentic outpourings of a grieving heart. See Walter Vogels, "Job's Empty Pious Slogans," in *The Book of Job* (ed. Willem A. Beuken; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994), 369-376.

by the life that was in her. This extends way beyond the merely physical dimensions of existence. As Janzen puts it, ". . . behind the human mother's breast stands the breast of God."³⁵ At the very least, the capacity within Job's children to celebrate life in the way in which they did hints at the kind of woman they had for a mother who nurtured this capacity within them.

We turn now to consider the significance of the children in the epilogue, and the ways they too enable us to see Job and his wife more clearly. If Job's further children at the end of the story (42:13) are seen merely as "replacements" for his earlier children, what will be missed is the transformation in Job that their very existence signals. Ellen Davis writes:

. . . the clearest expression of the renewal of Job's mind is not anything he says. It is his willingness to have more children. I have heard it said in modern Israel that the most courageous act of faith the Jews have ever performed was to have babies after the Holocaust, to trust God with more defenseless children. The note at the end of the book that Job had seven sons and three daughters is often considered to be a cheap parting shot – as though God could make it all up by giving Job another set of children to replace the ones who were lost. But that is to judge the last scene of the book from the wrong side. This book is not about justifying God's actions; it is about Job's transformation. It is useless to ask how much (or how little) it costs God to give more children. The real question is how much it costs Job to become a father again.³⁶

According to Davis, the decision to have more children would have been costly for Job. But it would also have been costly for Job's wife to become a mother again – and not just because of the physical demands upon her body and the personal risks associated with a further ten pregnancies.³⁷ The emotional pain of a mother losing all ten her children at once cannot be overstated. Such a trauma would change her forever, leaving a mark that would never be erased. The decision for such a mother to have more children would have been an agonising one, with each new birth being a bitter-sweet reminder of her previous loss. Yet, as hinted at in the nature of the first set of children, Job's wife was surely someone with an appetite for life. Together with Job she has more children – a transformative experience for him in which she draws him over to a different way of being in the world, which she had always embodied.

³⁵ J. Gerald Janzen, *At the Scent of Water: The Ground of Hope in the Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 76.

³⁶ Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (London: Cowley Publications, 2001), 141-142.

³⁷ It is not my concern here to consider the literal plausibility of the narrative tale and the implications of one woman having a total of twenty children.

The nature of Job's transformation, in which his wife plays such a significant part,³⁸ is further elucidated in his relationship with his three new daughters – a relationship in which the presence and influence of his wife can also be recognised.

4 Job's Daughters

The curious detail about Job's daughters in 42:14-15 provides a key interpretive clue as to the change that Job has undergone and the influence of his wife in that change. The significance of these verses is often overlooked. Bruce Zuckerman, for example, writes:

There are elements in the story (especially in the Epilogue) that seem completely extraneous. . . . The most obvious example is the discussion of Job's daughters in 42:14-15. One could excise these verses from the conclusion of Job's story without any adverse effect. One could even make a good case that this tightening of the narrative line would be a distinct benefit, since it would make the conclusion more direct and simple, thereby heightening its overall impact.³⁹

It is my contention that this "extraneous" element of the story in fact provides an important and indispensable insight into the nature of Job's transformation. It comprises three aspects – the naming of his daughters, the description of their considerable beauty and his granting them an inheritance along with their brothers. Job breaks with biblical norms by naming his daughters – the only instance in the Hebrew Bible where this occurs.⁴⁰ What is more, the names he gives his daughters are daringly sensuous. The first he named Jemimah, which means "dove"; the second Keziah, which means "cassia," a fragrant spice of the cinnamon family;⁴¹ and the third Keren-happuch, which means "horn of eyeshadow," a cosmetic (42:14). The next verse then goes on to describe their considerable beauty, stating that "In all the land there were no women as beautiful as Job's daughters" (42:15), and concludes with the aston-

³⁸ For a further treatment of the role of Job's wife in the transformation of Job, see Ellen van Wolde, "The Development of Job: Mrs Job as Catalyst," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 201-221.

³⁹ Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 159.

⁴⁰ David J. Clines, *Job 38 – 42* (WBC 18b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 1238.

⁴¹ The common noun "cassia" occurs in Ps 45:8 as a *hapax legomenon*, where it refers to the scenting of the king's robes for the marriage ceremony. See Richard E. Averbeck, "7904 קצ'יעה," *NIDOTTE* 3: 961.

ishing detail about them being given an inheritance by their father along with their brothers.⁴²

Clearly, Job's eyes have been opened to see his daughters in a whole new light. Unconstrained by cultural convention or the need to "play it by the book," he goes public with his broadened perspective of who they really are, recognising their individuality, celebrating their beauty, affirming their importance, redefining their place and honouring their rightful entitlements within his reconfigured world.

This newfound capacity to see his daughters in fresh ways is perhaps the most compelling evidence of the transformation that Job has undergone. His encounter with the LORD in the whirlwind was certainly the decisive moment of this transformation, but the enduring presence and influence of his wife, who already embodied the perspectives of this new worldview, surely played a complementary part in that work of transformation. Could it be that in his daughters, Job was now able to recognise a reflection of his wife?

Some (feminist) commentators decry the insinuation that it was the daughters' physical beauty that prompted Job to give them an inheritance, and see in this a perpetuation of a patriarchal worldview in which women's value is defined according to their sexual appeal. Willcox writes:

. . . what we have emphasized here is *not* the liberation of woman to become an equal to man, but painted, perfumed, sexual beauty. Job's old age is blessed with the almost illicit pleasure of sexually attractive daughters.⁴³

However, to limit the daughters' beauty to something merely physical in a sexually objectified way is to diminish and demean the expansive nature of true beauty. Certainly, there is a femininity to this beauty. Indeed, it is no coincidence that these are *female* characters that are the focus of the conclusion of the story. In the male-dominated landscape of the book, it is precisely the revisioning of the feminine that allows Job to give expression to the dramatic shift that has occurred within him. Stephen Mitchell expresses it well when he says, "There is something enormously satisfying about this prominence of the feminine at the end of Job . . . It is as if, once Job has learned to surrender, his world too gives up the male compulsion to control. [The daughters] appear with

⁴² Numbers 27:1-8 is quite specific that the rights of sons to inherit were pre-eminent, and that daughters could only inherit if there were no sons. See Otto Baab, "Inheritance," *IDB* 2: 702.

⁴³ John T. Willcox, *The Bitterness of Job: A Philosophical Reading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 222.

the luminous power of figures in a dream: we can't quite figure out why they are so important, but we know they are."⁴⁴

5 Job's Opening Speech in the Poetry Section

Up until now, our search for shadows and echoes of Job's wife within the text has been confined to the prose narrative. The final example that will be explored draws this hermeneutic task into the poetry section of the book. It concerns Job's first speech in the human dialogue.

Chapter 3, which marks the transition to the poetry section of the book, begins with the words, "After this. . ." (3:1). These words point back to all that has gone before in the prose narrative, the calamities and inflictions that Job suffered, the interchange that he had with his wife, the seven days and nights of brooding silence in which he surely pondered all these things. The next words we read are these, ". . . Job opened his mouth and cursed. . ." (3:1).

What issues forth from his mouth is a prolonged, embittered outpouring against the wretchedness of his life and the injustice of his lot. Job's words from chapter 3 are such a radical departure from the style and tone of his earlier utterances in the prose narrative that it feels like this is a different person speaking. There is nothing in the preceding chapters of the prologue that gives any indication that Job is even capable of such an outburst.

How is such a change in Job explained?⁴⁵ A common assumption is that Job simply needed some time for his grief to find him, which is what happened when he sat in silence for seven days and nights with his friends. It was only when the initial numbing shock and inevitable denial and disbelief of his losses – especially the death of his ten children – had passed that he was able to give voice to his grief. A closer reading of the text, however, reveals the inadequacy of this explanation.

Firstly, the text creates a temporal space between Job's initial losses and response in 1:13-21, and his second affliction and response in 2:7-13. The words in 1:22, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing," suggest a conclusion to the episode of the calamities described in chapter 1. Chapter 2 begins with the words, "One day. . ." which suggest an indeterminate period after the events of chapter 1. The interlude of the scene in heaven in 2:1-6 further entrenches this idea of the passing of time, especially when we learn that the satan has once again been going to and fro on the earth (2:2).

⁴⁴ Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), xxx.

⁴⁵ Commentators who argue for multiple authorship of the book usually cite the sharp disjunction between prose and poetry and the Job we encounter in each as evidence in support of their position. For an excellent summation of the history of this debate see Newsom, *Book of Job*, 3-9.

Indeed, the LORD'S understanding in 2:3 is that the test is over, and Job passed it! There's no unfinished grief work for him to still attend to.

Secondly, the assumption that Job's eruption in chapter 3 was his *real* grief that just needed time to simmer to the surface undermines the authenticity of his responses in 1:20-21 and 2:10. We might not understand or approve of his seemingly formulaic responses in the light of such immense tragedy, but to summarily dismiss them as inauthentic is to do a disservice to the text. The possibility must be retained that Job's responses in the prologue to his sufferings were congruent with the kind of person that he was and the faith perspective that was his.

We must therefore return to the question as to how the dramatic change in Job at the beginning of chapter 3 can be explained. What lodged within him that resulted in his "uncharacteristic" outburst? Though, to be accurate, this was not in fact merely an uncharacteristic momentary outburst from which he would soon retreat, but a whole new mode of being. To put it differently, what got into the patient, pious Job of the prologue to transform him into the impassioned, daring, articulate questioner and challenger that we encounter in the human dialogue?

My contention is that a compelling case can be made for the direct influence of his wife and her words in this necessary shift that occurred in Job. (I say "necessary" for without it there would be no book of Job.) Even a cursory glance reveals a strong association between what Job does in 3:1-26 and what his wife said he should do in 2:9. Up until that point, the conversation about whether or not Job would curse God had been conducted in heaven between the LORD and the satan. Job's wife brings the possibility of cursing into consciousness for him. His immediate and predictable response is to dismiss her words as those of a foolish woman (2:10). And yet, following seven days and nights of ruminating, brooding silence, it would seem that the words of his wife had taken root within him. Admittedly, he doesn't curse God *per se*, but rather the day of his birth – at least according to the narrator. Yet in what follows, not just in chapter 3 but throughout the human dialogue, the reader must navigate Job's words, whether they "curse" God or not. At the very least, we hear in Job's words in chapter 3 an echo of his wife's plea in 2:9.

I will deal more fully with Job's wife's speech shortly, but in concluding this point the following observation is important. In her speech in 2:9, three important terms are used – *tummâ* meaning "integrity," from the root *tmm* to be complete; *bārak*, meaning "bless," but also used euphemistically for "curse"; and *mut*, meaning death. These terms, coming from the mouth of his wife, introduce powerfully for Job the dichotomies of integrity/betrayal, blessing/curse and life/death – themes that Job will continue to grapple with for the remainder of the book. It is his wife who provides Job with the categories to

begin grappling with the ambiguities and contradictions thrown up in the wreckage of the collision of his faith and his experience.

E HEARING JOB'S WIFE AFRESH

In this paper I have sought to show that the presence and influence of Job's wife within the book as a whole is far more pervasive than what might initially have been imagined based simply on the two verses where she makes an explicit appearance. The picture that emerges is of a woman of strength and insight who shaped the lives of her husband and children in significant ways, drawing them into a transformed perspective of the world in which the beauties and ambiguities of life can be celebrated.

In the light of this re-visioning of Job's wife, how might the few words that she speaks in the book be heard afresh? Earlier in this paper I made brief mention of some readings of Job's wife that seek to be more sympathetic towards her. Two of these would be the readings by Claire McGinnis and Rachel Magdalene. McGinnis understands Job's wife, certainly in her utterance in 2:9, as playing the devil's advocate, in the common sense of the term. In urging Job to curse God and die, she is revealing to him the inherent dangers of such a response, to galvanise him further to remain true to his convictions. McGinnis writes, ". . . ultimately her suggestion wards off a threat that already exists; *she* verbalizes the option of cursing God so that Job will not."⁴⁶ Her role is that of a benevolent provocateur who draws from her husband a verbal response that safeguards him from the threat of abandoning his faith.

Rachel Magdalene also finds a positive role for Job's wife, but in a way that is the polar opposite of McGinnis's reading. Magdalene offers an intriguing, though ultimately unconvincing, reading of Job as a victim of torture under the violence of God's law. (She argues that all law is inherently violent.) According to Magdalene it is Job's wife who recognises that Job is a victim of theocratic violence, which has caused him to embrace the torturer's worldview rather than his own.⁴⁷ The words of Job's wife are thus understood as a means of urging Job to resist, to challenge the God who has treated him so brutally and unjustly.

She is exhorting Job to provoke his perpetrator, through blasphemy, into bringing his whole force upon Job. This is the way of the martyr. In presenting that option, [she] invites him to confront the possibility of death. . . Her chal-

⁴⁶ Clair M. McGinnis, "Playing the Devil's Advocate in Job: On Job's wife," in *The Whirlwind: Essays on Job, Hermeneutics and Theology in Memory of Jane Morse* (ed. Stephen L. Cook, Corinne L. Patton and James W. Watts; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 140.

⁴⁷ Magdalene, "Job's Wife," 232.

lenge to him to stand up to God and martyr himself through blasphemy is what frees him.⁴⁸

Magdalene's reading is a bold and provocative one. While her assessment of Job as someone exhibiting the classic signs of a torture victim is unconvincing, the suggestion that Job's wife is challenging him to abandon an inadequate worldview is compelling. This resonates with my own reading of the words of Job's wife in the light of the perspective gained through seeing her presence and influence throughout the story as a whole.

The first words we hear from the mouth of Job's wife are these: "Do you still persist in your integrity?" (2:9). This first half of her speech has not received the same kind of critical attention as the contentious words that follow, "Curse God, and die," yet this is the key to understanding her intention. In challenging Job's persistence in holding on to his integrity, she is questioning the entire religious world-view upon which he has based his life that has been the foundation of his sense of security. How has this world-view served him, and how is it serving him in this crisis? Newsom poses the question thus, "...has his integrity itself become such a fetish that he cannot recognize the perversity of blessing one who destroys him for no reason?"⁴⁹

It is this religious worldview, with its need for certitude and control, its "blessed rage for order,"⁵⁰ and its insistence on the dualisms of right and wrong that Job's wife recognises as inadequate, and challenges accordingly. As a mother of ten, she understood that the world doesn't work that way. She understood too that if Job were to be liberated from the shackles of his fundamentalism,⁵¹ the "God" of this worldview must be renounced. All of that would feel a bit like dying – but it was the dying like that necessary for the foetus for whom the womb was no longer adequate, if it was truly to be born.

Her words could therefore be paraphrased like this:

Are you still clinging to your "integrity," the one thing that you thought guaranteed security? Can you not see that it's a futile project? It's a way of seeing the world that is imprisoning you, preventing you from truly savouring the wonders of life in all their perplexing ambiguity. Let it go. Instead, do the craziest thing imaginable. Dare to stand in opposition of this "God" that you have constructed who has become your gaoler. Yes, curse this God. In doing so you will die. But do not fear. It's a necessary death so that a new,

⁴⁸ Magdalene, "Job's Wife," 233-234.

⁴⁹ Newsom, "Introduction," 361.

⁵⁰ See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁵¹ See Andre Lacocque, "The Deconstruction of Job's Fundamentalism," *JBL* 126/1 (2007): 83-97.

*authentic self might emerge that will be capable of seeing in whole new ways the truth of God, the world, and your place and mine within it.*⁵²

If such a reading is accepted, then Job's wife is none other than the forerunner of God in the divine speeches, where the vision of this alternative worldview is fleshed out in all its vibrant, stirring, risky glory.

F CONCLUSION

The negative light in which Job's wife has been viewed by many commentators of the text has been shaped by the negative way in which they have tended to hear the few words that the book places in her mouth. As a result, she has been given a marginalised place within the interpretation of the book as a whole.

An imaginative re-visioning of her place in Job's story, like that offered by William Blake, draws Job's wife in from the margins to the very heart of the unfolding drama of the book. The picture that emerges is of a woman of great influence, strength and insight who sees through the inadequacies of Job's anxious understanding of God that is dominated by a world-view obsessed with the need for control. As a wife and mother she embodies a radical alternative, which is articulated in the courageous words she speaks to Job. Unable to grasp the full import of what she says, Job dismisses her words as those that "any foolish woman would speak" (2:10). Yet, the necessary seed had been planted, and as his story unfolds Job begins to see what his wife could see – the utter inadequacy of the worldview that was his.

When the LORD finally speaks to Job in the divine speeches, the vision of a radically alternative understanding of God and the world is painted with bold and vivid strokes. It's a vision that Job will instinctively recognise as true precisely because of the ways in which his wife had embodied it and had already brought it into unknowing focus for him. This is the moment for which his wife has lovingly and courageously spoken her truth – when he will finally say of God (and her), "I had heard of you...but now my eye sees you" (42:5). Until that moment comes she must watch and wait – in silence and obscurity, bearing the anguish of her own loss and the torment of being so unjustly misunderstood – but also, most surely, with a fierce and defiant hope.

⁵² Recognising the ambiguity of the euphemistic rendering of *bārak* as "curse," an alternative reading that renders *bārak* literally, but remains true to the intent of this interpretation would be something like this: "If you persist in holding on to your religious world view, in "blessing" your God you will indeed die." This remains true of religious fundamentalism everywhere.

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