

## The Devil's in the Details

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The Biblical Book of Job, an examination of human suffering that is cosmic in scope, has attracted a significant amount of critical attention in the thousands of years since its composition, and much of this critical attention has been focused on one enigmatic yet crucially important character: Job's unnamed wife. Mrs. Job, as she is often called by commentators, has also inspired many retellings and related works that provide a more detailed picture of her past and possible motivations, which are never explored in the Book of Job itself. I examine one of these works, the *Testament of Job*, alongside the Biblical book in order to argue that, despite its dearth of details and exploration of the character's motives, the Book of Job presents the more compelling version of the character, as it allows Mrs. Job to be an enigma rather than an easily categorized and analyzed stereotype. I prove this by showing how the *Testament*, in ways both large and small, undermines the depiction of Job's wife as an independent woman with a will of her own by portraying her as weak and spiritually blind, unable to comprehend the true cosmic implications of her husband's plight. I also show how, while the *Testament* includes more female characters with larger roles, they all fall into the same category: spiritually weak females who must either die to redeem themselves or be taught how to cast aside their earthly concerns by a benevolent male. The Book of Job, on the other hand, allows Mrs. Job to be both complicated and unknowable, refusing to give in like her husband has to an uncaring God. This proves that, though the Mrs. Job of the Bible is a less traditionally developed one, she is also a stronger, more independent woman, and a far more compelling character.

At first glance, it is easy to miss that the Bible, a text associated with divine promises of salvation (and, just as often, damnation) is also a text preoccupied with human suffering. Nowhere is this made more clear than in the Book of Job, where the titular protagonist endures almost unimaginable pain of the physical, emotional, and mental varieties. Job's suffering comes about because he has unknowingly become the bargaining chip in a raging debate between God and the Satan, two equally enigmatic characters who are keen to prove their own philosophical points, seemingly regardless of the havoc they wreak. This havoc affects not only Job, but his family as well: his seven sons and three daughters are killed, his livestock and servants are decimated, and he is finally left

alone with only his bitter and unnamed wife, who apparently lingers only long enough to utter the single line, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (*New International Version*, 2.9). This apparent blasphemy and subsequent disappearance from her husband's narrative has ensured that Mrs. Job's character has been hotly debated and often reinterpreted, both in ancient and modern times. One of these reinterpretations is the apocryphal *Testament of Job*, a document that purports to be the last words of Job, told on his deathbed to his second set of sons and daughters. The *Testament* greatly expands the role of Job's wife, going so far as to split her into two separate characters. While it is reasonable to assume that this expansion would produce a more compelling and memorable character (the Bible's version

of Mrs. Job is, after all, little more than a cipher), the opposite is true: the level of detail lavished on Mrs. Job's character and motivations in the *Testament* makes her less memorable than her Biblical counterpart, not more. The very fact that she is a cipher, appearing only to deliver a scathing criticism of both her husband and God, is what makes Mrs. Job so powerful, a point that the *Testament* misses entirely.

From its start, the *Testament*, though a fascinating and compelling tale in its own right, makes small changes that greatly impact the implications of Job's story. While in the Book of Job Job is, even at the end of his ordeal, unaware of the reasons for his suffering and pessimistic about the possibility of an understanding God, reasoning, "Call if you will, but who will answer you?/ To which of the holy ones will you turn?" (5.1), in the *Testament* he is fully aware of the reasons behind his trials--in fact, he willingly risks Satan's wrath when he destroys a heathen idol (1.27). This change does make Job a more active character who chooses to accept responsibility for his own suffering, but it also creates a picture of the character that is far less powerful--rather than being an ordinary man bewildered by his extraordinary suffering, the *Testament's* Job (called Jobab) goes through no such deep existential crisis. Similarly, Mrs. Job becomes a more detailed yet less complicated character. She is split in two, a change made clear from the beginning: "...my first wife died with my other ten children in a bitter death" (1.6). Thus, Mrs. Job's character is changed fundamentally before she even officially appears in the story. The *Testament* does not create a character who blasphemes God and lives on, presumably alongside her husband in wealth and comfort. Rather, it ensures that this less faithful version of Mrs. Job dies (in agony and squalor, no less), clearing the way for a more suitably virtuous wife--Dinah, daughter of the Biblical patriarch Jacob (1.5).

Maintaining that Dinah became Job's second wife greatly changes the meaning of the text as a whole as well as the characters. As Michael C. Legaspi notes in "Job's Wives in the *Testament of Job: A Synthesis of Two Traditions*," Jobab's marriage to Dinah brings him "into the 'chosen and honored race' of the Jews" (79). By making Jobab's second and presumably more virtuous wife Jewish, the *Testament* erases a crucial reason for the story's power. In the Biblical book, Job and his wife are said to dwell in the land of Uz, a nebulous territory that is at least assumed to be outside the bounds of Israel. Furthermore, Job and his wife are never, at any point in the text, identified as being Jewish; Job is only noted to be "blameless and upright...fear[ing] God and shunn[ing] evil" (1.1).

By having the divine schemes of God and Satan work through the lives of non-Jewish characters, the Book of Job drives home a message that is as affecting as it is terrifying--no human, whether they happen to be part of a Biblical covenant or not, can escape the will of Satan or the will of God. On a more lighthearted note, the fact that Job is described as God-fearing despite being outside the Jewish covenant indicates a universality of salvation absent from the *Testament*. In the universe of his *Testament*, Jobab must enter into a traditional covenant with God if he is to be truly accepted as a hero of the faith. His first wife, who enters into no such covenant, is left to "lay herself down at the manger of the cattle and die there from exhaustion" (9.15). When it comes to the question of how much influence Satan exerts on Mrs. Job, the Book of Job remains ambivalent, simply recording the words she hurls at her husband. Not so in the *Testament*, which makes it explicitly clear that Satan easily twists Jobab's wife into just another instrument of torture: though she is outwardly more well-meaning than her Old Testament counterpart, this Mrs. Job is, in part thanks to her non-Jewishness, blind to the spiritual battle raging around him.

Jobab's wife takes pains to help her husband, supporting him by becoming a slave in another man's household, and her sensible concern over his earthly needs is treated as a weakness rather than a strength, a character defect that ultimately leads to her ignoble death. The *Testament* is infused throughout with the idea that women are "preoccupied with that which is earthly and corruptible" (Garret 57), and in no character is this idea made more clear. Jobab's wife mourns the loss of her status and material possessions, sparing but a verse or two for the "sons and the daughters that I carried on my bosom" (6.3). Though anguished over the plight of her husband, this Mrs. Job is implied to be just as--if not more--anguished by the fall from financial and social grace that his suffering has brought. Unable to discern the spiritual forces hard at work ensuring her husband's misery and unable to be accepted into the Jewish covenant, Jobab's wife dies a lonely death in the company of animals.

In contrast, the image (or rather, brief sketch) of Job's wife found in the Book of Job is at once less developed yet more arresting. Unlike her counterpart in the *Testament*, this Mrs. Job shows no concern for her husband's plight, at least not so obviously. Wraith-like, she seems to materialize by his side for the sole purpose of croaking out blasphemies before disappearing until the story's end. And even at the end, her well-being is only implied, as someone had to be alive and healthy in order to deliver Job's ten new children. It is through this lack presence, however, that the character comes into her full power. This Mrs. Job has no earthly concerns or earthly possessions to weigh her down. She is invested with only one true purpose, and her single-mindedness amounts to one brief but unforgettable line. Upon uttering "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (2.9), Mrs. Job cements her place in literature. It is easy to forget Jobab's wife, buried under her earthly worries, but who could ever forget Mrs. Job? From the outset,

her goals are tied to the cosmic battle she and her husband have been placed in the center of. Unlike Jobab's wife, she sees, if only dimly, the divine machinations responsible for her and her husband's suffering.

Mrs. Job's foresight has also served to make her a more controversial character. Over the years scholars have struggled to make sense of her single appearance and blistering line. The easiest, and most widely accepted, interpretation hews close to the the portrayal offered up in the *Testament*: Mrs. Job is nothing more than another tool of Satan. Her only function in the narrative is to bring her husband more suffering. In *The Book of Job: A Biblical Masterpiece*, for example, Newton Wray maintains that "The third test [after the deaths of his children and his plague of sores] was the attitude of his wife regarding these trials". Though Wray is somewhat more sympathetic to Mrs. Job, acknowledging that she does care for her husband: "[t]hese trials were, she felt, undeserved," he, much like the writers of the *Testament*, interprets this concern as a lack of spiritual wisdom, and places the blame for at least a portion of Job's misery squarely at her feet: "Nothing is more painful to a God-fearing man than to see this want [of confidence in God] in those he loves" (20). This sort of interpretation may be the most well-known, but it is hardly the only one. Because she is given no further dialogue in the Book of Job, Mrs. Job, unlike Jobab's wife, is not forced to make her exact meaning plain. The sentences, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" are not quite as clear cut as they first seem. They could be, for example, Mrs. Job's way of motivating her husband to make a final stand against a God who has proved Himself to be capricious and unjust. Works such as "Job's Wife as Hero" read Mrs. Job's words this way. Rather than asking Job *why* he still holds fast to his integrity, then, she is questioning whether he still possesses it at all, for if he did, he would surely curse the God who has allowed him to fall into such

horrible suffering. Such an explanation for her harsh words turns Mrs. Job into a heroic figure, “a model of resistance for all those whose suffering is both terrible and unacknowledged” (Magdalene 257). Interpretations such as this are both fascinating and quite convincing, and only possible because Mrs. Job’s lines are left open to them in the text. The very fact that her character is given so little development and explanation leaves her motives murky, and it is entirely possible to read her character as either blasphemous or heroic--or both. In contrast, the *Testament* leaves no room for an interpretation besides that of Jobab’s wife as spiritually dim-witted and tied down by her concerns with earthly matters. That she is loving and wears herself down to the bone caring for her husband is beside the point. The Old Testament’s version of Mrs. Job, on the other hand, is harsher but still more sympathetic; she is allowed a degree of ambiguity that Jobab’s wife never gets to enjoy.

One category that the *Testament* far outstrips the Book of Job in, however, is in its number of female characters and the number of pages devoted to them. Excluding Job’s unnamed first set of three daughters, who perish in the book’s first chapter, and his second set of daughters, who are given names but no meaningful action in the plot, Mrs. Job is the only female character mentioned in the Book of Job. And while her part is certainly meaningful, it is not exactly substantial, at least when judged in terms of page count. In addition to the larger parts given to both Jobab’s wife and his daughters, the *Testament* also introduces an entirely new character: a female servant who acts as the doorkeeper to Jobab’s house. She is another woman whose actions greatly influence the plot of the *Testament*. Unfortunately, her characterization is just as seemingly understanding, yet actually damning, as Jobab’s wife’s. She is first introduced in chapter 2, where she disobeys Jobab’s instructions to keep his doors locked

against visitors and instead takes pity on a starving beggar. When Jobab orders the doorkeeper to give the beggar burnt loaves, she, “being ashamed to hand him the burnt and ashy bread” (2.9) instead gives the beggar her own edible bread. The joke, though, is on her, as the pitiful beggar is in fact neither a beggar nor pitiful: he is Satan, coming to Jobab’s home in disguise and seeking vengeance. Recognizing that the bread she offers him is not Jobab’s, Satan demands the loaves meant for him instead. He chastises the doorkeeper for being a disobedient servant and, upon receiving the burnt, ashy bread, he promises Jobab “As thou seest this bread all burnt, so shall I soon burn thy body to make it like this” (2.14). To modern readers, Satan’s criticisms of the doorkeeper fall flat, as there is no possible way she could have guessed his true nature. But as Susan R. Garret explains in “The ‘Weaker Sex’ in the *Testament of Job*,” this would not have been the case for ancient readers: “the ‘virtues’ displayed by the doorman [...] are not virtues at all but the very attributes that tie females to the perishable realm and so enable Satan to use them to reach less vulnerable males” (59). In other words, the doorkeeper’s function in the narrative is no different from Jobab’s wife’s. Unlike Jobab, who, despite the loss of his children, property, and health, remains primarily concerned with the spiritual realm, the doorkeeper allows her more practical-minded concern to get the best of her; she is blind to the evil knocking at the door. She is yet another example of female material concerns compared unfavorably to male spiritual concerns. Women may be gifted with compassion in the *Testament*, but the writer makes it clear that compassion and a stake in the material world is no match for Jobab’s clear-sightedness. The doorkeeper’s kind deed is not meant to be admired, but ridiculed--like Jobab’s wife, her compassion is not the point. Her spiritual blindness is.

The only female characters who escape this particular flaw are Jobab’s second

set of daughters, though their decision to disregard all earthly things is not as empowering as it first appears. In the latter part of the book Jobab, who has told his children his life's story and is almost ready to die, portions his wealth out to them for their inheritances (11.7). His seven sons are gifted with all of Jobab's material goods. When his three daughters object Jobab reassures them that their own inheritances will be better by far; he orders one of his daughters, named Yemima, or "Day," to retrieve a golden casket from his treasure house. Inside the casket are three three-stringed girdles "about the appearance of which no man can speak" (11.12). The author nevertheless tries, describing these girdles as "not earthly work [...] celestial sparks of light flashed through them like the rays of the sun" (11.13). Jobab urges his daughters to put on the girdles, implying that they will act as protection from the suffering he once endured, but his daughters are unimpressed. Once more, they disregard spiritual safety in favor of more material concerns, pointing out that they can hardly live on the promise of protection. Their father disagrees. The girdles will "bring you into a better world to live in, in the heavens" (11.16). Jobab then relates how God gifted him with one of these heavenly girdles and how, upon putting it on, Jobab forgot all his worldly suffering as if it had never been (11.19). After this final story, each of Job's daughters relents and puts on her girdle, after which each are described as having a changed heart that "no longer wish[es] for earthly things" (11.25).

This last part of the tale is framed within the *Testament* as an empowering moment; each of Job's daughters is gifted with a new spiritual insight that allows them to transcend the material world and sing heavenly hymns, speak in the "dialect of the heavenly rulers," and in the "dialect of the Cherubim," respectively (11.24-28). It is important to consider, though, the fact that Jobab's daughters only attain this level of enlightenment after casting off their material

concerns. Moreover, they do this at the behest of a supposedly wiser man. And it is only by casting aside the very concerns that define their father's former wife and his former servant as characters that this level of enlightenment is allowed them. If there is any message to be found in the "raising up" of Jobab's daughters, then, it is that women cannot attain the same level of spiritual wisdom as men without throwing away part of their very natures. This is a point that Garrett hammers home in her essay: "the attribution to Job's daughters of 'different' or 'changed' hearts [...] impl[ies] that they were abandoning key elements of womanhood" (70). To add to this, it also sets them apart from their spiritually blind successors, Jobab's first wife and his doorkeeper, who did not heed the man's words. Not only must women cast aside their femininity in the *Testament*, but they must do it at the behest of their more spiritually enlightened counterparts--men.

In contrast, while the women of the Book of Job are far less present than those in the *Testament*, it can never be argued that they are just as beholden to men as the wives, servants, and daughters of the latter book. Mrs. Job seems to exist almost completely apart from her husband; that she has concern for his well-being can be proven just as easily as it can be disproven; her bitter words can be seen as either a call to action or a condemnation of her husband's faith. The one thing that is more or less set in stone when it comes to her character is her refusal to bow down to her husband's beliefs and opinions. For example, Job's understandably sharp response to her urging, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (2.10) goes unanswered; at this point Mrs. Job apparently disappears (at least physically) from the narrative. This lack of a response to her husband's criticism is traditionally taken to denote the fact of Job's moral superiority. After all, if Mrs. Job had a compelling counterargument on hand, would she not

have used it? Such an explanation ignores the fact that there is often more power to be found in silence than in speech, especially, historically, when it comes to women. Particularly in ancient cultures, where it was assumed that “the natural state of women is one of preoccupation with corporeal affairs” (Garrett 68). It can be assumed, given the culture her character was written in, that Mrs. Job would have been well aware of these notions, and would have understood that, no matter how she chose to respond to her husband, her words would be regarded as nothing more than the blind ravings of a spiritually blind and weak-willed female. Therefore, she makes no attempt to defend herself against Job’s accusations, and lets her silence prove her point. The only ones who defend themselves, after all, are those who need defending, and, from her point of view, Mrs. Job’s words are entirely without fault. If her husband cannot understand that the very real, physical pain and suffering he is going through could not possibly be afflicted by a just or loving God, what can she do for him? In this way, Mrs. Job’s silence, along with her abiding concern for the more material world, become her strengths rather than her weaknesses. Her husband may not be able to reconcile his devotion to God with the fact that this God has seemingly betrayed him, but she can. Thus, she offers no defense because she is not the one who should be explaining herself. That task should be left up to the One responsible for both her and her husband’s misery--God Himself (neither Job and his wife are ever apparently made aware of the role of Satan, or the Adversary in the cosmic betting pool that rules their lives).

Yet another interpretation exists that paints Mrs. Job’s silence in a more positive light; it is possible that she is not being deliberately obstinate but instead practicing compassion for her suffering husband. Though the point of the book is clearly Job’s pain, “Job does not suffer his tragedy alone. With the exception of the sores, Job’s wife

has suffered equally with her husband” (Hunter 28), and the fact that she has shared in Job’s pain enables his wife to understand it. Surely she knows that, in his no doubt fragile and tormented state of mind, no words she could possibly say to him would do any good or bring him any hope or comfort. Mrs. Job’s primary goal is certainly not to comfort her husband--she has her own sorrow that she is clearly processing in a far different way--but it is possible that she sees the effect her harsh words have on her husband and steps back (figuratively and perhaps physically). While Job may find comfort in the idea of a God, who regardless of His machinations, is fundamentally just and far above human contempt, his wife seems to take comfort from the very opposite concept. But when she realizes that this is not what her husband wants to hear--or, indeed, even what he needs to hear, Mrs. Job retreats into her own grief and into silence, allowing her husband to make whatever sense he wishes to make of it. This interpretation of her silence is just as valid as the other, and both are made possible by the lack of authorial judgement placed upon the character.

Though it would seem to be there upon a first reading, there is in fact very little in the book to suggest that the author favors one interpretation of Mrs. Job over the other; it is the book’s silence on her true motivations that have led to years of interpretation, speculation, and retellings. As E.O. Gravett notes, Mrs. Job’s “small and unclear” role in her husband’s story has “piqued, rather than quelled, interpreters’ interests for millennia” (98). Separated from its more taciturn source material, it is hard to imagine the *Testament* receiving the same millennium’s worth of interest and scholarship. Its abundance of details on its female characters serves to disempower rather than empower them--conversely, the one thing that seems to hold steady with every interpretation of Mrs. Job’s first and last appearance in the Old Testament is that she speaks her piece and holds to it,

regardless of what her husband says. Unlike the daughters of Jobab, who can attain knowledge only by casting aside the very things that make them (in the author's mind, at least) female and ascending to a more heavenly (and male) plane of existence, the Mrs. Job found in the Old Testament is content in her own earthly understanding of a God who appears to have turned his back on her and her husband: she does not acquiesce to Job's determination that God *must* be good. Rather, she silently keeps her own counsel, and lets her words speak for themselves.

The Book of Job does make mention of Job's second set of three daughters as well, and, just as it does with his wife, their parts are far smaller than what is allowed them in the *Testament*, but more effective and nuanced for that. They are only briefly mentioned in the book's epilogue, and are, strikingly, the only females named in the text: "The first daughter he named Jemimah, the second Keziah and the third Keren-Happuch" (42.14). They are also granted and inheritance, much like their counterparts in the *Testament*, but that is where the similarities end. Rather than receiving heavenly girdles and casting aside their femininity for better things, these daughters are simply said to have been "granted [...] and inheritance along with their brothers" (42.15). Such an action would have been revolutionary at the time of the story's writing, and contrasted with the view of earthly concerns as a particularly female failing put forth by the *Testament*, it feels even more so. Females are never as derided for their concern in the material world in the Book of Job. If anything, its ending implies that such concerns are entirely justified and, in fact, blameless. Job gives his daughters an entirely practical inheritance that will help them live long and prosperously in the earthly realm they inhabit. Therefore, by the end of the book, a preoccupation with the problems and requirements and living in the non-spiritual world are not seen as only the

province of women, and certainly not as a weakness. This Job understands that his daughters will require more than heavenly songs to live on; his concern for their earthly well-being could well be seen as another clue that he has finally found happiness again, for he is able to put aside his worries and agonized questioning of God in order to focus on the material needs of his second set of children. Though his wife is not mentioned in this ending section, it is typically assumed, outside of apocryphal literature like the *Testament*, that she survived. If so, it is gratifying to imagine her once again having a husband who is able to focus on more than the whims of God. Concern with the material world is neither an exclusively female nor exclusively negative trait in the Old Testament; this detail, above all else, sets it apart from more developed but less compelling works like the *Testament*.

Job's wife has prompted many interpretations and retellings throughout the years due to her seemingly brief and unsatisfying portrayal that hinges on the bitter delivery of only two lines. Yet ironically, it is the ambiguity of these two lines and the ambiguity of the text's attitude toward her that makes Mrs. Job such an enduring character. When contrasted with the more detailed portrayal offered in the apocryphal retelling the *Testament of Job*, the "original" Mrs. Job remains less in focus but more powerful, allowed to become a complicated and even perplexing character who can peer into the spiritual world just as her husband does. She is not weighed down by her ties to the physical world and she does not conveniently die in order to make room for a more righteous model; she, in all her bitterness and confusion, lives on, and her daughters are never forced to abandon their femininity at the behest of a man. The Book of Job does more with less, creating a character who is more enigmatic but also potentially more sympathetic. The *Testament* may offer a more traditionally developed

story, but the Book of Job offers up a far more fascinating character.

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