

Mrs. Job’s Role

An Exploration into the Interpretations of Mrs. Job



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There are so many minor characters in the Bible. Often times when reading through the passages these characters are easily glanced over. By glancing over these characters and focusing only on the main characters it is easy to miss the example and relevance they may offer for people of God. Feminist/Womanist theology frequently seeks to emphasize the significance of women characters in the Bible whose importance is often sadly overlooked. One such woman is the unnamed wife of Job. Mrs. Job, as I will refer to her as going forward, has one short line in the entire book of Job. Despite this one short line many have offered varying interpretations of her role. By including several of those interpretations as well as my own, I hope to relay Mrs. Job’s relatability to many different readers and her importance in the biblical story of Job.

Before exploring different interpretations of Mrs. Job’s character, it is necessary to have some background in the textual issue with her one line as well as background on other ancient texts that have influenced interpretations. First, and foremost is the highly debated textual issue surrounding the word *brk* ( בָּרֵ֥ך) used in the MT (Masoretic Text). Prior to Mrs. Job’s statement this word *brk* has been used euphemistically to mean both bless and curse. [[1]](#footnote-1) Because of the ambiguity of her statement it is unclear which word to choose in translation. Many of the patriarchal church fathers such as Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Gregory the Great have translated it in the negative, curse. This is primarily because of Job’s response to her. To many of Mrs. Job is viewed as Satan’s assistant.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Other ancient texts offer Mrs. Job in a different light. For example, the LXX gives a longer statement by Mrs. Job in which she is not saying bless or curse. Instead Mrs. Job points to her suffering as a mother who has lost her children, who now has to work hard every day, in so much pain and suffering and she can’t wait until night comes. From this exhaustion, she says “say some word against the Lord, and die.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Similarly, to the LXX, the *Testament of Job*, another ancient text, offers an expansion on what Mrs. Job said. After a 15-verse discourse explaining her suffering from all that has occurred; she says in verse 16 "Since the feebleness of my heart has crushed my bones, rise then and take these loaves of bread and enjoy them, and then speak some word against the Lord and die!”[[4]](#footnote-4) Furthermore, in her 15 verse discourse she names herself as Sitis. To be named is important because in the context of the Bible a name meant one existed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The textual issue surrounding *brk,* as well as the additional ancient texts of LXX and *Testament of Job* are cited by many commentators interpreting Mrs. Job in the biblical narrative. These things have also influenced Rachel Magdalene in her interpretation of Mrs. Job. Magdalene presents an interpretation with an understanding of the MT’s legalistic tone throughout the book of Job. She explores the role Mrs. Job plays in Job’s legal challenge to God by looking at four areas: “1) The violence of God’s law; 2) Job’s suffering under divine violence; 3) Job’s wife’s response to the violence; and 4) Job’s response to God in light of his wife’s remark.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In her focus on the violence of God’s law she believes that violence and suffering are the main points of interests in the book of Job. She views violence from the law as including tolerated acts such as being involuntarily detained in prison which in that process having freedoms taken away. She goes into great detail discussing more vicious acts of physical violence and corporal punishment used throughout history to entice desired confessions. She believes Job’s experience parallels those who have endured this type of violence as the Adversary is permitted to inflict so much suffering in order to invoke him to speak badly towards God. Magdalene suggests that Job’s responses are similar to those who have been tortured under the legal system.

Having explained the violence of the law and how Job suffers under that violent law she comes to explain point three; Mrs. Job’s response to what she is witnessing through Job’s torture via this legal system. According to Magdalene her short response in the MT displays her attempt to encourage him to stand up for himself. Mrs. Job is outside this legal battle, but still experiences suffering herself. She uses the best approach she knows how given her marginalized position in society by encouraging Job to oppose the accusations and the violence being used unrightfully against him.[[7]](#footnote-7) Mrs. Job invites him to “martyr himself through blasphemy.”[[8]](#footnote-8) She believes there is no other way for Job to cling to his integrity than by choosing the death of a martyr.

As she explains further, Job doesn’t exactly accept her statement. She argues that he continues to agree with his opponent to prevent further torture. [[9]](#footnote-9) Instead of snapping out at the adversary, his torturer, he takes his frustration out in his response to his wife.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, Job later takes his wife’s advice and argues his case against God. He even goes as far as to curse the day he was born. Magdalene believes he “holds the martyrdom card...to put pressure on God in the lawsuit.”[[11]](#footnote-11) He will use this to argue his innocence.

As Magdalene concludes none of the story of Job would have existed the way it did had it not been for Mrs. Job’s statement. If Mrs. Job had not encouraged her husband to stand up against the violent unjust acts committed against him the story would end very differently. Mrs. Job must have impacted Job deeply. “Job’s wife with just two painfully uttered sentences, joins the ranks of the wise.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Interpreting the story of Job using this perspective offers a positive view of a marginalized person who impacted the entire situation at hand. This view offers other marginalized persons hope that they too in their suffering can have an impact on the way others view God.

Lillian Klein offers another interpretation of Mrs. Job by viewing the story of Job through the lens of the womb language. She notes that Mrs. Job is the only female to speak in the book of Job, yet the feminine word womb is referred to twelve times in the book of Job.[[13]](#footnote-13) She explains that Job and his friends are arguing about Job’s righteousness whereas Mrs. Job is speaking about his integrity. She sets out to display that Mrs. Job has an unfair biased tone going against her. Unlike the friends and Job, himself, who speak “verbalizing a process of reasoning,” Mrs. Job is not afforded that opportunity. [[14]](#footnote-14) Along that same line, Mrs. Job is not given the opportunity to use metaphorical poetical language like all the male disputers. She, like Magdalene, points out that the namelessness of Mrs. Job displays an unimportance of her character. Furthering that unimportance is the fact that Job cares more about the responses of his friends than he does his wife’s. Later he degrades his wife even more when he offers his wife as a sex slave for his act of sinfulness. Klein is suggesting this patriarchal text views women in a negative light. She recognizes that this may seem untrue given the acknowledgement of the named daughters that appear in the epilogue. However, she argues the names given to them meaning “dove, fragrance, and horn of eye-shadow” display a male relating to young women as mere objects.[[15]](#footnote-15) This is evident as women are reduced to objects when they are identified as wombs in ten separate occasions. Further she argues that in three verses male voices make claim to the wombs equating them to not only objects but objects of male ownership. Using Klein’s interpretation it is clear that the reason the woman is often equated to the adversary’s assistant is that she is seen by the males in her society in a negative light. Klein’s interpretation brings to light a parallel for women suffering physical or sexual abuse from a male. If Klein’s interpretation is coupled with other more positive views of Mrs. Job, it can offer them a victimized character with whom they can relate to. Having this relatability to Mrs. Job with the addition of a positive view they may be empowered to overcome guilt that often occurs when they are reprimanded for speaking out of line with their abuser.

A third interpretation is offered by Sarojini Nadar. She, like Magdalene and Klein, acknowledges past history views Mrs. Job negatively. Like Magdalene, Nadar believes Mrs. Job is vital to the story of Job. It is her words that are the turning point for Job. She is suggesting that through the use of the ambiguous word *barak,* Mrs. Job asks the main question of the story; “Do our actions and the way in which we speak about God decide the way in which we are either rewarded or punished?”[[16]](#footnote-16) Mrs. Job’s theodicy question portrays an advantaged point of view, a female perspective that dismantles the patriarchal male view. She recognizes that Job initially rejects his wife’s wisdom, but as the story quickly unfolds in the next scene Job is doing exactly what his wife suggested. Therefore, Job must have realized his wife was right in questioning the suffering’s source. Nadar argues that this displays women as capable of wrestling with the theological question of suffering. Mrs. Job has an advantage on understanding suffering because her life’s influences allow her to better comprehend this question than her counterpart privileged husband.[[17]](#footnote-17) By viewing Mrs. Job from Nadar’s interpretation women, as she suggests, can also be moved by the suffering Job experiences. This perspective can relate to women of today who themselves have experienced suffering and relate to this theodicy question proposed by Mrs. Job.

A fourth interpretation is pointed out by Carol Newsom. Like some of the others she believes that ancient forefather’s, “Augustine, Chrysostom, Calvin and others,” view of Mrs. Job as Satan’s helper belittles the value of her role.[[18]](#footnote-18) Like Nadar, Newsom points to the ambiguity of the word *barak* used by Mrs. Job as well as the importance of the translation of the word tûmmā which she translates as integrity. She defines this integrity very specifically as a person “whose conduct is completely in accord with moral and religious norms and whose character is one of utter honesty, without guile.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This leads Newsom to believe that Mrs. Job’s statement can be viewed as acknowledging the discord between the religious norms and the absolute honesty latterly mentioned. According to Newsom, Mrs. Job perceives that her husband is being deceitful if he continues to follow religious norms by blessing God. On the other hand, if he stays true to his honesty by cursing God he will break the social law that prohibits the cursing of God. Additionally, she believes Mrs. Job’s question will become Job’s question as the story develops. By viewing Mrs. Job in this way, those who struggle with doing what is right under the governing law when it conflicts with their moral or religious beliefs can relate to the feelings of suffering experienced by both Job and his wife.

So far, all the examples of interpretations have been composed by women. By exploring Mayer Gruber’s interpretation, a male perspective, the focus shifts to examining diverse interpretations. He suggests a possible interpretation is that Mr. and Mrs. Job had poor communication in their marriage which is why Mrs. Job is so often viewed negatively. This poor communication is displayed not only in Job lashing out at his wife’s questions, but also again later in Job 19:17 when he mentions that even “’My odor is repulsive, to my wife.’”[[20]](#footnote-20) Job was unable to view his marriage from a position of a spouse that cares for the other “in sickness and in health.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In Gruber’s mind it makes sense that Mrs. Job would respond the way she did out of her frustration with their poor communication. By viewing Mrs. Job as a woman who is a participant in a poorly communicating marriage, those who are experiencing that same poor communication in their marriages can relate to the suffering that results from it. The hope would be that in recognizing it, they can seek out ways to resolve the poor communication.

A second male perspective is presented by Daniel Simundson. He states that to understand Mrs. Job’s response it is important to remember Job has been suffering greatly. It is at the point when he suffers personally with a disease that his wife enters the scene. He suggests that an argument could be made that Job’s wife is empathetic towards her husband’s suffering. Her grief with regards to his suffering is so great that she wishes he would die, not having to suffer any longer. He equates this to the many people who have stood at the bedside of loved ones who were suffering and had similar thoughts. For Mrs. Job, if cursing God brought this death on sooner than she hoped, he would curse God and die so he didn’t have to suffer anymore.

In her mind, if God is responsible for what happened, then Job has any right to curse him. He goes even further to say that if she loves passionately, she too may be angry enough at God to confront God. His main point is to not look to negatively on Mrs. Job because that perpetuates the negative view of women the church has had even up to the present.[[22]](#footnote-22) Viewing Mrs. Job as the empathetic spouse who is ready to confront God for God’s unjust actions relates to the husband, wife, mother, father, son, daughter, sister, or brother who has stood at the bedside of their loved one getting angry at God for allowing this suffering, hoping for it to end.

Another interpretation that is offered is not through words like those that have been viewed thus far. Instead, this interpretation is depicted through a painting that Seow describes in “Job’s Wife.” The painting by Albrecht Dürer portrays Mrs. Job as a caring loving wife pouring water on Job’s visible wounds. Seow concludes that Mrs. Job desires her husband’s suffering to end. Seow further argues that the Vulgate is correct in expressing Mrs. Job’s statement to Job as “’bless God’”[[23]](#footnote-23) Like what Simundson had expressed earlier, this offers a connection for caretakers who are empathetic to the pain their loved ones are experiencing and who only want to see their suffering end.

Another artistic interpretation of Mrs. Job is offered in a poem by Patricia Alford. She presents Mrs. Job as being on a “holiday” from all her burdensome jobs like cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. She then goes on to suggest that Mrs. Job views God as a just God who believes God will most likely repay her losses. She uses poetic form to relay the picture of what occurs in Job 2:8-10, where she states Mrs. Job’s response as, “Curse God.”[[24]](#footnote-24) According to Alford’s interpretation, Mrs. Job hopes to be free again from all her suffering. She further offers a very interesting perspective of Mrs. Job wanting her husband to pick himself up out of this funk and go with her on this dream vacation. She views Job as “in love with his suffering.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Moving through the poem, she portrays Mrs. Job as missing her life as it was in the past, hoping that Job would notice her, and they would take off into her dream world where they would find intimacy together. Yet, she realizes Job never looks at her because he is too busy paying attention to his friends who have come from far distances to advise him of his wrongfulness. In this most interesting poem she suggests that Mrs. Job recognizes her husband’s “blamelessness” which had gotten him nowhere. She concludes the poem, explaining that Mrs. Job believes Job to be “stubborn, like his God.” This poetic version of Mrs. Job offers an appreciation for the suffering wife who desires her life as it was before her husband was struck ill and the frustration she feels because he refuses to notice how it affects her. This interpretation can relate to the many caretakers who desire for life to be as it was before the illness changed everything. Additionally, it can relate to the caretakers who feel their own suffering going unnoticed. Suffering that resulted from their loved one’s trials or illness.

So far, I have covered several interpretations I discovered in my journey to understand the role of Mrs. Job. I believe these interpretations, as well as additional ancient texts mentioned earlier, are helpful if used to connect faithful people in a positive way. One scholar that discusses the helpfulness of these other interpretations and additional writings is Emily Gravett. Gravett argues that retellings like the *Testament of Job* and *Job’s Jobs* offer insights into answering the questions that arise from the short statement made by Mrs. Job in the MT. They offer insight into understanding Mrs. Job’s suffering that can only be speculated in the MT’s story of Job.[[26]](#footnote-26) She first explores the MT version and points to what it says about Mrs. Job. First, like the other interpretations mentioned, she points to the fact that Mrs. Job is unnamed which means she must be unimportant. Furthermore, she recalls that most of the main people in Job’s life are mentioned in the first chapter, but not Job’s wife. She only is mentioned when she mysteriously appears in chapter two with the absence of an introduction. Further, Gravett believes that what can be inferred from the MT is that she is perhaps a mother of ten children mentioned earlier. If she is the mother, then it can also be inferred that she is considered a revered woman producing so many children for her husband. She also assumes that Mrs. Job could be viewed as the nagging wife wanting her husband to stand up and do something about the struggles he is suffering in. Mr. Job’s response would make sense if Mrs. Job is viewed from this perspective. He could be so tired of the nagging that he snaps at her. Gravett reminds readers that Mrs. Job is absent in the rest of the MT’s story of Job. However, one can again assume that Mrs. Job is the mother of the ten children that are discussed in the epilogue.

After Gravett offers assumptions based on MT’s book of Job she turns to the *Testament of Job* as a resource to expand upon and appreciate Mrs. Job’s character. She argues that this is the first retelling of the story of Job. If viewing the *Testament of Job* as an extension and retelling, then the assumption that Mrs. Job is the mother of the ten children born to Job as his reward for faithfulness is false. In this retelling the reader is informed that Mrs. Job in the early narrative had died. This retelling also displays a “more intimate connection between the two spouses.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Overall in the retelling of the *Testament of Job,* Mrs. Job can be viewed more empathetically, acknowledging the suffering that she endured along with Job. This retelling offers a voice to the wife, mother, and caretaker also enduring suffering.

After reviewing the *Testament of Job,* Gravett discusses the retelling story by Aimee Bender *Job’s Jobs.* This is a very different retelling, but it too offers an interesting perspective of Mrs. Job. In this retelling Mrs. Job is viewed as being continually supportive through all of Job’s trials. It is Mrs. Job who eventually must keep it all together so that they and their marriage survive. The reader can empathize with Mrs. Job who longs to have the husband that she knew before these trials. Gravett suggests that these retellings help us to better understand and empathize with the Mrs. Job of the MT. They offer a picture of Mrs. Job that can be helpful for those who identify as caretaker and spouse of someone enduring suffering.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In her essay Gravett reminds others about viewing Mrs. Job as a caretaker. In my interpretation, I believe this is an ideal way of viewing Mrs. Job. In my translation of Mrs. Job’s statement, I debated how to translate the word *barak*. Originally, I was leaning toward translating it as bless because that translation appears more often than its euphemism, curse. After more research and reviewing other’s interpretations, I would argue that it really doesn’t matter which way it is translated. Either way will result in the same goal trying to be reached by Mrs. Job. If Mrs. Job is his wife, which the MT tells us, then she must be his caretaker. I have known many caretakers of loved ones, specifically spouses, who tell me the most exhausting part of being a caretaker is watching their loved one physically suffer while they are emotionally suffering. I imagine Mrs. Job speaks out of this exhaustion; this desire to see the suffering end for both of them. What is most notable about her statement is not curse or bless, but that she is saying please die already because I can’t stand my suffering as I watch you painfully, physically suffer. I believe my interpretation can be helpful to the caretaker who feels guilty or selfish because they experience this rollercoaster of emotions. Job hears his wife’s statement and responds rightfully in anger, lashing out at her. Yet, it is also Mrs. Job’s statement that snaps him out of his self-pity, recognizing that he must make changes or die in agony to relieve his suffering.

Again, Mrs. Job can be viewed as a tired care taker speaking out of exhaustion and who may be feeling guilty for doing so. However, the flip side is her angered statement eventually leading to a positive outcome. I am not suggesting that caretakers not try to control themselves when they are exhausted. Rather, I am suggesting that if they lose control they can be reminded that God can use even negative statements for good. In this case Mrs. Job’s negative statement, desiring her husband to die was necessary to the transition for the entire story of Job.

Even though many historical church fathers often viewed Mrs. Job’s role as insignificant or worse, as Satan’s helper, I believe the interpretations as presented in this paper, as well as my personal interpretation, demonstrates they were gravely mistaken. Mrs. Job’s role is very important to the story of Job because she offers a character that so many differing suffering people can identify with. Mrs. Job’s relatability is what makes her one of the most important characters even if she is only given on small line in the book of Job.

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