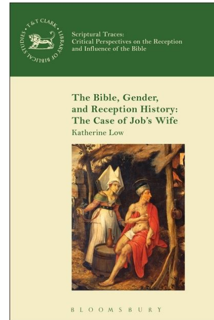
The Bible, Gender, and Reception History: The Case of Job's Wife, by Katherine Low



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This monograph, the published version of the author's doctoral thesis from Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University, provides a fascinating glimpse into the reception history of Job's wife. Low explores the portrayal of Job's wife through gender theory, with focus on her depiction in literature and art. She proceeds chronologically through the material, beginning in the mediaeval period with the church fathers and ending in the nineteenth century with an extended discussion of the art of William Blake.

The Introduction opens with a brief discussion of the biblical text itself. Low states that few words uttered in the Bible are as controversial as those of Job's wife. She only speaks once, in Job 2:9, where she makes two statements עדך מחזיק בתמתך ("are you still holding on to your integrity?"), and ברך אלהים ומת, normally translated as "curse God and die" (the verb ברך, which literally means "bless," is understood to be a euphemism). The latter statement, interpreted as an expression of despair and a wish for Job to commit suicide in order to end his suffering, has had a significant afterlife in art, literature, and film etc. The underlying idea is that of retributive theology: if someone curses God, God will retaliate and punish him. Job's response to his wife is negative: she speaks like a foolish woman (כדבר אחת הנבלות תדברי, v. 10aα), because humanity receives both good and bad things from God. The narrator then concludes the dialogue with the summary statement, "in all this, Job did not sin with his lips" (בכל זאת לא חטא איוב בשפתיו).

The rest of the introduction contains a lot of material which is interesting but presented in a somewhat haphazard fashion, which makes it sometimes difficult to follow the train of thought. Low looks at the longer version of Job's wife's speech found in LXX Job 2:9, which emphasizes her loss of her children, as well as her impoverished future as a servant woman. This addition links the narrative of Job and his wife with that of Tobit and his wife Anna, where the latter must support her blind husband. She also looks at tra-

ditions (e.g., *The Testament of Job*) which differentiate between, on the one hand, Job's first wife (named Sitidos) who is the mother of his dead children and who suffers servitude alongside Job's suffering, and, on the other hand, his second wife, identified with Jacob's daughter Dinah, whom he marries after his recovery and who becomes the mother of his second set of children. Unfortunately, Low does not delve deeper into these traditions and thus fails to explore their underlying theology as to why there is no afterlife for Sitidos.

Low also looks at some general methodological aspects of reception history, and defends her own choice of gender theory as the guiding principle for her work. She further surveys key works on gender theory and the Bible, with focus on Judith Butler, as well as theories pertaining to the gendered body. For instance, why did mediaeval painters emphasize Job's tormented suffering body? Further, how is Job's masculinity portrayed in contrast to his wife's femininity? Low ends the introduction with an overview of her study.

Chapter 1, entitled "Eden's Dunghill and the Wife's Deviant Speech," explores the portrayal of Job and his wife in mediaeval Christian literary sources. As the title suggests, early Christian writing often connected the tradition of Adam and Eve with that of Job and his wife. Eve's speech caused Adam to sin. Likewise, Job's wife, through her spoken words, is tempting Job to sin. In contrast to Adam, however, Job survives the spiritual test (2:10). The portrayal of Job's wife thus highlights the issue of gendered (female) deviant speech. Another connecting point between Job 1–2 and the Creation account in Gen 2–3 is the role of Satan who was understood to feature in both accounts (the Accuser in Job 1–2 and the Serpent in Gen 3). Low surveys mediaeval theological writings on the book of Job, with emphasis on their application of Job's wife's speech and on her and Eve's shared role as tempters of men. Common to most texts is the notion of contrast: while Adam fails in his marriage, Job succeeds as he does not heed his wife's words. According to this line of interpretation, Job's wife is an additional test which Job must overcome. Furthermore, alongside Eve, Job's wife is under Satan's control and her words are those of Satan.

These theological issues are expounded upon in the writings of the Church Fathers. Augustine, for example, treats Eve and Job's wife as parallels. Chrysostom represents another perspective as he maintains that in Eden, Satan used the Serpent, but now he uses the woman. Along similar lines, Gregory the Great portrays Job's wife as a vehicle which Satan uses in order to test Job. Satan remembered that Adam was prone to listen to his wife, so he assumes that Job's wife would likewise be able to persuade Job to sin. Other patristic

writers used the exchange between Job and his wife to illustrate a specific doctrinal point. Ambrose, for example, used Job 2:9 as a tool against his Arian opponents who were seeking to lead his own flock astray. There are, however, a few exceptions to this negative estimation of Job's wife. Notably, Asterius did not appeal to Eve but instead referred to Job's wife as an example of a good wife who cares for her husband. The idea of Job's wife as Satan's helper appears also in later mediaeval writings. In the homilies written by the Anglo-Saxon English abbot Ælfric, Job's wife is mobilized by Satan in order to tempt her husband so that he, like Adam, would fall. Similar thoughts are also present in the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

The tendency to connect Eve and Job's wife continues throughout the Middle Ages. Low interacts with a wide selection of texts, for example the writings by Heloïse, John Lydgate, Eustache Descamps, Chaucer, as well as manuals for women, and mystery plays. She further explores the notion of female deviant speech outside of the context of Job's wife, and highlights the prevalence in preaching and literature of the stereotypical foolish and chatty woman who utters useless words and who is prone to scold her husband. In contrast, she notes that blasphemy, a sin akin to heresy, is related to men.

The relatively short chapter 2, aptly entitled "the Troublesome Trio of Job, His Wife, and Satan in Medieval Art," runs in parallel to the first chapter. Low highlights the significance of the figure of Satan in art and how he tends to be portrayed in proximity to Job's wife, in this way symbolizing their close association with one another. As in the aforementioned literature, the focus in art is on gendered deviant speech. Much of chapter 2 explores a text called *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* ("Mirror of Human Salvation," here abbreviated as *SHS*), a widespread and well attested illustrated work of popular theology in the late Middle Ages. Each New Testament text is accompanied by three Old Testament texts which are understood to prefigure it. The scene of Job and his wife accompanies the New Testament passage which deals with the flagellation of Jesus. This typology serves to put Job's wife on par with those who carry out the flagellation of Jesus. The second Old Testament passage, namely Gen 4:18–19, which features Lamech and his two wives Adah and Zillah, strengthens this typology. In the *SHS*, these two women are shown to be nagging Lamech, in this way symbolizing the Gentiles who whipped Jesus. Both Lamech and Job are thus depicted as having marital difficulties. This portrayal in turn serves to highlight the benefits of a celibate marriage which, according to Mediaeval Christianity, was something to strive towards. Furthermore, by combining the idea of flagellation

and the idea of women's deviant and potentially dangerous speech, mediaeval art sought to depict Job as being scorched in two ways: physically by Satan and verbally by his wife. In addition, *SHS* conveys the view that the dominance of women over their husbands is from the Devil. Several manuscripts portray Job's wife in a position of standing (while Job is mostly sitting) with both hands on her hips, two positions which indicate her scorn and her sense of superiority towards Job.

Low also discusses the depictions of Job's wife in other mediaeval works of art, and how they differ from early Christian portrayals in terms of her gestures, her position in relation to Job, and her bodily posture. In mediaeval art, Job's wife often faces Job with her mouth open and her right arm drawn away from him and placed across her chest. Low highlights that the open mouth symbolizes her (deviant or useless) speech and that her arm gesture indicates her pride or her scorn: rather than touching Job as some of his friends do, she remains aloof.

Chapter 3 continues the focus on the role of Satan in mediaeval material related to Job. The chapter opens with a discussion of the portrayal of Job, his wife, and Satan in Reims Cathedral (1220 CE). Low then explores the significance of the body in mediaeval art. Following Mary Douglas, Low argues that the body serves as the primary instrument through which societies communicate their limits and beliefs. She looks at the concept of Satan as a bodily representation of evil. He is often depicted in grotesque form which symbolizes his monstrosity. The fact that he is often given select feminine features, such as having large breasts, further serves to warn the audience of the dangers of women and sexuality. Turning to the tormented body of Job, Low notes how he is often depicted with open sores or as suffering from other kinds of skin disease. According to Low, this portrayal stresses his suffering, yet also symbolizes his resistance to and subsequent victory over Satan and women. His nudity further serves to denote him as an innocent, pre-fall figure who, unlike Adam, has resisted Eve's temptation. In this way, the motif of Job's sore-ridden body preaches a message of human spiritual endurance, as well as prefiguring Jesus's suffering and ultimate victory. As we move closer to the Renaissance, the depictions of Satan change character, as do those of Job and his wife. Job no longer appears with open sores. He is rather portrayed in such a way as to emphasize his Christ-like patience and his belief in restoration and in the triumph of faith. He is still suffering, but now as a model Christian rather than as a type of Jesus. As such, he is supposed to show inward reflection as he ponders sin and salvation. Thus, when we

reach Baroque art, Job is no longer depicted as sitting on a dung heap where mediaeval art tended to place him. Instead we find him looking like a herald of Jesus's resurrection and like a symbol of ultimate redemption. In parallel, Satan is no longer furnished with a grotesque body. In fact, the satanic figure gradually disappears from view as the focus changes from Job's torment to his victory. Pictures may contain demons, and Satan may appear portrayed as a sinister human, but he lacks the traditional satanic features such as wings and grotesque form. Hand-in-hand with this development, the image of Job's wife also changes. In contrast to earlier material where she, through her deviant speech, sided with Satan, in Baroque art she is gradually shown as a *bad* wife. Her portrayal thus serves less to emphasize her deviant speech and more to present her as a shrew, i.e., as a woman given to violent, scolding, and nagging treatment (cf. chapter 4). She is furthermore depicted as old, and thus made to symbolize the threat to society that older women constitute, as they are past their "natural" role of wives and mothers.

To illustrate these tendencies, Low examines the art by, among others, Albrecht Dürer, Jan Lievens, Georges de La Tour, Gioacchi[n]o Asser[e]to, Gaspard de Crayer, Peter Paul Rubens, Matthaeus Merian, Bernard Picart, and Caspar Luyken. As in chapter 2, Low looks at the way that the painters have portrayed the body position and gestures of Job's wife. She is often, as before, depicted with her hands on her hips and her elbow pointing away from her body to symbolize her disassociation or disagreement. She furthermore often makes a "fig sign," i.e. a clenched fist where the thumb partly pokes out, which was understood to be a sexually offensive gesture.

Chapter 4 explores how the imagery of Job's wife as a shrew, found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art, walks hand-in-hand with the imagery attested in literature from the same time period. At this time, the book of Job had come to be used as the means of teaching men and women about Christian marriage. As such, it served to project gender expectations and to emphasize women's subordinate role in marriage. The figures of Job and his wife were employed as a visual metaphor for tension within a marriage. Job's wife exemplifies a bad wife who violates gendered social expectations, to be contrasted with a submissive and obedient wife who knows her place. After a general discussion of marriage in early modern Christian thought, Low turns to the ideal Christian marriage as portrayed in literature and highlights that religious ideas about marriage directed towards women can be found as early as fourteenth-century literature. She surveys pertinent works by, among others, George Swinnock, William Vaughn, Joseph Swetnam, John Donne, and William Shakespeare. Low notes that a married woman should ideally

comfort and support her husband in his suffering in silence. Many of these texts use Job's marriage as a counter-example.

The final chapter 5 focuses on the art of William Blake, and how he envisioned Job's wife in a non-traditional manner. Low explores the role of Romanticism in Blake's art, and how his depiction of Job and his wife agrees with Blake's wider understanding of Christianity. Low opens her discussion with an overview of those aspects of the Job narrative on which authors and artists tended to focus. She notes that, by the eighteenth century, the central issue concerned whether Job's suffering represented a specific historical situation in the past or served as an ongoing symbol of human suffering. In William Warburton's writings, for instance, Job's wife represents the exogamous marriages reproved by Nehemiah. In parallel, the book of Job began to feature in the debate of divine control and human will. Mary Shelley, for example, understood God as an oppressive force against which Satan rebels. This way of thinking further opened up the question as to whether Job's wife's speech—which questions God's decision—should be viewed negatively as it traditionally had been seen, or be reevaluated as commendable.

Turning to the art of William Blake, Low begins her discussion with a survey of Blake's life, beliefs, work, and their interrelations. She then explores the portrayal of Job's wife in the engravings in his Job series, *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. Low first offers an extended discussion of the 21 plates. All the plates, as well as select additional ones bearing on the discussion, appear as illustrations in the book. This is very useful as it enables the reader to follow the discussion while looking at the pictures. Subsequently, Low analyses the role of Job's wife as she appears in these pictures. Job and his wife are depicted as a couple. Job's wife is his faithful companion who shares in his suffering and redemption. They are often portrayed as sitting together, opposite his friends. Low also explores to what extent this portrayal of the harmonious couple reflects William Blake's own marriage with Catherine Blake. At the same time, she argues, we would do Blake an injustice if we assumed that he regarded Job's wife as being on the same level as Job. She is his companion, not his equal. This view agrees with Blake's general view of mythology and marriage. The sexes cooperate and work together towards harmony, with the goal that, at the end of this process, the Female Will is to be reabsorbed into the Male.

Low's book is a good example of reception history carried out well. Low deals competently with a wide range of material and offers new insight into the subject matter. At times, however, it is difficult to follow the train of thought, and the book would have benefited from spelling out some of the

insights in a clearer manner. For instance, although the book sets out to present the material in a chronological fashion, it is not fully clear why some material is discussed in chapter 2 and other, similar material in the opening parts of chapter 3. It also took me some time to understand the structure of the various chapters: general discussions tend to precede discussion of specific examples, yet in other places general discussions draw from specific examples. These drawbacks do not, however, deter the reader from enjoying the book.

The book is richly illustrated, with works of art stemming from the mediaeval ages to the nineteenth century, which greatly helped me follow the discussion.

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