

Job: Or, the Imagining of Justice · *Alicia Ostriker*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE. I am and am not a Jew. My case is (something like) H.D.'s, who was and was not a Christian. I am a Jew in the sense that every drop of blood in my veins is Jewish or so I presume, and every thought in my head, my habits of thinking, my moral impulses and burden of chronic guilt, my sense of humor if any, my confrontational and adversarial inclinations. They say a Jew is somebody who loves to argue, especially with God and other Jews. My laughter and tears are Jewish laughter and tears. What else could they be? My ancestors are Russian-Jewish ancestors, the peasant mud is hardly shaken from my roots. In the 1880s when the great pogroms swept Russia and eastern Europe, it was me too they hated and wanted to kill. Me, an innocent girl in my *bushka* throwing grain to the chickens. In 1944 it would have been me, my long nose no longer in a book, wetting my pants in a cattle car, or among the thousands of soft slain bodies layered over each other in the great mouth of a trench at Babi Yar — and I've fantastically escaped and can breathe air, enjoy freedom, by merest chance. Can't be anything else, though. Can't be a Buddhist like Allen Ginsberg (who anyway gets more and more rabbinical), or a Sufi like Doris Lessing. It would be a joke, silly to pretend. Could I despise the drops of blood in my body? To deny my Judaism would be, for me, like denying the gift of life. But I'm not a Jew, I can't be a Jew, because Judaism repels me as a woman.

To the rest of the world the Jew is marginal. But to Judaism I am marginal. Am woman, unclean. Am Eve. Or worse, am Lilith. Am illiterate. Not mine the traditions of Talmud, Mishnah, Zohar, not mine the centuries of ecstatic study, the questions and answers twining minutely like vines around the living Word, not mine the Kaballah, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet dancing as if they were attributes of God. These texts, like the Law and the Prophets, are not-me. I am supposed to light candles in their honor, revere my husband and raise my children, cook and clean and manage a joyous household in the name of these texts. What right have I to comment? None, none, none. What calls me to do it? I have no answer but the drops of my blood, that say try.

Is there a right of love and anger?

I'm afraid: but it seems obvious, doesn't it. *Everyone is afraid. Do what you fear.* I don't know if it says that in some text, but women have to run on hobbled legs, have to pray and sing with throttled voices. We have to do it sometime. We have to enter the tents/texts, invade the sanctuary, uncover the father's nakedness. We have to do it, believe it or not, because we love him. It won't kill him. He won't kill us.

The example of H.D. tells me it's possible to think through the most complicated and painful questions about our relation as women to "religion," and to men and their divine dominance. The path of the Dream is open to everyone; it has precedence even over the Word, as the Word has over the Sword, she says. "We are discoverers," she explains, taking my timid hand and pulling, "of the not-known." In "Tribute to the Angels," she trusts a heterodox personal vision of the Lady more than centuries of orthodox interpretations, for "none of these, none of these / suggest her as I saw her." In "The Flowering of the Rod," H.D. does what many of us would love to do. She imagines a wise man who might be Abraham, might be a lover of Mary Magdalen, might be God, and is certainly that modern prince of patriarchs Sigmund Freud. He is a man who conventionally condescends to women—and in a flash of dazzling wish-fulfillment, H.D. converts him to knowledge of female divinity.

Well, we can dream, can't we.

The story of Job calls me simultaneously from outside and from within myself. The book is a redaction of a folk tale with the work of one or more of the most sublime poets who ever wrote. So it is composed by not-me. Its characters are a male God who is pleased by his upright servant Job; a male Satan whom God permits to torment Job as a test to see whether Job will continue to worship God even through suffering; Job himself, a male patriarch in a male society; and Job's male companions, the false comforters who insist that if he's suffering he must have sinned. Women enter the story only minimally. Job's three daughters are killed with his seven sons, and at the end of the story he gets seven new sons and three new daughters. His wife appears in a single verse of the book. So the story's

subject is not-me. Ditto its many commentators, who until now have been not-me, but wise men who I am sure would feel it “unseemly” for a woman to have an opinion on such a difficult text.

What then calls me to comment on the tale of Job? What made me feel (as with all stories of this depth) when I first read it that I had known it always, as if it were a dream of my own that I had forgotten? What does the story mean to me and what do I mean to it? I can’t tell until I write. Then I recognize that the contradictions of the story are its strength. Man in *The Book of Job* is both an utterly insignificant worm and the worthy challenger of Almighty God. But this leads me further. For I see that the minimal, hardly-present *woman* in the story, like the fleck of light from the flawed jewel seen by Kaspar, opens and opens into something startling. I didn’t know this would happen before I wrote. It was H.D., obviously, who made it possible.

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It is a strange invention of the Jews, God’s “justice.” That God should be “just,” obliged to reward good men who obeyed his laws, care for widows and the poor and so forth, and punish evil ones who didn’t, was not a notion that occurred to the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Canaanites. We appreciate, if we step back a bit from our post-Christian assumptions, what a peculiar expectation it is. That justice should be intrinsic to a God and, still more odd, that human beings need to remind the god about it, as Abraham does before the destruction of Sodom, and as Job does when he complains of his afflictions. They remind God that he is not supposed to harm the innocent.

Now when Job confronts God of course God is not put exactly in the wrong—although indeed Job’s afflictions are a sort of sport for God, the result of a sort of bet with Satan, in the folktale frame. But there is challenge and argument. Job’s friends insist that he must have secretly sinned or he wouldn’t be suffering, and that no mortal has the right to question God. Job maintains his own righteousness and integrity and begs the Almighty to answer him. “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him” (13:15), he cries. And again, “Oh that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his

seat! I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments” (23:3–4).

When the Lord answers Job out of the whirlwind—“Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?”—his magnificent speech seems designed to smash Job and mankind into humility by an overwhelming display of gorgeous creative might. Were you there when I created the earth, the morning stars that sang together, the floods, behemoth, leviathan, the horse that has a neck clothed with thunder and saith among the trumpets, Ha ha? I am the Creator! I am *not* just!—That is the gist of the Lord’s reply, and it is very splendid to read, a verbal equivalent of a nuclear explosion. Yet at the very end, the folktale frame of the story, where Job gets everything back and is richer than before, vindicates man and his challenge and is almost a divine apology. (No, cut “divine,” it is not a word appropriate to this Lord who is so meaty and full of temper: “divine” refers to something thinner, more spiritual and attenuated than this Lord.) The conclusion is God’s apology. It is as if God were saying: It’s true that I’m unjust and that’s the way I like it, and of course the conventional piety of your friends which claims that I am just and that your suffering is your own fault is false as you are well aware; but, do you know, you have embarrassed me a little. There. I hereby rebuke your friends and give you back your health, sons, daughters, and cattle. And Job was more blessed in his latter end than his beginning, they will repeat. For it is important that reputation, too, be repaired.

No woman can read the story without thinking: other sons, other daughters, other cattle. Not the original ones, who were killed when enemies attacked, when the fire fell from heaven, and when the great wind destroyed her eldest son’s house while all of the siblings were eating and drinking there. The dead ones are permanently dead. “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee,” said each servant after each scene of malefic catastrophe, as she well remembers. Job has his recompense, but the killed children remain under the ground, and by the way, who compensates the wife, who has had to live with Job in all his phases: as righteous and complacent servant of God and super-holy man; as stricken beast; as the vibrant rhapsodist of an absent justice? She would be cooking the breakfast and darning the clothes. He in all his phases the focus of the story, she its

periphery, like the sheep and the sons and daughters, but preserved alive so that she can be conscious of her secondary status, rather than mercifully and suddenly annihilated. Job has many lines to say in *The Book of Job*, but Job's wife has one line and says it early: "Curse God and die." That is woman's wisdom. Look at it, a large cinder in her outstretched palm.

For she knows all along that God is not just. Never in her heart of hearts has she been deluded by the pieties she mouths along with the rest of the community. Any fool who looks with her eyes can see God is not just — to daughters, to wives, to mothers. They don't even exist for him. As for the man's world, why do the wicked prosper? But her husband has been lucky, and confidently believes his good fortune the consequence of his uprightness. So when he is stricken, and complains, she rushes in immediately with her knowledge, of which the distillation is "curse God and die." It is interesting that he, the man, has to do this, in her opinion; perform this brave rebellion; for her, too, he is the protagonist. She could never curse God and die herself. Shrew that she is, she is too timid for heroism.

But one day it will be the woman who rises, wounded and agonized, empty-handed, having thrown away dustrag and purse, her body pustulant from crown to toes. Rage will blister her and the blisters will be bursting as if it were an organ playing. Tiny as her body is, insignificant speck as she knows herself to be in God's universe, she will become so swollen with her demand—justice for me! justice for me!—that she will bellow it out against all rationality. And when she makes that cry, God will appear violently to her and the play will be played. She will taste, bitterly on her tongue, the condensed cruelty and beauty of the universe. She will recognize her own nothingness as she has never done before, and the experience will be the most rapturous torture for her so that she wishes only to be dead and not conscious or crazy and not conscious, and she feels she will be made to stay alive forever with this feeling unabated. That would be hell. She repents in dust and ashes. And then finally God will recompense her. It will have to be a large recompense. God will be embarrassed by her as by her husband Job.

Or rather, he was waiting for her to issue her challenge. That is what really happens. God does not know how to be just until the children de-

mand it. Then he knows. After all, he is just the laws of physics, the magnificent laws of physics, and then the adorable laws of biology. Consciousness and conscience bubble forth late, a sort of foam, sparkling and glinting, according to their own precise laws.

So she will need a large recompense because she will be asking: Where are my dead sons? What about the women executed as witches and whores? What of the beaten wives? Where are the souls who rose in smoke over Auschwitz? You teach me to say *The wicked shall vanish like smoke, when all tyranny shall be removed from the earth*, but it was innocent babies who vanished. She wants the unjustly slain to be alive and for singing and dance to come to the victims. Somewhere in her reptile brain she hopes the Lord will run the film backward, so that she can see, speedily in her time, the smoke coagulate and pour back down the chimneys, the stream of naked Jews and Gypsies walk backward out of the buildings.

We already know what she wants. She wants justice to rain down like waters. She wants adjustment, portion to portion, so that the machinery of the world will look seemly and move powerfully and not scrape and scream. The children of God do not really say that God is just. But they invent the idea. They chew it over and over, holding it up to the light this way and that. And though blood drips from the concept, staining their hands, they are persistent. It is their idea.