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"Job and the Unknown Wife:

Through the Lens of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam."

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ABSTRACT

Who knew that one line from a nameless wife would be the reason for theological discussions

and debates ever since it was first written? Considered a book of the people, the Book of Job

has many lessons and ideas that we all can learn and live from. Throughout my research

paper, I contend that comparatively analyzing Job's wife in various texts presents a distinct

perspective on a nameless wife. On the surface, Job's wife is portrayed as a spouse lacking

commitment: especially after uttering her famous words, she disappears from the story and

is never heard from again, leaving her husband to suffer alone. Biblical and Qur'anic texts

remain silent on her whereabouts, but a reception history of Job and his wife reveals a wealth

of explanatory interpretations for Job's wife's words and their lives together as husband and

wife. For centuries, scholars have questioned whether Job's wife blesses or curses Job. By

analyzing Jewish, Muslim, and Christian sources, one discovers the anti-feminist and

feminists views that revolve around this topic.

Keywords: Book of Job, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Job, Job's Wife.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Katherine Low, "no other words spoken by a woman in the Hebrew Bible carry more bite and bafflement than those of Job's wife in the book of Job, chapter 2, verse 9: "Curse God and die!" On the surface, Job's wife is portrayed as a spouse lacking commitment, especially because after uttering her famous words, she disappears from the story and is never heard from again, leaving her husband to suffer alone. Biblical and Qur'anic texts remain silent on her whereabouts, but a reception history of Job and his wife reveals a wealth of explanatory interpretations for Job's wife's words and their lives together as husband and wife.

At first glance, Job's wife is portrayed as an undedicated spouse who is easily beguiled by the devil. However, throughout the centuries theologians and scholars decided to take a deeper look into the role of Job's wife and what we can learn from her. One way which scholars and theologians learned and discovered more about Job, his wife, and their struggles, was to write more in-depth elaborations on the Book of Job. In Judaism and Christianity, one of the first translations and commentaries that was written on the Book of Job is "The Testament of Job"

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² Katherine Low "Introduction" in *The Bible, Gender, and Reception History: The Case of Job's Wife* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.

which is found in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Although she is not mentioned in the Qur'an, in the Islamic commentary *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*, Job's wife is given a name and plays a significant role in the story of Job as he struggles to understand his circumstances. When looking at the character of Job's wife, many scholars have come to the conclusion that there are two perspectives on how to look at Job's wife; she is either the devil's helper, or a dedicated loving wife. Through this essay, we will dive through the three largest Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and explore how they have come to know and understood the nameless wife of Job.

CHRISTIANITY

"Do you still persist in your integrity? **Curse** God, and die," New Revised Standard Version, Job 2:9.

The word "bless" comes from the Hebrew word *barak* (בְּרַך) which means "to bless, kneel, to be blessed, bless oneself; also (by euphemism) to curse (God or the King, as treason)."³ Due to these contrasting definitions, the word *barak* caused a lot of debate in early Christian writings. Many scholars have looked at the term in two different ways: looking at it literally to mean "bless," or taking it as a euphemism for "curse" or "blaspheme." Depending on the way you define the word, Job's wife is portrayed as a cruel, unsupportive, sharp-tongued "devil helper" or as a supportive wife caring for her ailing husband. Influenced by the works of the early church fathers- Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great, a majority of the interpretations of Job's wife viewed *barak* as a curse.

https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H1288&t=KJV.

³ Blue Letter Bible, "Strong's H1288 – barak,"

⁴ Karla R Suomala, "The Taming of Job in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam." Word & World 31 (4): 402.

SEPTUAGINT

The first translation of the book of Job appears in the Septuagint (LXX), "the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek." 5 While scholars do not agree on the reason why the Septuagint translation differs so much from its Hebrew parent text, "it is clear that the Greek version tames Job's character considerably." Not only is Job's character tamer, but the wife's speech that is found in the Hebrew text is changed as well. Compared to the Hebrew translation, the Greek version seems to have been aware of the ambiguity of the citation, "Bless God and die!," which has long been understood as a euphemism that means, "Curse God and die!" In the Greek version, the wife's speech has a fairly significant addition to her words. In the Hebrew text, Job's wife's speech only comprises two stichoi compared to "a full lament of 12 stichoi in the Greek book of Job."8 The origin of these extra stichoi is not certain but many scholars have "intertextually linked [Job's wife's speech] with Gen[esis] 3:16, Isaiah 65:23, and Tob 4:3-4."9 In this Greek translation, Job's wife is not speaking to him on impulse, but after waiting a while. Moreover, the reader has not pondered the suffering of Job's wife until now which the Septuagint makes a legitimate point that the suffering is not just Job's but hers as well, especially seeing as she bore their children.

EARLY CHURCH INFLUENCE

With the rise of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire in the 4th century CE, new ideas, translations, and commentaries emerged. Two of the early Doctors of the Church who produced commentaries on the Book of Job are Saint Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great.

⁹ Ibid, 43.

⁵ Ibid, 398.

⁶ Ibid, 398.

⁷ Ibid, 398.

⁸ Markus Witte, "The Greek Book of Job" in *Das Buch Hiob und seine Interpretationen*, ed. T. Krüger, M. Oeming, K. Schmid, and C. Uehlinger (Zürich: AZ Druck und Datentechnik GmbH, 2007) 42.

Saint Augustine

Saint Augustine lived from AD 354 to 430 and is well known for his Christian theology. In his treatise *On Patience*, Augustine suggests that Job's wife was not killed along with Job's children because the Devil might use her as another Eve-incident to deceive him into blasphemy. Augustine then compares Job to Adam:

She brought no help to her husband, but went on blaspheming God. Skilled in wrongdoing, the Devil had not deserted her when he had destroyed her sons, for he had learned with Eve how necessary woman was for the tempter. But, this time he did not find another Adam whom he could entice through a woman.¹⁰

In another sermon titled, "To the Catechumens on the Creed," Augustine wrote of Job's wife's role:

After the pattern of the serpent, who, in Paradise, deceived the first man whom God made, so now she also thought by suggesting blasphemy to succeed in deceiving a man who pleased God. How great were his sufferings, brethren! Who can suffer so much in his possessions, in his house, in his person, yea, in his wife, the temptress who remained to him? But even her Satan would long before have taken from him if he had not kept her to be his helper. He had overcome the first man by means of Eve, therefore he had kept his Eve. 11

Augustine later stated, "[h]is wife, the devil's helper, not her husband's comforter, would fain have persuaded him to blaspheme." In many of his writings, Augustine expressed his belief that "all women are impacted by Eve's act in Eden," and it is difficult for women to fall out of the tempter role. 13

¹⁰ Augustine, Mary Sarah Muldowney, and Roy J. Deferrari, *Treatises on Various Subjects*, Vol. 1st pbk. reprint. The Fathers of the Church, a New Translation. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002.

¹¹ Charles A. Heurtley, edu, "On Faith and the Creed: Dogmatic Teaching of the Church of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries" in *The Bible, Gender, and Reception History: The Case of Job's Wife*

⁽New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 33-34

¹² Ibid, 34.

¹³ Ibid, 34.

Gregory the Great

It would be remiss to discuss the book of Job without elaborating on Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob*, "a work completed in the second half of the sixth century [which] is without question the single most important commentary on Job in the Middle Ages, exerting an influence on virtually every Christian exegesis of the book," even influencing Jewish interpreters. 14

Similarly to Augustine, Gregory built his ideas off of the view that Job's wife was the New Eve. In his writings, Gregory saw Job's wife as another test Job needed to overcome. Focusing on "the mouth of Job's wife: 'the old foe put in motion the tongue of his wife' (*antiques hostis linguam mouit exoris*)." In his writings, "Gregory posit[ed] that the Adversary tests human beings in two ways: through suffering but also, more subtly through persuasion." Failing to 'break' Job by taking everything he owns, the Adversary returns to the cunningness found in Genesis. As the snake tricked Eve to speak perversely towards Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit, so the Adversary tried to trick Job through his wife to make him want to curse God.

JUDAISM

וַתִּאמֵר לוֹ אִשָׁתּוֹ עֹדָךְ מַחַזִיק בָּתַמַּתֶךְ בַּרֵךְ אֱלֹהִים וַמֶּת.

Similar to the Christian narrative, while rabbis put Job on a pedestal, they were often critical of the advice Job's wife gave to him. Robert Alter wrote in his Hebrew Bible translation and commentary:

Job's wife assumes either that cursing God will immediately lead to Job's death, which might be just as well, or that, given his ghastly state, he will soon die anyway, so that he might as well curse the

¹⁴ Choon-Leong Seow, "Job's Wife, with Due Respect" in *Das Buch Hiob und seine Interpretationen* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 2007) 352.

¹⁵ Charles A. Heurtley, edu, "On Faith and the Creed: Dogmatic Teaching of the Church of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries" in *The Bible, Gender, and Reception History: The Case of Job's Wife* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 38.

¹⁶ Choon-Leong Seow, "Job's Wife, with Due Respect" in *Das Buch Hiob und seine Interpretationen* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2007) 352.

deity who inflicted these horrors on him. In either case, her use of the repeated phrase "still cling onto your innocence" is sarcastic: what is the point of your innocence, she says, after all that has happened?¹⁷

From Alter's commentary, we understand that there are two main interpretations; we either sympathize with the pain Job's wife must feel or we see her as a temptress. For some, they prefer to see the term "curse" for its Hebrew meaning as "bless," which places her speech in a more positive light. According to Eli Ginzberg, leading Talmud and Jewish Theological teacher wrote, "His wife, fearful that he would not bear his horrible suffering with steadfastness, advised him to pray to God for death, that he might be sure of going hence an upright man." He also wrote, "Job's wife told him to blaspheme God so that punishment of death would befall him to relieve his suffering." Which means that Job's wife was sympathetic to the pain that Job felt and saw the way to right his 'wrong' is through death. While other scholars look at her speech as a temptation and outright sin against God. Even comparing her to the devil himself.

OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

This dual rabbinical interpretation can be seen in the ancient interpreters who took on two rather divergent traditions.²⁰ In one rabbinic commentary, "the *Targum of Job*, and Pseudo-Philo- identifies the wife of Job with Dinah, the daughter of Jacob."²¹ During the time when Hebrew dialectic was declining, the *Targum* came out as an ancient Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible for Jews to use. A second tradition "identifies Job's wife with a wretched Arabian

¹⁷ Robert Alter. "Job" in *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary; The Writings* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019) 469.

¹⁸ Eli Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, 7 vols, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909-1938) 457.

¹⁹ Anne W. Stewart "Job's Wife and Her Interpreters" in *Women's Bible Commentary* ed. Carol A. Newson, and Sharon H Ringe, and Jacqueline E Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012) 216-217.

²⁰ Michael C. Legaspi, "Job's Wives in the "Testament of Job": A Note on the Synthesis of Two Traditions." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 1 (2008): 71.

²¹ Ibid, 71.

woman."²² In the Jewish composition, "Testament of Job" found within *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, creatively provides a solution to lingering questions concerning his relation to ethnic Israel, and to elaborate on themes in the book of Job in a way that vindicates the role of women in Job's own moral athleticism.

In this version, Job is on his deathbed where he gathers his seven sons, three daughters and second wife around him where he talks about the events that occurred in his life and the suffering he endured. Job has two wives, one named Sitis, the other named Dinah. Sitis represents the unnamed Arabian wife that is found in Job 2:9 in the canonical account. Sitis, which "probably comes from "sitos," which is Greek for "food" or "bread," reflects one way Sitis provided for her husband in his moments of despair. However, in this account, Sitis' "plays a major role and is the subject of extensive lament." In a six chapter narrative, Job discusses his suffering with his family, describing Sitis as "something of a figure of pity, driven to enslavement and finally forced to sell her hair ignominiously to Satan." Unlike Augstine and Gregory the Great who see Job's wife as a devil's tool, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* she is not only given the name Sitis, but she is revered by her husband for being a *figure of pity*.

ISLAM

Unlike in Christian and Jewish holy books, there is no 'Book of Job' in the Qur'an.

Rather, The Qur'an or Koran consists of 114 units of varying lengths of suras with narrations of prophets and prayer appear within its texts. Instead of having a sole book dedicated to the character and story of Job, Job is mentioned only by name three times in the Qur'an; Surah 6:84,

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²² Ibid, 71.

²³ Mayer Gruber "Job" in *The Jewish Study Bible* (eds. by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 1507

²⁴ R.P. Spittler, "Testament of Job" in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1983) 839.

²⁵ Ibid, 835.

Surah 21: 83-84, and Surah 38:41-44. There is not much of a story or a clear explanation of who Job is or why he is considered a prophet, and there isn't even a mention of his wife. In order to gain an understanding of Job and his story, Muslims turn to the *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*. Written before 1200 by a man named al-Kisa'i, the *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* or "Tales of the Prophets," is a collection of various stories that have been adapted from the Qur'an to explain and expand on what is in the Qur'an.²⁶

QIŞAŞ AL-'ANBIYĀ

In the *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* is the story titled, "The Prophet Job." Similar to themes and stories that are found in the Christian and Jewish holy books, one significant difference in "The Prophet of Job," Job's wife plays a significantly positive role in Job's life and is considered a role model for Muslim women. In the Islamic story of the Prophet Job, Job, known in the Islamic tradition as *Ayyūb*, is a well-accomplished son "who married the daughter of Ephraim son of Joseph," who was called Rahmah, who blessed Job with twelves sons and daughters.²⁷

The story begins with Iblis watching over Job. Iblis, the personal name for the devil, is jealous of Job's material wealth and love for God. Rather than continuing to watch over Job, Iblis ascends to the seven heavens to ask Allah for permission to gain all the power over all of Job's possessions, family, children, and even his body. Similar to the Hebrew account, Iblis destroyed everything Job owned including his possessions and children, as well as caused a plague to fall over Job's entire body. As he lay there, afflicted with smallpox, Rahmah began to weep silently, but Job forbade her and asked her to move him to another place, as he lacked the strength to move. "Strengthened by God," Rahmah picked Job up and brought him to a place

²⁶ Ibid. xix.

²⁷ "The Prophet Job" in *Tales of the Prophets* (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic Word, Inc. 1997) 195.

"for the poor and unfortunate." Throughout Job's suffering, Rahmah is "a paragon of patience, she stays with her husband when all others could not bear to be in his presence. She shows her love and support in every way and praises God with him. She physically carries him around, even as she continues to work for food and seeks relief for him." Then one day, Iblis disguises himself as a physician and tells Rahmah that Job will be healed if he slaughters a bird and eats it without recognizing God. Concerned and worried for her husband, Rahmah presents this suggestion to Job. Job, however, recognizes this as a trick from Iblis and does not fall for it.

Angered, Iblis persists and disguises him again, this time telling Rahmah about a dualistic theological- a god of heaven and a god of the earth. Rahmah discusses this theological idea with Job where he rebukes her for toying with the idea that there can be multiple gods, and Job vows to whip Rahmah with a hundred lashes. Even then, "her concerns are first for her husband; she asks God to heal Job, even if it means twice as many lashes as Job promised." After this, Job anticipates that death is near to which Rahmah admits her undying love for him and goes on to beg for bread and eventually sells her hair for some bread.

After Job discovers that Rahmah sold her hair, he begins to lament in the sense that the loss of her hair is an affliction upon him. It was in this moment of suffering, the angel "Gabriel descended and greeted him saying, 'I am Gabriel, who brought you glad tidings, Job, of God's forgiveness.' Taking him by the right hand, he said, 'Rise, with the permission of God! And Job stood up."³¹ At this moment, Job is healed and fulfills his oath to give his wife a hundred lashes.

²⁸ Ibid, 195.

²⁹ Choon-Leong Seow, "Job's Wife, with Due Respect" in *Das Buch Hiob und seine Interpretationen* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2007) 364.

³⁰ Ibid, 364

³¹ Prophet Job, 202.

God, however, recognizes the faithfulness and patience of Rahmah and suggests to Job to take a bundle of one hundred twigs and beat her once, which would fulfill the oath.³²

The Islamic account compared to the story from *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, portrays Rahmah as a strong, devoted wife who is willing to sacrifice her own well-being, to protect and nurture for her ailing husband. Rather than being another tool for the devil to use, Rahmah is a worried and loving wife, seeking any means possible to heal her husband. While nurturing and caring for her husband, Rahmah was tempted by Ibilis three times, which is evidence of the fact that Job is not the only one suffering from loss. In the Islamic account, there is a strong feminist view of Job's wife, depicting her carrying her husband with the strength of God and sacrificing herself for the well-being of her husband.

JOB AND RAHMA AND THE MORISCOS

According to the Islamic account, Rahma's devotion and love for her husband has proven to be inspirational for many women throughout the ages. In particular, is the story of the Muslims in the Iberia Peninsula which was recorded in the fifteenth-sixteenth century CE.³³ It was during this time "when Christian officials decreed that all Muslims who wanted to live in Spain had to convert to Christianity. Moriscos, as Christians referred to these converted Muslims, hid many of their writings as Christian officials began to call in and burn forbidden texts." Although the story of Job, seeing that it came from the old testament, would be an unlikely text that would be taken by Christian officials, the Moriscos had their own version recorded in "Aljamia, a Romance dialect written in Arabic script." Not only was the text

³² Choon-Leong Seow, "Job's Wife, with Due Respect" in *Das Buch Hiob und seine Interpretationen* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 2007) 364.

³³ Mary Elizabeth Perry, "Patience and Pluck: Job's Wife, Conflict and REsistance in Morisco Manuscripts Hidden in the Sixteenth Century" in *Women, Texts and Authority in the Early Modern Spanish World* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003) 91.

³⁴ Ibid, 91-92.

³⁵ Ibid, 91.

written in a forbidden language but it also became a "text of resistance."³⁶ On the surface level, the Book of Job is a reminder to remain steadfast and faithful during a time of suffering but in this version, we meet Rahma, who "remains faithful to her husband throughout all the applications that strike Job and his family. More than patient and submissive or a mere helpmate for Job, she shows courage, determination, faith, and intelligence in taking direct action to assure their survival."³⁷

This version of a strong, faithful wife must have been an inspiration to Moriscos who lived under the Christian rule in the sixteenth century. In 1568-1570, "some 50,000 Moriscos were forcibly uprooted from their homes to be relocated following their unsuccessful rebellion," some of which lost everything and were separated from their family. Similar to Job, Moriscos suffered dramatic changes and lost everything they owned. The Book of Job reigned particularly inspirational to countless Morisco women who became "heads of households as husbands disappeared into slavery, hiding or captivity. Quietly, they replaced expelled Muslim leaders as they taught their children the prayers and beliefs of Islam." ³⁹

Similar to the account that is found in the *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*, Rahma sacrifices her wellbeing to help her husband. In the *Aljamia* account, Rahma is marveled for her devotion and beauty. One difference in this account is that Rahma builds a house for Job to rest in, carrying him on her back as puss and worms drip down her skin from Job's body.⁴⁰ The happy ending in Job's story proved to be particularly comforting to the Moriscos, "even as oppression increased to culminate in the decrees expelling them from all the inspiration and empowerment to both

³⁶ Ibid, 92.

³⁷ Ibid, 92.

³⁸ Ibid, 92.

³⁹ Ibid, 92.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 98.

women and men."⁴¹ In the midst of their suffering, the Moriscos were able to find their inspiration through a wife who never gave up.

RAHMA(H)

According to "The New Encyclopedia of Islam," the word 'Rahmah' comes from the root $r\bar{a}$, $h\bar{a}$, $m\bar{\imath}m$, and it means "mercy, to be merciful, to show mercy. This is an attribute of God which the Koran emphasizes over and over again, in keeping with its nature as the last revelation."

Unlike the Augustine commentary, Rahmah is not that of a temptress but is considered a strong, devoted wife, the opposite of Eve. "Thus the story is not just about faith and patience-both Job's and Rahmah's; it is also about the manifestation of God's compassion through human-here, female- agency."⁴³ In the case of the Moriscos in Spain, Rahmah is a symbol of hope and endurance not only for females suffering under the Christian oppression but men as well as they are taught to stay patient. In this translation, Rahmah herself has fallen victim to Iblis' charms and wicked ways. In contrast with the Christian and Jewish commentaries, Iblis isn't particularly using Rahmah to trick but trying to trick Rahmah herself and Job has to keep her in balance. In contrast to the story of Adam and Eve, Rahmah and Ayyūb didn't fall under Iblis's temptation and were rewarded for their endurance and patience through the trials.

CONCLUSION

As a character in the Hebrew Bible, Job's wife plays a minor role in the Book of Job, with only one line and no name. However, this one line raised an intriguing question, "should [barak] be taken at face value to mean "bless" or is it a euphemism for 'curse'?" Job's wife has

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⁴¹ Ibid, 100.

⁴² Cyril Glasse, "Rahmah" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, Inc. 2008) 433.

⁴³ Ibid, 366.

been roundly condemned by interpreters throughout the ages as the devil's tool or temptress, or even a personification of the devil himself. Yet, with these anti-feminist views comes an alternate perspective that sees Job's wife as a caretaker and support for her ailing husband. According to "the early doctors of the church," Job's wife is considered the *devil's helper*, used to deceive Job the same way Eve tempted Adam. In contrast, Islam held a very positive image of Job's wife, Rahmah and she was even one of the sources of inspiration for Moriscas in sixteenth century Spain. Overall, there is much more to know and learn from the nameless wife of Job 2:9. At the surface, Job's wife is seen as a temptress but as scholars and interpreters began to dig deeper into her character, they began to sympathize with her and portray her as a courageous wife, supporting her husband the best way she knows. Through the exploration of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there is more than meets the eyes to the nameless wife. If only we could take the chance to learn from each other.

⁴⁴ Choon-Leong Seow, "Job's Wife, with Due Respect" in *Das Buch Hiob und seine Interpretationen* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 2007) 351.

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