

About this first chapter of the book of Job, what is there to be said? It is the setup for the story, clearly a fiction about a man long ago and far away, in the mythical land of Uz. The story is a musing upon the problem of suffering in a critique of glib explanations. With the bet between God and the satan, or adversary, the storyteller calls into question God's benevolence and human assumptions about virtue, piety, and the good life. Virginia Woolf reportedly wrote to a friend that she had read the book of Job the previous night, and God had not come off well.

I think that's fair to say in these first 22 verses. God does not come off well. Job is strenuously, painstakingly pious, even to the point of sacrificing on behalf of his children who *might* have sinned. But challenged by the satan to see whether Job's piety is dependent on his good fortune, God allows the satan to remove everything that makes his life so pleasant: his livestock, his servants, and his children. And then they step back to watch.

There is a real-life parallel I'll just throw out here. Rabia Basri was a Muslim born into deep poverty in about 714. When famine struck and her father died, she was sold as a slave, and was worked hard. She became a famous mystic and poet, and is remembered for saying,

"Everyone prays to You from fear of the Fire;
And if You do not put them in the Fire,
This is their reward.
Or they pray to You for the Garden,
Full of fruits and flowers.
And that is their prize.
But I do not pray to You like this,
For I am not afraid of the Fire,
And I do not ask You for the Garden.
But all I want is the Essence of Your Love,
And to return to be One with You,
And to become Your Face."

"O Allah! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship You for Your Own sake, grudge me not Your everlasting Beauty."

Rabia was a mystic, in the Muslim Sufi tradition, and direct experience of the Divine was all she wanted or needed. I suspect that she would affirm that God *could* pull the rug out from under a prosperous man like Job, but she would not have found the scenario plausible in which a heavenly lawyer challenges God's own confidence in that man. Rabia was informed by the tradition of a God who knows everything; she said that even repentance is a gift from God because you can't know you're sorry till God reveals it to you. To her, her situation was what it was, and there was no question of challenging God about it; she loved God with all her heart already.

Putting God's sovereignty first is very Muslim; challenging God's justice is very Jewish. I have to think that the storyteller has set up the narrative like this deliberately, to put God in the hot seat, as it were, and to explore whether God is beneficent or trustworthy. Certainly Job comes off very well in this first chapter. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing.'

But it occurs to me, reading just the introduction, that God is also facing a possible loss. God does not really know if Job will still love him after he loses everything, and he is willing to find out the truth even if it's painful. This is a late story in the history of Israel, much later than the story about how God heard the cries of the people enslaved in Egypt and freed them. It is later than the story of

Moses, who told the people, “God did not choose you because you were the greatest of peoples; God chose you because God loved you.” It’s true that the narrators of the history of the conquest and the kings pretty much drum in the idea that good fortune is the reward for piety and destruction is the consequence of impiety, but even in those stories the good kings are those who care for the vulnerable and the bad kings are those who appropriate other people’s land and abuse their power. So there is a clear understanding that God feels for those who are in pain. Although the narrator is challenging God’s justice, God is known to be compassionate—feeling with, sharing pain. God is taking a chance here, setting up Job to suffer and perhaps reject God.

For the next thirty-some chapters God is silent, letting Job and his friends make meaning out of what has happened. There’s a loss of control there, for sure. God controls the conditions under which Job lives, but God does not control the meaning Job makes of it.

I do not want to over interpret this little bit of the story, since there is much more to come. I will just say that reading it this time around I do see a suggestion that besides challenging God, we might challenge ourselves: to what extent can we, like Rabia, find the beauty of God apart from our own situations? Rabia reminds me of the young soldier who becomes a monk in *The Brothers Karamazov* who, upon realizing his own arrogance and the kindness of his humble servant, has his eyes opened to the presence of God in all things:

Gentlemen,” I cried suddenly, speaking straight from my heart, “look around you at the gifts of God, the clear sky, the pure air, the tender grass, the birds; nature is beautiful and sinless, and we, only we, are sinful and foolish, and we don’t understand that life is heaven, for we have only to understand that and

it will at once be fulfilled in all its beauty, we shall embrace each other and weep.”

And I see also in this introduction an unexpectedly vulnerable God, holding God's breath to see whether a mere creature, one of millions, will turn his back on God and walk away. It seems like a cruel bet that God and the satan make together, but it also suggests a God to whom it really matters that human beings know and love God.

Let us pray:

Fathomless Mystery, creator of all that is and closer to us than our own blood, we have so many questions to which there are no answers. Help us to have the courage to ask them anyway, and the open hearts to hear you speak to us with sighs too deep for words. Amen.