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## Posing a Question —A consideration of the words of Job's wife

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### Introduction

Georges de La Tour, the French painter of the 17th century, left the beautiful work titled “ Job ridiculed by his wife (Job raille par sa femme) ” . The expressions of the human figures lit by faint candlelight in the darkness is a characteristic of the works of La Tour. The soft light gives clarity to the expression of the human figures adding an unfathomable depth. The contrast of light and dark in his works is very beautiful. The work “ Job ridiculed by his wife (Job raille par sa femme) ” , in the possession of the Musée Départemental d ' Art Ancien et Contemporain, Épinal, France, is a case in point. A woman dressed in orange holding a candle seems to whisper something, looking into the eyes of a half-naked worn-out man with a slight slouch. And the man seems to hope for something, looking up at the woman with his hands clenched. It seems to me that the depth and expressiveness of this work is to be found in their eyes looking at one another in the beauty of the candlelight.

The title - “ Job ridiculed by his wife (Job raille par sa femme) ” was given to the painting in 1935 by Jean Lafond, an art critic. It had been titled “ A young woman visiting a prisoner ” and “ Saint Peter rescued by an angel ” , but, from 1935, was known as “ Job ridiculed by his wife (Job raille par sa femme) ” . François=Georges Pariset had the following to say: “ On one side, a bright, wise and authoritative woman hovers over Job as if to see how he is, but in a manner that suggests that her presence is suffocating him. On the other side, Job, worn, confused and hurt, shows fortitude in his sad plight. ” \*1 Pariset sees the Job of this painting as a righteous man, insulted by his wife, resolutely maintaining his faith despite his confusion. But I wonder at the truth of such an appreciation. In fact, the intention of La Tour, the 17th century painter, remains a mystery.

I think it may be safe to say that such an arbitrary interpretation of this painting is not significantly different from the traditional and familiar interpretation of Job ' s wife and of Job himself. I suppose this painting is, rather, representative of interpretations which we put on the Book of Job.

We regard Job as a man of faith, patience and integrity, we treat him as righteous and as a model of patient obedience to God. His patience and obedience are seen as good examples for us to follow. By contrast, we think of Job ' s wife as a stupid woman who ridicules faithful Job telling him to die, or a limb of Satan who confuses patient Job. Indeed, I suppose we could see La Tour's painting in such a light. But such an interpretation is a one-sided view about a part of this work. We might be persuaded by this picture to question our interpretation of the Bible as a whole, as well as the Book of Job.

### **What is the “ integrity ” of Job the righteous?**

The Book of Job is a fairly well-known story. What sort of image do you have of Job and of the Book of Job?

In the Common Bible Translation, the prologue in Chapters One and Two, called “ the frame story ” describes Job as a man of “ integrity ” . Needless to say, the “ integrity ” of Job has a special significance in the Book of Job. In a one line, one off, remark from Job ' s wife, the word “ integrity ” is used: “ You are still holding to your integrity, aren ' t you? ” The Hebrew word “ tām ” (1: 1), translated by the English word “ integrity ” is translated by the Japanese word, “ muku ” .

However, this word, “ muku ” in the Common Bible Translation is actually unfamiliar to us and consequently enlarges the range of our interpretation. For example, according to Kojien, ( the most widely used Japanese Dictionary ) “ muku ” is defined as:

Renouncing worldly desires and being innocent.

Innocence in body and soul. Unworldliness.

Purity.

A suit of clothes made of the same plain-colored cloth.

Judging only from these descriptions, and considering our usage of “ muku ” about persons who are close to us, for example, this word is mainly used for describing “ naiveness ” or “ thoughtlessness ” .

Particularly in Japanese, the word “ muku ” is far from the image of “ the righteous ” , and rather is regarded in the light of the Japanese motto “ Purity, Righteousness and Beauty ” . Moreover, it is understood as “ idiot ” in extreme cases. In any case, it is difficult to connect the Japanese word “ muku ” with “ righteousness ” and “ the righteous ” .

We can suppose that the Hebrew word “ tām ” means “ absolute perfection ” (it includes the sense of “ flawlessness ” as mentioned later), “ noble character ” , “ exemplary character ” and “ steadiness in mentality ” , since this is how it is used in other places in the Book of Job and in “ Wisdom literature ” ( e.g. in Proverbs). \*2 It implies that Job is quite independent of God and fully subject to God, particularly in the Book of Job. In this context, we can accurately translate this word in Job ' s wife's remark as follows: “ You are still holding to the perfectness of your faith, aren ' t you? ”

### **Perfectness of Job**

What kind of implications does Job ' s righteousness have? We can catch a glimpse of the author's

intention. For example, in 1: 2ff, it says that by God ' s blessing, Job had been given a lot of cattle and that he owned " enough cattle to fill the whole country. " (1: 10). We also see that he had a large number of servants and was " the richest man in the East. "

The fabulous wealth of Job clearly corresponds to " the Blessings of Obedience " in Deuteronomy 28.

Gentile though he is, Job is placed on the same level as Abraham, one of Israel ' s patriarchs, who is typically seen as righteous. The righteousness of Job and the trials and sufferings depicted (1:13 - 19) in the frame story are also related to " the Consequences of Disobedience " in Deuteronomy 28. That is, Job ' s righteousness and trials perfectly correspond to " the Blessings of Obedience and the Consequences of Disobedience " according to Deuteronomic History that could be called Israeli tradition. Thus, Job is given the trait of " perfectness " .

Satan ' s " question " to Job in the frame story is a challenge based on views expressed in Deuteronomic History. The remark " Would Job worship you if he got nothing out of it? " is not beyond the laws of " the Blessings and the Curses " in Deuteronomy 28. And Job ' s response is notable. In his suffering, caused by the unreasonable experiment between God and Satan, he states " The LORD gave, and now he has taken away. May his name be praised! " He does not disobey God at this point. If he curses God here, he can not be regarded as righteous according to Israeli tradition. We can appreciate that Job ' s patience and complete obedience to God are also the attitude of a servant of God absolutely loyal to Israeli tradition. That is, Job ' s righteousness and perfectness are interpreted as righteous in the sense of the " perfect " (tām) righteousness of the Israeli patriarchs according to the view of God found in Deuteronomic thought.

What if the author of the Book of Job were to ask: " What good have Abraham the righteous Israeli traditional patriarch, the God of Deuteronomic thought and the laws, brought to Israel? " Though the people were faithful to the idea of a universal God and to traditional righteousness, atrocities, invasion and exploitation by other countries never ceased. Rather, many people suffered both from such oppression and from their persistence in believing in the traditional God. They might ask: " Does our God deprive us of everything, though the God we believe in is the source of life? "

According to the Book of Job, Job as a Gentile is described as a " perfect " and " persistent " being, and an object for God ' s blessings and curses from the traditional Israeli viewpoint of God. I suppose the author might have seen exclusive violence in both applying the principle of retribution Blessings and Curses according to the view of Deuteronomic History and in staying loyal to it. We can see in this connection that the prophets of Israel, for example, also grieve about and criticize exclusivity and Israeli violence, which at different periods, shows a tendency to legalism and nationalism. They grieve and ask God from their standpoint ( which is a standpoint of obedience to idols, produced by human beings as a result of those human being's thoroughness ), as they call for obedience to the essence of laws given by God, through the words of God that are the origin of life, in the midst of sufferings from foreign invasion and oppression. While we are apt to pay attention to Job as the righteous, there is also motivation for Job to change his tune and start to question God and to grieve in the Book of Job. In that case, the words of Job ' s wife might have a greater significance.

## What we can find in the words of Job ' s wife Wisdom literature and a capable wife

“ Speak up for people who cannot speak for themselves.  
Protect the rights of all who are helpless.  
Speak for them and be a righteous judge.  
Protect the rights of the poor and needy.  
How hard it is to find a capable wife!  
She is worth far more than jewels! ”  
(Proverbs 31: 8-10)

This is a well-known passage from Proverbs. This passage should give us some understanding about Job ' s wife and about wives in general in those days, for it was written as “ Wisdom literature ” in the exilic period which is the same time that the Book of Job was written. Also, we can find evidence that there was a certain understanding about God in the “ Wisdom literature ”, including the Book of Job and Proverb. Such an understanding about God poses “ a question ” about the righteousness of “ the Suffering Servant ” in Second Isaiah and in Job. At the same time, this passage of Proverbs might prove that Job ' s wife can be regarded as a wife who inspires Job to pose “ questions ” and who is able to give him advice. However, the interpretation of Job ' s wife as an advisor or a counselor has not been expressed because a lot of interpreters in later times saw things from a patriarchal perspective centered on the male elite. Such a way of reading might lead the readers to be blind to the sufferings of the invisible people, which is how it may have been read originally. In addition, if we dig out various traditions that were upheld by women or traditions of the many people at the bottom, who called for God in their sufferings, then we cannot interpret Job ' s suffering only on the surface.

We need to realize that the women in ancient Israel viewed religion from the perspective of their lived lives<sup>3</sup> and that in these lives, they had the role of counselor as Job ' s wife does. This is shown in the remark on “ a capable wife ” from Proverbs.

### As a counselor

We are not able to find the existence of women and the roles played by women in every story in the Bible. There is no denying that such expressions as, for example, “ a capable wife ” or “ a wise wife ”, cited from Proverbs are from the viewpoint of the male elite. However, a woman is also expected to be a counselor when her husband makes an important decision, as shown in the expression “ she speaks with a gentle wisdom ” in this proverb. And the image of “ a wise woman ” is in the tradition of the culture of ancient Israel. In this tradition, the Israelites were given teachings by Wisdom=Hochmā / Sophia, the female image of the God of Israel. Empirical knowledge, based on their daily life is



included in this feminine “wisdom”.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, daily living in Israel was the daily living of the poor farmers who were in the great majority, and “the wisdom” was a product of their lives.

Thus, the various “wisdoms” of women have been handed down from generation to generation as words of resistance by many suffering people, both men and women, who were not able to stand up against the powers that existed or to “question” them. And we can infer from Proverbs, the Book of Job and the words of Job’s wife that there was also their traditional view of God.

### **Then Job’s wife “poses a question”**

Can we interpret “the tradition” of suffering emerging from “Wisdom literature” and from the words of Job’s wife as “a question” or as words of resistance against the violence produced by the patriarchal tradition centered on the male elite in the various communities in Israel? If this is the case, then what the author may have wanted to show us by depicting the woman’s question might be both a question and grief, both of which arise from the grief and suffering of the people.

In other word, we can grasp the various traditions of the suffering, the oppressed, the people at the bottom, through the words of Job’s wife in the Book of Job. This book didn’t adopt the viewpoint of the strong or the chosen rich few at the peak of the social pyramid, but the viewpoint of the rest.

Precisely, what is tradition? Isn’t it the process by which we idolize God through believing that the world written about in the Bible, and the God we see depicted there, are the only possible ones that could exist. Indeed, as I said at the beginning, the Bible we hold emits an incalculable variety of light but contains darkness too. In fact, the Bible itself teaches us that what is written in the Bible is not everything that is the case. We would like to believe that, through the question posed by Job’s wife, the Book of Job provides us with a clue to realizing both this and the richness brought by this knowledge. However, we have emphasized unnecessarily the heroic image of Job the righteous, who endures suffering and makes sacrifices from the one-sided view of the Book of Job in the tradition of Christianity. And Job’s wife’s “question” has been seldom taken up. Regrettably, in the tradition of Christianity, she has not been regarded as a wife who poses “a question” but as “an unforgivable woman” or “a limb of Satan” who confuses Job.

### **“Why don’t you curse God and die?” — Job’s righteousness in The Letter from James**

The history of Christianity has, needless to say, been deeply influenced by the sufferings and patience of Jesus. Thus, Job’s righteous suffering and patience have been emphasized particularly in interpretations of the Book of Job. For instance, the image of Job as the righteous sufferer in the Letter of James, one of the canonical texts of the New Testament, neglects not only Job’s wife but also Job’s own “questions” in Chapter Three and in the chapters that follow it.

“ We call them happy because they endured. You have heard of Job ’ s patience, and you know how the Lord provided for him in the end. For the Lord is full of mercy and compassion. ” (James 5: 11)

The Letter of James itself views only a superficially righteous Job, loyal to the perspective of a narrow traditional framework.

In the case of the Letter of James, suffering, patience, trials and obedience to the God of the prophets in the Old Testament, were emphasized as a warning against the secularization of the Church especially in those days. These factors naturally overlap with the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. I think Job ’ s sufferings were regarded as a model of obedience to God. Indeed, in the scheme “ from patience to glory ” , Job ’ s sufferings in “ the frame story ” are appropriate to make Job a hero. By contrast, Job ’ s wife, who cannot appreciate his “ patience ” , is regarded as a symbol of human weakness. She is simply conceived as an unfaithful, selfish and “ stupid ” woman who cannot understand the masculine hero.

### **The influence of Augustine and Calvin**

As an extension of such an interpretation, the great John Calvin, one of the Reformers, typically viewed the Book of Job from an extremely traditional perspective. I quote a part of Calvin ’ s homily on Job 2: 1 – 10, for it is interesting, though it may be somewhat long.

“ For it is impossible that he should have the full use of us till we become to that point: that is to wit, till we renounce our selves, and that we set not so much store by our life, but we can better find in our hearts to yield our selves subject to him whose we are, and to whom it becomes us to dedicate our life, than to be so given to our own commodity and case....True it is that we can well enough confess, how it is good reason that God should be chief Master and reign over us, and that we should not strive against him: but when it comes to the deed doing, there be very few that demean themselves thereafter ....

Let us come to that which is added in the text: that is to wit, that Job ’ s wife comes to him to provoke him to despair. How now? (says she) Continue you yet still in your singleness? Bliss God and die. The Devil finds means now to encumber us, without having any bellows to quicken up the fire. For we know there is so great sturdiness in our nature, as it is pity to see it....

And it is not to be doubted but this woman here was an instrument of Satan and therefore it is not to be marveled though she be a She-devil, or as a friend of hell, to set Job in such a rage, as he should lift up himself against God and fall too rushing against his majesty. ” \*5

This pitiful “ sturdiness ” homily of Calvin, like the Letter of James, takes no notice of Job ’ s protest against God and God ’ s rebuke.\*6 Moreover, Calvin looks down on Job ’ s wife as “ an instrument of

Satan ” and emphasizes the spirituality of the tradition of the medieval Church, under the influence of Augustine the respected Church Father. In short, he holds up Job ’ s wife as a negative example in order to exclude those who disrupt spirituality from Church tradition. And this negative role of Job ’ s wife has maintained its influence on the Reformed Church up to recent times, through the Church Fathers and Calvin ’ s homilies.\*7 This influence is seen in comparatively recent exegeses which depict Job ’ s wife as “ a tool of Satan ” in the same way as Calvin did. Even at best, she is depicted, a little sympathetically, as “ a poor woman ” in the additional part of the Septuagint.

Nowadays, we as Christians mostly estimate Job ’ s wife according to this traditional interpretation and either we don ’ t take any notice of this matter or we don ’ t have any doubts about it. Such a situation indicates that we are now still “ holding ” to Job ’ s “ perfectness ” , as presented in “ the frame story ” , and we don ’ t take “ the question ” posed by Job ’ s wife seriously.

### **The Foresightedness of Job’s wife**

It is safe to say that the author of the Book of Job perhaps used the existing “ frame story ” of Job the righteous Gentile to draw out “ the questions ” in Chapter Three and the following chapters in order to cast doubt on and express his own grief at the traditional idea of God. It is certain that the author of the Book of Job found “ the old religious teachings and moral values which have enslaved people ’ s minds and paralyzed their souls ” \*8 in “ the frame story ” , which was originally folklore. Thus, the appearance of Job ’ s wife posing “ a question ” was actually to link “ the frame story ” with the verses in Chapter Three and the following chapters. Inspired by Job ’ s wife, the Book of Job came to depict the nation ’ s sufferings.

“ His wife said to him, ‘ you are holding to your integrity and perfectness in faith. Then, bless God\*9 and die. ’ ” (Job 2: 9, translation is mine)

To elaborate on this: “ Is your God such a God? Are you holding to such a God? Doesn ’ t our God, in whom we trust always stay with us in the midst of our sufferings and sorrows? ”

### **Who is suffering?**

I would like to think about who is actually suffering. For instance, at the time of the captivity in Babylon, there were those who were tormented by exploitation. In other eras too, due to wars and conflicts, people were tormented by invasion and oppression from other countries. The appearance of Job ’ s wife with her “ question ” brought to light the “ needless suffering ” of the people. This is confirmed by “ Job ’ s questions ” later. For example, Job ’ s complaint in Chapter 24 is regarded as pertaining to the sufferings of the socially disadvantaged; people very far from a rich man like Job the righteous. This part depicts the hardships of women including Job ’ s wife, namely, people at the bottom of the social scale. And the descriptions of God are clearly different from the image of God expressed by Job in “ the frame story ” .

Though the author examines the contrast between Job's "question" as a complaint in the verses and in "the frame story", it certainly emerges that Job cannot get rid of his patriarchal masculine views. In fact, in chapters 29 - 31.

“ If I have been attracted to my neighbor's wife,  
and waited, hidden, outside her door,  
then let my wife cook another man's food  
and sleep in another man's bed.  
Such wickedness should be punished by death. ”  
(Job 31: 9-11)

It is clear that Job was righteous in the patriarchal world centered on the male elite. However, on the basis of Job's statement, "let my wife cook another man's food and sleep in another man's bed", we cannot agree that the author was completely critical about Job's righteousness in former days, as expressed in "the frame story". Indeed, it is impossible that ancient audiences responded in the same way as people do today. It is undeniable that this statement is a means of showing Job as a model patriarch, for the author of the Book of Job "would have presented Job in the noblest possible term a model patriarch." \*10 Moreover, we must recognize that the appearance of Job's wife in "the frame story" is completely neglected by the author. It is also indicated by the absence of Job's wife in the epilogue of "the frame story". Regrettably, we must admit that the view of the author is based on patriarchalism. But it is important that the author of the Book of Job takes up the words of Job's wife in "the frame story" and that through these words, suffering and hardship are justly questioned.

### **What is the blessing of God? — Epilogue, and Job's wife again**

In the finale of the epilogue of "the frame story", Job is given extraordinary blessings by God. But these blessings are an extension of the retribution idea from the perspective of human beings. It is "given" by God as blessing against curse, (based on the Deuteronomic View) and blessing which exceeds, in number, blessing (based on the view of Deuteronomic History). Also Job's wife is neglected in this epilogue as if she is not necessary for the blessing on Job. Nevertheless, the author might overturn the prevailing convention of patriarchal society through admitting the succession of property to Job's new daughters. But it is impossible to get back Job's children who were 'killed' in the prologue of "the frame story" (1: 18 - 19) while Job's wife was ignored. In short, the way I see this epilogue, the author of the Book of Job also merely projects the then existing ideology on God.

We might observe that in the epilogue of "the frame story" in the Book of Job, people have rationalized about the Bible which was written and narrated. We are those who 'pose a question' and we must 'pose a question'. But we "pretend to know". The Book of Job and the words of Job's



wife warn us of the danger in this. We should not hide our “ questions ” .

We should receive, not the Book of Job which resulted in emphasizing the dynamic idea of retribution, but rather a Book of Job in which God offers a rich contrast. What do we now realize from the painting of La Tour mentioned in the introduction? What is taught by God through this painting might be not “ Job ridiculed by his wife ” but the candlelight and the shadows in the dark. We could “ understand ” that God emits various expressive lights and shades through the words of Job ’ s wife in the Book of Job. And we would like to trust that we are also allowed to “ pose a question ” to the expressive lights emitted by God.

## Notes

\*1 ジャン=ピエール・キュザン / ディミトリ・サルモン著、『ジョルジュ・ド・ラ・トゥール』遠藤ゆかり訳、高橋明也監修「知の再発見」双書121、創元社、2005年、47頁。(Jean-Pierre Cuzin et Dimitri Salmon, *Georges de La Tour, Histoire d ’ une redécouverte*)

\*2 G・グティエレス著、『ヨブ記 神をめぐる議論と無垢の民の苦難』山田経三訳、教文館、990年、43頁。(G. Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*)

\*3 キャロル・L・マイヤーズ、「イスラエルの女性の生活について聖書が語ること、語らないこと」、『聖書は語る』国際聖書フォーラム2007講義録、日本聖書協会・編、2007年。72頁以下。(Carol L. Myers)

\*4 山口里子著、『マルタとマリア イエスの世界の女性たち』新教出版社、2004年、167頁。(Satoko Yamaguchi)

\*5 ジャン・カルヴァン著、『カルヴァンのヨブ記説教集』手島欣二郎訳、聖恵授産所出版部、1998年、92 - 94頁。(Jean Calvin).

\*6 並木浩一著、『「ヨブ記」論集成』教文館、2003年、252頁。(Kouichi Namiki)

\*7 *ibid.*

\*8 C・S・ソン著『イエス 十字架につけられた民衆』梶原寿監訳、新教出版社、1995年、84頁。(C. S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*)

\*9 Though in the Common Bible Translation the word “ curse ” is used as a euphemistic expression, I have dared to use the word “ bless ” for the remark of Job ’ s wife. In the prologue of the so-called “ frame story ” of the Book of Job, the original Hebrew word is directly translated into the word “ bless ” in 1: 10, 11, 21, 2: 5, 9. For instance, in 2: 5 in the Common Bible Translation, although “ bless ” is clearly recognized as a euphemistic expression in this context and it is proper to translate it as “ curse ”, it is said that this word of 2: 9 can, in general, be given a double interpretation. But I interpret this word as “ bless ” according to the original Hebrew word without adopting its interpretation as a euphemistic expression. Incidentally, “ curse ” in “ and he cursed ” (3: 1) is aimed at “ the day ” Job was born and it is not a curse on God.

\*10 C・A・ニューサム「ヨブ記注解」、S・H・リンジ編『女性たちの注解書』新教出版社、1998年、242頁。(C. A. Newsome, ed., S. H. Lindsay, *The Women ’ s Bible Commentary*)

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