

Tried and testy

The Book of Job (and some Ruth)

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I want to tell you a story about a story about a story and then talk about the story of Job. I hope to touch on Wisdom, hubris, irony, embarrassing abundance – and the role of Satan. I might even hint at Why bad things happen to good people? And whether good people can do bad things for good?

But first, SMH journalist Jaqueline Maley wrote an article about an article in the New York Times¹....which apparently went viral, the NYT article, if you're following me. It is the story of two former friends (or just acquaintances, depending on who you ask). Here I will quote Maley,

It all started when writer Dawn Dorland donated a kidney to a stranger, a breathtakingly altruistic act that she documented at length on social media. We could call it the world's best (or worst) humble brag except there was nothing humble about it. Dorland's Facebook posts about her organ donation were grandiose and included a letter she wrote to her kidney recipient, in which she proclaimed that "while perhaps many more people would be motivated to donate an organ to a friend or family member in need, to me, the suffering of strangers is just as real."²

It does seem that her message about her lack of self-interest was seriously compromised by her need to shout it all over the internet.

However, the story is about the falling out of two friends (depending on who you ask). It started when her good friend failed to "like" look-at-me-aren't-I-good postings. This is a serious no-no in the virtual world of virtual friendships.³ In today's world – not to 'like' is a breach of unconditional support (another prerequisite for virtual friendships). Influencers live and die on how many people hit the 'like' button. They shamelessly oppress family and friends and friends of family to *hit that button!*



When asked why she hadn't 'liked', the friend was 'cool'. I think that means she brushed it off. Now aside from their virtual friendship, these women knew each other from an amateur writer's group.

¹ *Who is a bad art friend* – The New York Time

² *Bad Art Friend saga reveals how social media steals from all of us*, Jacqueline Maley, Sydney Morning Herald, October 10, 2021

³ At this point, I have to ask, are virtual friendships even real?

The dispute really started when the 2nd woman wrote a short story about a privileged, white woman who gave away a kidney and inserted herself into the donor's life. The story even included a letter to the donor which bore an incredible resemblance to the one Dorland posted on the internet. Trouble escalated when the story was picked for publication and the writer heralded as a promising new talent.

“Dorland felt violated, and sued for plagiarism based on Larson's apparent lifting of her letter. She also embarked on a more generalised jihad to stop Larson's appearance at a writers' festival and, it seems, destroy her reputation generally. Larson cross-sued for defamation and tortious interference.⁴” ...and the SMH story takes a tortuous turn through the courts and onto a commentary about raising and destroying reputations on the internet.

So we have a story about a story about a story about a story – but the gist of it is, no one does something for nothing ...

Or at least, that what Job's friends thought. And, I should add, and you never know who your friends are.

Job story begins, “¹ In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job.” In the Hebrew version, it starts with the equivalent of “One upon a time..” This is a story, a fictional story⁵. Believe it or not, it is full of irony and inverse logic and wild exaggeration which is part of Jewish humour. It is a ridiculous and outrageous story, full of imaginative dialogue and placed in the wisdom readings. Why? Why is it part of the Canon?

It starts with God saying he has this guy who is *so* good, it's almost too good to believe. Job is a man with faith in his God. Now the character, we now call Satan is actually 'ha'satan' in Hebrew. In Jewish tradition, he wasn't the opposite of God but rather an agent. His job was to test – literally to play devil's advocate. God would send 'ha'satan' out into the world to test the veracity of people's faith. Do people do good (and stick to the laws) for the wrong reasons? (Think Kidney donor)

⁴ The SMH story then turns to a discussion about how toxic social media can be and how it can be weaponised against individuals – but I was really interested in the original story.

⁵ It is not a Gospel or a report. It is a fairy-tale.

So there's a wager – they take this perfectly nice guy and they hurl (what's an appropriate euphemism here?) all over his wonderful life.

And Job is faithful.

So they make it worse, and worse and 'worsen' still. And Job is faithful.

At this point, I admit that historically theologians have explained the Book of Job being in the Canon because they saw (and some still see) suffering as an important part of spiritual formation. If you can't *feel* Christ's wounds, if you can't *bleed* with Christ than you can't possibly know or understand salvation. We read about how some saints would torture themselves and I've seen South Americans whipping themselves during Holy weeks. I have seen 'saints' who *need* to be with those who are suffering for their own salvation – which makes me think of the kidney donor. Right thing – wrong reason.

Job pleads with God and God gets all uppity with the 'do-you-know-who-I-am' passage, reminding Job how he can make it rain, and He can make earth etc and what could Job do? Mere mortal.

Then Job's friends come along to help. Do they help? At first, they were silent (which at least, did no harm) and then full of judgement. First, they share grief with their silent presence but when they begin to speak, I'm pretty sure they aggravated Job's distress. They concluded he *must* be guilty of something. Clearly followers of prosperity theology – God rains goods on good people and punishes the poor.

But job never wavered. He loved and feared God.

And maybe he was in it for himself – to start with. Maybe he was going through the motions to gain brownie points with his maker or friends. How many times did Jesus rail against people who kept the law; went through all the right motions but did squat for the world? He didn't call that faith. Isaiah too – faith has to be more than burnt offerings...

Because it is when Job prays for his useless friends, that God calls off the dogs.

But then, this is where all our English translations try and may it neat and tidy but it's not.

Job gives in and tells God he knows God can do *all* things – including sending 'Ha'Satan' to torture him - and we end Job's words with ⁵My ears had heard of you

but now my eyes have seen you.

⁶Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes.”

The problem is, in Hebrew, articles are prefixes to the word ‘Be’= in/’Ba’= in the...

In this line, ‘Be’ does not exist. Job say Shel avak (of dust) – repent **of** dust and ashes.” In other words, he is repenting on repenting. Irony? Sarcasm?

The story ends with God chastising the friends and showering totally-over-the-top, ridiculously-exaggerated wealth on Job. This is Jewish humour. *But* in truth, gives Job long life and remembrance through generations which is the Jewish equivalent of heaven.

It’s a pantomime and a morality play. Punch and Judy. It says, ‘take note- even the good will be tested’ ...but be faithful.

Now turn your minds to what you know about Luke 4 and Mark 4 – the temptation of Jesus. Next time you read these stories – the role of Satan will stand out starkly in a Jewish context, in a Jewish world. Jesus *was* tested and he was faithful.

In our last week of wisdom studies, we looked at Ruth. Because wisdom and ethics are hand in hand. In wisdom, we are taught Knowledge +intuition + experience with a love/fear of God. In ethics, we use body of law (Statutes) and social norm (pub test) + analysis, knowledge, experience + truth to our inner self.

What Ruth did was probably questionable, perhaps morally wrong and certainly outside the social norm but *why* she did it and what grew from it casts it in a different light.

Poor old Job did everything right and suffered – ultimately to be rewarded.

Ruth did everything wrong but secured the future of her mother-in-law and children – and a lineage that stretched through David to Jesus⁶.

And our kidney donor? Someone was given life – perhaps the gift was for all the wrong reasons but the gift was God sent to one person. Who’s to judge?

For her friend (depending on whom you ask) – I will leave that in God’s hands.

⁶ (again, Jewish Heaven)

Wisdom is never about wrong or right. It is never black and white. In the old texts she is mysterious, moves freely through heaven and earth and calls to our moral centre, our obligations.

In our study conversations, it was said that wisdom is about choice – but when I think about it, wisdom is what informs choice and is probably the indistinguishable from the Holy Spirit. When we make decisions, we can be tempted by one and urged by another but there is a Holy compass that is a voice in the conversation.

What do we take away from this?

- Bad things happen to good people in fairy-tales and real life
- Stay true to self and listen to your God
- When you are doing good – do it quietly, please...and
- Your 'friends' are not always on your side

My Dad died 22 years ago this week. He used to tell an old joke – which I'm sure you've heard...

There was a hunter who found a tiny bird nearly frozen in the snow. He picked it up and put it in his jacket. Along the road, he found a pile of steaming moose manure. He dug a little hole with his heel, and he put the bird in tucking the warm, soft goo around it. The warmth seeped into the bird's bones and he gave a little chirp of delight. A wolf sprang from the scrub and ate him. And my father said: 'the moral to the story is:

- It is not always your enemies who put you in
- And not always your friends who get you out...
- And when you are up to your neck, don't chirp.

And, may I advise....don't put it on the internet. Amen

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