

Poetics and the Bible
Poet Jacqueline Osherow in conversation
with scholar Michele Osherow
A Folger Shakespeare Library podcast

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Jacqueline and Michele Osherow were introduced by Teri Cross-Davis, O.B. Hardison Poetry Series and Lectures Coordinator.

Jacqueline Osherow: So, Genesis 1:3:

"And God said, let there be light. And there was light."

The point that I wanted to make here very quickly was, of course, how does God create the world? He creates the world out of words. This, of course, is extraordinarily important in trying to establish the power of the word. The power of language. Which is what the Bible sets up doing in a variety of ways as it begins, and I think it's important to talk about that before we go into poetic devices.

I need to say that in Hebrew this is an astonishing verse. [Speaks in Hebrew] Right. in Hebrew "let there be light" and "there was light" are exactly the same words. So God says them, [in Hebrew]. And then the text says them, [in Hebrew]. So it's absolutely magical. God's words are the text's words. We don't have this in English, but I think what the King James achieves here, "Let there be light, and there was light," is another kind of power. He says it, and magically, it happens.

The other thing I want to say is that tense, "and there was," is also "and there will be," that's a verb tense that only exists in the Bible, as if to say that the past and the future are the same tense, the eternal tense of a narrative of the Bible. But in any case, God creates a world out of words, just as writers create worlds out of words.

But the next thing I wanted to point to was, what's at stake with language and what language can achieve. And so I bring you to the eighth verse of chapter four of Genesis—I'm using Fox's translation, because he renders the Hebrew best, I think:

"Cain said to Abel his brother . . . But then it was when they were out in the field that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him."

Now you have this phrase again [in Hebrew]. The same word that God used, [in Hebrew], and God said. [In Hebrew] in the Bible always has the contents of what was said. It's "God said," and then you get the exact language of what he said. This verse, 4:8, is the only verse in the Bible that I know of in which you have, "and someone said," and you get no language. That's what happens here, it says, "and Cain said," and then he rose up and killed his brother. So it seems to me—and this of course is the first act of violence in the Bible. And it seems to me that violence is therefore equated as absence of language. Words fail Cain and so he commits violence. And so again, a great deal is at stake. What language can do is create, make something. Without language, you're always in danger of violence. Or, as we say to our kids in nursery school, use your words.

Okay. Now I wasn't going to read all this aloud because we could actually look at any one of these slides and talk about them for our half hour, but I just want to point out that the violence as the absence of words occurs not just with man, Cain, but it actually occurs with God himself, when God decides to destroy the world in the time of Noah. Why does he decide to do it? Because he sees how evil man is.

"The wickedness of man was great in the Earth, every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

God sees man's evil, he's sorry he created him, he destroys the world. Couple of chapters later, after the ark, the animals, the whole thing, God says, you know, I'm not going to destroy the world ever again, why? Because "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." In other words, the same reason that God decides to destroy the world is the same reason he decides never to destroy the world. Man hasn't changed, man is evil. But God figures out another way to deal with man's evil. First way of dealing with man's evil, destroy him. Second way, he gives him laws. He says, whoever sheds the blood of a man, his blood will be shed. You get law not in the first chapter of Genesis, but here, in the time of Noah. These are the first laws, so again, this is the place where language is the option against violence.

And the next, you're going to get in the book of Exodus. You'll get God ruling the world with signs and wonders. They work for a minute, and then they cease to work. He does a plague, Pharaoh says let them go. Then he changes his mind and keeps them. The people see these signs and wonders, they see the Red Sea part. Then they get into the

desert and say, Why'd you drag us out of Egypt? Why did you drag us away from the fleshpots? There's nothing to eat here. This is horrible, why did you take us out into the desert to die? It doesn't matter how many signs and wonders they see, they're still in doubt. So what does God do? He replaces signs and wonders, once again with language. With law, with the Ten Commandments. This is the way that you rule people. This is the way you make people into a civilization. Not through signs and wonders. So again, that's replaced by language.

And then finally, I will have some Psalms later, but then, what you have in Psalms is actually God being conjured up by man through language. It's as if, if you call upon God insistently enough, God will be there. And we have examples later, but I thought this was perhaps the best example, finally, a poetic example at last, of what is at stake with language in the Bible. This is Isaiah 55:10–12. A favorite moment of mine in Isaiah.

"For as the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the Earth and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth. It shall not return unto me void. But it shall accomplish that which I please and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. For you shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace. The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

There's a tremendous amount happening here, but the thing that I love—and of course, again, science was not entirely accurate in the time of Isaiah because, as we all know, the rain and snow actually do return to heaven. At least that's from my vague memories of third grade meteorology. There's some sort of cycle going on.

But the way, of course, the way Isaiah saw it, the rain and the snow leave heaven and they make the Earth full of what we need to prosper. They make the Earth flourish. So, and this is just a fabulous metaphor for the word of God, which makes us flourish. It's the equivalent of our bread. It makes us able to live valuable, meaningful lives. And the idea that God's word is like the rain and snow, it leaves heaven and makes Earth flourish, is just fabulous. And then it moves into this whole notion of joy, and the mountains and hills break forth into singing. And again, so singing, poetry, is the sort of end result of the power of the word. It doesn't just stop telling us what to do, accomplishing that which I please and prospering the thing I sent. But it moves out into singing, "the very mountains and hills." So, I guess finally, this is the place where words attain their ultimate importance in the Bible.

You've had sacrifices as the means of interacting with God. But in Isaiah, he constantly says, I don't want your sacrifices, your hands are full of blood. I want you to take care of the orphan, take care of the widow. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked. The sacrifice is replaced by action, but also language, prayer. And so the way Isaiah works, is you have these really elaborate poetic moments that surround very specific, clear, verbal directives. And it's kind of a strange mediation between poetry, which could mean anything, and works by suggestion, and very specific, direct commandments about how a person should behave. And you get these combined in Isaiah.

I thought actually, for me, the first chapter of Isaiah probably has the most concentrated examples of the varieties of poetic devices that you get in the Bible.

So, everybody's heard of biblical parallelism. What I want to try to show is the various ways in which it works. And it is not redundancy. It's not just, say it once, that's good, why not just say it twice? Something else is happening. And again, it's something about poetic suggestion.

So in the second verse—the first verse is simply, you know, the vision of Isaiah, etcetera—the first real verse of poetry:

"Hear, oh heavens, and give ear, oh Earth, for the Lord hath spoken."

Let's just stop there. Perfect parallelism, "Heavens, and give ear, oh Earth." Obviously, "hear" and "give ear," you could argue mean the same thing, but there's a slight nuance. You have to engage more to give ear. You have to attend in a different way, but also, it's including the heavens, it's including the Earth. So the entire universe has to pay attention. It's an extraordinary way to begin. If you think of the way the Greeks begin, they call on the Muses. Isaiah calls on the entire known universe. Why? Because God's speaking. It's not just some poet speaking, it's God who's speaking.

So you have a perfect parallel, but then in the next, you have what you might call an opposite parallel:

"I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me."

I can only hear this in the Hebrew [in Hebrew], which is what my father-in-law used to say to my ex-husband at every opportunity. It's a sort of Jewish equivalent to, you know, "how sharper than a serpent," since we're in the Folger, but in any case— So this is the

opposite, I have nourished and reared up children, they have rebelled against me. So it's an opposite, it's an opposition.

The next one is really more the way I think these parallelisms tend to work. And it's a complicated one:

"The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass, his master's crib. But Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider."

So again you have both an equivalent parallel, the ox knowing its owner, the ass its master's crib. And then you have this opposition parallel, here the ox and the ass, they know everything, but Israel on the other hand, doesn't know anything. So you get the equivalent parallel, you get the opposite parallel. But the thing that I love is what is being suggested. Even while he's chastising, really very strongly chastising, the people of Israel, he's saying, Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. So even while he's scolding them, he's still making a parallel between "Israel" and "my people." He's still claiming this people that he's scolding. So that there's an intimacy involved, so it is a bit like a parent to a child. So there's something I think kind of marvelous about that. Our words are getting smaller, how you doing in the back, can you read that? Alright, okay.

So then you get something that is kind of similar in verses five and six:

"The whole head is sick and the whole heart faint, from the sole of the foot, even unto the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores. They have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment."

So once again, it's pretty, and you're thinking, really, we came here to hear about poetry and you're giving us putrefying sores, you really couldn't do better than that? The reason I do it, of course, is to show you what this verse does. Even though it says they haven't been mollified with ointment, it brings in that possibility, and it ends with that word ointment. Which is indistinguishable in the original Hebrew, from you anointed my head with oil, [in Hebrew]. It's the same substance from which you get the ultimate grace, being anointed by God. So again, even as you have all this negativity, your whole body's sick, you're faint, you're a mess, there is this promise, this suggestion that there is the possibility of anointing. There is the possibility of healing, and so that I love.

And then finally, this is the kind of thing that I think you only see in Isaiah. Which I call sort of circular poetic patterns. And you get it in seven and eight:

"Your city is desolate, your cities are burned with fire, your land strangers devoured in your presence and it is desolate as overthrown by strangers. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city."

So what do I mean by this circular image? You start out with, your country is desolate, your city is burned. And where do you end up, at a besieged city. So it's basically the same image, but the magic of it is what you've gone through. So that when you return to the besieged city, you have all these other associations. Again these are agricultural associations. There are these little cottages in the vineyard, do you know, in the olden days you would stay there while you were doing the harvest. And of course it's left behind after all the grapes have been harvested, similarly the lodge in the garden of cucumbers, it's left behind, it's an empty booth, after you've harvested your field.

So you get this completely new understanding of what a besieged city means by the time you get back to it, though you started with it. So, I love that sort of image. And then finally on this page is the way, and this you'll get also in the Song of Songs, the way you start with a sort of metaphor and then you push it through and make it happen.

"Except the Lord of Hosts has left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been at Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah. Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom, give ear unto the law of our people, you people of Gomorrah."

So what happens here is, we're almost as bad as Sodom and Gomorrah, and then we're addressed as if we were Sodom and Gomorrah. So the poetry says, look how bad you are, and then turns us into the quintessence of all evil. So again, for me, these are the sort of quintessential poetic tactics that you see all over the Bible, all together in this first chapter.

But then, now we get to far more beautiful things. I think we'll just focus on 1:18. Probably if there's any line in this chapter that you've heard already, it's this one:

"Come now and let us reason together, sayeth the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

And actually it's interesting, I remember hearing this summer at Chatauqua, Barbara Smith Conrad, the opera singer, was giving a lecture and she talked about her grandmother sitting in a rocking chair in Texas saying, "come, let us reason together" all

the time. I loved hearing that because I love that this is the way God reasons. What is reasoning to God, it's one of the most beautiful poetic images in the Bible. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow.

And actually again, lovelier in Hebrew [in Hebrew]. It says, "like scarlet, like snow, though whitened." It sort of pushes the scarlet into snow quicker. But again this note, this kind of poetic reasoning I think is something to grab hold of. But this other part that I have here, is the part I was telling you about before, where you have all this elaborate poetry, but what does it encase? It encased these very clear directives:

"Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do well, seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. "

This all happens really fast in Hebrew. You get this long elaborate complicated poetry and then how we're to behave is very clear, very direct, encased in all of that.

Another line that I think is fairly well known:

"They that sow in tears, shall reap in joy."

This is Psalm 126, verse five. And the reason I chose to bring it here is that you've probably also, if you are interested at all in biblical poetics, you've heard about chiasmus, just sort of like making an X, and it really, I have to say, works a whole lot better in Hebrew than in any English translation. So I'm just going to show you the line in Hebrew, because it is really my favorite chiastic line in all of Psalms. Anybody who knows Hebrew, I've got it there for you [in Hebrew]. So literally, the sowers in tears, in joy, shall reap.

But if you listen to it [in Hebrew] you have these two three-syllable words, that either end, both of them involving action. One sowing, one reaping. And the thing that I love, sonically, the middle syllable [in Hebrew] is the same. So, sonically, the sowers turn into the reapers. And then the middle, in tears, in joy, once again sonically, you, with your ear, you hear the tears turn into joy [in Hebrew]. They share the same vowel signs, so the poem literally, poetically, sonically, turns tears into joy. And so you have the tears and the joy in the center, and the actions on the outside.

So it's just kind of a quintessential chiastic line. Notice how in English, what did they decide to do here. They that sow in tears, shall reap in joy. It's about as simple as a line

in the Bible gets. It only has monosyllables. Doesn't try to do it backwards: They that sow in tears, in joy shall reap. They don't try to do it. So what they do is just the most simple thing possible. They can't get the poetic quality, so they just say, okay, we'll say it simply, clearly, monosyllabically, and directly.

And it works in another way, and to me it actually reminds me of my favorite kind of cooking, which is Italian. Basically the key to Italian cooking is to buy the best possible ingredients and don't ruin them. That's Italian cooking. And frankly, that's the essence of good translation. You take this extraordinary ingredient and you don't ruin it. That's already a great achievement. And that I think is what's going on with this simple, beautiful line like this one.

Okay, we'll get to a Psalm. I just wanted to show sonic chiasmus here:

"Oh thou afflicted, tossed with tempest and not comforted."

So afflicted, comforted, tossed, tempest. So again you have the rhyming sounds in the middle and the sort of rhyming sounds on either end. And once again, even though it says not comforted, that ends on the word comfort, and implies the possibility of comfort.

Okay, I think the next is indeed, magically, from a Psalm. One of the reasons we chose this one was this particular Psalm is man speaking to God in the same way that God just spoke to man in Isaiah. God says wash you, make you clean. And basically what does this Psalmist say: Wash me and I shall be clean. purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. So it has that same image, but from the man's point of view. So, whereas God's directing man to wash himself, man's saying, you have to do it. He's so at God's mercy. He sees himself as a sinner. Traditionally, this particular Psalm is David at the moment after the whole ordeal with Bathsheba, not David at his finest hour, I think you all remember.

Michele Osherow: Remember, before you go though, I also think this Psalm demonstrates the earlier point, which is the power of language to please God. If you look at verse 15:

"Oh Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise. Or thou desirest is not sacrifice."

What this Psalm says so clearly, and that we see elsewhere, is a human being asserting that what you really want, God, are my words and my prayers and my praise. And that's the most valuable thing to God. Not the sacrifices that we see throughout the Bible.

Jacqueline: Also, that line is kind of valuable in a thousand ways. First of all, "lips" in Hebrew [in Hebrew], also means "my language." So, oh Lord, open thou my language and my mouth shall show forth thy praise. So in other words, I can't praise you unless you open it up for me and make it possible for me to pray. So in a sense, it's as humble as man can be: I can't even praise you without you praising me. On the other hand, there's an awful lot of hubris in it. It's sort of saying that God's part of the language of these Psalms. And in fact I would argue that the Psalms establish themselves, in this line as much as any, as a kind of collaboration between the Psalmist and God.

The other thing also, that I love about this line is the translation, Oh Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise. It really says in Hebrew, my mouth will speak your praise. It will say your praise, it will tell your praise. Doesn't say show forth. The "show," I think, is there for O and open, to keep getting that O, which of course you kind of have to open your lips to achieve. So that the verse itself, in English, keeps opening the speaker's lips. And kind of enacting what it's talking about.

Well, we thought you'd recognize this one.

Michele: We see in Psalm 23 something again that we see again and again in the Psalms, and it is especially common in the Song of Songs. Which is the ability of the poem of the language to bring forth the person being described and then addressed. So here it's:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me."

So it's the third person. And then miraculously that changes to "for thou art with me." So all of a sudden God is made manifest and appears in the words of the Psalm.

Jacqueline: And can be addressed directly.

Michele: And can be addressed. And that happens especially prominently in the Song of Songs. Where the lover is described and then appears and can be enjoyed in a variety of ways.

Jacqueline: We gave you Robert Alter's recent translation, which is probably more accurate in terms of literal meaning of the Hebrew. Just again to show you the brilliance of the King James, for example, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Notice he doesn't touch that. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." You'll see that in fact it says "grass meadows."

Why does he make it green, why do the King James people make it green pastures? Well, one reason is to reinforce the shepherd—pastures, pastors. So you get that sense again of God's care over the speaker, like the care of a shepherd over his sheep. Pastures suggest pastors.

Similarly, he uses quiet waters, which is [in Hebrew], I would say peaceful waters, it doesn't really say still waters in Hebrew, but choosing the word still: "he leadeth me beside the still waters, he restoreth my soul." Again, really inspired choice. Still, as in quiet, but still, as in, still, always, eternal. Also you have the still soul. So there is that sense of the possibility of an eternal soul through God. Again, it's mere suggestion. But that's how poetry works.

[Applause]