

King Solomon and the Otter's Complaint

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



Translated and Annotated by
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IN HER DEN ON THE RIVERBANK LIVED THE OTTER. About to go fishing one day, she was reluctant to leave her children unattended. So she asked the Deer to watch over them, offering in return a portion of her catch. The Deer agreed; and the Otter slid into the river and swam off in search of fish.

Several hours passed. The Deer lounged by the river, keeping an eye on the young otters. Suddenly a drumming filled the air. The Woodpecker was beating on the war gong.

Among the denizens of the river, the Deer was chief dancer. So he sprang to his feet and performed the war dance. But in his frenzy, he accidentally trod upon the young otters—trampling them to death.

When the Otter returned, she found the bodies of her children. "How did this happen?" she cried.

"The Woodpecker beat on the war gong," said the Deer. "I performed the war dance, and inadvertently trod on your children. I am sorry."

"Sorry!" said the Otter. And racked by sorrow, she wept.

Now it happened that King Solomon had come to the river that day, with some of his wives and children. They had brought along refreshments and were having a picnic. Learning of the king's presence, the Otter wiped away her tears and approached him.

"Your Highness," she said, "I wish to bring a complaint against the Deer. For he has slain my offspring."

"That's a serious charge," said Solomon, putting down his goblet of wine. "Let's hear what the Deer has to say."

Solomon summoned the Deer and asked if the charge was true.

"Yes," said the Deer, "I caused their deaths. But I wasn't really to blame. The Woodpecker had sounded the war

gong. So I was duty-bound to perform the war dance—in the course of which this unfortunate accident occurred.”

Solomon summoned the Woodpecker and asked if he had sounded the war gong.

“I did,” said the Woodpecker, “but with good cause. For I had spotted the Lizard—and he was wearing his sword. So I assumed war was at hand.”

Solomon summoned the Lizard and asked if he had donned his sword.

“Indeed I did,” said the Lizard. “For I saw that the Turtle had donned his armor. So I assumed war was upon us.”

Solomon summoned the Turtle and asked why he had donned his armor.

“Because I saw the Crab carrying his pike,” said the Turtle.

Solomon summoned the Crab and asked why he had been carrying his pike.

“Because I saw the Crayfish bearing his lance,” said the Crab.

Solomon summoned the Crayfish and asked why he had been bearing his lance.

“For a good reason,” said the Crayfish. “I had spotted the Otter swimming along the river—on his way to devour my offspring! I had to protect them!”

Solomon turned to the Otter. “Alas,” he said to her, “you yourself were the cause of this tragedy, through a chain of events. The Deer cannot be blamed.”

The Otter looked at him in disbelief. “I brought about my children’s demise?”

“Ultimately, yes—by threatening the offspring of the Crayfish.”

“But I have to fish! How else am I to feed my family? Besides, it is my *nature* to fish. How could I have acted otherwise?”

“Everything you say is true,” said Solomon with a gesture of helplessness.

The Otter moaned and asked: “Why has GOD made the world as He has?”

Solomon looked over to where his own children were playing. They were cavorting on the grass—tossing a ball,

shouting and laughing. A guard stood nearby.

And he had no answer for the Otter.*

* The question raised by the Otter is what philosophers call theodicy, or the Problem of Evil. How is GOD to be justified in the face of affliction? Why would a benevolent deity create a world in which pain and suffering abound? And not even King Solomon—the wisest of men—is able to provide an answer.

It is the same question that is posed in the Book of Job. After suffering a series of calamities, Job wishes he had never been born. Friends seek to console him and to make sense of his fate. They tell him he is being punished for his sins. But Job will have none of their conventional wisdom. He insists he is blameless and accuses GOD of being unjust.

A philosopher chides him for this complaint, arguing that GOD —“greater than any man”—need not account for His actions. But Job persists in trying to comprehend the cause of his suffering. And suddenly GOD Himself appears. Speaking out of a whirlwind, He rebukes Job for questioning His governance of the world.

“Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” asks GOD. “Declare, if thou hast understanding....Hast thou been to the depths of the sea? Hast thou glimpsed beyond the Gates of Death?” What do *you*, a mere mortal, know about anything? GOD is asking. And He goes on to describe His ordering of the natural world, and to enumerate some of its wonders.

GOD’s message? That He knows what He is doing. That His plan is perfect, though its underlying wisdom is a mystery to us—is beyond our understanding. We should simply accept His doings and stand in awe of His greatness.

Which Job—realizing his folly—finally does.