

# What Kind of Truth Is Beauty?: A Meditation on Keats, Job, and Scriptural Poetry

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*When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."  
—John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820)*

## I.

Two poems that I read during my sophomore year of college ended up changing my life. The first of these, John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," changed it quickly by helping me decide to change my major from accounting to English. It wasn't so much that I was impressed with Keats for being such a good writer as much as I was impressed with myself for being such a good reader and for sort of understanding "Ode on a Grecian Urn." It made me feel smart, perhaps for the first time in my life, and I decided that I liked feeling smart and wanted to spend the rest of my time in college understanding poems and feeling like a genius. So I majored in English. In fact, I majored in English three times. As a graduate student, a teaching assistant, and, eventually, as a professor of English literature I continued to teach "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in a variety of courses more or less the same way that I originally understood it the first time I read it.

The second life-altering poem that I read that year, the Book of Job, changed my life gradually. I read Job in a BYU religion

class that assigned only the first two chapters, the second half of the last chapter, and a few reputedly Christological verses in between. But (being a new English major and all) I read the entire book—or, at least, my eyes passed faithfully over every one of its words. I understood almost none of it, but I accepted, on the authority of the instructor and the Institute manual, (1) that Job was a historical narrative about a man who suffered greatly and never complained or cursed God; (2) that in the middle of his suffering and for no particular reason he prophesied of the coming of Christ by saying, “I know that my Redeemer lives”; and (3) that, as a reward for Job’s being such a good sport, God rewarded Job at the end of the book with twice as much stuff as he lost at the beginning. I learned, in other words, the small portion of the Book of Job that one can derive by reading only the first two chapters, as well as the second half of the last chapter, and a few reputedly Christological verses in between.<sup>1</sup> I am deeply ashamed to admit that I went on to get a PhD in English, write a dissertation on biblical literature in the seventeenth century, and publish half a dozen peer-reviewed articles on the Old Testament without ever learning one of the most basic and obvious things about the biblical Book of Job: that it—or at least most of it—is a poem.

I might very well have lived forever in my ignorance had it not been for my first job after graduate school, which required me to teach two sections each semester of a general-education, Plato-to-NATO survey course in world literature. To my delight, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” was on the common course syllabus. So was the Book of Job. The first time I read the introduction to Job in the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, I realized how absurdly little I knew about one of the Bible’s great literary masterpieces. With the guidance of a few basic footnotes, I quickly learned that almost everything I knew about Job was wrong. Since that first semester, understanding the Book of Job has become a mild obsession for me. I have taught Job dozens of times in college courses, and a few times in LDS Gospel Doctrine classes. I have read it many times, and, each time, I understand a little bit more. I have a “Job shelf” in my office, devoted to different translations of and commentaries on this great poem. It has become increasingly clear to me that, in order to understand Job, I must wrestle with it

the way I once wrestled with “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—only for a lot longer, as it is a much longer and much greater poem.

As I continue to teach and study both Job and “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” I remain impressed by similarities between the two poems that I could not have imagined as a college sophomore twenty-five years ago. Both, for example, are built around narrative questions that are really philosophical puzzles for readers to solve. And both ultimately fail to answer their questions convincingly but do create a vocabulary for discussing them productively. Both poems have been responsible for volumes of criticism and commentary that interpret them in wildly different ways. And most importantly for my purposes, both poems—for very different reasons—require us to consider very seriously what exactly we mean when we say that a poem, or any other work of art, is “true.”

## II.

The truth of art is the central problem of “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Throughout the poem, a narrator—we can call him “Keats” as long as we don’t confuse him with the poet—meditates on three simple scenes painted on an ancient urn. The images are fairly typical pastoral fare—a young child playing reed pipes, a shepherd boy about to kiss a shepherd girl, and a group of villagers participating in a sacrifice outside of their village—but for the narrator they raise profound questions about art and imagination and eternity. Can any song, Keats asks, match “the spirit ditties of no tone”? Can the consummation of love ever compare to the anticipation of a first kiss? Must experience always be a pale shadow of imagination? For the Romantic poets, at least, these were big questions.

In the poem’s first four stanzas, the narrator tries valiantly to draw some sort of conclusive meaning from the images on the vase. But the questions keep multiplying until they “tease us out of thought.” In the final stanza, the urn itself speaks in response to the narrator’s questions. But it gives a spectacularly unsatisfying answer: “beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all / Ye know on earth and all you need to know.” It is pretty much anyone’s guess what this means. Some interpreters read it as an anticipation of the late-nineteenth-century aestheticism of Wilde and Pater, something like, “nothing in the world is inherently true or mean-

ingful, so the only truth we have access to lies in subjective aesthetic experience.” Or it might mean something more like “so great is the power of truth, that anything true is also necessarily beautiful.” This would align Keats with the Platonists and Neo-Platonists who came before him. Or it could be an ironic joke: “get a life, dude, and stop talking to pottery!” Like the incessant “nevermore” of Poe’s raven, the words of the Grecian urn resist (even more than most poetic phrases) any kind of final or authoritative interpretation.

To make the matter even more puzzling, we have multiple drafts of the original poem that punctuate the last lines differently. Some versions enclose all of the last two lines in quotation marks—“beauty is truth, truth beauty, / That is all you know on earth and all you need to know”—thereby attributing the entire sentence to the urn. Other versions include only the words “beauty is truth, truth beauty” in quotation marks, which means that the rest of the sentence could be read as the narrator’s response to the urn (“that is all you need to know, you stupid old vase”) or the narrator’s or the poet’s closing advice to the reader (Keats’s use of the plural “ye” would tend to support this reading). Nobody knows for sure. Or, rather, a lot of people know for sure, but they do not know for sure in the same ways. During the first half of the twentieth century, most of the towering figures of the New Criticism—T.S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, M. H. Abrams, Douglas Bush, Hugh Kenner, and Walter Jackson Bate to name just a few—spent a considerable amount of time offering their own reading of these two perplexing lines of poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly all interpretations of these last lines begin with the assumption that, according to the poem’s internal logic, truth (an entirely objective judgment) and beauty (a wholly subjective judgment) are related to each other in fundamental-but-not-entirely-obvious ways. Here, at least, the vase is on solid ground. Cognitive psychologists have long believed that our judgments about “truth” and “beauty” directly influence each other. We know that attractive people are perceived as more honest and more intelligent than unattractive people.<sup>3</sup> And researchers are now discovering that it works the other way too. People perceived as honest are more likely to be considered physically attractive than people per-

ceived as dishonest. These connections appear to be cross-cultural and do not depend on any particular definition of either “truth” or “beauty.” Whatever an individual considers beautiful will tend to correlate highly with whatever that same person considers true. Beauty IS truth, and truth IS beauty—and we can prove it under rigorous experimental conditions.<sup>4</sup>

Though ultimately unsuccessful, the narrator’s struggle to find meaning in the urn produces a work of great beauty. So too does the reader’s struggle with the poem. And, because they are beautiful, these struggles are also true under the terms of the poem itself.” A poem, like a vase, can be quite true, even if it does not provide final answers to any of the burning questions that it raises. Just asking the right questions, and giving a voice to thoughts that many people have had but nobody has ever expressed, constitutes a type of truth all its own. And this is why millions of people in every age and culture have turned to poetry—to Lao Tzu or Valmiki, or to Homer or Dante, or to Bob Dylan and the Beatles—to find the truths that give meaning to their lives. In the lived experience of the human race, poetry has at least as strong a claim to truth as history and science do.

Yes, poems are true. But they are almost never true in the same ways that history and science are true. They do not present us with the same kinds of fact claims, nor are they subject to the same kinds of hypothesis-testing and falsification protocols. It doesn’t really matter, for example, whether or not John Keats ever saw a Greek vase. Nobody has ever found an urn like the one described in the poem (and, yes, a lot of people have looked), but this does not mean that Keats is a liar or that the poem is not true. Similarly, we need not be terribly concerned by the fact that Grecian urns can’t really talk. Talking pottery is a useful artistic conceit; it is not a claim of scientific fact. We can read and appreciate Keats, and even learn important truths from him, without having to change our understanding of physics to account for the possibility of talking urns.

Poetic truth also works differently than revealed truth of the “thus-sayeth-the-Lord” variety. We find very little poetry in, say, the Doctrine and Covenants or the letters of Paul. These works of scripture are designed to convey specific ideas from one mind to

another, and poems just aren't very good at that sort of thing. But poems are very good at other types of "revelation." Poems encourage us to notice things that we have missed and to see common things in new ways. They teach us how to name what we have always felt but could never describe, and they show us how to ask questions that we didn't even know were questions. To be successful, a poet must convey impressions and images with the force of revelation. But this is not quite the same thing as conveying facts or transmitting instructions. Great poems almost always mean multiple things at the same time, and they rarely coalesce into a single interpretation that everybody agrees upon. Those few poems that outlast their immediate context invariably do so because they allow new generations of readers to interpret them in new ways—often in ways that their original authors could never have foreseen. Poems are true in ways that devolve a great deal of the truth-making power to their readers.

But how should we read poems that are themselves part of sacred texts? Most religious traditions have poetic scriptures that can be clearly distinguished from sacred writings in prose. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the most impressive scriptural poetry is found in the Wisdom books of the Old Testament: Psalms, Proverbs, Lamentations, the Song of Solomon, and, above all, the Book of Job. With the exception of the Song of Solomon (which Joseph Smith labeled non-canonical) Latter-day Saints believe these books to be scriptures—books with a divine provenance and an uncontested claim to truth. And so, I believe, they are. But an important consequence of the argument that I am making here is that we can fully accept the truth and divine origins of these books without insisting that they be true in the ways that we expect books of history, or science, or prophecy to be true. We can affirm, rather, that they are true in the ways that poems are true.

Unfortunately, however, Latter-day Saints often adopt an unnecessary fundamentalist position that says that, for these books to be true in any way, they must be true in every way that any kind of text can possibly be true. I call this position "unnecessary" because Latter-day Saint theology does not require or even accept the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Joseph Smith closed the door of biblical literalism for all Mormons forever when he produced

his “inspired version” of the Bible that, among other things, added lengthy passages to Genesis and Matthew, emended other passages with no reference to the primary texts, and declared one canonical book—the Song of Solomon—to be “not inspired.” No biblical literalist could support such declarations and alterations. Nonetheless, contemporary Latter-day Saints often seem compelled to adopt a sort of default biblical literalism—that is, we regard everything in the Bible literally true unless somebody in authority has specifically instructed us to think otherwise. When we do this for the Wisdom poems of the Old Testament, we end up insisting on truth claims that the poems themselves do not make, and we often end up having to defend the theological equivalents of talking urns.

All I am really trying to say here is that there are different kinds of texts in the Bible that require different reading strategies to understand. The Bible that we have is not as much of a book as it is a library—and what we call the Old Testament contains the most significant writings of an entire ancient culture. Like any good library, the Old Testament contains history books and instruction manuals. It contains overtly religious works that declare truth directly through prophecy, but it also contains works of literature that teach spiritual truths imaginatively, through poetry and narrative. Like most of the cultures in the Ancient Near East, the Israelites had a wealth of such literature, much of which ended up in the Hebrew *Ketuvim* (Writings) that, together with the *Torah* (Teaching) and *Nevi'im* (Prophets) constitute the *Tanakh*, or the Hebrew Bible. Many of the works in the *Ketivum* identify themselves clearly as poetry. They claim divine inspiration—much as Dante and Milton claimed divine inspiration—but they do not claim to have been written by prophets or angels. They claim to be true as poems.

In what follows, I will suggest—using the Book of Job as my primary example—that the books of the Old Testament that present themselves to us as poetry should be read as poetry, and that the primary kind of truth that we should look for in these books is poetic truth. I am not suggesting that all scriptures should be read as poetry, or that the Bible is primarily a literary text, or that there are not books in the Old Testament that make strong claims to his-

torical and doctrinal truth. Clearly, a large portion of the Bible, including many of the books of the Old Testament, do make such claims and must be approached accordingly. But the Old Testament is a library that contains an entire people's history, law, prophecy, and literature. It would be remarkable if such a collection did not contain some texts designed to be read primarily as literature, just as it would be tragic if the collective consciousness of a great people contained no poetic truth.

### III.

Did a man named Job ever exist? A great many people believe this to be a very important question, partly out of a reflexive biblical literalism, but also because references to Job appear in other scriptures—including the Book of James in the New Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants. The passage in the D&C 121:10, in which God comforts Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail by telling him “Thou art not yet as Job,” has been particularly compelling evidence of Job's historicity for Latter-day Saints. In the LDS Institute Manual, one of only seven major headings in its commentary on the Book of Job is entitled “Was Job a Real Person?” As an answer to the question, the manual reprints portions of an address by BYU religion professor Keith H. Meservy:

Now, if Job were not real and his suffering, therefore, were merely the figment of some author's imagination, and Joseph Smith on the other hand was very real, and his suffering and that of his people were not imaginary, then for the Lord to chide him because his circumstances were not as bad as Job's were, would provide an intolerable comparison, since one cannot compare real with unreal things. On the other hand, since the Lord did make the comparison, it must be a real one. I would, therefore, conclude on this basis alone, that Job was a very real person.<sup>5</sup>

I see two legitimate objections to this position. First, it is not at all obvious that the circumstances of a literary character cannot be considered a valid comparison to those of a real person. Indeed, I would suggest that Jesus, during his earthly ministry, made such comparisons frequently by answering real people's concerns with instructional parables. Modern prophets and apostles frequently refer to the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son in conference talks knowing full well that these are not historical fig-



ures. Literary parables have long been able to serve an important role in prophetic teaching without staking any kind of historical claim.

Even if we grant that Job was a real person, however, it does not follow that the Book of Job should be read as an accurate historical account of that person's life. Many of the world's greatest poems have been based on the lives of historical figures without actually being history themselves. *Gilgamesh*, *Faust*, *El Cid*, *The Song of Roland*, *Sundiata*, and *Richard III* are all stories of people who actually lived, and they all have some basis in fact. But they are also all works of art and can only be read profitably as such. Anybody who looks to *The Song of Roland* for information about the Battle of Roncesvalles will have some very strange ideas about history, physics, and the number of soldiers that can fit comfortably in one narrow mountain pass.

Ultimately, I do not believe that it matters much whether there ever was an actual man named Job. And even if it does matter, there is no way to settle the issue with textual analysis. Those who believe in a historical Job do so for reasons of faith, not history. Given the fog of 3,000 years or more, there is no objective way to assess the historicity of Job. In a 1990 article, former BYU Provost John Tanner treats this question in a way that I would consider definitive: "One question . . . that many readers seize upon as they wrestle with the text is 'Is Job historical?' Personally, I am not persuaded that the answer to this question makes much difference for the interpretation of the text."<sup>6</sup>

A much easier question, and one that we can answer with greater objectivity, is "does the Book of Job present itself to us as a historical work?" This is an extremely important question. If we must take every bit of Job as a historical narrative of God's dealings, then we have some serious theological problems to solve—as nothing else in the standard works supports the image of a God who goes around making side bets with Satan and killing off whole families just to win arguments. Fortunately for God's reputation, nothing about the Job prologue signals that we should read it as history and quite a bit suggests that we should read it as literature. For example, the first words of the original Hebrew text—*ish hayah*, or "a man there was"—invert the normal word or-

der for historical narratives in Hebrew (*wayehi 'ish*, or “there was a man”) in a way that, as the eminent Hebrew scholar Robert Alter explains, “signal[s] the fable-like character of the frame story.”<sup>7</sup> The English phrase that comes the closest to sending the same signal is “once upon a time.”

Perhaps the most important literary observation that we can make about the Book of Job is that it consists of two very different literary genres. Chapters 1–2, 3:1–2, and 42:7–16 constitute a fully self-contained, fairly simplistic prose narrative about a man who suffers greatly and never complains. Both internal and external evidence suggests that the prose portion of Job came from an earlier story (probably reworked by the author) that would have been very familiar to the first readers of the poem.<sup>8</sup> The rest of the book is a long, complex poem in which “the man who never complains” complains to anyone who will listen.<sup>9</sup> In nearly every commonly available translation of the Bible, readers can distinguish between the Job frame and the Job poem scanning the pages and looking at the line breaks. Alone among major translations, the King James Version makes no distinction between poetry and prose. Every word of the King James Bible is typeset as prose, and, at the same time, nearly every sentence was rendered by the King James translators in the high style and elevated diction of poetry. For all of the considerable advantages of such a translation strategy, it makes it very difficult for untrained readers of the KJV to understand the Book of Job.

The Job tale works as a prose frame for the Job poem. The Job frame tells the familiar story of “Patient Job”—the only part of the story, unfortunately, that many people ever hear. Patient Job is a righteous man with a large family and a prosperous estate. But when God gets into an argument with Satan and points to Job as a righteous man, Satan complains that Job’s righteousness is simply a form of enlightened self-interest, since God gives him everything he wants or needs. To win the argument, God gives Satan permission to take everything away from Job. In rapid succession, Job’s children die, his property is destroyed, and his body is inflicted with “running sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.”<sup>10</sup> Against the counsel of his wife, who tells him to “curse God and die,” Job remains steadfast and keeps repeating the famil-

iar doggerel verse: “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” In the end, God rewards him for his patience by doubling everything that he lost.<sup>11</sup>

More than anything else, the Job poet wants us to know that the frame tale gets the moral of its own story wrong. By testing Job by taking away his wealth and well being, and then rewarding him with more health and well being when he passes the test, the frame ends up embracing exactly the theological narrative it should be rejecting: that our material circumstances on earth are tied directly to our moral choices. If we are righteous, God will reward us; if we are wicked, He will punish us. This is often referred to as “The Law of Retribution” or “The Law of the Harvest” (“as you sow, so shall ye reap”), and it is one of the most important unifying principles of the Old Testament, which begins with the punishment of Adam and Eve in Genesis and it continues all the way through Ezekiel and Jeremiah, which narrate Israel’s Babylonian captivity as God’s punishment for worshipping false gods.

Assuming that Job was written after the Babylonian exile, the Law of Retribution would have been all but universally accepted among his contemporaries—even (and perhaps especially) among other wisdom poets, such as the authors of the Proverbs and the “Wisdom Psalms.”<sup>12</sup> Take, for example, the text of the First Psalm, which is often taken as a preface to the entire collection:

Happy is the one  
 who does not take the counsel of the wicked for a guide?  
 or follow the path that sinners tread,  
 or take his seat in the company of scoffers,  
 His delight is in the law of the Lord;  
 it is his meditation day and night.  
 He is like a tree  
 planted beside water channels,  
 it yields its fruit in season,  
 and its foliage never fades.  
 So he too prospers in all he does.  
 The wicked are not like this;  
 rather they are like chaff driven by the wind.

When judgment comes, therefore, they will not stand firm,  
nor will sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
The Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

The Psalmist's point could not be clearer: God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. This is the theology of the Job frame, of the Psalms, of the Proverbs, and of nearly every other book in the Old Testament. It remains a rigid orthodoxy for many people of faith today.

But, along with being the greatest poet in the ancient Hebrew world, the Job poet was one of the bravest, and he dissents vigorously from one of his culture's most cherished orthodoxies. The poem portion of Job is an elaborate thought experiment designed to test the proposition that righteousness leads to rewards while unrighteousness leads to suffering. The original Job story provided an excellent vehicle for testing the hypothesis. The great masterstroke of the Job poet was to interrupt the familiar narrative before the standard happy ending and insert a few thousand lines of exquisite poetry that undercuts nearly everything upon which the fable stands—especially the image of “Patient Job,” who never complains about his suffering. In the poem, Job complains pretty much all the time. As his so-called “Comforters” try to explain his suffering by telling him that he must have sinned, Job responds with more anger and sarcasm directed at them, and at God, until we arrive at his final speech (Chapter 30), in which he swears an oath of innocence and demands that God appear before him to refute the oath. Nobody in the poem talks about coming to or going from the world naked. And Job does not sing praises to the Lord.

To understand the Book of Job in any but the most superficial sense, we must understand the extreme tension between the frame and the poem. I explain it to my students like this: imagine a version of Cinderella that begins and ends with a simple paraphrase of the Disney movie but contains, in between, a 15,000 word poem called “Cinderella's Lament”—a feminist manifesto challenging most of the sexist assumptions underlying the Cinderella story and the portrayal of women in folk literature gener-

ally. Imagine that the poem is written primarily from Cinderella's perspective but includes speeches by the stepmother and stepsisters—and by the presumptuous prince who says that she is his one true love, even though he can't remember what she looks like. And finally, imagine that the brilliance and technical sophistication of "Cinderella's Lament" makes it unequivocally the best poem of its age. This is how the Book of Job would most likely have looked to its first generation of readers.

When poetry suddenly interrupts the frame in Chapter 3, Job himself immediately gives lie to the "Patient Job" narrative by cursing—roughly in order—the day he was born, the night he was conceived, his mother's womb, the knees that received him, and the breasts that gave him suck. And after that, the Book of Job consists mainly of people arguing. Chapters 4–27 consist of formal interchanges between Job and the three "Comforters" mentioned in the prologue: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.<sup>13</sup> Each comforter makes a speech, followed by a response by Job, until each of the three has made three speeches and Job has given nine responses. These speeches are highly formal, extremely stylized exchanges that show a deep knowledge of the poetic, rhetorical, and legal conventions of the rhetorical conventions of the Ancient Near East. Though each man shades his argument somewhat differently, their overall point is remarkably consistent: Job must have done something wrong to earn God's punishment.

The first comforter, Eliphaz, leads with the core assertion that the rest of the speeches all develop:

For consider, has any innocent person ever perished?

Where have the upright ever been destroyed?

This is what I have seen:

those who plough mischief and sow trouble  
reap no other harvest.

They perish at the blast of God;

they are shriveled by the breath of his nostrils. (4:7–9)

Later, Bildad continues:

If only you yourself will seek God  
and plead for the favor of the Almighty,

if you are pure and upright,  
then indeed he will watch over you  
and see your just intent fulfilled. (8:5-6)

And Zophar wraps up the first set of speeches:

If only you had directed your heart rightly  
and spread out your hands in prayer to him!  
Any wrongdoing you have in hand, thrust it far away  
and do not let iniquity make its home with you.  
Then you could hold up your head without fault;  
you would be steadfast and fearless.  
Then you will forge trouble,  
remembering it only as floodwaters that have passed.  
Life will be lasting, radiant as noon,  
and darkness will be turned into morning. (11:13-16)

Job, in other words, is a sinner. And for this, God must punish him with suffering. If Job wants to stop suffering, all he has to do is stop sinning. The Comforters' speeches never stray much from this line of reasoning. As readers, however, we know from the outset that they are wrong. God himself has introduced Job as "a man of blameless and upright life, who fears God and sets his face against wrongdoing" (1:8). This means that we can never even think that the Comforters might be right. The Job poem creates an *ad absurdum* scenario to test the argument of the Job frame (and much of the rest of the Old Testament) that personal righteousness correlates to material prosperity. This proposition can be expressed more specifically in four distinct propositions: (1) that good people will be rewarded; (2) that bad people will be punished; (3) that those who prosper have been rewarded and are therefore good; and (4) that those who suffer have been punished and are therefore bad. The Job Poem is a sustained, full-scale attack on proposition #4: that material suffering is a sign of God's punishment.

But all four of the propositions must be true for the overall argument to be valid, and this is why the Comforters react so strongly against Job. He challenges, not only their belief that suf-

fering is a sign of God's displeasure, but the logically connected belief that prosperity is a sign of God's favor and that, therefore, morally correct action guarantees material success. By simply existing, Job rebuts one of their core beliefs. And in the process, he also challenges one of the most cherished illusions of human beings in all times and places: that we we can predict and control the world we live in. Religion is one way that we indulge this illusion. Science, politics, and history are others. And in nearly every era, human beings have been willing to engage in stunningly irrational forms of magical and conspiratorial thinking to avoid having to accept the proposition that things simply happen for no apparent or controllable reason.

Throughout the poem, Job never gives the Comforters what they want. He persistently claims to be innocent of any wrongdoing that he understands as such. Otherwise his worldview is much the same as that of his Comforters. Over and over again, he asks God to tell him what he has done wrong. He is as eager as his friends are to square his suffering with his understanding of the Law of Retribution. "Tell me plainly, and I shall listen in silence" he pleads. "Show me where I have been at fault" (6:24). Later, he insists that, if only God would lay out the case against him, he could respond to it in full:

If only I knew how to reach him,  
 how to enter his court,  
 I should state my case before him  
 and set out my arguments in full;  
     then I should learn what answer he would give  
 and understand what he had to say to me  
 Would he exert his great power to browbeat me?  
 No; God himself would never set his face against me.  
 There in his court the upright are vindicated,  
 and I should win from my judge an outright acquittal. (23:3-7)

It is clear from these lines (and many others from Job's speeches) that he accepts precisely the same relationship between morality and prosperity that his friends do. He does not think that their

views of God are mistaken generally; he just thinks that God has made a mistake in this one instance.

As readers we have no choice but to reject both Job's reasoning and that of his Comforters. The poet has carefully structured the poem to make us confront the fact that Job is innocent and yet suffers. To read Job with any integrity, we have to stare this uncomfortable fact in the face from the beginning—when God assures us that Job is righteous and yet sanctions his suffering—to the end, when God speaks to Job from a whirlwind without ever telling him what his suffering means. The poem does not even grant us the possible outs of atheism or nihilism. Whether or not God exists in the real world, He exists in the Book of Job more or less as Job and his friends imagine Him. The only possible conclusion that we can come to is that both Job and his Comforters dramatically misunderstand the nature of the universe.

In the dynamic between Job, his Comforters, and their understanding of reality, we begin to see the interaction between the layers of meaning that the Bible's greatest poem offers us. Like most great literature, Job works equally well on multiple levels of abstraction. For the majority of ancient readers, it was no more than a poetic meditation on the whims of their mercurial tribal god. But the poem flourished with the advent of Christianity—and continues to speak to people of faith today—because it speaks to one of the most vexing problems of monotheistic religion: How can a loving and all-powerful God permit unmerited suffering? For centuries, philosophers and theologians have grappled with this problem—often referred to as “the problem of evil”—without coming to a satisfactory conclusion. At some point, however, almost all of the grapplers have had to deal with the Book of Job as the first and greatest “theodicy,” or attempt to address the problem of evil through imaginative literature.

On a deeper level, the Job poem deals with an even more profound—or at least more universal—question than “Why does God allow bad things happen to good people?” It also asks, “Why are we willing to ignore the evidence in front of our faces, and even become bad people, in order to hold on to our incorrect beliefs”? We all do this, and human beings—of any religion or no religion at all—must ultimately identify with Job's Comforters, whose actions



are quintessentially human in ways that cognitive scientists are just now beginning to understand. As humans, we constantly struggle to interpolate the facts we encounter into narratives that we already accept. Human reason evolved to defend conclusions, not to arrive at them, and we are almost infinitely capable of creating comforting narratives out of any facts that happen along. But we cannot do this without incurring costs; and, in many cases, those costs include our relationships with people whose realities do not conform to our perceptions.

The Job poet soars when dramatizing the human cost of maintaining our illusions. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar are introduced in the frame as Job's friends who set out, at some sacrifice to their own affairs, "to condole with him and comfort him" (2: 11). But they become Job's greatest tormentors because they must. His very existence represents such a profound challenge to their understanding of the universe that, if they cannot seize control of Job's narrative, they will have to stop being who they are. This is a very human reaction. None of us wants to reject our core assumptions about the universe and start all over again. It's hard work, and it deprives us of nearly everything that makes us feel secure. When pushed, I suspect, most people would rather sacrifice a relationship with a close friend or family member than go through the work and pain of fundamentally changing who they are and how they perceive reality.

To read Job honestly, I believe, we must eventually read ourselves into the role of the Comforters by asking what plain evidence we may be aggressively dismissing—and what human relationships we might be actively destroying—in order to remain possessed of our comforting, and comfortable, narratives. Such questions can be dangerous to religious orthodoxies, whose primary function is to provide comforting and comfortable narratives. But the comfortableness of a religious orthodoxy exists in direct proportion to its rigidity, as people will always go to drastic lengths to preserve what gives them comfort. The Job poet dared to critique, and dismantle, the most powerful religious orthodoxy of his culture by confronting it with a set of facts that it could not accommodate. And he demonstrated in excruciating detail how those who hold to rigid orthodoxies will end up renouncing both

overwhelming evidence and basic human decency before abandoning their beliefs. The most profound readings of Job, I believe, recognize that it is not just about suffering, or retribution, or God, or Satan, or knowing that Redeemers live; it is about how rigid orthodoxies can and do destroy our humanity.

## V.

Like “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the bulk of the Job poem consists of a narrator asking a very difficult question. And just as Keats has the Grecian urn speak at the end of the poem, the Job poet has God speak in response to Job’s final demand for an accounting of the charges against him. Like Keats’s urn, Job’s God does not answer the major question of the poem (why do innocent people suffer?). He does not even answer the major question of the poem’s protagonist (why does Job suffer?). In fact, God refuses to answer any questions at all. He simply asks them:

Who is this who darkens counsel  
with words devoid of knowledge  
Brace yourself and stand up like a man;  
I shall put questions to you, and you must answer.  
Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?  
Tell me, if you know and understand.  
Who fixed its dimensions? Surely you know?  
Who stretched a measuring line over it?  
On what do its supporting pillars rest?  
Who set its corner-stone in place,  
while the morning stars sang in chorus  
and the sons of God all shouted for joy? (38: 2–7)

Commentators frequently note that, not only does God not answer Job’s question, he uses rhetorical questions to invoke his own power—even though nobody actually ever questions His power. In his recent book *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*, Rabbi Harold Kushner explains why this answer is so unsatisfactory:

Chapters 38 and 39 are an eloquent tribute to God’s power, but God’s power was never the issue. Everyone . . . acknowledged God’s awesome power. It was his fairness and kindness that were at issue. . . . Throughout the book, Job’s lament has been, What can I do? It’s

His world and He can do what He wishes with it. But I was hoping that He would treat good people kindly. Is this the answer of the Book of Job? God saying, You accuse Me of being a bully? I'll show you what I do to people who accuse Me of being a bully!<sup>14</sup>

But here is the problem: God cannot give Job a good answer because Job has not asked a good question. Job wants to know what he has done to cause his own sufferings. He has followed Jewish law, given a complete accounting of his life, and essentially served God with a writ of *habeas corpus*, demanding a full accounting of the charges against him so he can prepare a defense. Job still does not understand how things work. He still sees God as a being who doles out material rewards and punishments in exact proportion to our moral worth. Underlying all of the incorrect beliefs of Job and his Comforters is the assumption that God works according to motives and purposes that can be easily understood. What the poem's God needs to prove to Job, then, is not (as Kushner suggests) his great power, but his fundamental incomprehensibility to human beings.

The Jews, of course, already believed that God was mysterious and unknowable. This is precisely what separated Yahweh from the idol-gods of the Canaanites who could be contained in one place and time. All that the poet really had to do was convince people that their core belief about God (that He was infinite and beyond human comprehension) contradicted their understanding of reward and punishment (which required God to act in finite and understandable ways). The poet does not teach any new principles; rather, he places two existing principles in conflict with each other in a way that forces readers to confront the contradiction without any way to mitigate their cognitive dissonance. In this way, the poet can lead readers to understand what they already know, which, I would argue, is the primary function of Wisdom Literature.

And this is also how poems in every era and culture have always been true. When we read something like the Book of Job trying to prove that it is true in ways that it does not claim to be true—say by trying to locate Uz on a map of the ancient world or determine whether the Leviathan mentioned in 41:1 was a dinosaur or just a plain old crocodile—we end up ignoring all of the

ways that is true on its own terms—as a work of great poetry whose truth cannot be separated from its beauty—both the beauty of its language, for which we are usually at the mercy of its translators, and the beauty of its ideas, which transcend its unfamiliar language and speak to our minds and our hearts. That it does not ultimately solve its central problem is not important; it gives us a vocabulary for asking the right questions of ourselves, which is all that any work of literature can do.

In the Proverbs—one of the other great books of Wisdom Literature—another great poet tells us something important about wisdom: *Sagacity in a man's mind is like deep water / The intelligent person will draw from it.*<sup>15</sup> The image of deep water is particularly powerful: it suggests something that is already there, but buried and inaccessible without an equally deep well. So too, the Wisdom books suggest, are the reservoirs of wisdom in the human mind. This wisdom does not need to be placed there by an external authority; rather, it needs to be made accessible, unhidden, and revealed to the mind that has always contained it. This is what poems are good for.

### Notes

1. The current LDS Gospel Doctrine Manual for the Old Testament includes Job 1–2, 13, 19, 27, and 42; the Institute Manual contains commentary only on Job 1–2; Job 13:7–28; Job 19:26; Job 29:16–17; and the final chapter. Both explicate the traditional frame narrative and highlight the few passages in the Job poem that have traditionally been given Christological readings.

2. A good sampling of the critical debate over the ending of “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—including essays by Bate, Bush, Abrams—has been anthologized by Jack Stillinger in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats's Odes: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

3. See K. Dion, E. Berscheid, and E. Walster, “What is Beautiful is Good,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 24.3 (1972): 285–90; S. Brownlow “Seeing Is believing: Facial Appearance, Credibility, and Attitude Change,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 16.2 (1993): 101–15.

4. Sampu V. Paunonen, “You are Honest, Therefore I Like You and Find You Attractive,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 40.3 (2006): 237–49.

5. *Old Testament Student Manual 1 Kings-Malachi*, 3d ed. (2003), 28–29.

6. John S. Tanner, "Why Latter-Day Saints Should Read Job," *Sunstone* 14.4 (1990): 38–47, 39.

7. Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 11.

8. Alter 4–5.

9. One other small section in Job was originally crafted in prose: Chapter 32:1–6. This passage sets up the speeches of Elihu, Job's fourth interlocutor, which are generally considered by scholars to be a later edition to the text.

10. Job 2:7. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the Revised English Bible published by Oxford University Press (1989), which I chose after much deliberation as the translation that strikes the best balance between scholarly integrity and literary merit in its translation of the poetic books.

11. Job 1:21.

12. A handful of Psalms are traditionally considered "Wisdom Psalms" because they show strong evidence of coming from the wisdom tradition that produced Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. The list of such Psalms varies from commentator to commentator, but almost always includes: 1, 37, 49, 112, and 128

13. In Chapters 32–37, we hear from a fourth Interlocutor named Elihu, who interrupts the other Comforters and gives a summary statement of the strongest arguments against Job's position. Most commentators believe the speech of Elihu to be a later addition to the text, both on linguistic grounds and because it interrupts the flow of the narrative, coming between Job's declaration of innocence and God's answer. See Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 133.

14. Harold Kushner, *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person* (New York: Schocken, 2012), 144.

15. Proverbs 20:5. Here I use the Anchor Bible translation by R.B.Y. Scott (*The Anchor Bible: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* [New York: Doubleday, 1965]), 119.