

Job: A Useful Reading

Michael Austin. *Re-reading Job: Understanding the Ancient World's Greatest Poem*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014. 174 pp. Paperback: \$20.95. ISBN: 9781589586673.

Reviewed by John Crawford

Michael Austin's book aims to convince Mormons that the manner in which the Latter-day Saints have traditionally (since the early 1970s, if not longer) read the Book of Job is wrong and unhelpful and that a better reading of the text is worthwhile, yielding more useful applications to life and theology. He succeeds in making both arguments. The book is not a scholarly treatise and does not appeal to the original language of the text. Instead, Austin applies the literary training of his profession and his own personal good humor to make a valuable contribution to Mormon devotional literature.

The book is divided into ten chapters, which can in turn be roughly divided into three parts. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the background and foundation for what follows. In chapter 1, Austin confesses to having only a shallow understanding of Job for much of his life. The title of the work, *Re-reading Job*, is a reference to the tendency, common among contemporary Latter-day Saints, to read only the beginning and the end of Job, along with a smattering of proof-texting verses in the middle. We've all "read" Job in this way, without really reading it, so another reading is necessary. Chapter 2 makes the argument that Job should be read as literature and not as history. Austin asserts that, whether or not there was once someone on earth named Job, the story, as found in the Bible, has valuable lessons that we can learn. Getting lost in the minutiae of identifying the Leviathan or the location of Uz detracts from the reader's ability to discern the poem's true purpose. That purpose, of course, is to undermine a central tenet of almost all religions: the notion that God rewards the good and punishes the evil.

The next part, consisting of four chapters take us on a whirlwind tour of Job. The basics of the frame story, the dialogues, the wisdom material, and the final appearance of God are laid

out. Austin is obviously familiar with the history of scholarly and literary interpretations of Job. He explains the traditional scholarly divisions within the text, noting how different sections play against one another to create a sense of irony or to confirm suspicions. He also spends some time in this section persuading the reader to reject a second easy reading. If the initial easy reading is “God rewards the just and punishes the evil,” it is tempting to understand Job as making an equally flawed statement in opposition: “God is evil; nothing makes sense; nothing means anything.” Austin, by humanizing the villains of Job and by demonstrating that Job is also flawed in spite of his perfection, hopes to instead convince the reader that easy morals and straightforward understanding are impossible with a text like Job, but that this resistance to facile moralizing is what makes the text valuable.

The final portion of the book suggests different interpretive models for approaching Job. In chapter 7, Austin examines the critique of the “law of the harvest” found in Job. Placing the book in the context of the Old Testament canon, Austin argues that it acts as a counterweight to the Deuteronomistic history in particular, but also to the whole notion that God is bound by human acts to reward or punish. The Deuteronomistic history, that section of the Old Testament that begins with Joshua and ends with Second Kings, is commonly understood to be an historical document given its final form during the Babylonian exile. It appears to have been written to answer the question “What just happened?” for the Jews. If they really were the chosen people of God, how could they, God’s temple, and God’s chosen city be destroyed by these interloping barbarians? The Deuteronomistic history, reliant in particular on the book of Deuteronomy, argues that Israel broke covenant with the Lord early and often, bowing itself down to foreign gods and engaging in forbidden rites. In this understanding, the Lord put up with Israelite waywardness for hundreds of years, but eventually enough was enough and he brought in the Mesopotamians. The Israelites were the cause of their own destruction.

Austin argues that Job acts to undermine this interpretation by offering a hero whose destruction is clearly not his own fault.

Job is, after all, described as perfect. Austin sees, in the Job story, a means for positing that Israel's destruction may not have been its own fault and that the appropriate response may not be renewed devotion to the temple cult that the Deuteronomists suggested, but rather an assessment of the reliability of the "law of the harvest." If God is less like a vending machine and more like a slot machine, should we examine why we emphasize the blessings we have received or may receive for our righteousness? Austin suggests that setting aside the pursuit of reciprocal altruism with God may allow disciples to better fulfill God's will.

In the remaining chapters of the book, Austin applies the lessons he draws from Job to various features of the text. In chapter 8, the famous passage, rendered in the King James text as "I know that my Redeemer lives," is considered. Austin questions the common messianic rendering of the passage, arguing that it contradicts the purpose of the text. In chapter 9, Austin considers how we ought to read Job (and other works of theodicy) in the aftermath of the Holocaust. He carefully considers Jewish approaches to theodicy and Job, using them to illuminate potentially fruitful interpretations for Latter-day Saint readers. Finally, in chapter 10, Austin considers Job in the context of the biblical wisdom literature, considering its similarities with Ecclesiastes and its differences from Proverbs.

The sum of all this is a persuasive work that corrects a common misreading of an important biblical text. However, there are a few things that detract from the power of the work. There seems to be insufficient Job in this book about Job. By going through a reception history of Job, Austin does a fine job of covering the history of interpretation, but the book itself—the title character—sometimes feels like a minor player. Understanding that Austin cannot work with the original Hebrew, it would still be helpful to have a few more examples of the sublime poetry in Job in the place of assurances that the poetry is indeed sublime.

More troubling to his readers will be Austin's deconstruction of "I know that My Redeemer lives" as a messianic phrase. He admirably lays out the arguments for and against a messianic interpretation, explaining why he prefers the latter. The literary

and historical context renders a messianic interpretation altogether incongruous with the surrounding text. However, Mormons have a long history of acontextual interpretations, one noticeable even in founding Mormon documents (see, for example, the acontextual use of the Song of Solomon in D&C 5:14 [cf. Song 6:10]). Arguing for contextual readings within a context of traditional decontextualized interpretations is a hard argument for Austin to make and, while I suspect he will be convincing to the scholars who read this chapter, the average layperson will shrug his shoulders and continue to find Jesus in Job's exclamation.

Both of these criticisms are small, however, as Austin's book is a necessary and useful aid to Mormon engagement with the Bible. This work constitutes another worthy contribution to Mormon devotional literature by Kofford Books' Contemporary Studies in Scripture series.



Full Lives but Not Fulfilling

Paula Kelly Harline. *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women*. New York: Oxford UP, 2014. 256 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, index. Hardcover: \$29.95. ISBN: 9780199346509.

Reviewed by Polly Aird

This book is a gem. Paula Kelly Harline's writing shines. She has compiled excerpts from twenty-nine diaries and autobiographies of women who lived in polygamy between 1847, when the Mormons first arrived in Utah, and 1890, when the Manifesto was issued and polygamy was abandoned by the LDS Church. Harline chose women who were not married to Church leaders because she wanted to know "how common folk understood and lived polygamy" (4). Other criteria were that the women did not leave the Church or move to Mexico or Canada to escape prosecution. And finally, she focused on writings that were not widely known.