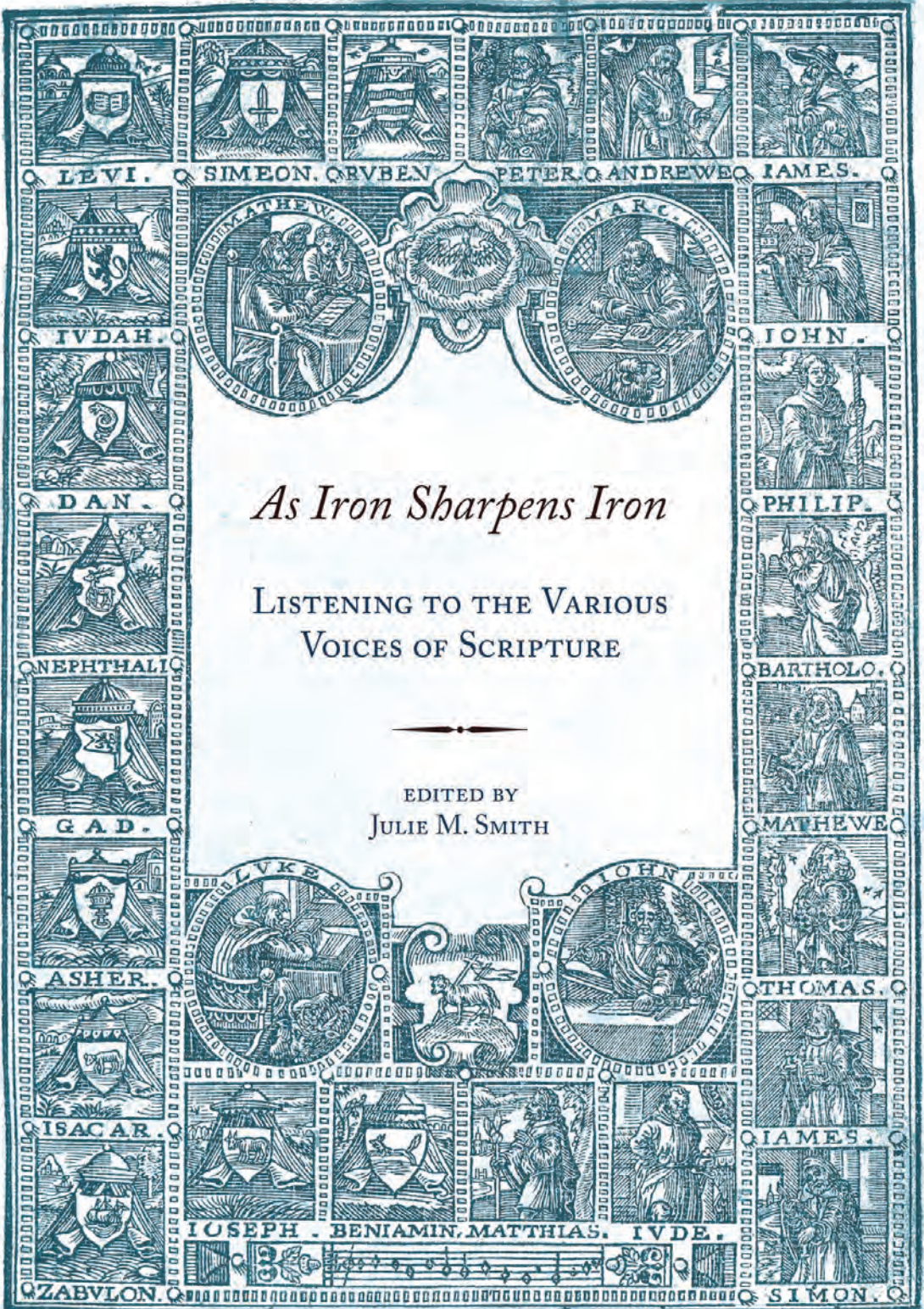


GREG KOFFORD BOOKS



As Iron Sharpens Iron

LISTENING TO THE VARIOUS
VOICES OF SCRIPTURE

EDITED BY
JULIE M. SMITH

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GREG KOFFORD BOOKS
SALT LAKE CITY, 2016

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Introduction

Julie M. Smith

Matthew Richard Schlimm's *This Strange and Sacred Scripture: Wrestling with the Old Testament and Its Oddities* made a big impression on me. It's a solid entry in the swelling genre of books that attempt to make the Bible's weird bits more palatable to a modern reader, but one part of the book in particular grabbed me and wouldn't let go. Weeks after reading it, I was still pondering a very brief portion of the book—it was just a page or two—which consisted of a dialogue between Ezra and Ruth. This dialogue was completely fictional; Ruth and Ezra were not even alive at the same time. But this invented conversation hewed closely to what is known of them from the biblical texts, where it is recorded that Ezra insisted that all of the Israelite men divorce their foreign wives¹ and Ruth, of course, *was* a foreign wife.² Given that profound disagreement on such a fundamental matter, they certainly would have had plenty to talk about! In Schlimm's dialogue, Ezra and Ruth present the arguments in favor of their respective positions regarding what today we would call interfaith marriages. They both advocate for their positions with clarity and charity. There is no “winner” here—just a wrestle with the complexities of marriage outside of the covenant. And in Schlimm's dialogue, these complexities were not hidden beneath a veneer of sprawling academic prose but were rather presented in a reader-friendly fashion.

I think the main reason why I was so taken by Ruth and Ezra's dialogue is that it modeled some important principles in the interpretation of scripture—principles which often get lost in the rush to find a personal application for the text. One of these principles, perhaps the most significant, is that not all scripture texts agree with each other. This is to be expected, since no writer of scripture has been freed from the confines of his (or, perhaps, *her*) fallen state, so we should expect none to have written perfectly. Joseph Smith lamented “the little narrow prison almost as it were total [sic] darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scat-

1. See Ezra 9–10.

2. See Ruth 4.

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tered and imperfect language.”³ There is no reason to think that scripture writers, even when acting under inspiration, were able to burst the bounds of this prison. Rather, we have evidence that they were all too aware of their limitations and bemoaned them. The very title page of the Book of Mormon warns the audience that there may be faults therein. This warning is repeated by Nephi,⁴ and Moroni recognized his “imperfections” and pleads with his audience not to condemn him for them.⁵

Each scripture writer also wrote from behind the blinders of a given cultural perspective; none perfectly transcended those limits. For example, Helaman 7:7 states that during Lehi’s day, “his people [were] easy to be entreated, firm to keep the commandments of God, and slow to be led to do iniquity.” One can imagine father Lehi smiling ruefully at this idealized portrayal where nostalgic yearning has overtaken historical accuracy. Similarly, Paul assumes that short hair on a man and long hair on a woman is such a natural and obvious state that it can serve as the undisputed premise of his theological argument.⁶ Of course, current cultural assumptions shape interpretation today and are perhaps all the more dangerous because they go unrecognized.

But it is not just being part of a fallen world and being embedded in a distinct human culture that circumscribe scripture writers. The Mormon claim to an ongoing Restoration requires that various authors will more—or less—completely reflect the truths of the gospel. For all of these reasons, we are being unfaithful to the scriptures when we treat them as if they were perfect, and one natural result of their imperfections is that various texts will not agree with each other. The casual reader may never notice these divergences, but the closer reader surely will.

What, then, is the close reader to do with these discrepancies? Historically, the most common response has been to gloss over them as quickly as possible, often by adopting elaborate theories which explain why there is not, despite appearances, any divergence at all. This may be a necessary exercise for those with a theological commitment to scriptural inerrancy, but this group does not include Latter-day Saints. What if we considered these differing viewpoints to be—to borrow a metaphor from the tech world—not a bug but a feature? For example, even the casual read-

3. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, 27 Nov. 1832, in Joseph Smith, “Letter Book A,” 1832–1835, Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Church History Library.

4. 1 Nephi 19:6.

5. Mormon 9:31.

6. 1 Corinthians 11:14–15.

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er of scripture knows that Jesus was crucified. One who reads more closely notices an irreconcilable difference between Mark's and John's chronologies of the crucifixion: in Mark, Jesus and the disciples celebrate Passover and Jesus dies the next day. In John, Jesus dies at the time when the Passover lambs are being slaughtered. But Jesus cannot die at the time the Passover lambs are sacrificed *and* eat the Passover meal with his disciples. Despite two thousand years of clever attempts to reconcile these accounts, it is simply not possible to do so. And attempts to ignore, minimize, or deny the difference can cause problems for readers who are left unprepared for future attacks on their faith based on the "unreliability" of the gospels. But once it is recognized that the gospel writers had a higher priority than chronology (namely: theology), the differences between the two accounts become not a problem to be solved but an opportunity to be explored. Scholars are divided as to whether Mark's or John's account is more likely to be historically accurate, but regardless of which one better corresponds to history, each advances important thinking about the nature of Jesus's life and ministry. In Mark, the meal is an occasion for Jesus to recast the symbols of Passover so that the site of liberation is now his own body. Mark does not mention the lamb in this context, but the bread and wine are identified with Jesus's flesh. In John, Jesus himself is the lamb. Each portrait is theologically rich and evocative in its own way, and one feels rather petty quibbling about chronological precision in the face of these magisterial portraits of the meaning of Jesus's life. The recognition that the gospels present more than one view of the meaning of Jesus's death implies that the meaning is multifaceted, perhaps beyond our understanding. Much more could be said about the theological presentation of these stories, but for our purposes this is sufficient: ignoring or denying or explaining away the disagreements in these texts only creates problems in the future, but embracing and examining them can yield profound insights.

Another problem with quickly ironing out any discrepancies is that it generally requires the silencing of part of scripture. If we were to insist on reconciling Mark's and John's account, we will end up, in effect, erasing one of the texts. So, paradoxically, efforts to create a complete harmony of scripture result in the silencing of scripture. An attempt to identify "the" biblical position on interfaith marriage will probably silence either Ezra or Ruth. Listening to the various voices of scripture requires us to hear both Ezra and Ruth, to recognize that they probably would not be in complete agreement with each other, and to acknowledge that they both are within the bounds of sacred writ.

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The presence of conflicting opinions within scripture raises the question: What if the diversity of canonized perspectives is intentional? What if, instead of just being the unavoidable result of flawed and fallen humanity, it is deliberate? What if God's design for scripture is that it reflect a multiplicity of voices? What if the inspiration is in the divergence? As biblical scholar Peter Enns wrote:

Judaism seems to have a good handle on [something that] . . . many Christians do not: debating each other, and debating God, is what God wants. We can see the same sort of attitude in the rich tradition of Jewish medieval commentaries on the Bible. The sages of Judaism debate the meaning of biblical passages, often arriving at contradictory explanations—and all of it is recorded and preserved as part of the sacred tradition, without any need to resolve the problem and arrive at a final answer. Even in their debates, though, we see their affirmations: God exists; he has given us his law; it is important that we wrestle with it and make sure we honor God in how we keep his law—even if we disagree. But killing the possibility of debate is what kills the faith. The debate keeps the conversation at the center of the community. Ending the debate, getting to the right answer, is not the prime directive in the spiritual life. You can tussle with each other and with God (and win!), and it's all good. The back-and-forth with the Bible is where God is found. Enter the dialogue and you find God waiting for you, laughing with delight, ready to be a part of that back-and-forth.⁷

Schlimm's dialogue cleverly demonstrated this, and I realized that this format was an ingenious way to explore the scriptures. I wanted to read an entire book of such dialogues, but I didn't know of one. So I asked some of the smartest people I know to write one for me! Each writer chose his or her own topic. Given the creative and artistic nature of the project, a heavy editorial hand seemed inappropriate (not to mention ironic), so some of the pieces have introductions and conclusions while others do not; some are footnoted while others are not; some present obvious disagreements while others explore far more subtle divergences. Because these dialogues are a creative work, the manner in which the conversations take place has been left for the individual authors to decide. This includes how, where, and when the discussion occurs, whether biblical criticism and modern revelation affect their understanding, and to what extent, if at all, they are able to reconcile their positions. But each one explores the various voices in scripture by placing two different characters in dialogue

7. Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 242–43.

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with each other, attempting to remain faithful to how each person is represented in the scriptural text.

Each dialogue also models civil, respectful discourse. It goes without saying that in the current political climate, polite and productive conversation between those who disagree is something of a lost art. Especially in a religious community that makes strong truth claims, the ability to engage different opinions without contention is a skill and a gift—one for which Latter-day Saints may not see very many models. These dialogues provide a template for what courteous and productive disagreement looks like. I hope that these dialogues counter the current trend to hunker down with the like-minded by showing what can be gained by respectfully and openly engaging those who disagree. The title of this book is drawn from Proverbs 27:17, which explains that just as iron can sharpen iron, engaging a friend can sharpen one's own thoughts and beliefs.

This approach of exploring conflicts instead of smoothing them over is unusual in the Mormon tradition and may be discomfiting to some readers. But there are two significant reasons why we might want to focus on these contrasting opinions despite the discomfort. First, it can enliven and invigorate scripture study; there is something inherently intriguing about wrestling with the contours of a conflict. Second, members of the church can experience a faith crisis when they encounter former church policies or practices which are difficult to understand. Knowing that multivocality has always been part of the program prepares a Saint to wrestle with today's challenges.

The dialogues in this book are somewhat reminiscent of midrash (the Jewish tradition of creative writings which extend scripture texts). But there is one very significant difference: we tried not to invent anything which would “solve” the differences between texts. Our goal was to explore those differences, not explain them away. While the dialogues are obviously fictional, we attempted to base them as closely as possible on what the scriptural records suggest that the people involved would have actually believed. Of course, we are all writing from our own limited perspectives and have surely missed the mark in significant ways. But the goal was to relish the apparent divergences in the canon—to highlight what is there without substantially changing it or adding to it.

Most readers have approached the wrinkles in scripture by ignoring them or by trying to iron them out as soon as possible. The approach in this book is entirely different: What if these are not wrinkles to be removed but rather an intentional texture to be appreciated?

Abraham and Job: Suffering

Michael Austin

Perhaps no story in the Hebrew Bible is as perplexing and potentially disruptive as the *Akedah*, or the binding of Isaac, in Genesis 22:1–19. When God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham binds his son, places him on an altar, and takes a knife in hand to perform the sacrifice—all without a word of protest towards the Almighty. The story has a happy ending, of course. An angel stays Abraham’s hand, and the Lord provides a ram to be the sacrifice instead. But the narrative does not resolve all of the questions, the largest among them being, “Why would God command a man to sacrifice his son, even as a test, and then reward him for being willing to go through with it?” and “Why would Abraham meekly comply with God’s order instead of protesting loudly and refusing to murder his son?”

People of the book have invested substantial time and energy into explaining what seems, on a first reading, to be an immoral demand by the Lord and an unconscionable acquiescence by a prophet. Christians, of course, read the story typologically: God required Abraham to sacrifice his son in anticipation of God’s own sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In Jewish thought, the *Akedah* has become a symbol of both ultimate faith and of the sacrifices that have always been required of God’s covenant people. And yet, the questions persist.

In her wonderful 2009 book *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*, the Jewish scholar Judy Klitsner makes a remarkable proposition about the *Akedah*. What if, she suggests, God was wrong to ask Abraham to sacrifice his son, even as a test, and Abraham was wrong to go along with the command? And what if later Jewish writers, knowing that the story sent the wrong message, created a “subversive sequel” to the story—a refashioning of the original narrative designed to correct its mistaken understanding of God and human responsibility? Klitsner believes that this is precisely what hap-

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pened, and that the subversive sequel to the story of the *Akedah* was the Book of Job.

The writer of Job, as Klitsner points out, consciously incorporates surface elements of the Abraham story into the narrative. For example, several of Abraham's named kinsmen—such as Uz, Buz, and Cased—are repurposed in the Job story as place names. More importantly, though, both stories feature “God-fearing men who face a mortal threat by God to their offspring.”¹ As they deal with these crises, the two men enact and embody very different forms of faith. Abraham's faith proceeds from perfect trust in a God with whom he has made a solemn covenant. Job's faith, on the other hand, takes the form of resignation to a greater power, with perhaps the hint of ultimate justice that Tennyson points to in *In Memorium*:

Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final end of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;
That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroy'd,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.

The following dialogue imagines a conversation between Job and Abraham along the lines that Klitsner draws. Job, who lost ten children to the whims of a capricious deity, confronts Abraham for passively accepting—and even being willing to participate in—Yahweh's unjust demand for the life of his son, while Abraham insists that faith must be something more than angry resignation to a greater force.

* * * * *

JOB: I cannot countenance, sir, what you did to your son.

ABRAHAM: But surely you know, friend, that I did nothing at all to my son. Isaac lived to a ripe old age and had many descendants.

JOB: But you bound him. You placed him on an altar. You set your own knife to his slaughter. And you did it without uttering a word of defiance.

1. Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), xxi.

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You were willing to give up of your own accord what was ripped away from me because I was too weak to prevent it. God never asked me if I was willing to see my children dead. He never gave me a chance to refuse His command.

ABRAHAM: And what if he had? What if God had asked you to

JOB: I would not have harmed a single one of my children. Never. If He had commanded me to slay them, I would have refused. I would have suffered anything rather than allow even one of my children to come to harm. But they were all slain anyway, and I still suffered everything.

ABRAHAM: Oh come now, you made out alright. If I recall, you became wealthier than ever—and God restored your children in the bargain.

JOB: Did I hear you correctly? Are you really suggesting that children can simply be replaced, like goats?

ABRAHAM: Well, not exactly. But God made everything right with you, didn't He?

JOB: I had ten more children, if that's what you mean. But that did not "make it right." It just means that God killed half of my children instead of all of them. I will never get over, or forget, the ten babies that God took from me in a single day.

ABRAHAM: But at least you had children while you were young enough to enjoy them. My wife was childless until I was a hundred years old. And even her handmaid, Hagar, did not bear me a son until I was eighty-six. I lived almost my entire life without the blessings of children or the possibility of posterity. Isaac was the great miracle of my life.

JOB: And yet you were willing to kill this great miracle with your own hand? That is something that I could never understand. Or forgive.

ABRAHAM: That is because you do not really understand what it means to have faith in God.

JOB: How dare you say that! Did God not once call me His most faithful servant on earth? Did He not appear to me in all his fierce glory and

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demonstrate his awesome power? And did I not repent in sackcloth and ashes when he contradicted me? In all of these things, I demonstrated my faith in God.

ABRAHAM: You demonstrated your submission to God. That's not the same thing. You learned to bow before a superior power. But you never learned to trust His goodness. Without trust, there can be no real faith.

JOB: I saw very little of His goodness.

ABRAHAM: You saw as much as any man who ever lived. You were the greatest man in the East. You had wealth, land, and family. And even after you lost it all, God blessed you again. Do you not realize how many people have lived and died in this world without any of the comforts you enjoyed for all but a few months of your life? God simply allowed you to experience, for a brief time, some of the misery that defines most people's entire existence.

JOB: You speak eloquently of the suffering of others, but when did you ever suffer? You were rich too. And God walked before you all of your life removing the stones from your path. You never suffered as I did. And when God told you to slaughter your son, you didn't even complain. You just tied him up and popped him on an altar like a sack of lentils!

ABRAHAM: You speak of something that you do not understand. Binding Isaac was the most terrible thing that I could have imagined. I would a thousand times rather have been commanded to slaughter myself.

JOB: Then why didn't you fight back, man? Why didn't you demand that God explain himself? Why did you just go along with God's plan to shed the very blood that runs through your veins?

ABRAHAM: Because I trusted the Lord. That is what faith means. I did wrestle with Him, once—as He prepared to destroy the Cities of the Plain. I convinced Him to spare Sodom for the sake of ten righteous men. But when I searched the great city, I did not find even one. And I realized then that the destruction that seemed so terrible to me was, in the eyes of God, a mercy to future generations. That is when I finally learned to trust the Lord.

JOB: But your own son?

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ABRAHAM: That's the point. I had to trust God in everything—even the hard things—or it wouldn't have been faith. And I had a covenant with God. He promised me that my descendants would outnumber the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore. I *knew* that God would keep His covenant. And I knew that Isaac would be my heir.

JOB: Are you saying that you knew God would send an angel to stay your hand?

ABRAHAM: I did not know how God would keep His word; I knew only that He would. God made a covenant with my house, and I knew that God could not, would not, violate that covenant. That was, and is, the essence of my faith.

JOB: I once thought much the same way. I made no complaints when I lost my wealth or when I developed lesions all over my body. All I ever wanted was to understand why I was made to suffer—I wanted to know why God had set His hand against me. The men who came to comfort me talked as you do now. They assured me that God had a plan for me and that everything would work out for the best. But it did not. God required everything of me, as He did of you. But I was never allowed to understand why.

ABRAHAM: But in the end, you stood justified before God, as I did. We were both rewarded for having faith.

JOB: But we weren't standing in the same position at all. You were rewarded for doing what God told you to do. And you could draw a straight line from your obedience to the material well-being of your family. You knew that God was testing you and you even understood the nature of the test. When it was all over, you had a tidy little cause-and-effect narrative to hold on to: you kept God's commandments; he gave you a reward. Oh, and by the way, your son doesn't really have to die after all. That was just a little joke.

ABRAHAM: But surely you believe that God rewards those who obey Him and punishes those who do not? What could be more basic to any belief than that?

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JOB: That's not how it worked out for me. I was rich and happy, and then I was poor and miserable, and then I was rich and happy again. But I never had the consolation of understanding why. All I ever got from God was, "Can you make the world like I can, Job? Can you catch Leviathan with a fish hook? Do you know how to keep a hippopotamus hedged in a bridal bower?" I got a smashing display of God's power, but I never saw anything that even suggested a coherent connection between what I did and what I got. And I never understood "divine justice" as anything more than the force of uncontested power.

ABRAHAM: Fascinating. But I must believe that, somehow, God had a plan for you and that, being omniscient, He knew that everything would work out in your favor.

JOB: You and my comforters. That's what they kept saying to me over and over again: "God has a plan"; "There are good reasons for your pain that you don't understand"; "God cannot be unjust."

ABRAHAM: And they were right, weren't they? God did bless you.

JOB: Yes, but His blessings were just as random as His curses. He never told me what I did wrong to deserve my suffering, and He never told me what I did right to deserve my reward. It wasn't as easy as, "obey God and find a ram in the thicket." I obeyed God as much as you did, but my children still died. God never sent me a ram.

ABRAHAM: Still, God justified you in spite of your complaints, and He rejected your comforters who had been His greatest defenders.

JOB: True. And that's why I think that He wouldn't have minded if you had questioned His orders a little bit before binding your son. If anything, my situation shows that God would rather have an honest questioner than a mindless follower. Don't you think that he would have blessed you, as he blessed me, if you had demanded justice for your son like I did?

ABRAHAM: But we were being tested for different reasons. I was establishing a covenant with God on behalf of hundreds of future generations. Your test involved only yourself and your friends. As far as anybody has been able to figure out, you weren't even Jewish.

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JOB: Well, there's that. I've always been more of a Universalist. I mean, what's more universal than suffering?

ABRAHAM: But your suffering did not occur in the context of a covenant. You were no more part of the covenant than the Persians and Egyptians who also told your story. My ordeal came as a direct result of the promises between myself and my God. It showed my descendants that God expects much from those He calls His people. And it showed them that they could always trust God, even when it looked like He was abandoning them. This is something that my children had to learn to survive, as a people, in a world that would require them to endure many things worse than the sacrifice of a single child.

JOB: Well, I showed them something too. I showed them that they could never understand God well enough to use other people's material circumstances to judge their moral worth. I showed them that God's ways are mysterious and inscrutable. And most of all, I showed them that, while they can't control what God does, they can sure kvetch about Him to anyone who will listen.

ABRAHAM: Yes, my friend, you did teach them that. Perhaps a little too well.

JOB: It's a gift.

ABRAHAM: Indeed.

* * * * *

In the end, as we see in the dialogue, Job and Abraham are more similar than they are different. They stand together as the two great examples of a God who devises excruciating tests for those who follow Him. But while their narratives require structurally similar sacrifices, Job and Abraham respond very differently. Abraham acquiesces in everything, while Job shakes his fist to the sky and questions the justice of God.

What makes the two stories remarkable, however, is that God's responses to Job and Abraham are nearly identical. God commends Abraham for his faithfulness and rewards him with the promises of the Covenant. But God also commends Job. After thundering at Job from the

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whirlwind for a while, God turns to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—the Comforters who have been attacking Job and defending God for most of the book—and says, “My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath.”²

The final words of God are quite remarkable, since nearly all of Job’s words have been directed as challenges to God. As Klitsner points out, this signals a dramatic shift in the divine perspective. “From the *Akedah* to the Book of Job,” she writes, God’s responses to the tormented hero have dramatically changed. While God congratulates Abraham for his unquestioning acceptance of the divine will, He commends Job for his insistent challenging of God’s actions.”³

Both Job and Abraham were tested by God, and both passed with flying colors—even though their responses could not have been more different. Abraham obeys unquestioningly, and Job complains vigorously. That God ultimately commended both approaches shows us that the Divine Mind is perhaps more open, and more willing to change, than three millennia of believers have understood.

2. Job 42:7.

3. Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*, xxiii.

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