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# The Gospel of John as Literature

Thomas F. Rogers

If I were challenged to name my favorite literary work, my thoughts would quite naturally turn to those remarkable novels by Russian authors—*The Brothers Karamazov*, *Anna Karenina*, or *Doctor Zhivago*—which, in my opinion, have no equal and even rank among the world's semisacred books. I would be hard pressed, however, to choose among the Russians, universal and profound as their writing is for me. If pressed, I would probably settle for *The Brothers Karamazov*, whose epigraph, incidentally, is from the Gospel of John.

Each in his unique way, our greatest writers and the life they depict cry out, often tragically, for that controlling, mediating, comforting, inspiring voice of one who can alone assure us that the universe is not cruelly indifferent to our circumstances and ultimate fate. Intentionally or not, their works point to the Savior. But there are other writings that emanate from the Savior and in which his very voice calls to us. (See D&C 18:34–36.) These of course are the scriptures. And if I were cast upon a desert island with only one book to sustain me for the rest of my days, I would want that book to be the Gospel of John. I would choose it because, beyond any other work I know, it is both a literary and a spiritual masterpiece, as lovely and compelling as any Sophoclean tragedy or the verse of our greatest poets, yet also a profound testimony to the divine mission of Jesus Christ.

Viewing the Gospel of John aesthetically, we can say, first of all, that it is richly poetic yet at the same time the simplest in its vocabulary of all the books of the New Testament. It is also a slim book. (Indeed, I note with some embarrassment that my commentary is easily as long as the Gospel itself.) John tells us in his last verse, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written” (21:25). If John knew more, why didn't he give us more? Did his

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stylus run dry? Did he lack the means to buy more ink and parchment? Possibly. But John's style, we are told, was essentially gnostic, which means he wished in cryptic fashion to allude to the gospel's deep mysteries without betraying their essence to the unreceptive or as yet uninitiated. These are the hallmarks of poetry too: brevity, compression of meaning, and obliqueness or indirection. In this, the only Gospel that so alludes to all it does not give us, so much is nevertheless given—intimated between the lines or in the form of pithy clues that, if we are sufficiently thoughtful and sensitive, conjure a wealth of feelings and associations. We are so engaged, given so much space to thinkingly, feelingly react expressly because the text is so understated. Less is truly more.

This work has such potency that if it were not scripture I'd be wary of its sway on me. Its precepts strike with the force of mathematical axioms whose truth we do not question. They are like compelling music, whose ethereal harmony and pure pitches convey distilled intimations of eternal truth and divine love. Like the very greatest verse or music, this Gospel provokes, in an almost magical way, a sense of awe, a tearfulness, a quiet euphoria, a ready intimacy with its subject, a "peak experience" (to borrow a term from the psychologist Maslow), a spiritual "high" or "fix." It makes us feel the way we sometimes feel in the presence of a masterpiece or in very holy places. Those who have beheld Michelangelo's *David* at the Academia in Florence or visited the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam or traveled to Christ's alleged tomb in Jerusalem or the Sacred Grove in New York know what I mean.

Like a certain kind of poetry, the Gospel of John is also basically "lyric." Like the most ecstatic love poem, it celebrates the goodness, truth, beauty, and above all love of God for his principal creations, you and me: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (3:16). The author openly acknowledges the forces of darkness and destruction, and the work's hero entertains no illusions regarding the threat they pose: "If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father" (15:24). But unlike the great tragedies or the finest realistic novels, the Gospel of John does not brood about the human condition. Nor does it condemn: "I judge no man" (8:15), Christ declares. And to the woman taken in adultery: "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (8:11). John earlier confirms this divine restraint by telling us, "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (3:17). Instead, the Savior affirms—and here without



coyness or the slightest indirection—"I love the Father" (14:31) and "the Father loveth the Son" (5:20) and then prays that his disciples may know the same love: "that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them" (17:26). The Gospel of John is in this sense the ultimate love lyric—a paean of universal affinity like no other. It affirms the Lord's full, unqualified acceptance of us all—something many a Christian has a hard time understanding, particularly about himself or herself.

Perhaps, where his immediate hearers are concerned, the chief mystery in John is the Lord's identity as the Son of God, the true Messiah and Savior of this world. It is this to which the book's striking metaphors largely have reference. And how many there are, how rich because of them, the work's imagery. John begins by enigmatically referring to Christ as "the word" (1:1), alluding, as the New Testament rarely does, to the Savior's premortal existence and his role as Creator. (In Greek the term is *Logos*, which bears an array of further associations, not the least of which are the concepts of *order* and also *intelligence*.) Then, in one of the Gospel's most pregnant and recurring images, John calls the Savior "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (1:9). How marvelously this metaphor ties in with all the connotations of vision or lack of it that later arise as Christ heals the blind man. The double entendre and the greater figurative significance of the following lines—so reminiscent of what Sophocles does with the very same image in *Oedipus Rex*—require no further comment, though they appear to be totally lost on the learned Pharisees. The blind man's parents, in their effort not to be implicated by the disapproving officials, also fail, it seems, to see the spiritual import and the tremendous irony in their very own words: "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind: But by what means he now seeth, we know not; or who hath opened his eyes, we know not" (9:20–21). In powerful though perhaps unwitting testimony, the blind man himself provides the key:

Then again called they the man that was blind, and said unto him,  
Give God the praise: we know that this man is a sinner.

He answered and said, Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one  
thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.

Then said they to him again, What did he to thee? how opened he  
thine eyes?

He answered them, I have told you already, and ye did not hear.  
(9:24–27)

If we question what is ultimately being conveyed by this intricate play of words, Christ lays the issue to rest just verses later:



And Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind.

And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also?

Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth. (9:39–41)

Across the broad spectrum of Indo-European languages, incidentally, there is a close correlation between the basic roots for “to see” and “to know.” Hence, what from Latin emerges into English words like “vista” and “vision” has clear analogues in the Slavic *videti* (to see) and *vedeti* (to know). (*Bear* in Russian is *medved* the “honey-knower.”) And in Sanskrit we have the oldest sacred texts, the *vedas*, and the science of wisdom, *vedanta*, with obviously the same root. For a fuller elucidation of this central image of light and vision in relation to Christ and the spirit of truth, reread the remarkable vision in Doctrine and Covenants 88—equally poetic, by the way, in its expression.

The other metaphors in the Gospel of John are similarly profound in what they tell us about Christ and his dominant role in the destiny of all mankind. In chapter 1 and many times thereafter, the Savior refers to himself as “the Son of Man.” (Even in 9:35, where the King James Version reads “the Son of God,” the Greek has “the Son of Man.”) I’ll have more to say about the import of that particular expression. In chapter 2, Christ is “the bridegroom” (2:9) and also refers to his body as a “temple” (2:19, 21). What profound implications there are in this striking notion that Christ’s body and ours are in the fact temples of the Spirit—a concept we find only in this one Gospel. In chapter 3, the Savior defines himself as the analogue of the brass serpent that Moses raised to preserve his people in the wilderness (3:14). In the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, he is the source of “water springing up into everlasting life” (4:14) while, when teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, he is the “living bread” (6:32, 35, and 51). As in other literary masterpieces, we encounter leitmotifs which unite images, lines, and the work itself with other texts. The symbolic tie to desert manna, to the unleavened bread of the Passover, and to the emblems of the sacrament is apparent. And there are further remarkable associations with this single image—the staff of life. As Malcolm Muggeridge suggests, “Bread, in his estimation, was to the body what the truth he proclaimed was to the soul. It had its own sanctity, and just for that reason could not be procured, as the Devil proposed, miraculously from stones.”<sup>1</sup>

Then consider this: after partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve were thereafter



prevented from partaking of the fruit of the tree of life (Moses 4:31), at least while in a mortal, sinful state. The tree of Lehi's vision, which is only finally reached by those who enduringly hold to the iron rod, is in turn clearly interpreted as symbolic of "the love of God" (1 Ne. 11:22), while the tree of faith described by Alma (or are they all to some extent the same tree?) is described as bearing a fruit, for those whose faith sufficiently matures, as "sweet above all that is sweet" and "white above all that is white" (Alma 32:42)—a fruit that fully fills and nourishes but that is only accessible when we satisfy certain conditions. Do you sense, as I do, a further correspondence between the constraints placed upon our access to the precious fruit of those several trees and the admonition given with respect to our partaking of the emblems of the atonement: that in doing so unworthily, we eat and drink "damnation" to our souls (1 Cor. 11:29; 3 Ne. 18:29). Again, the beverage we partake of in the sacrament service as much evokes the Savior's reference to himself as the source of "living water" as it does the sacrificial shedding of his blood. What a deftly woven network of allusions and cross-references! How compacted and seemingly endless the pattern of its imagery.

There are other metaphors that I can barely touch upon. George Tate has pointed out that for him "the feature that most distinguishes John from the other Gospels is the overt, spoken comparisons Christ makes between himself and details of the Exodus."<sup>2</sup> One such image appears in the announcement of John the Baptist, "Behold, the Lamb of God" (1:29), with its obvious allusion to the unblemished lamb prescribed for sacrifice during the Passover. When challenged by the Pharisees, Jesus meaningfully gives them one of the titles of the Old Testament Jehovah, "I Am" (8:58). (I doubt, incidentally, that many Christians perceive all that this response clearly implies about the overarching role of Christ in the history of mankind.) With equal significance he refers to himself in chapter 14 as "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6) while in chapter 10 he is the "door" to the sheepfold (10:9) and also the "good shepherd" (10:11), thus pointing to a further scriptural antecedent in the twenty-third Psalm. In chapter 11 he is "the resurrection and the life" (11:25) and in chapter 15 "the true vine," of which we are the "branches," fruitful or otherwise (15:1–6).

In a remarkably insightful discourse, Jeffrey Holland suggests a further reason for the use of such metaphors grounded in the familiar experiences of the Savior's listeners:

They . . . needed the uncommon invitation commonly extended to lift up their eyes to higher purposes. . . . Jesus spoke of *temples* and the people thought he spoke of temples. . . . He spoke of *bread* and

the people thought he spoke of bread. . . . [T]hese were not merely parables in the allegorical sense. . . . They were in every case an invitation to “lift up your eyes,” to see “heavenly things.” . . . They are also repeated manifestations of his willingness to meet people on their own terms, however limited that understanding, and there lead them on to higher ground.<sup>3</sup>

I have been writing of the Gospel of John as I might of a poem. Like the other three Gospels, it is also a drama with pathetic if not starkly tragic overtones in the depiction of its hero’s earthly demise. The Savior’s betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, and resolve to submit to the most painful of deaths, are, at this point of his story and as pure plot, as nobly tragic as anything any dramatic hero ever had to face. And in the fact that Christ’s predicament is occasioned by his own sense of principle and concern for others, there is a decidedly greater affinity with tragic heroines such as Antigone or Joan of Arc than with the victims of hubris and temperamental excess found in most Greek and Shakespearean tragedies.

The Gospel of John is also remarkable for the skill with which it characterizes various supernumeraries through dialogue. Think of the blind man’s gutless parents, so unwilling to acknowledge the miracle of their son’s healing and its obvious source. They must have been highly respectable citizens who valued their reputation above everything else. How vividly they contrast to the guileless Samaritan woman who, though she has lived with as many men as certain Hollywood starlets, hides nothing, readily acknowledges, “Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet” (4:19), and forthwith approaches her own people, urging them to “Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?” (4:29). The principal theme of these terse dialogues is, again, the discovery of who Jesus really is. These encounters embody all the tension and surprise, all the suspense and reversal of expectation of Sophocles’ “recognition scenes” that Aristotle commended to dramatists in the *Poetics*. Consider the lines from three by now familiar episodes—each, in the total unawareness and incredulity of its personae (“Who is this man?”), a gem of dramatic suspense. From the encounter with the woman of Samaria:

If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.

The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water?

Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle?



Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst. . . .

The woman saith unto him, I know that Messias cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things.

Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am he. (4:10–14, 25–26)

After all the indirection and verbal parrying, the simple matter-of-factness of that last line takes my breath away, as it must have the woman's. It also reminds me of perhaps the most compelling testimony recorded in modern times because, again, so terse, so direct, so unqualified and unpretentious—straight reportage without need for the slightest speculation:

And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

For we saw him, even on the right hand of God. (D&C 76:22–23)

There is a similar climactic directness in Jesus' words to the blind man:

Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God?

He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?

And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee. (9:35–37)

You may ask, who was the reporter who stood by and took down these exact words? I cannot tell you. But I feel, as I read such passages, it is the Master's voice I hear—yes, almost hear—in or between such lines. And I'm reminded of something I once heard the great literary scholar Rene Wellek say about the Christ of the Gospels to a group of "sophisticated" graduate students as we examined Dostoevsky's memorable "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor": "No man could ever duplicate that voice or that personality." Malcolm Muggeridge made a similar observation:

The Gospels convey no impression of how he spoke, the timbre of his voice, whether he used gestures and was given to declamation, though in their reports of what he said the style of his utterances is unmistakable. This was sharp, incisive, pungent, often ironic and never theatrical. He was clearly very observant, both of nature and of men; very aware of how society worked, of the forces of cupidity and aggressiveness which shaped human behavior. Hence his great gift for vivid imagery, and for telling a story; his parables are little masterpieces of narration, and, like the best of Tolstoy's short stories, easily comprehensible at all levels of understanding. As a communicator pure and simple, I should say that Jesus was supremely



effective—this quite apart from his special role and mission in the world. . . .

. . . No one can fail to be aware of the teller; behind the parables one senses a perceptive, often ironic, brilliantly creative mind. Unmistakably, they are the work of an artist rather than of a thinker, or, in the narrower meaning of the word, moralist.<sup>4</sup>

Part of that voice's force and potency comes again, like the gospel itself, from all that the Savior says or hints at in so few words. Dostoevsky uncannily captured this quality in the "Inquisitor," where, in medieval Seville, a bitter and condemning Spanish priest harangues his prisoner in a monologue pages long, then, when he stops, receives the most eloquent and irrefutable response imaginable: with not a single word but with a kiss, a kiss of understanding, forgiveness, and magnanimous compassion from the condemned prisoner for the man who has decreed his imminent destruction in the fires of the auto-da-fé. In a letter he wrote while in Siberian exile, Dostoevsky, like Wellek, commented on the singularity of the Savior's voice as he had encountered it in the scriptures:

I believe that there is nothing lovelier, deeper, more sympathetic, more rational, more manly, more perfect than the Savior; I say to myself with jealous love that not only is there no one else like him, but that there could be no one. I would even say more: If anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with truth.<sup>5</sup>

That voice is taut, suspenseful, intrinsically dramatic in its reply to the Pharisees as recorded by John:

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.

Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?

Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. (8:56–58)

That took the Pharisees' breath away also—enough for them to pick up stones and attempt to take his life right then and there.

Jesus engages in similar repartee, deftly placing the burden of self-justification upon his accusers, even when he is seized by the authorities: "Jesus therefore, knowing all things that should come upon him, went forth, and said unto them, Whom seek ye? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus saith unto them, I am he" (18:4–5). Again before Caiaphas (this in the account by Matthew), in response to the high priest's demand, "tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God": "Thou hast said" (Matt. 26:63–64). And yet again before Pilate: "Pilate therefore

said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king" (John 18:37). That is indeed another of the Savior's appellations, isn't it—"King of the Jews"? Note with what further dramatic irony—far surpassing even the comprehension of its instigator, Pilate—a sign to that effect is placed on the cross above Christ's head, legitimizing over the objection of his enemies his just claim to that title. And similarly the scarlet robe, crown of thorns, and reed scepter with which the Roman soldiers adorn him. Here we are truly dealing with the kind of ironic confusion of mock appearances with reality that we have come to expect in the work of certain twentieth-century absurdist playwrights.

In examining the text's overall narrative structure, we encounter another effect in common with the best dramatic scripts. Episodic as are all the Gospels, we reach a point in John where the pace of events nevertheless radically changes. In a scene whose action becomes so retarded that time seems to stand still—as it does during Shakespeare's soliloquies, certain operatic arias, or very intimate and usually very climactic cinematic moments when the camera slowly moves to a long, sustained close-up—the Gospel of John similarly concentrates on the Savior's discourse to the Apostles just prior to his arrest. This sermon, which in its significance rivals and beautifully complements that delivered on the mount in the Gospel of Matthew, extends over five chapters and treats subjects not dealt with in any other account: the sending of the Comforter and with him the Lord's peace; the striking parable of the vine and the branches; the great high priestly prayer invoking divine unity and love; and, at the outset, what must be an especially sacred ordinance—the washing of the disciples' feet. Again a visible gesture but fully articulate in all it teaches about the Savior's unsurpassed humility and love for others. There must be a reason why John, of all the evangelists, was privy to that occasion and alone recorded it.

Others could tell you far more about the nuances of the Gospel's original Greek. (One wonders what we may be missing because we can't have the Savior's words in Aramaic—or, for that matter, Nephi's in Reformed Egyptian.) It was exciting for me to learn that the root meaning of our word *deacon* is simply "servant," of *angel* "messenger," that *pneumatic* derives from the Greek for "spirit," and *martyr* means "to witness." (What heroic associations those two bring together: "witness" and "martyr.") As with all fine writing, the exact choice of words and their subtle connotations are very important and sometimes crucial. Here's just one example: in a scripture familiar to all returned missionaries—"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus



Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3)—the form of the verb *know* is present subjunctive, which makes the recommended action, to “know” God, a process and an ongoing requirement rather than a single completed act. Thus salvation is *not* just a matter of instant conversion, but a process of enduring and ever renewing our acquaintance with the Lord until we draw our very last mortal breath.

As much as I value the literary qualities I have been discussing, it is the fundamental themes of the Gospel of John that finally persuade me to prefer it to any other text. Christ is characterized in chapter 1 with the attributes of “grace and truth” (1:14) in the King James version. The Greek word for *grace* has a still broader range of significance, however. It also stands for divine or spiritual love. When you think about it, these two qualities, love and truth, sum up all the other virtues. Many verses in the Gospel of John affirm to what extent Christ taught them and was their exemplar: “This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you” (15:12); “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (8:32); “And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth” (17:19).

Another interesting point that Christ stresses time and time again, particularly in the Gospel of John, is that in all he says and does he defers to the Father: “I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not my own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (5:30); “He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him” (7:18). With what special concern he gives us this touchstone to his own credentials and, by extension, ours too when we act in his name. Then there is that plea for unity in his great intercessory or high priestly prayer, which has to be the spiritual high moment in this or any other Gospel. (How fittingly—and how ironically—it occurs just prior to the divisive and conspiratorial playing out of his betrayal, arrest, trial, and execution.)

There is a further important corollary, I believe, to the Savior’s plea “that they may be one, even as we are one” (17:22). That is the sense of joyful fulfillment to which, along with Deity, mankind is potentially heir: “that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together” (4:36). Already in that pregnant first chapter, the evangelist asserts, “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God” (1:12). And elsewhere: “And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one” (17:22); “I ascend unto



my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (20:17). Not only is it clear from the foregoing verses that the Father and Son are distinct personages, but we too are time and again invited to partake of all they enjoy. (Yet, need I remind you, that for saying so, we are viewed by many as spurious or even non-Christians?) There are further profound implications in the Lord's striking term of self-address, so frequently invoked in this particular scripture: "the Son of Man." I find here an undeniable suggestion that God the Father is indeed a Man (though written with a capital "M"): a perfect Man. The further implication is surely that we, too, being men and women, are at least potentially heir to the same divinity and perfection. This recurring thesis is, to my mind, the philosophical apotheosis of the Gospel of John and its greatest so-called "mystery." Sadly, the glorious import of this very clear teaching tends to be overlooked or even denied by the majority of men, who must think so little of themselves that they are unwilling to believe what the Lord has told them about their own divine nature—or to live for its full realization.

The Savior's discourse on the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John is surely the most extensive in all scripture. Lest we become impatient and weary when the Spirit seems to elude us, we should all ponder Christ's statement, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (3:8). And we should keep in mind the various blessings that he has promised us, through the Spirit, if we keep his commandments: comfort, discernment of truth, enlightenment, remembrance, and peace that passeth all understanding (14:16–27). In his comments on the man born blind, the Savior also gives us a very important answer that separates his doctrine from all the fatalistic or deterministic theologies and -isms of this world. When even his disciples wondered, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (9:2), the Savior's singular reply was, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (9:3). Still later he reaffirmed, "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (14:13). (Lest we forget, this is again a glory they wish to share with all of us.) There is another interesting set of statements which, on the surface, seem terribly discriminating: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (6:44); and "I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine" (17:9). Calvin must have cherished these verses, but he failed to see in them that impersonal statement of natural law to which even the Lord is



bound. Surely those who fail to qualify as the Lord's do so by their own choice. As another verse so forcefully puts it, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved" (3:19–20).

Finally, there is the Lord's sublime plea for our sanctification in his great prayer to the Father, which ties this scripture to the final verses of the Book of Mormon. What does it mean to be sanctified? Do we sufficiently ponder that expression? A key to how we must go about doing so is provided in another striking metaphor, again in John, in that very verse which Dostoevsky chose as epigraph to his great masterpiece: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (12:24).

There is a further tie to both the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price, dealing, again, with an aspect of the Savior's personality that transcends mere words. First, there is the incident in a vision, recorded in Jacob, in which "the Lord of the vineyard wept, and said unto the servant: What could I have done more for my vineyard?" (Jacob 5:41). (Incidentally, this represents a different application of horticultural imagery from that which occurs in the New Testament.) After addressing the multitude on the American continent, the Savior "wept, and the multitude bare record of it, and he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them. And when he had done this he wept again" (3 Ne. 17:21–22). It is interesting that in the description of Christ's emotional state the account in 3 Nephi differs markedly from the accounts of his sermons in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If John had included an account of the Sermon on the Mount, I would expect it to resemble 3 Nephi in what makes that version so distinctive. Another account of the Lord's weeping occurs in chapter 7 of the Book of Moses. Speaking with Enoch several millennia before his mortal descent upon the earth, the Lord declared, "Behold, I am God; Man of Holiness is my name; Man of Counsel is my name; and Endless and Eternal is my name, also" (Moses 7:35). And then:

The God of Heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?

. . . How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?

. . . [H]ow is it thou canst weep?

The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency;

And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood. (Moses 7:28–29, 31–33)

How profoundly this elucidates the reason why Christ would weep while blessing the children of the Nephites—sensing, despite their innocence, a like potential for enmity, contention, and consequent affliction. A few verses later we are told that the Lord

told Enoch all the doings of the children of men; wherefore Enoch knew, and looked upon their wickedness, and their misery, and wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook. (Moses 7:41)

How aptly all of this pertains to Alma's explanation of the atonement—"that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh" (Alma 7:12)—and his characterization of true disciples as "willing to mourn with those that mourn . . . and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:9). Through the gift of compassionate tears, God enters the hearts of men, and men in turn unite, in affinity and in purpose, with the Divine.

The account in John of the Savior's reaction to Mary's grief prior to the raising of Lazarus similarly underscores that profound compassion that finally, as much as all he ever said, endears him to us and persuades us that, with all our fallibility, he truly understands and still stands by us:

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled,

And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see.

Jesus wept.

Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him! (11:33–36)

The Savior's tears, described, except as already noted, nowhere else in scripture, are the most sublime token of his matchless love. To my knowledge, there are no passages in the world's many other sacred writings that so poignantly convey God's unfathomed love for men, his constant other-directed tenderness and sensitivity, and, most moving of all, the grief occasioned by his paternal compassion—so human, yet so divine.



At this point aesthetic principles may no longer apply. Nevertheless, in common with only the greatest literary, musical, and visual masterpieces, such scripture touches our hearts and has its way with us in a manner that critical analysis cannot fully account for but that cannot be forgotten and leaves us never again quite the same.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus: The Man Who Lives* (Glasgow: Wm. Collins, 1981), 53.

<sup>2</sup>George Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1981), 256.

<sup>3</sup>Jeffrey R. Holland, "Lift Up Your Eyes," *Ensign* 13 (July 1983): 12–13.

<sup>4</sup>Muggeridge, *Jesus*, 43–44, 64.

<sup>5</sup>F. M. Dostoevsky to Mme N. D. Fonvisin, Omsk, March 1854, in *Letters of F. M. Dostoevsky*, trans. Ethel Colburn Mayne (New York: Horizon Press, 1961), 71.