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## “Whoso Is Enlightened . . . Shall Obtain Benefit”: The Literary Art of the Apocrypha

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# 5

## “Whoso Is Enlightened . . . Shall Obtain Benefit”: The Literary Art of the Apocrypha

Steven C. Walker

As an enthusiastic reader of the Apocrypha, I have been surprised to find that Mormons don't read it much. My survey at no less enlightened a place than Brigham Young University indicated that less than 2 percent of us have read the Apocrypha, fewer than one in four have read *anything* in it, and only half of us are convinced we *should* read it. Responses to my “What do you think of the Apocrypha?” question tended toward hesitation tinged with hostility—and unfamiliarity: “One has to be careful what he accepts as truth. Much of the Apocrypha is not inspired—the Song of Solomon, for instance.” Yet reactions from those who had read the book were in direct antithesis to that reluctance: “There are things in the Apocrypha,” wrote one student, “that make my soul vibrate.”

There are things in the Apocrypha that play my soul like a harp. I am persuaded, and hope to persuade you, that the Apoc-

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rypha is good reading. I hope that we might, by looking at the Apocrypha close up, demonstrate to ourselves the wisdom of Doctrine and Covenants 91:5 about the Apocrypha: “Whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom.” It would be a sad loss to us if we were to miss that benefit because of the Protestant protestation “A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible” (2 Nephi 29:3), tempting though that excuse may be for us who have not only a Bible but a Book of Mormon and a Doctrine and Covenants and a Pearl of Great Price and an *Ensign* constantly multiplying up-to-the-minute words of living prophets.

Much in the Apocrypha is reading so good it may warrant inclusion in the Bible. A delightful old legend dramatizing that possibility sounds apocryphal enough to belong in a discussion of the Apocrypha. It is said that translators of an early Bible version had difficulty determining whether certain scrolls should be included in or excluded from the canon. So, the story goes, the learned and devout translators cleverly solved the problem by leaving the scrolls on end overnight, omitting from the canon all those that had tipped over by morning. The biblical canon is shaky enough to make me share translator Edgar J. Goodspeed’s conviction “that the Wisdom of Solomon and Baruch are at least as useful for religious instruction as Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, that if Esther is worthy of inclusion in the canon so is Judith also, that the Books of Maccabees are as deserving as Chronicles and Ecclesiasticus as Proverbs.”<sup>1</sup>

The Apocrypha is anything but competition for the Bible. As the additions to Esther demonstrate—making as they do no sense whatever unless interspersed throughout the biblical Esther—the Apocrypha is a supplement to the Bible, a sort of Bible bonus. If you like Proverbs, you can triple the number of biblical proverbs by adding to them Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon. If you’ve wondered what happens after Malachi, the books of the Maccabees provide an intriguing extension of the history between Old and New Testament. If you like Daniel, you’ll love the History of Susanna. If you like anything at all in the Old Testament, you’ll like the Prayer of Manasses, composed entirely of phrases lifted from Old Testament sources. The Douay Version

demonstrates nicely how this Apocrypha we look upon as an isolated text can snuggle comfortably into the canonical Bible.

The best way to appreciate the biblical quality of the Apocrypha, the simplest way to discover how good it is as reading, is to read it. The History of Susanna suggests itself as an ideal introduction to the Apocrypha by that most compelling of literary qualities, brevity—it possesses the ultimate literary virtue of being the shortest of the books of the Apocrypha. If you've never met Susanna, you'll want to read her history. If you have read it, you'll be likelier still to want to read it. But even if you've never set eyes on the Apocrypha, you're likely to know the story:

We meet immediately in the second verse of the History of Susanna the heroine, the lovely Susanna, “a very fair woman, and one that feared the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> The parents of this paragon, we discover in verse 3, are “righteous,” and Joachim her husband “honorable” in circumstances as idyllic as those of the book of Ruth. Enter, in verse 5, a pair of wicked judges to darken the horizons of that happy home and thicken the plot. These legal parasites “kept much” at Joachim’s home, hanging around the folks with money, with an eye out for a fast buck, apparently public servants of the selfless sort that nowadays chase ambulances—“all that had any suits in law came unto them” (verse 6).

“Now,” in verse 7,

when the people departed away at noon, Susanna went into her husband’s garden to walk. And the two elders saw her going in every day, and walking; so that their lust was inflamed toward her. And they perverted their own mind, and turned away their eyes, that they might not look unto heaven, nor remember just judgments. And albeit they both were wounded with her love, yet durst not one shew another his grief. For they were ashamed (8–11).

But they keep a close eye on Susanna (12). The lawyers try to get rid of each other with a “See you later; I’ve got to go to lunch” (13). Sneaking back separately in verse 14, they run into each other in Susanna’s garden—I like to think run into each other literally, in a Laurel-and-Hardy backing around a bush and bumping, with perhaps a “Fancy meeting you here,” a “This is an unexpected pleasure.” Caught redhanded—and redfaced—in

that verse 14, they plot to catch Susanna alone. In verse 15 they hide in the bushes, Tweedledum and Tweedledee peeping Toms, watching Susanna prepare for her bath. Susanna, modest beyond all Babylonian expectations, sends away her personal maids so she can bathe in privacy, to our dismay by her very virtue providing opportunity for the elders to leap out of hiding to try to coerce her, in verse 20, to "lie with us." They threaten to ruin her reputation if she refuses—no light threat, since that could get her stoned for adultery.

"Then," in verse 22, "Susanna sighed, and said, I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death unto me: and if I do it not, I cannot escape your hands." Determining that death is preferable to the advances of these elders, she screams. They scream. Servants come running to "see what was done unto her" (25). Susanna's personal servants are confused by the elders' accusation, and that doesn't augur well for the ensuing court scene. Self-protectively, vengefully, lustfully, arrogantly, in Joachim's very house, the elders indict Susanna.

Now Susanna was a very delicate woman, and beauteous to behold. And these wicked men commanded to uncover her face (for she [like any decent Babylonian Jewess] was covered) that they might be filled with her beauty. Therefore her friends and all that saw her wept. Then the two elders stood up in the midst of the people, and laid their hands upon her head. And she weeping looked up toward heaven: for her heart trusted in the Lord (31–35).

The elders tell their lying tale, and swear to it. Because they are respected elders and judges, as verse 41 wryly stresses, the assembly on their word condemns Susanna to death. Susanna prays with admirable firmness in these bleak circumstances, and even more admirable realism. In verse 44, "the Lord hear[s] her voice" and sends, just as she is being "led to be put to death," a rescuer.

Daniel captures the immediate attention and no doubt the curiosity of Susanna's executioners by shouting: "I am clear from the blood of this woman" (46). Insisting the case has not been properly tried, he reconvenes the court, and, in a Solomon-like or even Perry Mason-like move, interrogates the principal

witnesses separately. He badgers them splendidly: “So when they were put asunder one from another, he called one of them, and said unto him, O thou that art waxen old in wickedness, now thy sins which thou hast committed aforetime are come to light” (52). To the key question, “Where was the alleged deed done?” the judge answers, “Under a mastick tree” (54). His unfortunate companion in lust, similarly interrogated, answers in verse 58 dissimilarly: “Under an holm tree.”

Thus the clever Daniel, as verse 61 exults, convicts the elders of false witness by their own false-witnessing mouths. So in verse 62, “according to the law of Moses they did unto them in such sort as they maliciously intended to do to their neighbour: and they put them to death.” And everyone praised Susanna, “because there was no dishonesty found in her” (63). Such a case, of course, made young Daniel’s reputation, which may be why this record of it gets placed as a preface to the book of Daniel in the Catholic Bible.

The History of Susanna is a good story, “good” not only in the moral but in the aesthetic sense—not only worth summarizing the moral of, but worth reading, even relishing. But the story is so unassuming that modern readers, jaded by literary sophistication, may be embarrassed to get caught up in so apparently transparent a tale. We may feel this to be the kind of story that might be all right to read to our children, but not the sort of thing in which we ought to indulge ourselves. We may fear we would be responding sentimentally to melodramatic characters too little detailed were we to feel real concern for Susanna, genuine outrage at the elders.

But there may be more to this modest tale, itself as self-effacing as Susanna, than immediately meets the eye. There may be substance enough here that “whoso is enlightened . . . might obtain benefit” (D&C 91:5). The story is admirably compact. The insight we would expect to be laid out in detail in a modern short story is concentrated in this brief history in the tiniest literary touches. The title typifies the process: “The History of Susanna”—short “history,” this, a *Reader’s Digest* condensed version. A single incident is made to tell Susanna’s entire story,

one anecdote designed to bespeak the total significance of her life. That kind of concentration is typical of this artful little tale, wherein what seems little is shown to mean much.

Susanna herself may be as compelling a characterization as any in literature. Certainly artists have paid wide tribute to her influence upon the culture. Veronese and Rembrandt painted two versions each of “Susanna and the Elders”; Tintoretto did four. Handel composed an oratorio *Susanna*. The tale worked itself into popular culture by the Middle Ages in several such folk ballads as “The Pistill [Epistle] of Susan,” and the Elizabethans celebrated Susanna in poems like “The Constancy of Susanna.” Shakespeare named his eldest child Susanna.

Nor has that high cultural visibility dimmed in our day. As up-to-the-moment a poet as Wallace Stevens is poetically fascinated by those lustful elders whose “thin blood” pulses “pizzicati of Hosanna” after Susanna’s everlasting loveliness: “Now, in its immortality, it plays / On the clear viol of her memory, / And makes a constant sacrament of praise.”<sup>3</sup> On more popular fronts, Leonard Cohen’s lyrics to his 1960s hit, “Suzanne,” made Susanna immortal among the flower children:

And you want to travel with her.  
And you want to travel blind,  
And you know that she can trust you  
'Cause you've touched her perfect body  
With your mind.

That’s far-reaching influence for half a dozen descriptive phrases from a minute book in an obscure corner of an uncanonical collection—enough influence to make a really clever observer suspect there may be more to Susanna than meets the eye.

Not that what meets the eye is not striking. A Hollywood version of this “very fair” woman (verse 2), this “delicate woman, and beauteous to behold” (31) would require a Mia Farrow or even a Jessica Lange. Delicate hints of sensuality—cool water on a “hot” (15) day, “oil and washing balls” (17)—are enough in this atmosphere of elderly “lust” (8) to titillate imagination and sensitize us to Susanna’s allure. The understatement amplifies the passion; this graceful prose moves us to the climactic scene at the bath by a path that makes it possible for us

to appreciate the prurience of the elders hiding in Susanna's garden in verse 16: "And there was no body there save the two elders, that had hid themselves, and watched her. Then she said to her maids"—no doubt in a Candace Bergen sort of voice—"Bring me oil and washing balls, and shut the garden doors, that I may wash me" (17).

That is good writing, not only because of the tactfulness with which it portrays delicate matters, but because of the intensity. The text makes much of little: without even seeing the bathing scene we feel the impact of it. And Susanna is more than sensuous, more than just another pretty body. She is passive in contrast with such legendary heroines as Judith or Jael or Joan of Arc, and her very understatedness may make her the ultimate heroine both for second century B.C. Jews and for us—Susanna's passive resistance in verse 23 anticipates Mahatma Gandhi's and Martin Luther King's: "It is better for me to fall into your hands, and not do it, than to sin in the sight of the Lord."

*Susanna*—Hebrew *Shoshanna*—means "lily." Even in such apparently simple imagery the History of Susanna invites complex insights. The lily, a traditional symbol for purity, also connotes Susanna's loveliness, and that slight ambiguity of the image encourages questions: Does beauty complement or complicate the goodness of "this very fair woman, and one that feared the Lord"(2)? Does that pointed alliteration—"fair woman" that "feared the Lord"—point to parallel or to opposition between her piety and her provocative appearance? Can Susanna be both beautiful and good?

The elders obviously think not. We can see in their reacting to Susanna as if her beauty is only skin deep something of why rapists justify their acts to themselves on grounds they were seduced; to people of materialistic perspective, the surface is all—beauty is inherently seductive when you assume it exists only to be used. But for us Susanna is more than the elders can see—not only sensuous but spiritual. Her loveliness magnifies her goodness. We see Susanna not as a sex object, but as virtue embodied in beauty.

Setting is as concisely drawn in the History of Susanna as character, and as rich in significance. The entire action of the



story takes place in a garden. In that "fair garden" (4) where everyone "fear[s] the Lord" (2) and is "righteous" (3) and "honorable" (4), we see Susanna walking as innocently as Eve in *Paradise Lost*, as meditatively as God "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" in Eden (Genesis 3:8). Into that innocent garden, right on Genesis cue, slithers "ancient . . . wickedness" (5). The Garden of Eden implication is submerged, present by hint only, but we are missing emphatic subliminal hisses if we fail to see the judges as somewhat snaky, and Susanna in that garden as something of a flower ripe to be plucked.

Narrative is even more carefully understated in the story than setting and image and character. Consider, for example, a single narrative detail, at first glance trivial—the placing of the elders' hands on Susanna's head in verse 34: "Then the two elders stood up in the midst of the people, and laid their hands upon her head." That brief ceremony, incidental as it seems, like all narrative incident in the story vibrates implications throughout the History of Susanna at many levels.

The laying of hands upon the head is a levitical legal formality, customary in ancient Jewish courts. But it is normally a ritual of judgment, a sign of final witness of worthiness of death, as in Leviticus 24:14: "Bring forth him that hath cursed without the camp; and let all that heard him lay their hands upon his head, and let all the congregation stone him." There may be in the timing of the elders' laying on of hands a hint of a stacked jury, of decision arrived at before examination; and certainly there is in it redflagging of the judges' illegal doubling in the case as prime—in fact, sole—witnesses.

At a deeper level, the act implies Susanna's innocence. Sacrificial animals had hands laid on their heads to transfer to them the offerer's sins: "And he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (Leviticus 1:4). Susanna is going like a lamb to the slaughter; the sins of the elders are being projected upon her. That mirroring of the psychological reality of the situation suggests at a still deeper level the horror of the act. This holy ordinance, intended for sacred blessing, is made horrific by the elders' use of it not for spiritual contact but for sensual: the

elders by this blasphemous stratagem are indulging their lust to touch Susanna.

The pious perversion in that laying of their hands upon her head reaches even deeper; it may anticipate and paradigm the formal movement of the entire tale. The hands of these ostensibly upstanding elders who rise “up in the midst of the people” (34) move downward in the direction of the baseness of their desires and of their doom. “Laid” upon Susanna’s head, the elders’ own hands indicate the direction of their downfall. Susanna’s hopes, conversely, transcend even the earthiness of this situation: “And she weeping looked up toward heaven: for her heart trusted in the Lord” (36). Susanna looks up; the elders look down—she will rise; they will fall.

Susanna turns the tables on the elders. The act they intended sensually she receives spiritually, so that her goodness of heart frustrates the elders’ evil intent. That *as-ye-do-so-shall-it-be-done-unto-you* irony works everywhere in this story of the temptress tempted, the deceivers deceived, the judges judged. The elders’ removal of Susanna’s veil to expose this woman so modest she bathes without maids prefigures the more serious exposure of judges bound to be “ashamed” (11). That pattern of reversals prepares us to feel in our bones and the bones of the story that the elders’ legal power play will pull into play, with *he-that-liveth-by-the-law-shall-die-by-the-law* inevitability, powers higher than theirs.

The elders’ humbling of Susanna’s head with their hands anticipates their own humbling in surprisingly precise ways—much of hands and heads in the story anticipates and echoes that single act. Susanna worries in verse 22, “I cannot escape your hands,” and in 23, “it is better for me to fall into your hands.” When Daniel pronounces upon the elders their doom, he does it in words which directly recall that perverse handling of Susanna’s head: “Thou hast lied against thine own head” (55). That stressing of hands and heads may be part of the reason that executions in this story seem not to be traditional stonings, but beheadings.

I am suggesting that the History of Susanna is significant literature because everything in it signifies: the tiniest incident, the most minor image, the slightest touch of characterization

means, and means profoundly—becomes, not only metaphorically but literally, a matter of life and death. Every word matters. And the words have a way of projecting actuality.

When the elders feel themselves “wounded” by their love of Susanna (10), we may chuckle at the overstatement of the pain of pangs of lust. But at the same time we sense ominous foreshadowing: they will indeed be “wounded” because of their love. Nor is that the only instance of crescendo from metaphor to actuality in the story. The “blood” in Daniel’s “I am clear from the blood of this woman” (46) is hypothetical, legalistic blood. But the “blood” when later “they put them to death” (62) flows. That sort of movement of mere words toward actualization occurs again and again: Susanna says in verse 22 that the elders’ threat “is death” to her; by verse 45 she is “being led to be put to death.” Daniel’s legal admonition in verse 53, “shalt thou not slay,” leads to the very definite slaying in verse 59 where “the angel of God waiteth with the sword to cut thee in two, that he may destroy you.”

Again and again in the story, theoretical death—the sort of dying that happens to other people—approaches actual death—the sort we ourselves must personally, past all theoretical dying, ultimately face. That deepening seriousness of the story, with its incremental accumulation toward realism, plucks at the strings of life with an intensity that sets up compelling resonances. Out of such statements as “the innocent and righteous shalt thou not slay” come prolonged echoes of “thou shalt not slay.” This unassuming little narrative may even be suggesting that our assumptions about what is true need constant testing against reality because those assumptions shape our reality.

Lest you fear we’re imposing too much on this innocent tale, let me point out that we are reading it on its own terms. Words matter deeply in this story. Dialogue is carefully ordered, the speeches and shouts and prayers and legalistic jargon and even sighs and quiet orders to servants made to contribute profoundly to suspense and significance. The History of Susanna is a history, not a drama—a verbal incident. Nothing much really happens, though much is talked about. The elders discuss rather than seduce, plan and proposition rather than pounce upon Susanna.

Susanna's response, in direct contrast to Joseph's vigorous reaction to Potiphar's wife, is not flight, but debate with herself. Even when she determines what to do, what she does is not to push the elders in the pool nor beat them about the head with her towel, but to call out "with a loud voice" (24). The loudness of Susanna's voice is about as active as the action, amidst conversations and speeches and court proceedings, gets.

Maybe all that talk is saying something. Maybe at a certain level this carefully worded story is examining how words mean. Sophisticated a perspective as that is for the most up-to-date modern fiction to investigate, I suspect the History of Susanna is doing just that. The text is at great pains to make us aware not only that the elders are breaking the ninth commandment, but that their words do not accord with reality. When the elders "say" in verse 13 and verse 20 and verse 36, they invariably lie. Even when they proposition Susanna to "consent," they ask her to "lie with us" (20). No wonder "they are ashamed to declare" (11). The elders' words are barren of meaning—they produce no results because they are unrelated to reality.

In marked contrast, when Susanna speaks, people listen. Much is made of how promptly in verse 18 Susanna's maids "did as she bade them," going quickly to "fetch the things that she had commanded." Even more is made of the fact that when Susanna prayed "the Lord heard her voice" (44). Susanna countermands the elders' official witness in verse 40—"these things we do testify"—with "I never did such things" (43), echoing that beautifully ambiguous response of the servants to accusations about Susanna's virtue: "there was never such a report made of Susanna" (27)—a sort of early Jewish "you don't say," with stress on the probability that even if you do, we won't hear of such a thing. In this context of verbal significance highlighted by verbal illusion, the people are asking more than Daniel's motivations when they inquire in verse 47: "What mean these words that thou hast spoken?"

In that kind of atmosphere, where words are supercharged with meaning, a single term may serve to tell the entire tale: *witness*, for example. There is suggestion at the deepest levels of the story that the History of Susanna is a story in part about wit-

nessing, and the tragedy of false witnessing—witnessing not only in the sense of testifying, but also in the sense of seeing.

The word recurs, always in its negative form—*false witness*—as a litany in verses 43, 49, 61—"false witness," "false witness," "false witness." Ramified by such synonymous terms as unjust judgment (9, 53), evil report (27), slanderous testimony (40), and outright "lie" (55, 59), that litany urges us by negative implication to *witness*—to see wholly, to speak truly. The seeing and the speaking are interconnected, insists the History of Susanna; Hebrew *seers* declare deepest truth because they see most deeply. Neither the elders nor the assembly nor any of us can speak truly until we have seen clearly.

Clear vision is not likely for the elders; they are doomed to see only what their narrow materialistic perspective permits. Susanna to the elders can never be *beauteous*, but only "beauteous to behold" (31): "The two elders saw her . . . so that their lust was inflamed toward her" (8). Cross-examining the elders, Daniel wonders, as we wonder, "if thou hast seen her" (54). Given their limited line of vision, no matter how long "they watched diligently . . . to see" (12), no matter how intensely "they watched a fit time" (15), they are bound to see Susanna reductively. That way of seeing pervades their entire perspective: "And they perverted their own mind and turned away their eyes, that they might not look unto heaven" (9).

Susanna, in clear-eyed contrast in verse 35, even with her eyes clouded by weeping, manages to look "up toward heaven." She witnesses inclusively; they witness with the blinders of atheism. She "trusted in the Lord"; they didn't so much as trust each other. The elders project, seeing the world in their own image. When in verse 38 the elders testify of "seeing this wickedness," that is indeed all they see. "No man can see us," they try to persuade Susanna in verse 20; certainly they cannot see themselves. Susanna sees it differently; she prays in verse 42 to a God who sees all, who "knowest the secrets."

The words of Susanna and the elders recall another apocryphal text, from Ecclesiasticus:

Who seeth me?  
I am compassed about with darkness,

the walls cover me,  
 and no body seeth me;  
 what need I to fear?  
 the Most High will not remember my sins.  
 Such a man only heareth the eyes of men,  
 and knoweth not that the eyes of the Lord  
 are ten thousand times brighter than the sun,  
 beholding all the ways of men,  
 and considering the most secret parts. (23:18–19.)

And that is where I think the witness of the History of Susanna ultimately takes us—into our own “most secret parts.” The elders aren’t the only ones in Susanna’s neighborhood whose vision is partial. Susanna’s personal servants, who ought to have known better, are humiliated and confused by the elders’ testimony (27). Even the learned and devout council fails at first to see what Susanna is really made of. Surely those damaging partial visions illuminate a strong moral responsibility for us, having eyes, to see. Truth might spring up anywhere, as unexpectedly as Daniel, for those who look for it. And accessibility to truth may be very much an individual matter. Pairs of elders, even entire assemblies, may not perceive truth as clearly as an individual Daniel. Pairs of maids, even entire families, may not apprehend the way things really are as astutely as an isolated Susanna. Truth may appear most readily to individuals wont to taking meditative walks alone like Susanna, lone rangers striding into town from out of lonely nowheres like Daniel, readers reading such out-of-the-way texts as the Apocrypha.

We have not begun to hint at the rich ramifications of the History of Susanna. We could lift veils all day long and still not disturb Susanna’s essential modesty. Daniel means “God has judged,” yet we haven’t even glanced at the way the story is framed by reference to the law of Moses in the third verse and the third-to-last verse, and makes much throughout of legalistic considerations—sometimes with great fun, as when the two lawyers, running into each other in the compromising circumstance of Susanna’s backyard, cross-examine each other. We have studiously avoided the consideration that many scholars see the history as “a polemical pamphlet of the Pharisees attacking the Sadducees for their laxity in court procedure,” in which Phari-

sees “advocated greater strictness in cross-examining witnesses and the death penalty for false witness.”<sup>4</sup>

We haven’t even wondered about the story as drama, with those nicely balanced acts—the rape-attempt exposition in verses 1 through 27, the kangaroo-court complication in 28 through 41, the denouement of the elders’ comeuppance in 42 through 63. We haven’t even considered it as allegory, though third-century Roman bishop Hippolytus saw Susanna as “a type prefiguring the Church; Joakim her husband prefigures the Messiah.”<sup>5</sup> We haven’t so much as glanced at the story as *bildungsroman*, with its unsettling of the older generation by the younger—that “young youth” (45) Daniel pitted against the seasoned wiles of those “ancient” (5) elders. We have not come close to intimating its possibilities as a suspense story, though Bruce M. Metzger sees it “among the earliest detective stories ever written.”<sup>6</sup>

We have carefully ignored the echoes of the Babylonian myth in which two elders are seduced by the goddess of love.<sup>7</sup> We have assiduously avoided the interpretation of folklorists who view it as another version of the motif of the chaste wife condemned to death on the word of a rejected suitor.<sup>8</sup> We have not so much as allowed to cross our minds the possibility that the History of Susanna glosses the Genesis account of Joseph, in the process providing an early feminist statement, though St. Chrysostom of Constantinople sees Susanna as “a glorious example to women of all times. Susanna endured a severe fight, more severe than that of Joseph. He, a man, contended with one woman; but Susanna, a woman, had to contend with two men.”<sup>9</sup> We haven’t nodded in the general direction of the likelihood that the story may be Haggadic commentary on Jeremiah 29:21–23.<sup>10</sup> We have not begun to tap the literary riches of the History of Susanna, let alone the Apocrypha as a whole.

Careful readers conclude that much of the Bible is even better at the sort of concentration I’ve been admiring than the History of Susanna. But the Apocrypha, for the very reason that it is less well known to us, may be more literarily accessible. We have a hard time seeing the human nuance in Abraham or Moses or Elijah because they have become for us larger-than-life embodiments of ideals, losing in the process much of their human iden-

tity. We tend to read biblical characters as we have read them since our first Sunday School class—as ideals: Gideon equals courage, Samson equals strength, Job equals—of all things—patience. The Apocrypha has a fresher chance to get us to glimpse the real-life complexities behind artfully reticent scriptural details.

What goes for Susanna goes double—fourteen times, to be precise—for the Apocrypha as a whole. I like this minor tale, but have discussed it not because it is best, but because it is shortest. My students like Judith better. Mary Ellen Chase finds Tobit “the most delightful” of the stories.<sup>11</sup> Edgar J. Goodspeed, with many other readers, places “Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus . . . among the masterpieces of the Jewish sages.”<sup>12</sup> And we may not have been seeing even Susanna at her best; literary experts generally consider the King James Version, which we have been reading, among the least graceful of the translations of the Apocrypha.

It may be appropriate to close this attempt to open up the possibilities of the Apocrypha as literature with the Apocrypha’s own artful closing:

And if I have done well, and as is fitting the story, it is that which I desired: but if slenderly and meanly, it is that which I could attain unto. For as it is hurtful to drink wine or water alone; and as wine mingled with water is pleasant, and delighteth the taste, even so speech finely framed delighteth the ears of them that read the story. (2 Maccabees 15:38–39.)

I delight in the Apocrypha, and think we all ought to. If good literature, as Robert Frost suggests, is writing which “begins in delight and ends in wisdom,”<sup>13</sup> the Apocrypha is good literature. I would not contend that it is as good overall as the Bible; but parts of it are better than parts of the Bible. And it’s ten times better than what you’re reading if what you’re reading is the *Reader’s Digest* or the *Daily Universe*. “There are many things contained therein that are true. . . . And whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom.” (D&C 91:1,5.)



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## Notes

1. Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Apocrypha: An American Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), xix.

2. The History of Susanna, *The Apocrypha According to the Authorized Version* (Haverhill, Mass.: Destiny Publishers, 1946). All subsequent references to the Apocrypha are to this readily available edition of the King James Version.

3. Wallace Stevens, "Peter Quince at the Clavier," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 92.

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