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Edwin and Abrelia Hinckley Scholarship Luncheon  
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### Poetry, History, and Scripture

I, too, would like to thank the Hinckley Family, even though it has been some years since I received the scholarship. The generosity of the Hinckley Scholarship allowed me to finish the “homestretch” that completed my undergraduate education. My parents are still thanking you for helping me finish that undergraduate education! I also appreciate the remarks of both of our scholars today and hope that I can add a little something thoughtful as we close our luncheon this afternoon.

I have entitled my remarks “Poetry, History, and Scripture,” which is perhaps far too broad of a subject. My subjects—literature and scripture—are etymologically essentially the same thing, with *literatura* in Latin being a noun and *scribo* a verb, but both having to do with writing or that which is written. “Literature” came to be applied to those writings in prose or verse (i.e., poetry) that have excellence in form and express ideas of permanent or universal interest. “Scripture,” I suppose, is a subset of that, writing that authoritatively expresses truths of permanent—we would say eternal—interest and value. Of course neither of these topics can be treated in any serious way in a mere fifteen minute luncheon address, so instead I thought that I would instead share with you perhaps some perhaps random thoughts that I have had on these subjects in the last two and a half months as I have considered poetry, history, and scripture in the course of teaching two classes—one a History of Civilization course, Classic Civilization 201, and the other a section of Religion 121, Freshman Book of Mormon.

As I began to explore some of the earliest extant literature in the Western tradition with my Civilization 201 students, we began, of course, with Homer. In this most ancient of the great literary works in the Western tradition we encountered figures who, although they may not have actually existed, nonetheless serve as archetypes of people in every age. Let me just share a couple of examples from the poetry of Homer. In *Iliad* book six we find what is perhaps one the most stunning and personal depictions of a family. The Trojan hero Hector, about to go forth, perhaps to die, says good-bye to his wife Andromache and to his little son Astyanax. In what seems to be an epic about “doers of deeds” and “speakers of words,” the Homeric ethic of courage and honor we have a man who loves his family, a woman who weeps at the prospect of losing her husband, of a young boy who will never really know his father. When the young Astyanax is brought to his father, he recoils in fear because his father is wearing this great big helmet with a horsehair crest on it. And so when Hector removes the helmet, he and Andromache laugh as the chubby little Astyanax at last smiles at his father.

Without making a political statement regarding current political and foreign affairs today, what a powerful testament this tender family scene is in this day, when we are involved in wars and as wars and rumors of wars permeate everything that we do, as families lose fathers and brothers, sons and daughters. Later at the end of that epic, supposedly about war, in *Iliad* 24, Achilles, whose wrath has motivated the entire poem, finds his wrath at last dispelled when he comes face to face with the father of his enemy Hector. Old King Priam sneaks into Achilles’ camp late at night to beg for the mutilated body of his son, and in a moment of revelation, Achilles realizes that this old man weeping for his son is so much like his own father.

In *Odyssey*, perhaps a happier work, there is a wonderful example of what we would call family values. This is not a very good example of faithfulness by our standards as Odysseus seems to have romantic liaisons with every goddess whom he encounters, but perhaps the only real challenge to his faithfulness to his wife Penelope is when he meets a princess, a human princess, named Nausicaa. Resisting the temptation to accept her hand in marriage from her father Alcinous, he turns to this young lady Nausicaa and says, “. . . May the gods grant your heart’s desire, a husband and a home, and the blessing of a harmonious life. For nothing is greater or finer than this, when a man and woman live together with one heart and mind, bringing joy to their friends and grief to their foes.” How interesting in a poem composed perhaps in the eighth century that such timeless values and universal feelings can be so wonderfully captured.

As my students and I left epic and moved into the archaic period of Greece, we experienced a few snippets of lyric poetry, a very different genre, but poetry nonetheless. I always tell my students that whereas Homer speaks of universals, lyric poetry gives us our first truly individual voices, as individuals speak about their experiences, which can admittedly still be universal. One poet Tyrtaios speaks about hoplite warfare and patriotism and the importance of standing the front line of the phalanx shoulder to shoulder with one’s comrades and giving one’s all for the sake of his homeland. Another poet Archilochos gives an alternative view of war. Fighting the vicious Thracians of the northern Aegean, he throws away his shield and says,

Some Thracian is waving the shield I reluctantly left  
by a bush, a flawless piece.  
So what? I saved myself! Forget the shield.  
I will get another one, no worse (frg. 12, trans. D. Mulroy)

Archilochus knows that his life is more important than his armor, and in realizing this completely reverses the Homeric concept of honor.

Then there is the poetess Sappho. Without getting into the complicated and perhaps disconcerting details of her personal relationships, let me just share her expression of what it means to fall in love.

My tongue is broken; a subtle flame  
Instantly courses beneath my skin.  
No vision is left in my eyes. A whirring  
Fills my ears.

Cold sweat flows. Trembling  
Shakes my entire frame. I grow  
Paler than grass and feel as though  
I have nearly died

[frg. 16, trans. Mulroy]

To make that sixth century poem have more immediate application, I often share with my students at this point the story of my first experience with puppy love in fourth grade, Sheryl Neugebauer. Only in Pittsburgh do you get last names like Neugebauer! Oh I loved Sheryl, or

how I thought as a young boy that I loved her. When I looked across the classroom each day, I felt like Sappho . . .

The next thing we do in Classical Civilization as we move beyond poetry is to look at some of the first works of Greek prose, which are some of our earliest examples of history writing. Herodotus, known as the Father of History, begins his account of the history of the Greeks and particularly their involvement in the Persian wars with this statement: “These are the researches *historiēs apodexis*—which means the laying of the “research” or “inquiries”—of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the barbarians from losing their due meed of glory” (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.1). Generally about this time in Civilization 201 we start talking about the difference between epic heroes, who are legendary, and the deeds of *real* men, people who actually existed, such as those Herodotus set forth. Yet Herodotus was still, in a sense, poetic. His real men do things that people in all ages do, and he deals with issues that apply to every age. Discussing the mutability of human fortunes, he notes that many cities that were once great are now empty and abandoned, whereas many that were once small are now powerful. Furthermore, Herodotus talks about *nemesis* and how doing bad things will catch up with you.

Nevertheless, perhaps the first historian in our sense of the word “historian” was Thucydides, who in his introduction says, “Readers of my work will not be disturbed either by the lays of a poet, displaying the exaggeration of his craft or by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive, but at truth’s expense, the subjects they treat being out of the reach of evidence and time having robbed most of them of historical value by throwing them in the region of legend” (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.21) No, Thucydides is going to talk about a real war, real events, and hopefully we can learn from that. He was the father, I suppose, of scientific history. He thinks history has a didactic or teaching purpose. In this he has provided every history major from that point on with a pat answer for why studying history is important. As I often joke with my history students, as we face Thanksgiving and Christmas. We are re always very nervous about our families’ asking us what we are going to do with a history major. What are we going to say to Aunt Bertha after we pass the turkey when she says, “Why in the world are you studying history?” Then in desperation we turn to the worn-out but true aphorism “those who don’t know the lessons of the past are due to repeat them,” and in that moment we should breathe out thanks to Thucydides under our breath.

My Civilization class then moved on to the great tragic authors of Greece, in whose works poetry had a strong comeback. Without intending to burden you with classical quotations, let me share one last important one with you, an important passage from Aristotle, which will provide me, in fact, with a way to come back to my theme of poetry, history, and scripture. Trying to understand better what tragedy is, we read from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where the philosopher tells us that this powerful dramatic form reaches us and moves us because the tragic character is a good, but not too good, character, someone with whom that the audience can relate. Even though they are more often than not based on legendary or mythological characters—Agamemnon and Oedipus and the like—they are figures with whom we can identify. That is because they are imperfect, like us, but not so flawed that we are repelled. If a tragic character were too good, we almost be relieved when he fails—Peter Priesthood, Molly Mormon, all of the squeaky clean, better-than life characters somehow do not fully reflect our own life experiences. We try to be good, but often we can not be happy ever after. On the other hand, if the characters are bad and despicable, we are almost glad when they fail. However, if

the character in a tragedy, albeit a legendary one, a type, is somehow like us, when something terrible happens to him, his fall arouses pity and fear in us, the audience or reader, and we can have what Aristotle called *catharsis*, a good cry that purges our anxiety and pent-up emotion.

This of course is going beyond my topic, but let me share the connected Aristotle quote:

“The difference between the historian and the poet is not in their utterances being in verse or prose . . . the difference lies in that fact that the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of thing that *can* happen. Hence also poetry is a more philosophical and serious business than history; ***for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars.*** (*Poetics* 38 | 51b1 [Else, 32–33], emphasis added)

Therein lies my segue to what is most important to me, scripture.

After nine years of teaching Classics, I made the career decision to leave that particular career track to teach something that was even more important to me—the scriptures, particularly the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. Scripture, I would suggest to you, is the great melding of both poetry and history. Oh, we can find obvious examples of poetry in the scriptures, the prophecies of Isaiah and the other Hebrew poets, the parables of Jesus, the semi-poetic language of John. Whenever Jesus opens his mouth in the Gospel of John, for instance, the language is different. John is trying to tell us, it seems, that Divine speech is different than mundane human speech. Think of how Jesus speaks in powerful yet simple images: “I am the Way the Truth and the Life,” “I am a Fountain of Living Water springing up to eternal life,” and “I am the Bread of Life.” Think of the prologue of John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. And the Word was made flesh.”

As chance would have it, when I read that quote from Aristotle with my Civilization 201 class, my Book of Mormon class happened to be reading 2 Nephi 1 and 2. Now chapter one has some obvious examples of poetry in Lehi’s words to his sons, but chapter two is perhaps a less obvious example. Grant Hardy in his recent studies on the Book of Mormon has mentioned that Nephi, and I would say Lehi and probably Jacob, are the first and last prophets in the Book of Mormon to have the benefit of what we could call a classical Hebrew education. They are poets, and when we read 2 Nephi 1:14 and 15 as Lehi pleads with his sons with his dying breath to hearken to his teachings.

Awake and arise from the dust  
and hear the words of a trembling parent  
whose limbs you must soon lay down into the cold and silent grave  
from which no traveler can return.  
A few more days and I go the way of all the earth.  
But behold the Lord has redeemed my soul from hell,  
and I have beheld his glory.  
And I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love. (2 Nephi 1:14)

As my students and I moved into 2 Nephi 2:2, I thought I knew what it was I was going to talk about: opposition in all things, the familiar story of creation, Adam and Eve, Eden, the Fall, the need for a Savior. But having been influenced either by Aristotle, or I hope the Spirit, I felt impressed to say to my students that the story of Adam and Eve is both history and poetry, at

which they stared at me deeply as freshman are sometimes prone to do when their teacher says something odd. I said, “Do not get me wrong, Adam and Eve were real people, historical characters, and the Fall and Creation were historical events and not some mythical allegories of liberal theologians.” Even so though these figures and events are what Aristotle calls, “examples of particulars in history,” they are also, as I think most of us understand, particularly from a certain ritual dramatic presentation of the story, about universals.

Accordingly I suggested to my students that in addition to learning about Adam and Eve and the Fall and what happened next, we should remember that this historical account is also an allegory. What happened to Adam and Eve happens to each of us. We started in the presence of a loving Father in Heaven. We walked and talked, I believe, with God. But in that state we could not progress. We would not have opposition and a chance to grow from that opposition. We would not have the opportunity to have increase and the joy of parenthood. And so we needed to be separated from God’s presence. Not cast out of it rudely and brusquely but perhaps reluctantly as we left heavenly parents and came to this world, where we fall, where we sin, where we through a process of making and keeping covenants seek our way back. Hence 2 Nephi 2 constitutes this powerful allegory teaching eternal universal truths about each of us. Not just Adam and Eve but each of us has need of a Redeemer.

I am struck by the powerful imperative of atonement and reconciliation and am led to declare with Nephi, “I glory in my Jesus, for he hath redeemed my soul from hell” (2 Nephi 33:6). I have a testimony, as Alma put it in 31:5, the virtue of the word of God, especially written but also spoken. I have testimony of a God who works in history, who speaks through the inspired verse of poets, and most powerfully in the sacred literature that we call scripture. I know that he continues to speak, of both particulars and universals, through prophets and seers today. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.