

# INTERPRETER

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# SOME NOTES ON FAITH AND REASON

Daniel C. Peterson

Philosophers and theologians, believers and unbelievers, friends to faith and enemies, scientists, historians — these and many others have devoted a very great deal of time and attention for centuries to the relationship between faith and reason.

There is little if any general consensus on the matter, and I have no intention, in just a few pages here, of trying to settle things. I'm inclined, though, to share a few thoughts on the topic from my Latter-day Saint perspective.

## No Uncommitted Thinking

What we now know as Section 4 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received very early in the history of the Restoration — in February 1829. That was more than a year before the publication of the Book of Mormon and the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and it was roughly three months prior to the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods.

In that revelation, given through the Prophet Joseph Smith to his father in Harmony, Pennsylvania, the Lord announced:

Now behold, a marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men. Therefore, O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day. (D&C 4:1–2)

The mind, according to this revelation, serves an instrumental role in the building up of the Lord's Kingdom. I take this to mean that, just as we are to exert ourselves to the extent of our physical strength in God's service, we are to use every bit of intellectual ability, training, education, and skill, where appropriate and needed, in doing the Lord's work.

In at least one sense, this is easily understandable. The metaphor of redemption that runs through scriptural accounts of the Atonement of Christ — so familiar to us that we seldom remember that it *is* a metaphor — is borrowed from, among other things, the slave markets that existed in every sizeable town of the ancient world. "Redemption" signified deliverance from captivity or bondage.

Jesus, our Redeemer, has purchased us with the blood of his sacrifice on our behalf from the bondage of Satan. Provided we accept the Savior's action — we are graciously allowed the freedom to do so or to reject it, even though, from the perspective of eternity, only a fool would prefer to remain in bondage to the devil — we belong to him. He is a kindly master, and he allows us far more freedom than our previous owner or owners did, but we remain his. "I beseech you therefore, brethren," writes the apostle Paul to the Roman saints, "by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).

We are to place everything upon the altar, to consecrate not merely our money and our time but our skills and abilities. All of them.

In May 1829, preparatory to missionary service, Hyrum Smith received this revelatory admonition from the Lord through the Prophet, his younger brother:

Seek not to declare my word, but first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then,

if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men. But now hold your peace; study my word which hath gone forth among the children of men, and also study my word which shall come forth among the children of men, or that which is now translating, yea, until you have obtained all which I shall grant unto the children of men in this generation, and then shall all things be added thereto. (D&C 11:21–22)

When the Latter-day Saint school system — which now includes high school, college, and university education as well as seminaries and institutes — was first being established in Kirtland, Ohio, the instrumental use of the mind (and, thus, of education and training) was a major priority.

“And I give unto you a commandment,” said the Lord through Joseph Smith at the end of 1832 or the beginning of 1833,

that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand; Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms — That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you. Behold, I sent you out

to testify and warn the people, and it becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor. (D&C88:77–81)

Ideally, there is to be no uncommitted thought among the disciples of Christ. In his second letter to the Saints at Corinth, the apostle Paul writes of “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Here is the New International Version’s treatment of that overall passage from 2 Corinthians. Notice that it, too, has a missionary focus:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3–5 (NIV))

But if the thrust of this passage is for missionaries to seek to capture the thinking and imagination of others for Christ, surely it’s reasonable to assume that their own thoughts and imaginations, ought also, ideally, to be subjected to Jesus as Lord.

And why not? If all of our actions should be brought into conformity with the Gospel, why should our thoughts remain unsubmitted and, to that extent, unredeemed?

“Be not conformed to this world,” wrote Paul to the Romans:

But be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:2)

Of course, it is the work of more than a lifetime, and perhaps the work of a very long period of training and effort beyond the grave, to bring ourselves — both our actions and our thoughts — into complete conformity with the divine will. But that is the plain goal, and, it seems, the overall purpose of the Plan of Salvation.

### No Unthinking Commitment

Moreover, if there is to be no uncommitted thought in Christian discipleship, there is also to be no unthinking commitment. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine how there *could* be. The point of bringing all the resources of our mind to bear on building the Kingdom is, precisely, to think about how to do it and how to do it better.

That seems trivially obvious.

But, here, I would like to look at another aspect of thoughtful faith. The fact is that none of us can believe without at least some intellectual investment in our belief. At a minimum, for example, we need to know what it is that we believe. Faith inescapably has content; it cannot avoid focusing on at least some ideas.

But it also involves judgments as to what is believable and what isn't, what makes sense and what doesn't.

Obviously, not everybody is a scholar. Not everybody will approach the gospel in the manner of students in a graduate seminar or academics debating at a scholarly conference. (And I candidly hope that nobody, not even the most intellectually inclined among us, will view it as solely a matter of academic interest, however intense. It's far too important for that.) I'm not talking solely about judgments regarding the Book of Mormon and the Isaiah problem, say, or concerning archaeology and the Nephites, although I certainly include such matters.

But the ordinary faith of ordinary people still involves trying to make sense of things — of suffering and death, for

example, of seemingly unanswered prayers, of the application of gospel principles to daily life, of how the teachings of Christ and of the living prophets give meaning to our earthly existence, with all its ups and downs. If the doctrines of Christianity and Mormonism didn't help believers to understand life, or if (even worse) they seemed to make it more confusing, few if any believers would remain — not even among the least academic or scholarly.

There has been a scripturally warranted place for thinking from the very beginnings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Even an essential place. It's not just an option. In a revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery in April 1829, the Lord said:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong. (D&C 9:7–9)

Thinking is, thus, inextricably bound up even with the process of revelation itself. And such thinking is open to, and indeed, inevitable for, every believer.

Indeed, the history of Mormonism begins, amidst “a strife of words and a contest about opinions,” when Joseph Smith's desperate personal questions drive him to the Bible and then to his knees. He wasn't asking academic questions. He wasn't merely idly curious. He was hoping to make sense of the existential situation in which he found himself.

In his 1838 account of his First Vision, the Prophet specifically says that “[his] mind was called up to serious reflection,” recalls that “[his] mind became somewhat partial to the Methodists” at one point, remembers that “[his] mind at times was greatly excited,” and describes the confusion that he felt as a very young boy in the face of the “reason and sophistry” deployed by the various competing religious factions in his neighborhood. He wanted forgiveness for his sins and to know which church to join (Joseph Smith — History 1:5–14).

The restoration of the priesthood and the experience of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon occurred in response to questions sparked by passages in the still incomplete translation of that book (Joseph Smith — History 1:68–73).<sup>1</sup> Many of the revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants, too, came as answers to questions posed by the Prophet Joseph Smith and by others. President Joseph F. Smith received his great 1918 vision of the redemption of the dead as he pondered scriptural passages regarding the atonement of Christ and the condition of those in the world of spirits (D&C 138:1–11).<sup>2</sup> Likewise, President Spencer W. Kimball’s 1978 revelation on priesthood “came to him after extended meditation and prayer” (D&C — Official Declaration 2). The 1997 revelation to President Gordon B. Hinckley authorizing the construction of smaller and simpler temples was given in response to his reflections about the problem of making the

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1 See also the prefatory note to Doctrine and Covenants 17, which specifically lists 2 Nephi 11:3, 27:12, and Ether 5:2–4 as the passages providing the background for the story of the Witnesses.

2 It probably isn’t coincidental that he was meditating on such topics as the end of World War I, with its roughly 17 million military dead and missing; the great 1918 influenza pandemic, which would kill somewhere between 50 and 100 million people worldwide; and the sudden and untimely death of his son, Elder Hyrum Mack Smith of the Council of the Twelve Apostles.

blessings of the temple more easily accessible to the Saints, specifically to those in Colonia Juárez, Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

Revelations, however, come to and through the hearts and minds of imperfect, fallible human beings. They're given through error-prone mortals, and they're interpreted by error-prone mortals. They will always demand intellectual effort to be properly understood and applied.

“For now,” wrote the apostle Paul to the Saints at Corinth — notably including even himself, a great apostle and prophet, in his generalization — “we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12).<sup>4</sup> Part of the task of mortality, though, surely, is to clean that glass as much as possible, or, more accurately (since the ancient *esoptron*, a “looking glass” in the world of the King James translators, was actually made of metal rather than of glass), to polish the mirror in which we perceive the divine. We do so by developing spiritual sensitivity and through repentance, obviously, but, surely, we also do it through clear thinking and reflection.

Brigham Young recognized this as one of the challenges of life in a fallen world. “I do not even believe,” he said,

that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fulness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, groveling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all

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3 Virginia Hatch Romney and Richard O. Cowan, “President Hinckley’s Inspiration,” *The Colonia Juárez Temple: A Prophet’s Inspiration* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), accessed June 6, 2014, <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/colonia-juarez-temple-prophet’s-inspiration/2-president-hinckley’s-inspiration>.

4 The King James Version’s *darkly* renders the Greek *en ainigmati*. Compare English *enigma* and *enigmatic*.



its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities....

If an angel should come into this congregation, or visit any individual of it, and use the language he uses in heaven, what would we be benefited? Not any, because we could not understand a word he said. When angels come to visit mortals, they have to condescend to and assume, more or less, the condition of mortals, they have to descend to our capacities in order to communicate with us. I make these remarks to show you that the kingdom of heaven is not yet complete upon the earth. Why? Because the people are not prepared to receive it in its completeness, for they are not complete or perfect themselves.

The laws that the Lord has given are not fully perfect, because the people could not receive them in their perfect fulness; but they can receive a little here and a little there, a little today and a little tomorrow, a little more next week, and a little more in advance of that next year, if they make a wise improvement upon every little they receive; if they do not, they are left in the shade, and the light which the Lord reveals will appear darkness to them, and the kingdom of heaven will travel on and leave them groping. Hence, if we wish to act upon the fulness of the knowledge that the Lord designs to reveal, little by little, to the inhabitants of the earth, we must improve upon every little as it is revealed.<sup>5</sup>

The Prophet Joseph Smith, who had as much experience with divine revelation as anybody in modern times or, for

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5 Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 2:314.

that matter, in any period of human history, also knew that revelation and scripture weren't entirely transparent or always completely perspicuous. Lamenting the limits of human communication in a late 1832 letter to William W. Phelps, he wrote:

Oh Lord God, deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.<sup>6</sup>

Critics of Mormonism sometimes attack Latter-day Saint scholars and apologists for, as the critics see it, adjusting Mormon doctrine and views of Mormon history in order to align them better with the latest science and scholarship. And, obviously, this criticism isn't without potential merit because there are limits beyond which the claims of the Restoration cannot be adjusted or attenuated without surrendering the essence of Mormonism, which makes it distinctive, and (in the view of believers) powerful.

And, surely, some degree of tension with the ever changing consensus of science and scholarship is unavoidable. If we scurry too hard to make our theology match the latest journal articles, we're likely to find our theology out of sync with the next issue of that very journal. The final synthesis of science and religion is still quite some distance away — partially because scientific discovery itself is nowhere near coming to a halt. I wouldn't expect it before the Millennium, at the very least.

But, surely, given the fact that our understanding of the gospel and of the scriptures isn't infallible, there can be no serious objection, in principle, to fine-tuning our concepts and images as we gain more information. Are the critics really suggesting that our views of scripture, our understandings of

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6 Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church*, 1:299 (November 27, 1832).

scripture, and our conceptions of the gospel should be static, frozen, and rigid? That they cannot grow as we ourselves grow, mature, and gain experience? At what age, exactly, should a Latter-day Saint's doctrinal and historical understanding be declared unalterable?

Some may say they cannot rely on or trust people who, having written something, later change their minds. But how could they ever trust someone or rely on someone who, claiming to be committed to the truth, never learned anything new and never altered a viewpoint?<sup>7</sup>

Science and scholarship are always, or, anyway, should always be, open to correction. This is because human reason is fallible, human understanding finite, and human culture constrains the pursuit of both science and scholarship. There are things that we can see that our ancestors simply couldn't, and there are things that we cannot see that our posterity will deem completely obvious.

But those same constraints apply to our grasp of revelation and of scripture as well. Revelation and scripture don't lose their value because of human restraints any more than the enterprises of science and scholarship do, but recognition of our limits, of our finitude, and of our historical situation should make us humble.

The great Galileo Galilei famously wrote of two books from which humans might learn about God — nature and the scriptures. His view seems sound, and I cannot see why we shouldn't also describe the two books as reason and revelation, thus permitting us to include not only the physical and biological sciences but scholarship (including history and archaeology) among the sources in which we can discern truth about life and about God's dealings.

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7 Compare to Joseph Fielding McConkie, "Bruce R. McConkie: A Special Witness," *Mormon Historical Studies* 14/2 (Fall 2013): 201.

I've always been fond of a formula that seems to have emerged from the 17th century Dutch Reformed Church: *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*, which means "The Church is always to be reformed."

I don't cite this to suggest that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is corrupt and, thus, in need of a Reformation. Please don't come away with that impression. But I do regard it as obvious that the membership of the Church, each individual one of us, needs to continually monitor what we're doing and saying and teaching, in order to be certain that they're in line with the gospel and the will of God — and to correct them if they're not. *Semper reformanda*. Like a car that always needs a hand on the wheel to keep it from veering gradually and often imperceptibly off to the right or the left, we should be always correcting.

Scholars have their role in this, too. We should constantly be trying to refine our understanding, deepen our knowledge, avoid error, share new knowledge and understanding, and, as gently as possible, correct error where necessary. Additionally, we should be constantly looking and working to bring both reason and faith into convergence.

Of course, ultimate responsibility for guiding and correcting the Church rests with those divinely called to lead it. But all Latter-day Saints have the inescapable duty of thinking and the divine obligation to learn and to do as well as they can. In its modest way, those associated with The Interpreter Foundation seek to help in this process of building a stronger, more knowledgeable, and ever more thoughtful faith among the Latter-day Saints — emphatically including ourselves.

I close with a quotation from Joseph Smith that recognizes both the need for reason as instrument (as usual, in a missionary context) and for deep study and thought in trying to more adequately understand the gospel:

The things of God are of deep import, and time and experience and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O Man, if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternal expanse; he must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart, none but fools will trifle with the souls of men.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Dean C. Jessee and John W. Welch, "Revelations in Context: Joseph Smith's Letter from Liberty Jail, March 20, 1839," *BYU Studies* 39/3 (2000): 137 (spelling and punctuation standardized).



# WHEN WAS CHRIST BORN?

*John A. Tvedtnes*

*Abstract: Many people still believe that Jesus Christ was born on 25 December, either in 1 BC or AD 1. The December date is certainly incorrect and the year is unlikely.*

Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world, to show unto the world that I will fulfil all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets. Behold, I come unto my own, to fulfil all things which I have made known unto the children of men from the foundation of the world, and to do the will, both of the Father and of the Son—of the Father because of me, and of the Son because of my flesh. And behold, the time is at hand, and this night shall the sign be given. (3 Nephi 1:13–14)

**T**he question of when Christ was born can be considered in two parts: 1) In what year was Christ born? 2) On what day of the year was Christ born?

## **The Year of Christ's Birth**

Christians of the sixth century wanted a calendar that was not tied to the Roman rulers. About AD 525 (1278 AUC), Dionysus Exiguus ("the little"), a Scythian monk living in Rome, prepared, at the pope's request, a new calendar based on the year in which Christ was born. He determined that the Savior was

born on 25 December 753 AUC.<sup>1</sup> Since Dionysus commenced the AD system with the year following Christ's birth, this would place the nativity in 1 BC by his reckoning, with ad 1 beginning a week later. Modern scholars acknowledge that he erred by at least four years, perhaps because his calculations were based on the regnal years of the Roman emperors, and he counted the reign of Caesar Augustus from 27 BC, neglecting the four years Augustus reigned under his own name, Octavian, prior to becoming emperor.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible has clues that can help us pinpoint the approximate year of Christ's birth. The first hint comes from Matthew 2:1, where we read that he was born in the time of "Herod the king." That this refers to Herod the Great and not to one of his sons or grandsons of the same name, is clear from the fact that neither Herod Antipas nor Herod Philip were kings, but tetrarchs only, while the kings Herod Agrippa I and II were too late in time. It is true that Herod had named another of his sons, Herod Archelaus, as king, but Matthew 2:22 makes it clear that this Archelaus, in whose time Joseph, Mary, and Jesus returned from Egypt to Nazareth, was son of the Herod who had ordered the slaughter of the children at Bethlehem.

Luke 1:5 notes that the birth of John the Baptist had been announced "in the days of Herod, the King of Judaea." John's mother Elizabeth was a cousin of Jesus's mother Mary and John was evidently born six months before Jesus (Luke 1:24–36). So

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1 AUC derives from the Latin *ab urba condita* ("from the founding of the city") and denotes the years following the founding of Rome, 753 BC by our reckoning. AD is from the Latin *anno Domini* ("year of the Lord").

2 For thirteen years following the assassination of Julius Caesar, there was a power struggle among his close friends. Mark Anthony refused to acknowledge Octavian as Caesar's heir and led the Egyptians in revolt against Rome. The matter was settled in 31 BC when Anthony died in the Battle of Actium and his ally and paramour Cleopatra committed suicide. Octavian was sole ruler of Rome at that point, but did not adopt the name Caesar and become emperor until 17 BC.



Luke agrees with Matthew in placing the birth of Christ in the time of King Herod.

The problem is that scholars consider that Herod died earlier than Dionysus Exiguus placed the birth of Christ. This is based on the fact that the first-century ad Jewish historian Flavius Josephus recorded that Herod had died after an eclipse of the moon and before the following Passover (*Antiquities of the Jews* 17.6.4, 17.9.3). Famed German astronomer Johann Kepler (1571–1630) calculated that there would have been a partial lunar eclipse (40%) visible in Palestine during the night of 13–14 March 4 BC, a month before Passover, which fell on 14 April that year.<sup>3</sup> This would mean that Jesus could not have been born later than that time. Several modern astronomers have suggested that the lunar eclipse of which Josephus wrote was not the one that occurred in 4 BC, but a later one.<sup>4</sup> There was, in fact, a total lunar eclipse visible from Jerusalem on the night of 9–10 January 1 BC, about three months before the beginning of Passover on 8 April.<sup>5</sup> But there are other records that also suggest the earlier date.<sup>6</sup>

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3 There were other partial lunar eclipses in the years 4 BC (2), 2 BC (2), 1 BC (1), AD 1 (1), AD 2 (2). The only eclipse close to the time of Passover was in 4 BC.

4 John P. Pratt, “Yet Another Eclipse for Herod,” *The Planetarian* 19/4 (December 1990), 8–14. The article has been posted on a number of web sites. Pratt is a Latter-day Saint, and while I find his research interesting, he seems to have preconceived ideas that guide his conclusions, and there are a number of problems with some of his reasoning that cannot be discussed here.

5 At least one researcher, in an attempt to establish the 4 BC eclipse as the one mentioned by Josephus, wrote that the eclipse occurred on the night following a “fast,” which he identified as Purim, the day commemorating the Jewish fast in the days of Esther that saved the exiled Jews from being massacred by the Persians. He placed the fast on 13 March and the eclipse on 14 March 4 BC. A careful reading of his source (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.6.4) reveals that Josephus’s mention of the fast day was a retrospective view in a parenthetical insert and that it did not occur on the day before the eclipse. As much as I would welcome such additional evidence for the 4 BC date, it is clear that this researcher’s view of the timing of the eclipse is incorrect.

6 Some have argued that the events Josephus recorded as having taken place during the period between the 4 BC eclipse and Passover (29 days) could

Josephus, who lived less than a century after Herod's death and had access to records of the time (including those of Nicolaus of Damascus, Herod's biographer),<sup>7</sup> noted that Herod the Great was named king of the Jews in "the one hundred and eighty-fourth Olympiad, when Caius Domitius Calvinus was consul the second time, and Caius Asinius Pollio [the first time]" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 14.14.4–5). The Greeks and Romans counted the founding of the Olympic games in 776 BC, with games every four years thereafter. Consequently, the 184th Olympiad ended in 40 BC. Elsewhere, Josephus wrote that Herod died 37 years after being named king of the Jews by the Roman Senate, which would have been 3–4 BC (*Antiquities of the Jews* 17.8.1; *Wars of the Jews* 1.32.8).<sup>8</sup>

According to Josephus, following the death of Herod, his son Archelaus sent to Caesar (Augustus) his petition for approval of Herod's testament. Caesar consulted with others, including his grandson Gaius, about the matter (*Antiquities of the Jews* 17.9.5). From a Roman source (*Prenestus Fasti*), we learn that Gaius left Rome for the Orient on 29 January 1 BC. This excludes 1 BC as a possible year of Herod's death.

Josephus gives us further clues that support 4 BC as the year in which Herod the Great died. He notes that Herod's son, Herod Philip, was made tetrarch of the region east of the Sea of Galilee upon his father's death and died in the 37th year of

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not have occurred during such a short space of time. This is rather subjective reasoning and I find no difficulty believing that they all happened within that time.

7 Josephus mentions Nicolaus several times in his writings.

8 The Jews resisted acknowledging Herod as king because, as the son of a proselyte, he was not a native-born Israelite, as required by Deuteronomy 17:15. Consequently, Herod had to fight for the kingdom given him by Rome. In the third year of his reign, his army besieged and took Jerusalem (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.15.14). This date is confirmed by Josephus's notation that the destruction of Jerusalem took place "when Marcus Agrippa and Canninius Gallus were consuls of Rome, on the hundred and eighty-fifth Olympiad, on the third month, on the solemnity of the fast" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 14.16.4).

his own reign,<sup>9</sup> corresponding to the twentieth year of Tiberius Caesar (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.4.6). Since Tiberius became emperor in AD 14, this would place Philip's death in AD 34, and hence his reign began in 3 BC, meaning that his father died before that time.

In his compilation of ancient chronographies, Michael, the Jacobite Christian patriarch of Antioch, Syria (1166–1199), wrote that the wise men came in Herod's thirty-fifth year and that the king died at the age of 70 after a reign of 37 years. His son Archelaus ruled for nine years, after which he was succeeded by Herod (Antipus) the tetrarch, in the same year that Caesar Augustus died and Tiberius Caesar succeeded him for twenty-three years (*Chronicle* 5.10, p. 139).<sup>10</sup>

The second-century Christian writer Clement of Alexandria wrote that some had calculated that Christ was born in the twenty-eighth year of the reign of Caesar Augustus (*Stromata* 1.21). Since Augustus became emperor in 31 BC, this would indicate a date of 4 BC for the Savior's birth. Isidore of Seville (died AD 636) wrote that Christ was born in AM 5155, 587 years after the Jews were taken captive into Babylon,<sup>11</sup> it being the forty-second year of Octavian's rule (*Chronicon* 65–66).<sup>12</sup>

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9 A coin minted in Philip's thirty-seventh year is known.

10 Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* (Paris, 1899; reprint, Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1963), 1:139. In the same passage, Michael wrote that Pilate became procurator in the fourteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, which would have been AD 28. (An inscription from Pilate's time found at his headquarters in Caesarea, calls him "prefect of Judaea.") The title *procurator* was introduced later.)

11 AM denotes Latin *anno mundi*, "year of the world," which was used in some early Christian writings to denote the time since Adam. It is generally accepted by modern historians that the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 587 BC.

12 In *Chronicon* 67, Isidore placed Christ's crucifixion in AM 5229, making Christ 74 years old at the time of his death, which is impossible. In the same place, he says that Christ was crucified in the eighteenth year of Tiberius; since we know that Tiberius became emperor in AD 14, this would make Jesus 32 years of age, which is more reasonable, especially considering Luke's declaration that he was "about thirty years of age" when he was baptized (Luke 3:23).

If counted from the year in which Octavian became emperor, this would place Christ's birth in AD 11; but if we count from the death of Octavian's predecessor, Julius Caesar, in 44 BC, then Christ was born in 2 BC. A similar date is derived if one follows the witness of two other early Church Fathers, Irenaeus (*Against the Heresies* 3.21.3) and Tertullian (*An Answer to the Jews* 8), both of whom wrote that Jesus was born in the forty-first year of Augustus.<sup>13</sup> If one counts from the time that Octavian was named consul in August 43 BC, this suggests a birth year of 2 BC for Jesus. Tertullian also noted that Christ was born twenty-eight years after the death of Cleopatra (August 30 BC) and fifteen years before the death of Augustus (August AD 14), again giving us 2 BC.<sup>14</sup>

The fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius wrote that Christ was born in the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus Caesar and twenty-eight years after the death of Anthony and Cleopatra (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.5.2). Augustus became emperor upon the death of these two enemies in 31 BC, so it is clear that Eusebius was counting Augustus's reign from the death of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, in 44 BC, which would give us 3 BC for the birth of Christ, which is precisely twenty-eight years after 31 BC, when Mark Anthony died in the Battle of Actium. Eusebius also declared that Christ entered his thirtieth year at the time of his baptism, being the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.10.1–2).<sup>15</sup> Since Tiberius became emperor in AD 14, this would place

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13 Actually, Irenaeus wrote that "our Lord was born about the forty-first year of the reign of Augustus." Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:452.

14 The medieval Ethiopic *Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 14:9 indicates that Christ was born in the thirty-second year of the reign of Augustus Caesar. If one counts from 31 BC, when Augustus became emperor, this places the Savior's birth in AD 1, which is closer to the date calculated some centuries earlier by Dionysus.

15 *Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 15:11–13 indicates that Christ was thirty years of age when he was baptized and that he was crucified in the nineteenth

Christ's baptism in the year AD 29 and his birth in the year 1 BC Eusebius derived his information from Luke 3:1–2, 23, where we read that Jesus was “about thirty years of age”<sup>16</sup> at the time of his baptism and that John the Baptist began preaching “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod [Antipas] being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother [Herod] Philip tetrarch... Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests.”<sup>17</sup>

A Syriac text known as *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, says that

It came to pass in the 309th year of Alexander, the son of Philip the Macedonian, in the reign of Tiberius Caesar, in the government of Herod, the ruler of the Jews, that the Angel Gabriel, the chief of the angels, by command of God went down to Nazareth to a virgin called Miriam,<sup>18</sup> of the tribe of Judah the son of Israel (her who was betrothed to Joseph the Just), and he appeared to her and said, “Lo there ariseth from thee the one who spake with our fathers, and he shall be a Savior to Israel; and they who do not confess him shall

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year of Tiberius.

16 Under the law of Moses, Israelite priests could begin their service at the age of 30 (Numbers 4:3). This would apply to John the Baptist, but Christ was not of the priestly clan. Moreover, the term “about” suggests that Luke did not know precisely how old Jesus was at the time of his baptism.

17 This method of dating events seems to have been borrowed from the Romans, who indicated years by who the proconsuls were at the time. Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius, a fourth-century Christian apologist, seems to have misunderstood Luke, for he dated the death of Christ in the year that, according to Luke, the Savior was baptized. He wrote, “But from the time in which [the Old Testament prophet] Zechariah lived, until the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, in which Christ was crucified, nearly five hundred years are reckoned; since he flourished in the time of Darius and Alexander, who lived not long after the banishment of Tarquinius Superbus” (*The Divine Institutes* 4.14, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7:114).

18 *Miriam* is the Hebrew form of her name. English *Mary* (and French *Marie*) derives from Latin *Maria*. The Greek texts call her *Marian*.

perish, for his authority is in the lofty heights, and his kingdom does not pass away.”<sup>19</sup>

The *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior* 2 agrees with this dating, saying that, “In the three hundred and ninth year of the era of Alexander, Augustus put forth an edict, that every man should be enrolled in his native place. Joseph therefore arose, and taking Mary his spouse, went away to Jerusalem, and came to Bethlehem, to be enrolled along with his family in his native city.”<sup>20</sup> The *Syriac Chronicle of Edessa*, composed ca. AD 540, also says that Christ was born in the year 309.<sup>21</sup> Alexander the great died in 323 BC, so 309 years later brings us to 14 BC, which seems much too early for Christ’s birth. The second-century AD Christian philosopher Justin Martyr wrote, “We say that Christ was born one hundred and fifty years ago under Cyrenius” (*First Apology* 46).<sup>22</sup> Since Justin died in AD 165, his words suggest that Christ was born no later than 15 BC, which is too late given other evidence.

Since the western calendar is based on the work of Dionysius Exegus, as noted earlier, it is interesting that other Christian calculations differ with respect to the year. Thus, the Abyssinian Church of Ethiopia follows a calendar that is seven years behind ours and marks the new year in September. The Abyssinian year 2000 actually began on 12 September 2007. This would suggest that Jesus was born in 7 BC.

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19 J. Rendel Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* (Cambridge University, 1900), 25.

20 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:405.

21 A later Syriac text, *Book of the Bee*, 35, says that the angel Gabriel announced to Mary the birth of her son in the year 307 after Alexander.

22 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:178.

## The Taxation

Luke muddled the waters by placing Jesus's birth at the time of the taxation under "Cyrenius, governor of Syria" (Luke 2:1-2).<sup>23</sup> When Herod the Great died, his son Archelaus (mentioned in Matthew 2:22) became king of Judaea, Samaria, and Idumaea; another son, Herod Antipas, became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea; and a third son, Herod Philip, became tetrarch of Ituraea, Trachonitis, and the area known today as the Hulah Valley and the Golan Heights. Archelaus fell into disfavor with the Jews, then the Romans. The Roman emperor Caesar Augustus banished him in his tenth year of rule (AD 6) and made Judaea a Roman prefecture, with Coponius as the first prefect. Coponius and Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, senator and governor of Syria (the Cyrenius of Luke's account), went to Judaea for the express purpose of reviewing the financial records of Archelaus, which may have included taking a census of the people for taxation purposes.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Luke was perhaps not a Jew, which would explain why he placed the birth of Christ in the context of the Roman world, rather than the Jewish (Matthew places the divine birth in the reign of Herod, king of the Jews). Luke traced Christ's ancestry to Adam, the father of all mankind, while Matthew, a Jew, traced his pedigree to Abraham, ancestor of the Israelites. Luke is the one who recounts the story of the good Samaritan and Jesus's healing of ten lepers, of which only the Samaritan returned to praise God. He is also our only source for information on the seventy disciples chosen to assist the twelve apostles. His account of the missionary service of Paul, in the book of Acts, suggests that he had much more interest in non-Jews than the other gospel writers. It is strange, then, that Matthew, not Luke, is the source of our information about the wise men.

24 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.1.1-2, 2.2; *War of the Jews* 2.7.3. Dion Cassius (55.27) wrote that Archelaus was deposed during the consulship of Lepidus and Arruntius, which was in AD 6. This taxation prompted the revolt of Rabbi Judah of Galilee, who founded the anti-Roman Zealot party (he is mentioned in Acts 5:37). Because King David had brought severe punishment upon the Israelites because he ordered a census (2 Samuel 24:1-17; 1 Chronicles 21:1-17) and because the Lord had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their posterity would be so numerous they could not be counted (Genesis 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 32:12), the Jews felt it wrong to count their numbers.

Since Joseph and Mary lived in Galilee, they were under the rulership of Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great), not Coponius. Because the prefect of Judaea had no authority over Antipas's territory, scholars have doubted that Joseph could have gone to Bethlehem for taxation purposes. If he did go at the time specified by Luke, it would have been in AD 6, ten years after the death of Herod the Great. Some have suggested that the Greek term *prote*, rendered "first" in the King James version of Luke 2:2, sometimes has the sense of *protera*, "before," giving the meaning "This census was held before that which took place when Cyrenius was governor of Syria." The second-century AD Christian philosopher Justin Martyr wrote that Joseph went to Bethlehem "on the occasion of the first census which was taken in Judaea" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 78).<sup>25</sup> An inscription uncovered at Tivoli, Italy, in 1764, suggests that Quirinius was twice governor of Syria, but since we know the names of the Roman officials who governed Syria from 9 BC until AD 11, Quirinius's first term in that office must have been much too early to correspond with the birth of Christ.

Some have suggested that Luke's Cyrenius was Quinctilius Varus, who became governor of Syria in 6 BC, around the time of another Roman census, and held the office at the time of Herod's death. However, records of the time suggest that each census conducted in the time of Caesar Augustus was of Romans only, not of subjugated peoples. An inscribed marble stone found at Ankara, Turkey, mentions three censuses ordered by Augustus, one in 726 AUC (28 BC), one in 746 (8 BC), and one in 767 (AD 14), but they specifically called for the enrollment of Roman citizens. From Roman records, it is clear that, during a forty-two-year period, the emperor Augustus ordered censuses only of Roman citizens, never requiring that the people return

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25 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:237. That Joseph went to Bethlehem to be enrolled prior to taxation is affirmed in *Book of the Bee*, 36.



to their ancestral homes. Some Egyptian papyri dating to the time the Romans ruled the land, indicate that Egyptians who could not pay their taxes were required to return to work their farms so they could pay. We do not know if this rule applied elsewhere.

According to the *Chronographia* of John Malalas, bishop of Antioch (ca. AD 491–578), Augustus issued an order to take a census of all lands held by Romans during the consulship of Agrippa II and Donatus. This would have been in 5 BC. The Byzantine historian Suidas (10th c.) noted that the census was conducted in Palestine the following year. Christian apologist Tertullian mentioned a census during the time Sentius Saturninus was governor of Syria (9–6 BC), so this remains a possibility if Christ was born prior to 5 BC (*Against Marcion* 4.19).

The Greek term usually rendered “taxed” in translations of Luke 2:1, 3, 5, really means to “be enrolled.” Thus, this would have been a census, not a taxation. Some have suggested that Joseph owned property in Bethlehem, which would have required him to register for taxation purposes. In view of the fact that he was rather poor, this seems unlikely. Moreover, if he had land in the region, he surely would have had family members who could have put him and Mary up in a house. Moreover, it would have been a bureaucratic nightmare for the Romans to compel people to travel to their ancient homes to register and then return to their cities of residence where they would have to pay the taxes.

Most early Christian pseudepigrapha follow Luke’s declaration that Caesar Augustus decreed “that all the world should be taxed” (Luke 2:1). Thus, *History of Joseph the Carpenter* 7 declares, “There came forth an order from Augustus Caesar the king, that all the habitable world should be enrolled, each man in his own city. The old man therefore, righteous Joseph, rose up and took the virgin Mary and came

to Bethlehem, because the time of her bringing forth was at hand. Joseph then inscribed his name in the list; for Joseph the son of David, whose spouse Mary was, was of the tribe of Judah.”<sup>26</sup> Since Rome did not control the entire known world, the statement about “all the world” seems somewhat hyperbolic. *Protevangelium of James* 17 differs from Luke’s account, saying that “there was an order from the Emperor Augustus, that all in Bethlehem of Judaea should be enrolled.”<sup>27</sup> But why the emperor should concern himself with a minor village in a distant Roman province seems rather odd.

### Age of the Jerusalem Temple

Another complication comes from John 2:20, where we read that the Jerusalem temple had already been forty-six years in the building early in Jesus’s ministry.<sup>28</sup> Since Herod had begun the structure in his fifteenth (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.11.1) or his eighteenth year (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1.21.1), forty-six later would bring us to AD 24 or 28 for Christ’s baptism.<sup>29</sup> Because he began his ministry when he was “about thirty years of age,” this would agree with an earlier birth date between 7 and 4 BC. To this, we must add that all four gospels agree that Jesus was crucified during the prefecture of Pontius Pilate, a fact on which both Josephus (*Antiquities of*

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26 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:389.

27 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:365.

28 Writing in the early third century ad, Origen wrote, “For forty and two years, I think, after the date of the crucifixion of Jesus, did the destruction of Jerusalem take place” (*Against Celsus* 4.22, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:506). The Romans destroyed the temple and much of the city in AD 70, at the end of the First Jewish War, and destroyed virtually everything that remained in AD 135, at the end of the Second Jewish War led by Simon Bar Koseba (Bar Kochba). Using Origen’s figure, this would place the crucifixion at either AD 28 or AD 93. The latter date is far too late, but the former is possible.

29 Though most of the work had been done by the time Jesus began preaching in the temple, it was not completed until AD 63, in the time of the Roman procurator Albinus (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.9.7), just seven years before the Romans destroyed it during the first Jewish war.

*the Jews* 18.3.3) and the contemporary Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals of Imperial Rome* 15.44) agree. Pilate governed from AD 26 to AD 36. At one point in Christ's ministry, the Jews said to him, "Thou art not yet fifty years old" (John 8:57). The early second-century AD Christian bishop Irenaeus of Lyon argued that this could only mean that Jesus was in his forties when he preached, rather than his thirties as is usually supposed (*Against the Heresies* 2.22.6).<sup>30</sup> Since Pilate subsequently heard the case against Christ prior to being sent back to Rome in AD 36, this would place Jesus's birth no later than AD 4 and likely earlier still, if we accept that he was in his forties at the time of his death. But evidence from the Book of Mormon suggests that Christ died 34 years after his birth (see and compare 3 Nephi 1:19; 2:7–8; 8:5; 10:18; 4 Nephi 1:1), which agrees with traditional Christian views.

Acknowledging that Herod the Great died in 4 BC, Christ could not have been born after that time. Matthew, who recorded the visit of the wise men to Herod, also noted that after the departure of the wise men, Joseph "took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: And was there until the death of Herod" (Matthew 2:14). This suggests that they remained in Egypt for more than just a month and this would mean that Jesus was born before 4 BC, especially when we consider that he was two years old when the wise men visited (Matthew 2:7, 16). This lends support to those who place his birth in 6–7 BC.<sup>31</sup>

There was a time when Latter-day Saints, based on an all-too-literal reading of D&C 20:1, would have argued that Christ

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30 In his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 74 and 77, Irenaeus seems to have confused King Herod the Great with his son, Herod Antipas, for he makes King Herod and Pontius Pilate contemporaries and says that Christ was crucified in the time of Nero, who became Roman emperor in AD 54.

31 Much of this speculation depends on the nature of the star seen by the wise men, which cannot be discussed in this present article.

was born in 1 BC.<sup>32</sup> The expression “since the coming of our Lord” in the verse has the same meaning as “year of the Lord” (Latin *anno Domini*, from which we get “AD”). When it became clear, from the available evidence, that we do not really know precisely when he was born, things changed. When the Church began publishing its own edition of the King James Bible in 1979, all dates were omitted from the time of Christ’s life from the “Chronology” chart in the Bible Dictionary included at the end of that edition. The dates in the left-hand column end abruptly just before the birth of Christ and resume only after his crucifixion.<sup>33</sup>

### Astronomical Timing

A number of Bible scholars and astronomers have sought answers to the date of Christ’s birth in the appearance of the star that guided the wise men to Bethlehem.<sup>34</sup> The concept of an exploding star, called a nova, long proposed as the star

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32 James E. Talmage, citing D&C 20:1, wrote, “Without attempting to analyze the mass of calculation data relating to this subject, we accept the Dionysian basis as correct with respect to the year, which is to say that we believe Christ to have been born in the year known to us as BC 1, and, as shall be shown, in an early month of that year” (*Jesus the Christ*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 103).

33 Elder Bruce R. McConkie, who oversaw the preparation of the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Bible, mentioned Elder Talmage’s preferred date and noted that President J. Reuben Clark Jr., in his book *Our Lord of the Gospels*, had opted for late 5 or early 4 BC as the year in which Christ was born. McConkie also quoted the view of Elder Hyrum M. Smith of the Council of the Twelve in his *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*: “The organization of the Church in the year 1830 is hardly to be regarded as giving divine authority to the commonly accepted calendar.” Elder McConkie concluded “that Gabriel came to Zacharias in October of 6 BC; that he came to Mary in March or April of 5 BC; that John was born in June of 5 BC; and that Jesus was born in December 5 BC, or from January to April in 4 BC” See McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 349–50, 356; *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965) 1:91.

34 The Bible never says the wise men followed the star from their homeland, only that it guided them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem after their visit with King Herod.

(“nova” means “new”), has been abandoned in recent years for lack of evidence, but other dates have been proposed based not on specific stars, but on either 1) the conjunction or proximity of two or more heavenly bodies in the night sky or 2) on the movement of the planets through the signs of the Zodiac. Based on such observations and on the possibility of calculating where each planet was at any given time in the past (or future), some have proposed dates between 10 and 6 BC for the birth of Christ.

Here are some of the planetary/astral conjunctions that have been considered:

- Jupiter and Saturn            Late March/early April 7 BC
- Jupiter and Regulus        3 BC
- Jupiter and Venus            17 June 2 BC

### The 600 Year Prophecy

Some Book of Mormon prophets announced that Christ would come 600 years after the departure of Lehi from Jerusalem (1 Nephi 10:4; 19:8; 2 Nephi 25:19; 3 Nephi 1:1; 2:6). Lehi fled his homeland in the first year of Zedekiah, king of Judah, which would make it 598 BC. If Christ was born even as late as 4 BC, this would separate Lehi’s departure from the Savior’s birth by 594 years at a minimum. While many readers probably accept the 600 years as literal, the Book of Mormon suggests that this may be an approximation. For example, Mosiah 6:4, recounting events in the time of Mosiah<sup>2</sup>, noted that this was “*about* four hundred and seventy-six years from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem.” Describing the destruction that occurred at the time of Jesus’s crucifixion, 3 Nephi 8:2 adds the caveat that “*if there was no mistake* made by this man in the reckoning of our time, the thirty and third year had passed away.”<sup>35</sup> There

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35 Other Book of Mormon passages suggest that there may have been mistakes in the records. See 1 Nephi 19:6; Mormon 8:12; 9:31–33; and the last paragraph of the title page of the Book of Mormon, written by Moroni.

is less uncertainty about the prophecy of the Lamanite prophet Samuel, who declared that the sign of Christ's birth would be given in five years (Helaman 14:2; 3 Nephi 1:8–21; 2:7–8).

In modern Hebrew the word *me'ah*, “hundred,” is also used to denote a century. The same is true in other languages, including English, where the word “century” derives from *cent*, “hundred,” having come to us from Latin via French.<sup>36</sup> It is likely that the 600 years should be read as an approximation, i.e., six centuries. That the term “hundred” is often used as an approximation in the scriptures is clear from Abraham's prophecy of the 400 years of Israel's captivity in Egypt (Genesis 15:13), while later records indicate that it was actually 430 years (Exodus 12:40–41; Galatians 3:17). Moreover, the Lord also told Abraham that his descendants would leave Egypt “in the fourth generation” (Genesis 15:16). Similarly, some Book of Mormon prophecies indicate that the Nephite nation would be destroyed in “the fourth generation” following Christ's appearance (1 Nephi 12:12; 2 Nephi 26:9; Alma 45:12; Helaman 13:10; 3 Nephi 27:32), though other passages indicate that it occurred after about 400 years (Mormon 8:6; Moroni 10:1), while the great battle at Cumorah took place after 385 years (Mormon 6:5). Thus, both “generation” and “hundred” are used as approximations.<sup>37</sup>

### The 5500 Years

Some have wondered why the Bible is not as precise in its prophecies of the Messiah as the Book of Mormon. The second-century Christian philosopher Justin Martyr wrote, “In these books, then, of the prophets we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming, born of a virgin, growing up to man's estate.... And

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36 Thus one cent is a hundredth of a dollar, while a centimeter is a hundredth of a meter.

37 For one attempt to explain the 600 years, see Randall P. Spackman, “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998).

He was predicted before He appeared, first 5000 years before, and again 3000, then 2000, then 1000, and yet again 800; for in the succession of generations prophets after prophets arose” (*First Apology* 31).<sup>38</sup>

A number of early Christian texts suggest that the Lord told Adam that he would be born in mortality after 5,500 years (*Conflict of Adam and Eve* I, 3:1–2, 4–5, 15; 7:2; 38:1–2;<sup>39</sup> *Gospel of Nicodemus* 3 [19]; *Discourse of the Abbaton*; Armenian *The History of the Expulsion of Adam from the Garden* and *The Letter Sent to Adam by God*).<sup>40</sup> The third-century Christian historian Hippolytus knew of the 5,500 years, writing, “For as the times are noted from the foundation of the world, and reckoned from Adam, they set clearly before us the matter with which our inquiry deals. For the first appearance of our Lord in the flesh took place in Bethlehem, under Augustus, in the year 5500” (*On Daniel*, fragment, 2.4).<sup>41</sup>

### The Date of Christmas

Clement of Alexandria (Egypt), writing in the late second century AD, noted, “There are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus,

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38 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:173.

39 *Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 11:7, notes that the Persian king Cyrus issued his decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem in the year 5000 after Adam. From the Bible and other ancient chronicles, we know that this was in 537 BC. Five hundred years later would bring us to 37 BC, which is much too early for Christ’s birth.

40 This disagrees with the chronology of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, which places Adam approximately 4000 years before the time of Christ. These figures derive from the Hebrew manuscripts used by the KJV and other translators, but other ancient versions, including the second- or third-century BC Greek Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the late first-century AD Jewish historian Flavius Josephus all place the flood about 3100 BC (rather than the twenty-fifth century BC of the KJV), with Adam having fallen more than 1500 years before that time, thus around 5600 BC.

41 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:179.

and in the twenty-fifth day of Pachon.... Further, others say that He was born on the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi” (*Stromata* 1.21).<sup>42</sup> The two dates (given in Egyptian months) correspond to 19 April and 29 May, though Clement himself preferred 18 November. An anonymous North African contemporary of Clement gives the date as 28 March.

The earliest date widely accepted in Christianity for the celebration of Christ’s birth, known from as early as the second century, was 6 January, the feast of Epiphany (“appearance”).<sup>43</sup> This is the date on the Julian calendar (19 January on the Gregorian calendar used by western Christians)<sup>44</sup> on which

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42 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:333. The full passage reads:

Accordingly, in fifteen years of Tiberius and fifteen years of Augustus; so were completed the thirty years till the time He suffered. And from the time that He suffered till the destruction of Jerusalem are forty-two years and three months; and from the destruction of Jerusalem to the death of Commodus, a hundred and twenty-eight years, ten months, and three days. From the birth of Christ, therefore, to the death of Commodus are, in all, a hundred and ninety-four years, one month, thirteen days. And there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, and in the twenty-fifth day of Pachon [19 April]. And the followers of Basilides hold the day of his baptism as a festival, spending the night before in readings. And they say that it was the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, the fifteenth day of the month Tubi [28 March]; and some that it was the eleventh of the same month. And treating of His passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the sixteenth year of Tiberius, on the twenty-fifth of Phamenoth; and others the twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi and others say that on the nineteenth of Pharmuthi the Savior suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi [29 May].

43 In the Eastern Churches of the fourth century AD, 6 January was held to be the date of Christ’s birth, of the visit of the wise men, and of the Savior’s baptism.

44 The Julian calendar was inherited from the Romans and was introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 BC. The Gregorian calendar was introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1578 and was initially used only in Catholic nations. It was finally adopted by European Protestants early in the eighteenth century, but was not acknowledged in England and its colonies until 1752.



Christmas is still celebrated in the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Coptic Church of Egypt. About the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century, the main body of Christianity moved Christmas to 25 December. The change was probably intended to dissuade Christians from celebrating the various pagan festivals that fell around that time of year.

In the old Julian Calendar of Rome, 25 December marked the winter solstice (which in our modern Gregorian calendar falls on 21–22 December) and was the Roman festival known as *Brumalia*. In AD 273, the emperor Aurelian designated it *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, “birthday of the unconquerable sun” (in honor of the sun-god Mithras),<sup>45</sup> after which the days in the northern hemisphere become longer until 22 June. It fell in the midst of the very popular Roman festival of *Saturnalia*, a week-long celebration in honor of Saturn, father of the Roman gods and the *Juvenalia*, which celebrated the children of Rome. During the *Saturnalia*, Romans hung garlands of laurel in their homes and mounted green trees lit with candles, the light of which, in the dead of winter, was intended to ward off evil demons. During this time, war and the punishment of criminals were suspended and people exchanged gifts with friends and family.

In AD 325, Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor, proclaimed Christmas as an immovable feast on 25th December. In AD 349, Pope Julius I specified the 25th of December as the official date of the birth of Jesus Christ. Despite this official sanction, Pope Liberius celebrated the Savior’s birth on 6 January in AD 353. The following year, he

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45 Mithra was a Persian solar deity whose cult became Christianity’s major competitor in the centuries following Christ’s birth, especially in the early fourth century AD. Like Jesus, Mithra was said to have been born outside his mother’s home (in the fields) and to have been visited by shepherds.

switched it to 25 December.<sup>46</sup> In AD 376, John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch, Syria, urged acceptance of the new date in two of his sermons and Antioch became the first of the eastern churches to celebrate Christmas on 25 December. It was later adopted by the churches in Jerusalem and Alexandria, Egypt.<sup>47</sup> *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 5.3.13 admonishes, “Brethren, observe the festival days; and first of all the birthday which you are to celebrate on the twenty-fifth of the ninth month; after which let the Epiphany be to you the most honored, in which the Lord made to you a display of His own Godhead, and let it take place on the sixth of the tenth month.”<sup>48</sup>

The transition from a celebration of the reborn sun to the birth of Christ was facilitated by the identification of the Savior as “the Sun of righteousness [who should] arise with healing in his wings” (Malachi 4:2).<sup>49</sup> Among the early Church Fathers who identified Christ with Malachi’s “Sun of righteousness” are John Chrysostom (*Homily 18 on 1 Corinthians* 6:15, 5), Jerome (*Letter 48 to Pammachius* 21), and Augustine (*City of God* 18.35). Augustine further compared Christ to the sun (*City of God* 18.32) and called him “the Sun of Glory” (*On the Psalms*

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46 Pope Leo the Great (AD 440–461), in his *Sermon 22 on the Feast of the Nativity*, I 6, denied that Christmas had anything to do with the rising of the sun. Yet he retained some of the imagery and terminology, such as one finds in his *Sermon 26 on the feast of the Nativity*, IV 1, where he wrote, “But this Nativity which is to be adored in heaven and on earth is suggested to us by no day more than this when, with the early light still shedding its rays on nature, there is borne in upon our senses the brightness of this wondrous mystery.” See Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 12:131–2.

47 A Latin text supposedly written by Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (AD 171–183) indicates that the Gauls celebrated Christ’s birthday on 25 December, but the document is thought to be spurious.

48 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7:443.

49 Though the word employed in Malachi 4:2 is “sun,” in the Book of Mormon it appears as “Son of righteousness” (2 Nephi 26:9; 3 Nephi 25:2). The word-play, though valid in English, where the two words are pronounced the same, does not work in Hebrew, where “sun” is *shemesh* and “son” is *ben*.

40.13), while Jerome called him “Sun of the Church” (*Dialogue against the Luciferians* Introduction, 28). Pope Leo the Great (AD 440–461) rebuked those who celebrated the birth of the sun rather than the birth of Christ, “the new sun” (*Sermon 22 on the Feast of the Nativity II*, 6). It was natural for Christians to associate Christ, “the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9), with the increasing light of the sun following the winter solstice. When Christians adopted 25 December as the date of Christ’s birth, they also adopted the revelry formerly associated with pagan rites.

The *First Homily, on the Annunciation to the Holy Virgin Mary*, attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus (ca. AD 213–275) praised the day on which the angel Gabriel announced to Mary the forthcoming birth of her son, saying, “Today are strains of praise sung joyfully by the choir of angels, and the light of the advent of Christ shines brightly upon the faithful. Today is the glad spring-time to us, and Christ the Sun of righteousness has beamed with clear light around us, and has illumined the minds of the faithful.” Expanding on the angel’s salutation to Mary, the passage adds, “Hail, thou that art highly favored, the rising of the rational Sun, and the undefiled flower of Life!”<sup>50</sup> In another homily on the annunciation, he wrote that Gabriel came to “announce the Sun of righteousness.”<sup>51</sup>

Two third-century Church Fathers, Tertullian and Hippolytus, established the method by which the western church calculates the date of Easter, indicating that Christ was resurrected on 25 March. Ultimately, this came to be accepted as the date of Mary’s conception of Jesus as well, since it is precisely nine months before 25 December. In the Christian Armenian calendar, based on the Julian calendar of earlier times, these dates correspond to 7 April and 6 January. Another reason for placing Christmas on 25 December is that Roman

50 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 6:58–9.

51 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 66.

Catholic tradition ties Jesus's circumcision with New Year's Day (1 January), the beginning of a new life. The Bible calls for circumcision of newborn boys on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12; 21:4; Leviticus 12:2–3; Luke 1:59; 2:21). Counting Christmas day as day one, the eighth day would be 1 January.

The fourth-century Syrian bishop Ephraim wrote that Christ was born in December, when the days begin to lengthen toward summer (*Hymns on the Nativity* 3.12; 4.10–12). He further suggested that Christ was conceived in the month of Nisan (late March, early April)<sup>52</sup> and born in December (*Hymns on the Nativity* 3.10; *Hymns on the Resurrection* 14.10). His reasoning was that seed is planted in December and the grain harvest begins in March.<sup>53</sup> He further wrote, "In March when the lambs bleat in the wilderness, into the Womb the Paschal Lamb entered!"<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Ephraim specified the tenth day of Nisan as the date when Mary conceived Christ. His reasoning was that this was the day the Israelites set aside the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:3) in preparation for its slaughter four days later (*Commentary on the Diatessaron* 1.14; *Commentary on Exodus* 12.2–3). In his *Hymns on the Nativity* 5.2–3, he wrote

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52 In this, Ephraim was followed by the thirteenth century Armenian-born Syriac bishop Shelemon (Solomon) of Basra, in his *Book of the Bee*, 35.

53 In the Holy Land, the biblical "first rains" come in late October and November, with a break during December, when wheat and barley seeds are planted. The "latter rains" come during the months of January and February and taper off in early March.

54 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 13:230; see also 13:252–3. In a note, the translator cited Ephraim's commentary on Exodus 12:3, "The Lamb is a type of our Lord, who on the tenth of Nisan entered into the womb; for from the tenth day of the seventh month when Zachary [Zacharias] received the message of John's birth, even to the tenth day of the first month when Mary received the message from the Angel, are six months" (Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 230n2). His reasoning was actually backward; Christ was born at the same time that lambs are born, i.e., in the spring. He also contradicted this reasoning in *Hymns on the Nativity* 5.1–4, where he wrote that the shepherds brought a newborn lamb when they came to see the newborn Savior.

that “the shepherds also came laden with the best gifts of their flock.... They brought a suckling lamb to the Paschal [Passover] Lamb, a first-born to the First-born.... The lamb bleated as it was offered before the First-born.”<sup>55</sup>

Some modern Bible scholars have suggested that Jesus was conceived on 25 December and born in the fall, during the feast of Tabernacles (late September, early October), when Jewish pilgrims came to Jerusalem.<sup>56</sup> This would explain why there was “no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). But this would also be true of other feasts requiring pilgrimage to the nearby Jerusalem temple, such as Passover, the feast of Weeks (New Testament Pentecost), and Tabernacles.<sup>57</sup>

Though some of the eastern churches still celebrate Christmas in January, in today’s western Christianity, 25 December marks the birth of Christ, while the earlier traditional date, 6 January, commemorates the arrival of the wise men at Bethlehem. Indeed, in some countries, gifts are exchanged on this latter date rather than at Christmas, because it is held that the gifts represent those given to Christ by the wise men.

Some modern writers have used information about priesthood service in the Jerusalem temple to calculate the time of year of Christ’s birth. Though there were originally four “courses” of priests, based on patrilineage, King David divided the priests into twenty-four courses (1 Chronicles 24:7–19; see also 2 Chronicles 8:14; 31:2). Zacharias, husband of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, was “of the course of Abia” (Luke 1:5), which was the seventh of the priestly courses (1 Chronicles 24:10).<sup>58</sup> At

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55 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 13:237.

56 My personal view, based on scriptural passages too numerous to discuss here, is that Christ was born at the time of Passover and will return at the time of the feast of Tabernacles.

57 The law of Moses requires all Israelite males to assemble for these three festivals (Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:16).

58 The name Abia in the New Testament corresponds to Old Testament Abijah, where the *j* is pronounced as it was in early English (and other Germanic

the time the angel announced the forthcoming birth of his son, John the Baptist, Zacharias was serving in “the priest’s office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord” (Luke 1:8–9).

According to the Babylonian Talmud, each priestly course began serving at noon on the Sabbath and served until noon on the next Sabbath (TB *Sukkah* 55b). Flavius Josephus, himself a priest, also wrote of the twenty-four courses, saying that each served for one week from Sabbath to Sabbath (*Antiquities of the Jews* 7.14.7). Each course also served twice in each year. The first course began serving in the spring, on the first week of the sacred year, followed by the second and so on. When the twenty-fourth course had served, in the autumn of the year (the first week of the civil year), the first course would commence again, and all of the courses would repeat the order on each of the forty-eight subsequent weeks during the year, one course per week. But during three other weeks, all twenty-four courses served together, during Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, because of the need for more priests to serve the pilgrims (TB *Sukkah* 55b).<sup>59</sup>

Since he was serving in the temple at the time the angel appeared to him, we must conclude that it was during one of the five weeks during which Zacharias and his “course of Abia” would have been on duty in Jerusalem. Contrary to those who argue for specific dates for the birth of John the Baptist, the choices are actually more varied. If Zacharias’s wife Elizabeth conceived her son during the week following the return of her husband to their village, we have a choice of five weeks of the year for John’s conception and, consequently, of his birth.

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tongues) as y.

59 These were the three annual feasts when all Israelite males were to assemble to the temple (Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:1–16).

## Nativity in the Spring

Latter-day Saints have sometimes quoted the opening verse of Doctrine and Covenants 20 to support the idea that Christ was actually born on 6 April. But that passage is not as explicit as one would hope, merely recording the day of the formal organization of the Church in 1830. The best evidence for April as the birth date of Christ is found in Joseph Smith's declaration of 6 April 1833, noting that this date commemorated the creation of the world, Passover, the birth of Christ, and the anniversary of the Church's restoration.<sup>60</sup> Thus, Jesus, the Firstborn, was born and died at Passover, at the time when the firstborn humans and cattle among the Egyptians died while the Israelites, who offered a firstborn lamb, escaped death.<sup>61</sup>

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60 The relevant passage, from *History of the Church* 1:336, reads: "On the 6th of April, in the land of Zion, about eighty officials, together with some unofficial members of the Church, met for instruction and the service of God, at the Ferry on Big Blue river near the western limits of Jackson county, which is the boundary line of the state of Missouri and also of the United States. It was an early spring, and the leaves and blossoms enlivened and gratified the soul of man like a glimpse of Paradise. The day was spent in a very agreeable manner, in giving and receiving knowledge which appertained to this last kingdom—it being just 1800 years since the Savior laid down His life that men might have everlasting life, and only three years since the Church had come out of the wilderness, preparatory for the last dispensation. The Saints had great reason to rejoice: they thought upon the time when this world came into existence, and the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy; they thought of the time when Israel ate the 'Passover,' as wailing came up for the loss of the first-born of Egypt; they felt like the shepherds who watched their flocks by night, when the angelic choir sweetly sang the electrifying strain, 'Peace on earth, good will to man;' and the solemnities of eternity rested upon them. This was the first attempt made by the Church to celebrate the anniversary of her birthday, and those who professed not our faith talked about it as a strange thing." That Christ, who is called both the "Firstborn" and the "beginning" of God's creation in both the Bible and early Christian texts, should be born on the day commemorating the creation is especially significant, for it was through him that God created the earth.

61 See Exodus 4:22–23 and chapters 11–13 of Exodus.

Some non-LDS Bible scholars have argued that Christ cannot have been born in December, since this is a very cold month in the region of Bethlehem, and that shepherds would not have been “abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8).<sup>62</sup> During the winter months, the sheep are brought into shelter for the night.

During the eight years I taught in the Brigham Young University Jerusalem program (1972–79), it was our practice to take each of the semester-abroad student groups to the hill overlooking Bethlehem from the north to celebrate Christmas Eve. One group went around 6 April, the other in mid-December. During those cold December nights, we never saw shepherds outside (nor snow). But during our April visits, there were always shepherds with their flocks on the hillside, and they often wandered through our group as we sat discussing the Christmas story. It was a wonderful visual aid.

The reason Palestinian shepherds spend the night with their flocks in springtime is that it is the lambing season. A shepherd’s wealth is in his flock, so he must be on hand to assist the ewes should birthing problems arise.

Some have jokingly noted that since U.S. income taxes are due on 15 April, Joseph would have gone to Bethlehem early that month to pay his taxes (Luke 2:1–5). Though Roman taxation practices cannot help us pinpoint the timing of Christ’s birth, they can help us eliminate the month of December. In the Holy Land, the rains begin in November and increase dramatically during the months of January and February. During this time, the lowlands are comprised largely of mud and the highlands are whipped by chilly winds. It seems most unlikely that the Romans would have required people to travel during this time of year.

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62 The word “field” originally meant “outdoors” as opposed to “indoors.” The Greek from which it was translated has this meaning and does *not* allude to a field where crops are planted.



The Passover season, however, would have been a good time for tax registration, since the people always gathered at Jerusalem and nearby towns (such as Bethlehem) to attend the festival at the temple. In the Jewish lunar calendar, Passover (as its Christian counterpart, Easter) falls in late March or early April, when the heavy rains have ceased and warmth returns to the land.

At least one of the early Church Fathers, Gregory Nazianzen, associated the feast of Passover with both the birth and death of Christ. In his *Second Oration on Easter* 21, he told the assembled congregation, “Such is the feast thou art keeping today; and in this manner I would have thee celebrate both the Birthday and the Burial of Him Who was born for thee and suffered for thee. Such is the Mystery of the Passover; such are the mysteries sketched by the Law and fulfilled by Christ.”<sup>63</sup> Gregory also wrote that “the present Festival is the Theophany or Birth-day, for it is called both, two titles being given to the one thing. For God was manifested to man by birth.... The name Theophany [meaning ‘appearance of God’] is given to it in reference to the Manifestation, and that of Birthday in respect of His Birth” (Oration 38, *On the Theophany or Birthday of Christ* 3).<sup>64</sup>

No matter when Christ was really born, most of the Christian world unites to celebrate the event on 25 December. The very fact that so many people—about a third of the world’s population—turn to thoughts of the Savior at this time of year makes it special indeed. With all of our theological differences, Christmas is probably the single greatest thing that unites Christianity and directs our thoughts to God’s greatest gift, his Son.

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63 Sermon 45 in the collection published in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 7:431.

64 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 7:345.

## Addendum

I wrote the first draft of this article in 2002 and the last in 2010, but revisited it before sending it to *Interpreter*. I was therefore not influenced by more recent studies on the subject of Christ's birth. These include two scholarly articles published at Brigham Young University.<sup>65</sup>

- Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ," *BYU Studies* 49/4 (2010). A report on the study was posted on the *Meridian Magazine* website on 12 November 2010 (<http://www.ldsblog.com/article/6637/1>).
- Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment, "When Was Jesus Born? A Response to a Recent Proposal," *BYU Studies* 51/3 (2012).<sup>66</sup>

Chadwick challenged the view that D&C 20:1 reveals the precise date of Christ's birth and agreed with J. Reuben Clark's view that the Savior was born in December, 5 BC. He amassed evidence for this view. Aside from his view of the opening verse of D&C 20, I find, in his article, many points of disagreement,<sup>67</sup> notably his comments on the Jewish calendar and his identification of the "sixth month" of Luke 1:26 with the calendar month when, in fact, it refers to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Chadwick concludes that Elizabeth's sixth month fell "coincidentally" in the sixth month of the year. That Luke was probably not Jewish and would not have followed the Jewish calendar seems not to have occurred to him. I did, however, learn some things from Chadwick, notably that Elder Orson Pratt placed the birth of Christ at 11 April, 4 BC.

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65 See also Kevin Barney, "When Was Jesus Born?" notes for his gospel doctrine class, posted on By Common Consent, blog, 9 December 2010, <http://bycommonconsent.com/2010/12/19/when-was-jesus-born/>.

66 Wayment had previously authored "The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ," an appendix to volume 1 (of 3) of *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, eds. Richard Neitzel Holzappel and Thomas A. Wayment (Deseret, 2005).

67 I also disagree with a number of Chadwick's assertions that are unrelated to the birth of Christ and will not refer to them here.

Chadwick rightly points out that Joseph Smith never interpreted D&C 20:1 to mean the birth date of Christ and demonstrated that he always celebrated Christmas on 25 December. But neither he nor any of the other writers I have consulted deal with the prophet's 1833 identification of 6 April with the anniversary of the creation, the Exodus, the birth and death of the Savior (1800 years previous), and the organization of the restored Church,<sup>68</sup> which I quote in my note 60.

Blumell and Wayment responded to Chadwick's article and added much information that he did not cover. I concur with most of their disagreements with Chadwick. They cover much of the same ground I do, especially in quoting the New Testament and early Church fathers and even in details such as the question of errors made by Nephite historians. I quote some early writers that are not used by Blumell and Wayment and vice-versa. I did not rely on Julius Africanus, but was pleased to see that he, like others, mentioned that Christ was born in AM 5500, which I discuss in my paper. I have come to believe that the Blumell/Wayment article must be read in connection with mine and wish that the three of us had collaborated to produce a single article.

During 2012, Ronald P. Millett came to the defense of Elder Talmage (with whom Sidney B. Sperry also agreed) by posting two articles on the Meridian Magazine web site.<sup>69</sup> Like many Latter-day Saints he assumes that the source was revelatory, because (1) *Jesus the Christ* was authored by an apostle, (2) who wrote the book under commission from the First Presidency,

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68 Joseph Smith, Jr. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Documentary History)*. 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 1:336.

69 "Elder James E. Talmage and the Birth Date of Jesus Christ," posted 30 October 2012, <http://www.ldsblog.com/article/1/11684>; "Why So Bold a Statement? Elder James E. Talmage and April 6," posted 12 November 2012, <http://www.ldsblog.com/article/1/11759>. Millett followed these up with a post entitled "Pope Declares Calendar Error on Date of Christ's Birth," posted 27 November 2012, <http://www.ldsblog.com/article/1/11830>.

(3) wrote it in the Salt Lake Temple, and (4) it was published by the Church. I believe that these reasons deserve some comment.

As regards Elder Talmage's apostleship, four other apostles (Orson Pratt, Hyrum Smith, J. Reuben Clark Jr. of the First Presidency, and Bruce R. McConkie) discussed the matter. Of these, Elder Smith, who published his *Doctrine and Covenants* commentary four years after Talmage's book, agreed on the date of 6 April, but rejected Talmage's assertion about 1 BC being the year in which Christ was born. The other three disagreed entirely with Talmage. Like *Jesus the Christ*, Clark's *Our Lord of the Gospels* (1954) was reprinted by the Church as the Melchizedek Priesthood handbook for 1958.

Must apostles and prophets be infallible in their beliefs? Does such a calling deprive them of their agency and right to private opinions? Under date of 8 February 1843, Joseph Smith wrote, "[I] visited with a brother and sister from Michigan who thought that 'a prophet is always a prophet;' but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."<sup>70</sup> Prophets are, after all, human beings. The fact that they speak for God on occasion does not remove their free agency. Like all of us, prophets have opinions.

Elder Charles W. Penrose, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and later a counselor in the First Presidency, wrote, "At the head of this Church stands a man who is a Prophet.... [W]e respect and venerate him; but we do not believe that his personal views or utterances are revelations from God."<sup>71</sup>

Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, "It makes no difference what is written or what anyone has said, if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside. My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them. Let us have this matter clear. We have

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70 J. Smith, Jr. *History of the Church*, 5:265.

71 *Millennial Star* 54 (21 March 1892): 191.

accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man's doctrine. You cannot accept the books written by the authorities of the Church as standards in doctrine, only in so far as they accord with the revealed word in the standard works."<sup>72</sup>

He further wrote, "When is a prophet a prophet? Whenever he speaks under the inspiration and influence of the Holy Ghost.... When prophets write and speak on the principles of the gospel, they should have the guidance of the Spirit. If they do, then all that they say will be in harmony with the revealed word. If they are in harmony then we know that they have not spoken presumptuously. Should a man speak or write, and what he says is in conflict with the standards which are accepted, with the revelations the Lord has given, then we may reject what he has said, no matter who he is."<sup>73</sup>

Similar thoughts were expressed by President Harold B. Lee in a European area conference: "If anyone, regardless of his position in the Church, were to advance a doctrine that is not substantiated by the standard Church works, meaning the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, you may know that his statement is merely his private opinion. The only one authorized to bring forth any new doctrine is the President of the Church, who, when he does, will declare it as revelation from God, and it will be so accepted by the Council of the Twelve and sustained by the body of the Church. And if any man speak a doctrine which contradicts what is in the standard Church works, you may know by that same token that it is false and you are not bound to accept it as truth."<sup>74</sup>

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72 Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr. *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-1956), 3:203.

73 J. F. Smith, Jr., *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:187.

74 *The First Area General Conference for Germany, Austria, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Spain of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-*

In January 1970, six months after the first Apollo moon landing, Joseph Fielding Smith became President of the LDS Church. Some anti-Mormon groups took delight in pointing out that he had, during his tenure as an Apostle, declared that it was “doubtful that man will ever be permitted to make any instrument or ship to travel through space and visit the moon or any distant planet.”<sup>75</sup> What these same critics failed to point out was that President Smith never attributed his belief to a revelation from God. Indeed, many of his generation held the same opinion, and all were surprised (but delighted) when proven wrong. Incorrect opinions do not make false prophets.<sup>76</sup> Elder Bruce R. McConkie, in his *The Mortal Messiah*,<sup>77</sup> indicated that the very nature of that book made it inevitable that it would contain some of his own opinions and speculations.

Does a commission from the First Presidency give more authority to Talmage’s view? In 1936, President Heber J. Grant copyrighted a book entitled *Joseph Smith as a Translator*, written by a non-Latter-day Saint named Homans (writing under the

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*day Saints, held in Munich Germany, August 24–26, 1973, with Reports and Discourses*, 69. I am grateful to Matt Roper for these references.

75 Smith, Joseph Fielding, Jr. *Answers to Gospel Questions*. First ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 2:191. “Following the Apollo moon landings and the death of President David O. McKay, President Smith became president of the Church. At a press conference following his assumption of Church leadership, he was asked by a reporter about this statement. President Smith replied: ‘Well, I was wrong, wasn’t I?’” ([http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism\\_and\\_science/Joseph\\_Fielding\\_Smith\\_claimed\\_that\\_man\\_would\\_never\\_walk\\_on\\_the\\_Moon](http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_science/Joseph_Fielding_Smith_claimed_that_man_would_never_walk_on_the_Moon) (accessed January 18, 2014)). This statement was changed in later editions of the book to read as follows: “The Lord will permit men to go just so far and no farther; and when they get beyond the proper bounds, he will check them” (Smith, Joseph Fielding, Jr. *Answers to Gospel Questions*. 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 2:191.

76 Some of the Bible’s foremost prophets, such as Moses and Jeremiah, objected that their lack of eloquence made them unsuited to fill the role the Lord had cut out for them. God overruled these opinions and sent them on their way.

77 Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary*. 4 vols. *The Messiah Series* 2-5, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979-1981), 1:10.

pseudonym R. C. Webb), who had been asked by President Grant to write the book. I know of no one who would attribute divine revelation to this official publication.

What about the place of Talmage's work? Does the sanctity of the Salt Lake Temple make his book a revelation from God? In addition to relying on the text of the King James version of the Bible, Talmage also used New Testament commentaries written by various Protestant clergymen, notably that of Adam Clarke. This is a highly unusual way of receiving revelation from God!

As for D&C 20:1, it has been noted by Chadwick and others that this introductory verse was added later and was not part of the original. Moreover, it is likely (again, Chadwick provides some evidence for this) that the entire Section 20 is not a revelation, but a statement of principles comprising the Articles and Covenants of the restored Church.<sup>78</sup>

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78 For a discussion, see chapter 44 ("The Role of the Book of Mormon in the Restoration of the Church") in John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights From a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999, later reissued by Horizon). An early version of D&C 20 in the hand of Oliver Cowdery has suggested to some that he was the author.





## ANOTHER ACCOUNT OF MARY WHITMER'S VIEWING OF THE GOLDEN PLATES

*Royal Skousen*

Carl T. Cox has graciously provided me with a new account of Moroni showing the Book of Mormon plates to Mary Whitmer (1778-1856), wife of Peter Whitmer Senior. Mary was the mother of five sons who were witnesses to the golden plates: David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses; and Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Peter Whitmer Junior, four of the eight witnesses.

For a long time we have known that Mary Whitmer was also shown the plates. These accounts are familiar and derive from David Whitmer and John C. Whitmer (the son of John Whitmer). For comparison's sake, I provide here two versions of their accounts (in each case, I have added some paragraphing).

David Whitmer's account, according to an interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith in September 1878, published 16 November 1878 in the *Deseret News*, and reproduced by Dan Vogel in his *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:51-52 (Salt Lake City, Utah: 2003):

When I was returning to Fayette with Joseph and Oliver all of us riding in the wagon, Oliver and I on an old fashioned wooden spring seat and Joseph behind us, while traveling along in a clear open place, a very pleasant, nice-looking old man suddenly appeared by the side of our wagon and saluted us with, "good morning, it is very warm," at the same time wiping

his face or forehead with his hand. We returned the salutation, and by a sign from Joseph I invited him to ride if he was going our way. But he said very pleasantly, "No, I am going to Cumorah." This name was somewhat new to me, I did not know what Cumorah meant. We all gazed at him and at each other, and as I looked round inquiringly of Joseph, the old man instantly disappeared, so that I did not see him again. ... It was the messenger who had the plates, who had taken them from Joseph just prior to our starting from Harmony.

Soon after our arrival home, I saw something which led me to the belief that the plates were placed or concealed in my father's barn. I frankly asked Joseph if my supposition was right, and he told me it was. Sometime after this, my mother was going to milk the cows, when she was met out near the yard by the same old man (judging by her description of him) who said to her, "You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil, it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened." Thereupon he showed her the plates. My father and mother had a large family of their own, the addition to it therefore of Joseph, his wife Emma and Oliver very greatly increased the toil and anxiety of my mother. And although she had never complained she had sometimes felt that her labor was too much, or at least she was perhaps beginning to feel so. This circumstance, however, completely removed all such feelings, and nerved her up for her increased responsibilities.

John C. Whitmer's 1878 account, as recorded by Andrew Jenson (see his *Latter-Day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* 1:283, Salt Lake City, Utah: 1901):

I have heard my grandmother (Mary Musselman Whitmer) say on several occasions that she was shown the plates of the Book of Mormon by a holy angel, whom she always called Brother Nephi. (She undoubtedly refers to Moroni, the angel who had the plates in charge.)

It was at the time, she said, when the translation was going on at the house of the elder Peter Whitmer, her husband. Joseph Smith with his wife and Oliver Cowdery, whom David Whitmer a short time previous had brought up from Harmony, Pennsylvania, were all boarding with the Whitmers, and my grandmother in having so many extra persons to care for, besides her own large household, was often overloaded with work to such an extent that she felt it to be quite a burden.

One evening, when (after having done her usual day's work in the house) she went to the barn to milk the cows, she met a stranger carrying something on his back that looked like a knapsack. At first she was a little afraid of him, but when he spoke to her in a kind, friendly tone and began to explain to her the nature of the work which was going on in her house, she was filled with unexpressible joy and satisfaction. He then untied his knapsack and showed her a bundle of plates, which in size and appearance corresponded with the description subsequently given by the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. This strange person turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also

showed her the engravings upon them; after which he told her to be patient and faithful in bearing her burden a little longer, promising that if she would do so, she should be blessed; and her reward would be sure, if she proved faithful to the end. The personage then suddenly vanished with the plates, and where he went, she could not tell.

From that moment my grandmother was enabled to perform her household duties with comparative ease, and she felt no more inclination to murmur because her lot was hard. I knew my grandmother to be a good, noble and truthful woman, and I have not the least doubt of her statement in regard to seeing the plates being strictly true. She was a strong believer in the Book of Mormon until the day of her death.

Here is what Carl Cox writes:

This same experience with Mother Whitmer and the plates is a part of my family history. Elvira Pamela Mills Cox heard the story before she was married. Christian Whitmer, one of the Book of Mormon witnesses and the eldest son of Peter Whitmer, had married Anna Schott in 1825. They must have lived in close proximity to Peter Whitmer while the Book of Mormon was being translated. When Christian died in Clay County, Missouri, in 1835, Anna was left a widow. Sylvanus Hulet married the widowed Anna, and also had care of his orphaned niece, Elvira Mills. The experience of Mother Whitmer would have been known by family members, and Elvira was an interested teenager at that time. This is the way the story appears in our family history:

“Elvira Pamela Mills”, *Cox Bulletin II* (1958), written by Orville Cox Day (O C Day):

Grandma stopped telling a story of Mother Whitmer till 1900 when B. H. Roberts printed it in his “New Witness for God.” Then she said, “I’m so glad I can tell it again.”

David Whitmer had invited Joseph and Oliver to live in his father’s home while translating the Book of Mormon. When Oliver’s hand and Joseph’s eyes grew tired they went to the woods for a rest. There they often skated rocks on a pond.

Mary Whitmer, with five grown sons and a husband to care for, besides visitors, often grew tired. She thought they might just as well carry her a bucket of water or chop a bit of wood as to skate rocks on a pond.

She was about to order them out of her home.

One morning, just at daybreak, she came out of her cow stable with two full buckets of milk in her hands, when a short, heavy-set, gray-haired man carrying a package met her and said,

“My name is Moroni. You have become pretty tired with all the extra work you have to do. The Lord has given me permission to show you this record.” turning the golden leaves one by one!

The most interesting aspect of this story is that Mary Whitmer’s difficulty with the household situation was more than just being tired from all the extra work. She was irritated by Joseph and Oliver’s indifference to all the work she was

doing, with their not helping out and instead skipping rocks for relaxation, so “she was about to order them out of her home.” Thus Moroni’s intervention was perhaps more purposeful than we might have previously thought. Undoubtedly, many others exerted much effort on behalf of providing help to Joseph and Oliver (such as Emma Smith had just done in Harmony, Pennsylvania, for the previous three months). Here, however, Moroni needed to deal with a more difficult situation, one that could have forced Joseph to find another place – and a secure one – to do the translating. Moroni (and the Lord) weren’t in the habit of just showing the plates to people to encourage them to act as a support team for the work of the translation.

There is independent evidence that during the translation process Joseph Smith liked to skip rocks on water as a form of relaxation. Martin Harris tells of one such occasion in the spring of 1828 when he was acting as scribe when Joseph was translating the book of Lehi (the 116 manuscript pages that were later lost). In an interview with Edward Stevenson and published in the *Deseret News* on 30 November 1881 and republished in the *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* (30 January and 6 February 1882), Martin says (on page 87 of the *Millennial Star*) that “after continued translation they would become weary, and would go down to the river and exercise by throwing stones out on the river, etc.”

There are a few other differences in this account. The plates were in a package rather than a knapsack. Mary had already done the milking, and it was in the morning rather than the evening. As with all independent accounts of historical events, there will be minor additions, omissions, and variants. But the reason for Moroni’s intervention is clearly a significant difference – and probably accurate.

Carl Cox has also provided me in various emails (dating from 2012) with the following information on the provenance of this account:

21 August 2012, email from Carl Cox to Royal Skousen:

I talked to O C Day's children (he is the one that published the pamphlet) and they do not know of any earlier written stories. O C's mother, Euphrasia, liked to tell family stories at night to the children, and her mother Elvira Pamela Mills Cox probably did the same. O C was 18 when Elvira died, so he would have heard the stories from her, and also from his mother. I have another Cox history pamphlet from 1957 that has genealogy with many tidbits of stories interspersed. O C was born in 1885, so he was in his 70s by that time. The pamphlet we are interested in was published just a little later.

The other pamphlets were published in the late 1950s by the Alpine Publishing Company, in Alpine or American Fork. Orville Cox Day is the son of Euphrasia Cox Day, who is the daughter of Elvira Pamela Mills Cox, who married Orville Sutherland Cox, my great grandfather. All this genealogy is on the website, OSCox.org. I got the pamphlet in the 1960s when I published the Cox Family Bulletin, which was the source for the beginnings of the OSCox.org website about 10 years ago.

29 September 2012, email from Carl Cox to Royal Skousen:

My investigation of the source of the Elvira Mills Cox story mostly confirms my earlier ideas. I have almost identical copies of the story, one typed on the legal size sheet used for Books of Remembrance, and the other which may be the

published Cox Bulletin II printed in typewriter paper size.

I believe that O C Day heard the stories from his grandmother, Elvira, and from his mother, Euphrasia, in his youth, but didn't write them down until the 1950s, when he decided such history needed to be shared. His daughter and granddaughter that I talked with only knew of them after the stories were printed in 1958. And at the beginning of the compilation of Elvira's stories he said: "While spinning and weaving wool, grandma liked to tell us stories about her people."

At the end of the 14 page bulletin is written: "Abridged from information written by" in pencil just before the typewritten – Orville Cox Day –, and indicating 5 sentences just above about Elvira's character. But the whole bulletin is a Xerox copy, which I just noticed. And this bulletin says it is John Whitmer whose widow Sylvester married, but it is Christian Whitmer instead.

1 October 2012, email from Carl Cox to Royal Skousen:

I have scanned the 14 page printing. I think some of the marks on there were instructions to the typist 50 years ago when I published the Cox Family Bulletin, but otherwise I don't know anything other than it came from O C Day when he was about 73 years old. I think I corrected his errors.



I am just sending the cover this time, and will send about 4 pages at a time because they are big files.

3 October 2012, email from Carl Cox to Royal Skousen:

Christian Whitmer was in the David Whitmer [Peter Whitmer Senior] home during the translation process, and is listed as one of those who actually acted as scribe, I believe. He and his wife would have known of the visit of Moroni to Christian's mother. He died in 1835, and his widow, Anna Schott, whom he had married in 1825, then married Sylvester Hulet, in troubled Missouri. Sylvester cared for his niece and nephew after their parents died, while Elvira Pamela Mills was a teenager, during this time. Elvira married Orville Sutherland Cox, my great grandfather, in 1839, and told the stories to her descendants.

Elvira's youngest daughter was Euphrasia Cox, who married Eli Day as a second wife. Their oldest child was Orville Cox Day (O C Day), 1885-1969, who followed his mother as the family genealogist. He was also one of the grandchildren who heard Elvira's stories, and wrote down some of what he heard in later life.

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*his critical text work, The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text. He is also known for his work on exemplar-based theories of language and quantum computing of analogical modeling.*

SEPARATED BUT NOT DIVORCED:  
THE LDS CHURCH'S UNCOMFORTABLE  
RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS POLYGAMOUS PAST

*Craig L. Foster*

*Abstract: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints's uncomfortable relationship with its polygamous history is somewhat like an awkward marriage separation. This is, in part, because of the fitful, painful cessation of plural marriage and the ever present reminders of its complicated past. This essay looks at examples of members' expression of discomfort over a polygamous heritage and concludes with suggestions of possible pathways to a more comfortable reconciliation.*

Divorce can be an ugly, painful experience that leaves all involved angry, confused, and embarrassed. The separation before the actual divorce can often be even more embittered. The period between the separation and actual divorce can seem nebulous and interminable. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints's uncomfortable relationship with its polygamous past is much like the painful interim between when the parties have gone their separate ways but are not yet allowed to completely sever their ties.

Plural marriage was introduced to Church members by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the 1840s as a commandment from God and continued as doctrine and an official practice until 1890.<sup>1</sup> Official Church support for plural marriage ended

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph engaged in one plural marriage with Fanny Alger in the 1830s. He did, however, not require any other members to practice the doctrine until the Nauvoo period. See Don Bradley, "Mormon Polygamy before Nauvoo? The Relationship of Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger," in *The Persistence of Polygamy:*

after the Manifesto, and many members have come to see this change as the final end of plural marriage. The historical record, however, clearly demonstrates that Church leaders intended at least a few plural marriages to continue without the Church's public sanction and encouragement.<sup>2</sup> This contributed to the difficulties of the next few decades. The practice suffered a slow, difficult death as the Church and its members came to terms with the demise of the practice and yet continued their efforts to keep what they regarded as a sacred principle alive.

By the end of these few decades, a number of members had doctrinally and physically separated themselves from the body of the Church because they continued to teach and practice plural marriage. In spite of their migration out of the mainstream Church, discomfort within the Church persisted and intensified over time. Members were stung by the presence of those who had chosen to continue plural marriage outside of the Church's control.<sup>3</sup> This constant reminder to both members and the outside world has embarrassed and bothered Church officials and members alike.

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*Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, eds. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 14–58, and Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 1:85–126.

2 It should be noted that while most of the sanctioned post-Manifesto plural marriages were performed outside of the United States, some were performed within U.S. borders. For more information regarding these post-Manifesto marriages, see Drew Briney, *Apostles on Trial: Examining the Membership Trials of Apostles Taylor and Cowley* (Salt Lake City: Hindsight Publications, 2012); B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); and D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890–1904," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18/1 (Spring 1985): 9–105.

3 For examples of people who chose to secretly practice plural marriage while still members of the LDS Church, see Craig L. Foster, "The Persistence of Plural Marriage Within Mainstream Mormonism: The Example of the Barr and Mary Musser Family," in *Scattering of the Saints: Schism Within Mormonism*, eds. Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2007): 290–314.

This essay will examine the uncomfortable relationship between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its polygamous past and the effect this discomfort has had on its members. I will examine examples of members' expression of discomfort over a polygamous heritage and conclude with suggestions of possible pathways to reconciliation.

### A Complex, Often Misunderstood History

From the time of its introduction, plural marriage has been wrapped in controversy. The confusion and conflict began with the secrecy and prevarication of Joseph Smith when he revealed plural marriage to a trusted circle of the Nauvoo elite.<sup>4</sup> Plural marriage was not openly practiced until after the Saints left Illinois and were safely ensconced in the Great Basin of the western United States. Plural marriage continued to be practiced in the open until the anti-polygamy persecution of the 1880s and the issuance of the Manifesto in 1890. After that, the practice again went underground and was once more surrounded by a veil of secrecy which made it even more difficult to completely stop.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the obfuscation which attended the beginning and end of the official practice of plural marriage—necessary though it was—provided ammunition for anti-Mormons and anxiety for modern Church members. From the 1840s to the present, anti-Mormon literature has accused Church leaders and members of immorality and lasciviousness,

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4 As already noted, Joseph Smith entered into plural marriage before the Nauvoo period. His first plural wife was Fanny Alger in 1835–1836 as explained by Bradley, “Fanny Alger,” in *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 14–58.

5 For an excellent discussion about this pivotal time period, see Gregory L. Smith, “Polygamy, Prophets, and Prevarication: Frequently and Rarely Asked Questions about the Initiation, Practice, and Cessation of Plural Marriage in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” FAIR, 2005, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/publications/polygamy-prophets-and-prevarication>.

with suggestions that Joseph Smith started plural marriage to cover-up his own adulterous affairs.<sup>6</sup> The 1840s saw some early purveyors of the lustful and lascivious stereotype in the supposed insider exposés of John C. Bennett and the Van Dusens.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, some of these clichéd stereotypes are still being used today. Not surprisingly, many members have believed these unfortunate and mostly false accusations and stereotyping, in no small part because some historians have repeated and embraced them uncritically.<sup>8</sup>

Joseph Smith's involvement in so-called polyandrous marriages added to the image of him as a man with unbridled lust. Anti-Mormon literature has portrayed Smith as sneaking around behind unsuspecting husbands' backs and seducing willing women. In fact, most of the literature discussing these marriages suggests Joseph had sexual relations with these women, usually without the cuckold husband's knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

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6 For a more detailed discussion of anti-Mormon accusations and stereotyping, see Craig L. Foster, "Victorian Pornographic Imagery in Anti-Mormon Literature," *Journal of Mormon History* 19/1 (Spring 1993): 115–32; "Old Themes and Stereotypes Never Die: The Unchanging Ways of Anti-Mormons," FAIR, 2003, accessed October 14, 2011, [http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR\\_Conferences/2003\\_Unchanging\\_Ways\\_of\\_Anti-Mormons.html](http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2003_Unchanging_Ways_of_Anti-Mormons.html), and Craig L. Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics: A Critical Analysis of Anti-Mormon Pamphleteering in Great Britain, 1837–1860* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003).

7 John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842). Increase and Maria Van Dusen published a series of "tell all" pamphlets about the temple ceremony and polygamy during the 1840s and early 1850s. For more information on the Van Dusens, see Craig L. Foster, "From Temple Mormon to Anti-Mormon: The Ambivalent Odyssey of Increase Van Dusen" *Dialogue* 27/3 (1994): 275–86.

8 Examples of some who have furthered and even built upon some of this sensational and inaccurate stereotyping are Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945); George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "... but we called it celestial marriage"* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008); and Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).

9 "Joseph Smith married other men's wives while they were still married to their husbands," *Mormon Think*, accessed October 12, 2011, <http://>

Another accusation of more recent date, perhaps even more insidious than the previous, charges the Mormons of pedophilia because of marriages with teenage brides.<sup>10</sup> This

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mormonthink.com/joseph-smith-polygamy.htm#other. This website noted Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner married Joseph Smith in 1842 when she was seven months pregnant and queried whether the child was Adam Lightner's or Joseph Smith's. Another example of anti-Mormon accusations of adulterous polyandry can be found at LDSFreedom.org, "Polyandry & Joseph Smith," accessed October 12, 2011, <http://www.ldsfreedom.org/node/7>. Unfortunately, George D. Smith's *Nauvoo Polygamy* appears to not only accept the idea that Joseph Smith was sexually involved with these women because parts of the book are reminiscent in language and imagery of early anti-Mormon exposés. For a discussion of *Nauvoo Polygamy*, see Craig L. Foster, "Review of Nauvoo polygamy: '...but we call it celestial marriage,'" *Mormon Historical Studies* 11/1 (Spring 2010), 155–58. Brian C. Hales, on the other hand, in an excellent essay, "Joseph Smith and the Puzzlement of 'Polyandry,'" in *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 99–151, offers a compelling argument for the proposition that Joseph Smith's polyandrous marriages were non-sexual and were "eternity only" sealings. Hales expands this argument about Joseph Smith's "polyandrous" marriages in his three volume work titled, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2013). Another source providing good answers and positive information regarding Joseph Smith's polyandrous marriages is "Joseph Smith and Polyandry," FairMormon Answers, accessed February 22, 2014, [http://en.fairmormon.org/Joseph\\_Smith/Polygamy/Polyandry](http://en.fairmormon.org/Joseph_Smith/Polygamy/Polyandry).

10 For examples of accusations of Joseph Smith and pedophilia, see Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*; Mark Webster, "He's a Dangerous Man: God Talk and Sexual Abuse," Beyond Opinion.com: Christian Apologetics Ministry, December 13, 2010, accessed October 14, 2011, <http://beyondopinion.com/tag/joseph-smith/>; and Sandra Tanner, "Joseph Smith as a Sexual Predator," *Mormon Coffee: It's Forbidden But it's Good*, June 21, 2009, accessed October 12, 2011, <http://blog.mrm.org/2009/06/joseph-smith-as-a-sexual-predator/>. Ironically, Mary Elizabeth Rollins, who was mentioned above, was 16 when she married Adam Lightner, and yet critics have not condemned Lightner for marrying a teenager when he was 25. In contrast, Craig L. Foster, David Keller, and Gregory L. Smith use both history and a statistical review of Mormon and non-Mormon marriage practices in Illinois and neighboring Iowa to demonstrate that marriage to teenage women was not uncommon for the place and time in which Joseph Smith lived, nor was it considered pedophilia: "The Age of Joseph Smith's Plural Wives in Social and Demographic Context," in *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 152–83. Alternately, Todd D. Compton, in an essay in the same volume, 184–232, titled, "Early Marriage in the New England and Northeastern States, and in Mormon Polygamy: What Was the Norm?" argues that such age gaps between marriage partners were unusual, but because his analysis relies on New England marriage

slur has been aimed particularly against Joseph Smith in order to attack his claim to be a prophet of God. These and other negative claims against early Mormon polygamy have caused understandable mental and spiritual turmoil for members.

### A Constant Reminder

There are thousands of fundamentalist Mormons throughout the Intermountain West who are a constant reminder of Mormonism's polygamist past. Indeed, some even try to dress like 19th-century Mormons, except in neo-pioneer style pastel dresses topped off with a bizarre hairstyle. Mormon fundamentalism seems to be ever-present, even invading television on shows such as the now-ended HBO series "Big Love," which one television critic described as understanding "local culture," "our idiosyncrasies," and, in fact, "the whole Mormon thing."<sup>11</sup> While some people would contest this description, the television show did, nevertheless, have an impact and likely encouraged the reality show "Sister Wives" as well as other copycat reality fare gracing the cable channels.

"Sister Wives" follows the large family of Kody Brown and his four wives. The show's first season was set in Utah Valley until the Utah County police began to investigate the family. The Browns then moved to Las Vegas, where they continue to produce their show.<sup>12</sup> Not to be outdone, the Darger family

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patterns rather than those of the frontier, I do not believe he has rebutted the perspective offered by Foster, Keller, and Smith. For more information showing Joseph's Smith's marriages to teenage wives were not out of the cultural and social norm of his time, see "Joseph Smith/Polygamy/Marriages to Young Women," FairMormon Answers, accessed February 22, 2014, [http://en.fairmormon.org/Joseph\\_Smith/Polygamy/Marriages\\_to\\_young\\_women](http://en.fairmormon.org/Joseph_Smith/Polygamy/Marriages_to_young_women).

11 Scott D. Pierce, "More Often Than Not, Big Love Gets it Right," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, December 28, 2010, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=12564307&itype=storyID>.

12 Steve Chapman, "Kody Brown and His Four Wives," townhall.com, July 14, 2011, accessed July 14, 2011, [http://townhall.com/columnists/stevechapman/2011/07/14/kody\\_brown\\_and\\_his\\_four\\_wives](http://townhall.com/columnists/stevechapman/2011/07/14/kody_brown_and_his_four_wives), and Brent Bozell,



published *Love Times Three: Our True Story of a Polygamous Marriage*.<sup>13</sup> They took to the talk show circuit to describe their lifestyle and went so far as to suggest they were the inspiration for the family on “Big Love.” Given the Darger’s soap opera adventures, this might be a rather dubious honor.

Most recently, Rebecca Wall Jeffs Musser, a former plural wife of Rulon Jeffs, with the assistance of award-winning author M. Bridget Cook Burch, published *The Witness Wore Red: The 19th Wife Who Brought Polygamous Cult Leaders to Justice*.<sup>14</sup> This is a fascinating account of her life within and eventual escape from the FLDS, a branch of the fundamentalist movement.

It is television shows and books like these that confuse non-Mormons. Since the time of the Manifesto, there has been suspicion that Latter-day Saints still practice plural marriage.<sup>15</sup> Rumors and stereotyping of secret Mormon polygamous marriages have continued to the present, as news commentators and political pundits alike misconstrue and misrepresent LDS history and doctrine. For example, television talk show host Bill Maher explained that Mormonism is “a religion founded on the idea of polygamy. They call it The Principle. That sounds

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“TLC’s Lobbying Show,” townhall.com, July 15, 2011, accessed July 15, 2011, [http://townhall.com/columnists/brentbozell/2011/07/15/tlcs\\_lobbying\\_show/page/full/](http://townhall.com/columnists/brentbozell/2011/07/15/tlcs_lobbying_show/page/full/).

13 Joseph Perkins, “Will Same-Sex Marriage Lead to Legalized Polygamy,” *Christian Post*, October 8, 2011, accessed October 8, 2011, <http://www.christian-post.com/news/will-same-sex-marriage-lead-to-legalized-polygamy-57640/>.

14 Rebecca Musser and M. Bridget Cook, *The Witness Wore Red: The 19th Wife Who Brought Polygamous Cult Leaders to Justice* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2013).

15 See for example, Mollie, “Picturing Polygamists,” *Patheos* (December 24, 2011), accessed February 15, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/getreligion/2011/12/picturing-polygamists/>, and “Do Mormons Practice Polygamy?” Mormon.org, accessed February 15, 2014, <http://mormon.org/faq/practice-of-polygamy>.

like The Prime Directive in ‘Star Trek.’”<sup>16</sup> Is there any wonder a 2011 poll undertaken by a California polling company found that almost half of those polled thought “Mormons either ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ practice polygamy”?<sup>17</sup>

This non-Mormon perception of Latter-day Saints is more prevalent than many members of the Church realize. I remember a fifth or sixth grade classmate who came to my central California elementary school and said, “You’re a Mormon, right?” I answered in the affirmative, and he then announced, “My father says Mormons can have more than one wife. Is that true?” I thought he was joking. I thought everyone knew we no longer practice plural marriage, so I played along with him.

“Sure,” I said, “My dad has three.”

Unfortunately, he believed me, and it took a little bit of explaining for him to finally believe I had been joking and that members of the LDS Church no longer practice plural marriage.<sup>18</sup>

Other members of the Church have recounted anecdotal evidence of the widespread perception of polygamy among mainstream Mormons. Hamani Stevens of the University of Oregon football team recounted how “the usual misconception

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16 Joseph Walker, “Sarandon Calls Pope a ‘Nazi,’ Maher Calls Mormonism ‘Ridiculous,’” *Deseret News*, October 20, 2011, accessed October 21, 2011, <http://www.deseretnews.com/user/comments/700189837/Sarandon-calls-Pope-a-Nazi-Maher-calls-Mormonism-ridiculous.html>.

17 Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Poll: Most Still Unsure about Mormons and Polygamy,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 12, 2011, accessed September 13, 2011, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/52568348-78/mormon-mormons-polygamy-percent.html.csp>. According to the newspaper article, the Lawrence Research poll found that 15% said Mormons definitely practice polygamy while another 31% said Mormons probably practice polygamy: a total of 46%.

18 Craig L. Foster, “Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic: Latter-day Saints and Popular Polygamy Stereotypes,” Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/2010-Craig-Foster.pdf>.

about Mormonism is that we all believe in polygamy.”<sup>19</sup> That mistaken perception is compounded and exploited by merchandizers like Wasatch Brewery in Park City that sells “Polygamy Porter,” a beer whose advertisement invokes a polygamy theme, asking “Why have just one?” Along with the beer, they sell polygamy-themed merchandise. “The Polygamy Porter T-shirts are our best seller,” the owner explained. “One guy from Japan ordered 5,000 of them for resale.”<sup>20</sup> Another alcoholic beverage company banking on the polygamy image is Five Wives Vodka, an Ogden, Utah distillery whose suggestive label displays five women in old-fashioned nightgowns.<sup>21</sup>

### The Church Reacts to Present-Day Plural Marriage

It is within this milieu of multifarious information and misinformation that modern members of the Church are placed. Many are confronted with these issues regarding plural marriage without a firm understanding of the LDS Church’s polygamous past. Even some of those who became aware of plural marriage at a young age approach the subject through a 21st-century prism that warps their understanding.

It isn’t surprising that modern members are ignorant of Mormon plural marriage and the context in which it was practiced, since the LDS Church has, in many ways, downplayed and even ignored its own history. As one historian explained regarding the 20th-century Church’s approach to plural marriage:

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19 Sam Finley, “Duck Football: From One Mission to Another...,” *Eugene Daily News*, September 16, 2011, accessed September 16, 2011, <http://eugenedailynews.com/2011/09/16/duck-football-from-one-mission-to-another>.

20 Bill Redeker, “Beer Maker Finds Polygamy Ads Sell,” *Good Morning America*, February 8, 2011, accessed February 10, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=126371&page=1>.

21 Bill Frost, “Idaho Bans Ogden’s Five Wives Vodka,” *City Weekly*, May 29, 2013, accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.cityweekly.net/utah/blog-21-7669-idaho-bans-ogdens-five-wives-vodka.html>.

As time passed, fewer and fewer Mormons came to identify personally with polygamy. By the 1950s Mormons had become thoroughly Americanized and tended to display a split opinion about polygamy. On one hand, they were immensely proud of the sacrifices made by their pioneer ancestors, but as modern Americans and the very model of American family values, they were also uncomfortable with their heritage of socio-sexual experimentation. Raised on *Essentials in Church History* and similar volumes and never hearing of Joseph Smith's own plural relationships in general conferences or in other official publications, the new public memory began to take root.<sup>22</sup>

It is human nature, explained one Mormon blogger, to "choose aspects of our past that we feel define us. In like manner, we hide or diminish those things that embarrass us." One of those things is Joseph Smith's practice of polygamy because "it seems that his polygamy is only in the picture when we're called upon to defend him."<sup>23</sup> Such an approach is not confined solely to individuals.

The Church of Jesus Christ itself has been described as "a Church very much against polygamy" that "will continue to distance itself as far away from polygamy as possible."<sup>24</sup> As

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22 Stephen C. Taysom, "A Uniform and Common Recollection: Joseph Smith's Legacy, Polygamy, and the Creation of Mormon Public Memory, 1852–2002," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35/3 (Fall 2002): 136.

23 David Grua, "From Embrace to Embarrassment: Remembering Joseph Smith's Polygamy," *The Juvenile Instructor* (November 2, 2007), accessed August 24, 2011, <http://www.juvenileinstructor.org/from-embrace-to-embarrassment-remembering-joseph-smiths-polygamy/>. On a positive note, the LDS Church has recently taken a more active approach to interpreting and defining its polygamous past. In December 2013, the LDS Church published an essay titled, "Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah," accessed January 20, 2014, <http://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-and-families-in-early-utah?lang=eng>.

24 Melissa Crabtree, "Modern Mormon Misconceptions Linger," CBS 42, Birmingham, Alabama, September 26, 2011, accessed September 28, 2011, <http://>

previously explained, the Church has, since at least the late 1920s, repeatedly tried to distance itself from fundamentalist Mormonism and modern plural marriage. These strenuous denials have continued to the present, in large part because of the negative publicity generated by Warren Jeffs, the FLDS, and other branches of Mormon fundamentalism.

For example, the Public Affairs Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has, over the years, issued a number of press releases explaining that the Church does not practice or allow plural marriage and has differentiated between the LDS Church and fundamentalist Mormons.<sup>25</sup> There have also been comments by Church leaders. In 1998, the late LDS president Gordon B. Hinckley proclaimed, “I wish to state categorically that this Church has nothing whatever to do with those practicing *polygamy*. They are not members of this Church. Most of them have never been members. They are in violation of the civil law. They know they are in violation of the law. They are subject to its penalties. The Church, of course, has no jurisdiction whatever in this matter.”<sup>26</sup>

LDS Apostle M. Russell Ballard stated in a Semiannual General Conference session, “Let me state clearly that no polygamist group, including those calling themselves Fundamentalist Mormons or other derivatives of our name, have any affiliation whatsoever with The Church of Jesus Christ

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[www.cbs42.com/content/localnews/story/Modern-Mormon-Misconceptions-Linger/9N3Lxvw0AUS0USwYKsQHig.csp](http://www.cbs42.com/content/localnews/story/Modern-Mormon-Misconceptions-Linger/9N3Lxvw0AUS0USwYKsQHig.csp) or [http://www.clipsyndicate.com/video/play/2879871/modern\\_mormon\\_misconceptions\\_linger](http://www.clipsyndicate.com/video/play/2879871/modern_mormon_misconceptions_linger), accessed April 10, 2014.

25 For examples of numerous press releases and public statements regarding past and modern plural marriage, see The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Newsroom: The Official Resource for News Media, Opinion Leaders and the Public, <http://newsroom.lds.org/search-results.xqy?q=polygamy&x=0&y=0>.

26 Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking About Us?” *Ensign* (November 1998): 70.

of Latter-day Saints.”<sup>27</sup> LDS Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland was even more outspoken in referencing the fundamentalists, “We haven’t practiced polygamy for over a century...and it’s a little frustrating to have these fundamentalist groups resurface.”<sup>28</sup>

Discomfort about the Church’s polygamous past is particularly noticeable in Church-produced literature and at Church-owned historical sites. Almost any discussion of the subject seems to be discouraged through a lack of mention in the manuals and public presentations. For example, several years ago the priesthood/Relief Society manual on the teachings of Brigham Young included a timeline of significant dates in his life, including his first marriage and his second monogamist marriage after the death of his first wife. There was not, however, any mention of Brigham Young’s plural marriages. And, later, the priesthood/Relief Society lesson about Doctrine and Covenants section 132 discussed celestial marriage but did not mention plural marriage. A whole lesson about Doctrine and Covenants 132 and not one mention of plural marriage? A manual focused on the present-day application of doctrine might understandably devote little attention to plural marriage, but complete silence may heighten the sense that we are ashamed and that there *is* actually something to hide.<sup>29</sup>

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27 M. Russell Ballard, “The Importance of a Name,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints October 2011 General Conference Addresses, accessed October 24, 2011, <http://lds.org/general-conference/2011/10/the-importance-of-a-name?lang=eng>.

28 Michael Brissenden, “The Mormon Moment,” ABC.net, October 18, 2011, accessed October 19, 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2011/s3342583.htm>.

29 Newell G. Bringham, “Where Have All of Brigham Young’s Wives Gone?: Latter-day Saint Ambivalence over Its Polygamous Past,” in *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 88, and Lesson 31: “Sealed . . . for Time and for All Eternity” in Doctrine and Covenants and Church History: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual, accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.lds.org/manual/doctrine-and-covenants-and-church-history-gospel-doctrine-teachers-manual/lesson-31-sealed---for-time-and-for-all-eternity?lang=eng>. The manual emphasized that plural marriage “should not be the focus of the lesson.” On the posi-

I remember being about 15 or 16 years old and visiting Brigham Young's Winter Home in St. George. The sister missionary was giving the tour to what appeared to be a non-member family and me. The missionary told how Brigham Young's wife would keep house, and I naturally wondered which wife, so I asked. Her expression approximated that of a deer in the headlights, and she replied, "Well, his wife."

"Okay," I persisted, "Which wife?"

"Well, *his* wife."

I finally realized that she did not want to discuss Brigham's plural wives, especially if I was accompanied by non-members, so I dropped the subject.<sup>30</sup>

This experience is likely not an anomaly. A number of years later I was organizing a visit of some dignitaries to Salt Lake City. Recognizing their interest in history, I decided to arrange a tour of the Beehive House to accompany the usual tour of Temple Square. When I suggested to a volunteer at Church Hosting that we take the guests to the Beehive House, she immediately said, "Oh you don't want to do that."

I asked why not and she gave a nervous laugh and said, "Well, *you know*."

"I know?" I said, somewhat puzzled.

She gave another nervous laugh and repeated, "*You know*." She continued, "They might ask questions."

"About plural marriage?" I wondered.

"Yes," she responded, relieved that I had understood at last.

"Well," I replied, perhaps a little too sarcastically, "we wouldn't want them to do that."

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tive side, unlike earlier Sunday School manual referred to, the online version of the latest Sunday School manual includes an explanation and discussion points about plural marriage.

30 Foster, "Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic."

“No,” she answered. I thanked her and hung up, amazed at the extent of her embarrassment and effort to avoid the subject.<sup>31</sup>

### A Polygamy Survey

This palpable discomfort with polygamy is shared by regular members of the Church. In preparation for this essay, I conducted an unscientific online survey of attitudes about plural marriage among current and former members of the LDS Church. The survey was not random, as people were contacted by e-mail and on Facebook and asked to participate and to spread the word among their LDS family and friends. There were approximately 400 people who participated in the survey with an almost even mix of men and women.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of the limited number of respondents, there actually was a good variety of people from different ages and backgrounds in terms of marriage status and activity in the LDS Church. There was not, unfortunately, a good representation of race and ethnicity: almost all of the respondents were Caucasian, with just a few identifying themselves as Hispanic or Asian/Pacific Islander.<sup>33</sup> Respondents lived all over the United States as well as in Canada and several other countries. Not surprisingly, the largest number of respondents who identified their place of

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31 Foster, “Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic.”

32 The survey on plural marriage was titled “Your Feelings About Plural Marriage” and was conducted at SurveyMonkey, located at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/GQZSTGR> between September 16 and October 20, 2011. There were 400 respondents, with a little over half being male. While this survey was intended only for those of a Latter-day Saint background, at least two respondents identified themselves as non-Mormons. There were also several who identified themselves as fundamentalist Mormons of former LDS membership. While another, more up-to-date survey was not conducted before publication, anecdotal evidence suggests attitudes have not changed between fall 2011 and winter 2014.

33 “Feelings About Plural Marriage.” There was one who chose Native American as an identifier while there were no African-Americans represented.



birth were from Utah, with the next largest group identifying their birthplace as somewhere in the western United States. The midwestern United States also had a good representation, as did Canada (especially western Canada). Even so, 12 other countries were represented, most from European countries.<sup>34</sup>

Over 47% of survey respondents heard about polygamy as a child while another 39% heard about it as teenagers, for a total of over 86% learning about plural marriage while in their childhood or youth. That is a significant number. While there were a variety of ways people first learned about plural marriage, about 42% of respondents said they learned from their family.<sup>35</sup>

Obviously, those who converted later in life did not have family who could explain the background of the doctrine and practice. Converts' reactions varied, and for some the concept was difficult to accept. One convert, who joined at age 24, wasn't told about the Church's polygamist past until after he was baptized. His first thought was, "What a dumb idea, why would anyone want more than one woman telling him what to do?"<sup>36</sup> Another convert who did not learn about plural marriage was a woman who was "distressed about the very thought of having [to] share my husband with another." It bothered her enough that she discussed it with other members, and she was told to pray about it. Through prayer and a very powerful dream she experienced, she "no longer worried about it all."<sup>37</sup>

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34 "Feelings About Plural Marriage." Over 230 of the respondents were born in Utah or the western United States. Interestingly enough, 5 of the respondents were from England, with at least 3 of them identifying themselves as fundamentalist Mormons.

35 "Feelings About Plural Marriage."

36 John Kitzmiller, personal interview, October 13, 2011. He explained that he was not troubled by the knowledge as the Church was a restoration of all things.

37 "Claire," e-mail correspondence, October 4, 2011. Copy in author's possession.

Unfortunately, many members are not reconciled to aspects of plural marriage.

While 57% of respondents said their feelings were neutral toward polygamy when they first became aware of it, over a quarter of the respondents' reactions were unfavorable to very unfavorable. These negative feelings increased when confronted with criticism of the Church on the subject of plural marriage. At the time of the survey, 30% of the respondents had unfavorable to very unfavorable feelings regarding plural marriage. Of those who had a very unfavorable feeling toward plural marriage at the time of the survey, over three quarters of them learned about polygamy as a child or teenager.<sup>38</sup>

An intriguing survey finding was that almost 58% were children or teenagers when they learned about Joseph Smith having plural wives. Surprisingly, only 4% of the respondents did not know he had plural wives. Of those who were aware, thirty percent had learned from a family member while almost ten percent learned from sources critical of the Church.<sup>39</sup>

As interesting as the survey statistics were, the most fascinating parts of the survey data were the respondent comments. They were similar to statements that I have heard and read in other settings and reflect a combination of discomfort, embarrassment, and ignorance regarding plural marriage. Comments ranged from the positive to the negative and for some people, the discovery of the Church's polygamous past was devastating.

Beyond an overall dislike for plural marriage expressed by those who had negative views, there were several factors that seemed to particularly distress them. These included the lying about plural marriage, the apparent polyandrous marriages of

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38 "Claire," October 4, 2011. The percentage with very unfavorable feelings toward plural marriage was the highest among the possible unfavorable, including possible unfavorable feelings toward the LDS Church.

39 "Feelings About Plural Marriage."

Joseph Smith, the teenage wives of Joseph Smith, and the idea that plural marriage will be practiced in the celestial kingdom.

### **Lying About Plural Marriage**

Some members of the LDS Church have expressed shock and puzzlement that early Church leaders such as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young would lie about plural marriages before the public announcement of the doctrine and practice. Even more disturbing for these members is the possibility that they have been lied to by modern Church leaders. Unfortunately, many believe the lack of information in official Church publications about plural marriage is a form of cover-up. They interpret this lack of information as a species of lying—about Joseph Smith, about other Church members' polygamous past, or about the events which surrounded the cessation of Church-sanctioned plural marriage.

For example, one survey respondent wrote, "The Church has done much to cover up that part of its history, and little to bring the truth into the light. That makes me sad." Another wrote, "In general I was OK with polygamy, thinking it was instituted by Brigham Young. Finding out Joseph Smith practiced was a shock—as I had not learned this in Church. Discovering the details of his polygamous practices was particularly distressing (polyandry, 14-year-old-wives, etc.). These details (in part) caused me to lose my testimony."<sup>40</sup>

Such shock at the prospect that Joseph Smith would have practiced plural marriage reminds me of an experience I had almost thirty years ago. I commuted between Provo and Salt Lake City and enjoyed visiting with other regular commuters,

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40 "Feelings About Plural Marriage." In contrast to the perception the Church and its leaders try to hide the Church's past, one respondent wrote that he had previously had problems with polygamy until a general authority visited his mission and, during a question and answer period, explained the background of plural marriage. From that point on, the respondent was okay with it.

all of whom were active members of the Church. During a conversation regarding Mormon history, I mentioned in passing that Joseph Smith had plural wives. One woman got an angry look on her face and exclaimed, “He did not! Brigham Young might have done that, but Joseph Smith never would.” I let the subject drop.

Given the lack of available information from official sources, it isn’t surprising that members like this woman would believe Brigham Young was the prophet who introduced plural marriage. One of the members of a private e-mail group of faithful Latter-day Saints wrote, “EVERYTHING that Correlation has produced, since its inception, indicates the Church is running away from polygamy as fast as it can.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Polyandrous Marriages of Joseph Smith**

For many active and disaffected members of the Church, certain aspects of Joseph Smith’s polygamy have been difficult to understand or accept. The prospect of polyandrous plural marriages seems particularly problematic. For some, it has been too much. One survey respondent wrote, “Inadvertently finding out the truth about polygamy/polyandry absolutely devastated me.”<sup>42</sup> Another complained about Joseph Smith “shacking up with women for years” and then wrote, “I am glad I discovered the truth about dirty Joe’s polyandry.... I am much happier as a saved Christian outside the vile, lying Mormon cult.”<sup>43</sup>

Discovery of Joseph Smith’s polyandrous marriages can be a traumatic experience. One faithful Latter-day Saint wrote of his in-laws’ learning of Joseph Smith’s polyandry, “My

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41 “Polygamy in the Spotlight,” e-mail correspondence, July 14, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

42 “Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy.”

43 “Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy.”

mother-in-law's eyes bulged out."<sup>44</sup> One woman who found out about Smith's polyandrous marriages, combined with other issues regarding Joseph Smith and Mormonism, declared she was "done, done and DONE!!!"<sup>45</sup> Another woman's exit letter from the Church had a series of accusatory questions including, "Why did Smith marry and have sex with 11 women who were married to other men at the same time, some of whom he sent away on missions before marrying their wives? Why did he marry young teenagers, including 14-year-old Helen Mar Kimball, who had both parents and didn't want to be married?"<sup>46</sup>

### Joseph Smith Marrying Teenagers

Joseph Smith's marriages to teenagers have increasingly become a stumbling block to faithful members. In fact, some have left the Church specifically because of this issue. The depth of dismay occurs in part because of the negative publicity attending Warren Jeffs's marriages to under-aged brides as well as modernity's changed concept of childhood and adulthood. Nevertheless, it remains a problem that is extremely difficult for some members to reconcile and even some of the most faithful Latter-day Saints remain troubled by it.

For example, one active Latter-day Saint in a private e-mail group opined about possible similarities between Smith and Jeffs, "None of this eases the nagging feeling in the back of the brain that somehow Warren Jeffs is a 21st-century Joseph Smith."<sup>47</sup> This same member had previously written, "I can see

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44 "How to Explain Polyandry to the Church Membership," e-mail correspondence, July 14, 2011. Copy in possession of the author.

45 "Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy."

46 Dianne Chryst Ormond, "It Started with Science," MormonThink.com, 2006, accessed October 15, 2011, <http://mormonthink.com/itstartedwith-science.htm>.

47 "Nate Oman on Jeffs and Modern Mormonism," e-mail correspondence, August 25, 2011. Copy in possession of author.

how the Jeffs case really could be a problem for some. Jeffs, in a way, *is* practicing what Joseph practiced. Polygamy. Teenage wives. Sex with teenage wives.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Plural Marriage will be Practiced in the Celestial Kingdom**

The idea that plural marriage will be practiced in the celestial kingdom, the highest degree of salvation in Mormon theology, probably elicits more comments and reaction from the women of the LDS Church than any other aspect of plural marriage. A few reasons suggest themselves: first, while 19th-century polygamy happened, it is, after all, in the past. Eternal plural marriage would be in the future, and, for some Latter-day Saint women, that makes it a very dark future. Second, celestial polygamy seems to evince a degree of sexism in the Church and even God’s eternal plan.

One female survey respondent commented, “I don’t feel a need to defend the original practice, and I don’t think it is an eternal principle. It is not part of my ‘testimony’ of the Church.”<sup>49</sup> Another respondent referred to the idea that plural marriage would extend into the eternities as nothing more than “folk belief,” which “is very distressing, especially to women of faith,” and “many individuals of LDS background have left the Church over this and similar issues.”<sup>50</sup>

In July 2011, Mormon author and blogger Jana Riess wrote about an e-mail she had received from a former Latter-day Saint woman who had “eventually left the Church over several issues, including the persistence of polygamous theology among Mormons.” Riess went on to explain, “As for individual belief, I’ve occasionally heard it taught from the pulpit (and Relief Society’s lace-draped table) that heaven will be polygamous. To

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48 “Nate Oman on Jeffs,” August 25, 2011.

49 “Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy.”

50 “Your Feelings About Mormon Polygamy.”

be fair, in the RS lesson this declaration evoked criticism and debate of a kind not often seen in RS.”<sup>51</sup>

An outspoken skeptic of the plurality of wives as an eternal principle is former BYU professor Valerie Hudson. At the 2011 FAIR Conference, Hudson gave a presentation describing plural marriage as an Abrahamic sacrifice, or an “exception to God’s law” rather than an eternal principle.<sup>52</sup> Her conference presentation, titled “A Reconciliation of Polygamy,” was based on an earlier article of hers titled “Polygamy.” Hudson claimed that “in the eternities we will have the privilege of living under the law, not the exception to the law.”<sup>53</sup> She further referred to the belief, which she felt was mostly held by male members of the Church, as nothing more than “celestial lust.”<sup>54</sup> In her article, she also made comments regarding modern Latter-day Saint beliefs about the eternal nature of plural marriage:

If cultural misinterpretations cause the women and men of the Church to mourn over polygamy, either because they mistakenly believe that God is indifferent between sacrifice and non-sacrifice and so no escape from this sacrifice will be provided by God or because they are led to believe that they are selfish and not

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51 Jana Riess, “My Polygamous Heaven . . . Not,” *Flunking Sainthood*, July 5, 2011, accessed August 11, 2011, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/flunkingsainthood/2011/07/my-polygamous-heaven-not.html>.

52 Joseph Walker, “Recent Events Highlight Confusion of Polygamy,” *Deseret News*, August 6, 2011, accessed August 7, 2011, <http://www.deseret-news.com/article/700168842/Recent-events-highlight-confusion-of-polygamy.html?pg=2>.

53 “Recent Events Highlight Confusion of Polygamy.” For the actual presentation, see <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2011-fair-conference/2011-a-reconciliation-of-polygamy>.

54 Valerie Hudson, “A Reconciliation of Polygamy,” presentation at the 2011 FAIR Conference, notes in possession of author. At the time, Hudson suggested some Mormon men had “celestial lust.” She compared these men to the young Muslim suicide bombers who killed themselves and others expecting to be rewarded with 72 virgins in the hereafter. Her comparisons troubled, even angered, some conference attendees.

righteous if they feel pain at the thought of polygamy, then these cultural interpretations are actively harming our people. We then have a duty to root out these cultural misinterpretations from our midst, lest they cause great spiritual mischief.<sup>55</sup>

Echoing the thought that belief in plural marriage as an eternal principle should be rooted out among Latter-day Saints were several faithful Latter-day Saints who actively discuss Church doctrine and history. One man commented, “I see a lot of men... in the Church who have become a little too complacent in pat (but unsatisfying) answers to questions about polygamy and women’s issues in the Church, which causes some understandable frustration for women trying to see how they’re still of equal importance.”<sup>56</sup> In response to that comment, a woman wrote, “I have watched a current thread about polygamy on the message board. For the very first time, I am seeing outright ‘no’ in response to will there be celestial polygamy. And not just one isolated no. We are indeed turning a corner... finally.”<sup>57</sup>

Another active Latter-day Saint responded:

Are you suggesting that what is making you pleased is the denial of relationships in the Celestial Kingdom? That some are now agreeing—on message boards—that polygamy is something that will NOT be present in the post [mortal] world in any form, by any couple? I am not sure that those that faithfully practiced it many years ago would be with that conclusion—do you?

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55 V. H. [Valerie Hudson] Cassler, “Polygamy,” <<*Square Two* 3/1 (Spring 2010), accessed May 14, 2010, <http://squatetwo.org/Sq2ArticleCasslerPolygamy.html>.

56 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, August 11, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

57 E-mail correspondence, August 11, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.



Their sacrifice, etc., involving the practice was in vain and for a false principle????<sup>58</sup>

The discussion by e-mail continued back and forth between those who believed that plural marriage was a celestial principle and those who either did not believe or at least questioned whether it was indeed something that would be practiced in the Celestial Kingdom. As the discussion grew heated, one group member observed in a private e-mail to another, “Most of those who did not agree with the reinterpretation of whether or not plural marriage...will be practiced in the Celestial Kingdom... have been hammered into submissive silence by louder voices and the powers that be.”<sup>59</sup> Near the end of the online discussion, one of the men answered a woman who adamantly expressed her belief that plural marriage would not be a requirement or even a possibility in the celestial kingdom. “If this is the only thing that is causing all this polygamy angst why not just accept that it is NOT a requirement to have multiple wives in heaven and let it go at that? If someone believe[s] differently is it really worth getting upset over and offended? I would think not.”<sup>60</sup>

Not surprisingly, the ambivalence among even active, faithful Latter-day Saints regarding plural marriage continues. In a 2012 e-mail discussion between fellow Latter-day Saints about Joseph Smith and polyandry, one member wrote, “There really is a chance that these married women might have been just as interested in the ‘prurient’ side of this as Joseph Smith.”<sup>61</sup>

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58 E-mail correspondence, August 11, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

59 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, August 14, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

60 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, August 13, 2011. Copy in author’s possession.

61 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, February 17, 2012. Copy in author’s possession.

Another later agreed that “polyandry, no matter how you try to present it, is weird. That’s just how it is.”<sup>62</sup>

### **Suggestions of What To Do**

Unfortunately, over time there have been a number of members of the Church who have been upset and offended about aspects of plural marriage, especially the so-called “weird” aspects. This has led to unanswered—perhaps even unspoken—questions, as well as hurt feelings, insecurity, and resentment. Even more tragically, accidental discovery and/or inadequate teachings about the Church’s history and relationship to plural marriage have caused crises of faith which have alienated members of the Church and, in many cases, led to their eventual departure from the faith.

Even one soul lost over the now-unpracticed principle of plural marriage is too many. The Church and its defenders have begun to take steps to inoculate members against the insidious attacks of critics and enemies. Anti-Mormons are constantly pushing and picking at members’ faith in order to plant seeds of doubt and to destroy members’ testimonies. Plural marriage has proven to be a prime weapon because a little of the truth can be devastating. This weapon must be neutralized. While steps have been taken to inoculate members, more can be done.

Here are some suggestions that might help members avoid the potential negative impact of the Church’s plural marriage heritage.<sup>63</sup> Members need to be taught the full history of the Church, including plural marriage from Joseph Smith into the 20th century. Plural marriage did not start nor end abruptly. The commencement and particularly the end of plural marriage

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62 E-mail correspondence between [anonymous] and Craig L. Foster, August 7, 2012. Copy in author’s possession.

63 It is not my place to advise Church leaders on how to handle this problem and, therefore, these suggestions should be seen as such—simple suggestions that might help.

were fitful and certainly painful for those involved. This and other facts about plural marriage need to be understood by Latter-day Saints, so information and specific detail regarding the theology and practice of plural marriage need to be provided at the appropriate time and place. The place is easy—a Church setting in which accurate information may be taught in programs such as Primary, Sunday School, and Seminary. The time or times of such sacred education needs a little more explanation.

## Children

There is gospel wisdom in Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way they should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” This gospel principle certainly includes learning about Church history and doctrine. When people learn gospel principles as children, they are able to grow in their understanding as they learn line upon line, precept upon precept.<sup>64</sup> It should be the same regarding the Church’s history of plural marriage.

Of course, the teachings should be simple and matter-of-fact information such as mentioning in passing that early Church leaders like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, as well as other early members of the Church, were commanded by God to have more than one wife. Then it should be emphasized that we no longer practice plural marriage. With simple explanations, children become aware of this aspect of Church history without being overly burdened by all of the complexities. My wife and I, for example, would explain to our children about their own ancestors from the time when they were able to understand. As they grew up, we would point to pictures of ancestors on the wall and explain how they came from his fifth wife or that the lady in the photograph was the plural wife of the man in

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64 2 Nephi 28:30.

the photo hanging next to hers. As the children grew in age and understanding, we would explain a little more so that by the time they were teenagers, they had a broad familiarity with Mormon polygamy as a historical reality.

## Youth

Our teenage youth need to know about plural marriage, including the fact that Joseph Smith, by commandment of God, introduced the doctrine and practice of the plurality of wives. A couple of years ago, I was talking with one of my daughter's 16-year-old friends, a descendant of LDS polygamists, and mentioned Joseph Smith's plural wives. Her eyes bugged out, her mouth dropped open, and she asked in a weak voice, "Joseph Smith had more than one wife?" Afterward, she repeated several times that she was blown away.<sup>65</sup>

If my daughter's friend had been taught from her childhood, she would not have been blown away. Furthermore, if she had been learning about the Church's polygamous history in the youth Sunday School programs, she would have had a better foundation on which to stand. Unfortunately, she was not alone in being shocked to learn Joseph Smith had plural wives. For some of our youth, the shock is too traumatic for their tender testimonies.

When my daughter heard about her friend's shock at learning that Joseph Smith had plural wives, she said, "You didn't know that? I thought everyone knew that."

I replied, "They don't all have parents like you do." As with every gospel principle, the foundation needs to be laid in their childhood and then built upon in their youth with more information about the faith and sacrifices practicing plural marriage necessitated among the Saints, as well as the reasons for ending the practice.

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65 Foster, "Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic."

## Adults

By addressing difficult aspects of Church history like plural marriage in their childhood and youth, eventually an understanding of the historical practice of plural marriages would be commonplace among active adult members of the Church. Nevertheless, with reactivation success, there will always be a need to teach adult members about the Church's polygamous past.

There should, then, be a better historical and doctrinal explanation of plural marriage in adult Gospel Doctrine classes. Members should learn that one practices plural marriage only when God commands it through his prophets, and we are following the prophet by not presently practicing it.

## New Members

Not all members of the Church have been members since their childhood, and too many new converts have stumbled upon the Church's history of plural marriage and have been shocked and even angered they were not told of it before their baptism. Missionaries should learn more about the history of plural marriage and then mention this in a faithful way before converts' baptisms.

This brings up another matter that needs to be addressed: missionaries at Church historical sites must be taught how to discuss the topic of Mormon polygamy because it is inevitable it will be brought up by curious visitors. Gains have been made since the days I observed palpable discomfort in missionaries and volunteers. Nevertheless, more should be done since the obvious discomfort and embarrassment of Church representatives is not only fodder for anti-Mormons but also sets a poor example for their fellow members, many of whom are struggling with their own ambivalence about plural marriage.

If missionaries, as well as other members of the Church, are given more information to gain a better understanding and firmer foundation regarding the history and doctrine of plural marriage, they might not be so uncomfortable discussing it with non-Mormons. That understanding will come through appropriate Church courses and Church literature. Rather than plural marriage being noticeably absent from Church publications, it should be adequately discussed. It should be placed within historical and theological context and be available as resource material for Saints with questions or for those who need to respond to questions.

Now, in a world-wide Church such as the LDS Church, not all members will have the same need for or interest in information about the Church's polygamous past. For example, this topic is probably not as important to African or Asian Saints as it is to those living along the Wasatch Front. For that matter, it may not even be as important to Saints residing in the eastern parts of Canada and the United States as it is to those residing in the western United States. And while such issues might be of little interest in one stake or ward, members in a neighboring stake or ward might be very interested or have a need for further teaching and explanation. Therefore, leadership at different levels could decide what and where to teach its members, as well as who might be the most knowledgeable and able to teach such sensitive matters.<sup>66</sup>

Hopefully these suggestions will help those who are troubled or discomfited about the Church's legacy of plural marriage. At the very least, it might help dispel the popular

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66 The LDS Church leadership already does a very good job of listening to and trying to address the needs of its members. However, it is obvious more needs to be done to answer the questions and concerns of members of all ages. When there are problems in different places around the world over difficult subjects like plural marriage, such as the recent apostasy problems in Sweden, leadership could then place even more emphasis on the education of its members in those specific places.

perception that plural marriage revolved around sexuality—and not only sexuality, but the dominance of male sexuality. Because of plural marriage's inherent sexual implications, it is natural there would be some discomfort and embarrassment. But sexual relations and procreation were only one aspect of plural marriage.

True, many non-Mormons and even some members nervously—or insensitively—joke about the plethora of plural wives in a suggestive way. Most of these people, however, are just trying to find a way to react to something that is so contrary to accepted marriage patterns. Latter-day Saints should remember that while there are certainly non-members who want to attack, criticize, or simply make fun of the Church's polygamous past, there are many who are genuinely curious and who mean neither harm nor insult. For example, a number of years ago I showed some important guests around the Family History Library and then the neighboring Museum of Church History and Art, both in Salt Lake City. After leaving the museum, they tentatively, almost apologetically, asked me about how plural marriage started and what it was like. I told them I would be glad to answer any question they had. We spoke for at least 45 minutes during which time I was very open and honest about aspects of plural marriage, including my own family's history. They thanked me for being willing to so openly and comfortably talk about plural marriage. They said they had asked other Mormons about plural marriage and had been met with embarrassment, silence, and awkwardness.<sup>67</sup> I was sorry for both them and the members who had not known how to gracefully react to honest curiosity.

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67 Foster, "Like Two Crazy Aunts in the Attic."

## Conclusion

When marriages suffer from serious problems, separation almost always leads to either reconciliation with the hopes of the marriage surviving or to divorce. While some periods of separation are longer and uglier than others, a finality is almost always achieved. Unfortunately, such an outcome is not the case for Latter-day Saints and their polygamous history. Since few anticipate plural marriage's return, and even fewer hope for it, the estranged partners are not getting back together. But, on the other hand, the Church and its members will never be able to divorce themselves from historical plural marriage. No matter how hard the LDS Church may try to cut ties to its polygamous past, the two are irrevocably and inseparably tied to each other.

With every separation or divorce comes uncomfortable reminders of former relatives. In many ways, Fundamentalist Mormons are like Latter-day Saints' former relatives—ex-uncles or crazy former cousins who cause embarrassment and discomfort, for they remind us of a married past we would rather forget. Quite often, in spite of divorce, extended family members remain connected because of a common interest, such as children. In many ways, the Fundamentalists are the Latter-day Saints' extended and somewhat estranged relatives. After all, both the LDS Church and Fundamentalist Mormons share common roots and attributes. And, like plural marriage itself, they are not going away.<sup>68</sup>

The LDS Church and its members must confront and accept not only its past but also the fact that the Church will probably forever be associated with polygamy. Indeed, in the minds of

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68 Unlike Warren Jeffs and a small minority of polygamists, most Fundamentalist Mormons are quiet, law-abiding (other than practicing polygamy) people of good report who generally blend in with the rest of society and who have no desire to attract attention to themselves or their religious practices.



many people, 19th-century Mormon polygamy defines western polygamy.<sup>69</sup> Accepting that the twain are inseparable does not mean the Church must acquiesce to the negative stereotyping used by its critics. Faithful historians and scholars can and should continue to study the Church's polygamous past in order to help members better understand and appreciate the complex history of Mormon polygamy. By so doing, they will be able to help present and future members trump critics' attempts at malicious manipulation.

Furthermore, the Church must accept that there will always be coat-tail relatives to remind its members of their past. The Church has done a good job of differentiating itself from its Fundamentalist relatives, particularly with renegade groups like the FLDS, who have exemplified the fact that while there are similarities, there are many more differences. The Church should probably highlight the differences when needed and otherwise ignore Fundamentalist groups like the FLDS as much as possible.

Whether or not the particular suggestions in this essay are adopted, the goal of leaders and defenders of the Church should be to aim for a more knowledgeable membership who thereby exhibit less discomfort and embarrassment about the Church's past relationship to plural marriage. Ultimately, the hope for Saints who struggle emotionally and spiritually with plural marriage is that a better understanding of the history

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69 For examples of Mormon polygamy defining western polygamy, see Jessica Ravitz, "'Sister Wives' explained: A fundamentalist Mormon polygamy primer," CNN Belief Blog, October 25, 2010, (accessed February 22, 2014); <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/10/25/sister-wives-explained-a-fundamentalist-mormon-polygamy-primer/>; Michael E. Price, "Are People 'Naturally' Polygamous?" *Psychology Today*, August 18, 2011, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/darwin-eternity/201108/are-people-naturally-polygamous-0> (accessed February 22, 2014); and W.W., "Polygamy Now!" *The Economist*, June 28, 2013, (accessed February 22, 2014), <http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2013/06/slippery-slopes>.

and doctrine of plural marriage will encourage greater faith and bring solace to the soul.

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# DISSENTERS: PORTRAYING THE CHURCH AS WRONG SO THEY CAN BE RIGHT WITHOUT IT

*Brian C. Hales*

*Abstract: This essay addresses the reasons many persons have left The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In particular, there are those who publicly assert the Church is not led by inspired leaders so they can feel at peace about their decision to leave it. One common argument used to justify their estrangement is the “Samuel Principle,” which ostensibly would require God to allow his followers on earth to go astray if they chose any level of unrighteousness. Problems with this interpretation are presented including examples from religious history that show that God’s primary pattern has been to call his errant followers to repentance by raising up righteous leaders to guide them. Also explored are the common historical events that dissenters often allege have caused the Church to apostatize. The notion that the Church and the “Priesthood” could be separate entities is examined as well. The observation that Church leaders continue to receive divine communication in order to fulfill numerous prophecies and that a significant number of completely devout Latter-day Saints have always existed within the Church, obviating the need for any dissenting movement, is discussed. In addition, several common scriptural proof-texts employed by some dissenters and their ultimate condition of apostasy are analyzed.*

**A**longstanding process that affects most religions occurs when dissenters portray their parent church as *wrong* because they are determined to be *right* without it. This

phenomenon has affected The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the past as individuals have left it but apparently did not wish to discard its doctrines. Usually underlying their reasons for leaving is the belief that they possess superior knowledge, superior righteousness, superior priesthood power, superior practices, and/or superior extra-worldly experiences than those found within the church. Before they can embrace this superiority, however, they must demonstrate that at some point the church and its membership have lost knowledge, righteousness, priesthood power, practices, and/or extra-worldly experiences. Hence for these dissenters, their formal or informal estrangements signal not a departure from truth but from church members they perceive as being *less* (or possessing *less*). Sometimes they embrace the title of “fundamentalist,” asserting they have returned to the “fundamental” teachings introduced by Joseph Smith—teachings they believe have been abandoned by the mainstream membership.<sup>1</sup>

Being a successful dissenter or fundamentalist requires the ability to embrace Joseph Smith without fully espousing The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which claims

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1 Throughout this text I will refer to “Mormon fundamentalists” as a title rather than a description. “Mormon fundamentalists” prefer the name “Fundamentalist Mormons.” While I mean no disrespect, I do not believe they qualify through their works to be so addressed. “Mormon fundamentalists” are similar to fundamentalist groups that have attached themselves to other religions such as Islam, Catholicism, and the Jewish faith in that they selectively emphasize a few fundamentals while ignoring many others. For example, Mormon fundamentalist leaders like Lorin C. Woolley, John Y. Barlow, Joseph W. Musser, Leroy Johnson, Rulon C. Allred, Elden Kingston, and Joel LeBaron placed little or no emphasis upon missionary work—the need to preach the gospel and baptize unbelievers. The fundamentalist leaders sent some missionaries to gain converts to polygamy, but unlike Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor, they did not set the gathering of Israel as a priority (see D&C 84:75–76, 88:68; 110:11). The historical record demonstrates that missionary work was more fundamental to Joseph Smith than polygamy. See Brian C. Hales, *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism: The Generations after the Manifesto* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006), 451–78.

continuity to the church he established in 1830 and its leaders. This might sound easy but in reality is not because the church professes to be led by a living prophet and by personal revelation to those called to leadership positions. Consequently, those who leave must demonstrate two things: first, that God would allow a disconnect to occur between the heavens and church leaders and its members, and second, that such a disconnection has occurred historically.

Two strategies are commonly employed to support this interpretation. One affirms that under certain conditions it is possible that God would allow the church and its leaders to go astray. That is, priesthood authorities are not infallible and could lead the Latter-day Saints into apostasy. Once this belief is established within their own minds, dissenters simply need to pick an historical event as the trigger. A second approach asserts that the “priesthood” (and its highest offices) is an *organization* that can exist separate from the “church.” Once embraced, dissidents need simply declare that the church has gone astray but the “priesthood” (organization) has not and then claim to be members of the “priesthood.”

### The “Samuel Principle”

Before proclaiming when and how the church apostatized, dissenters need to establish that God would allow such an apostasy to occur. To do this, they emphasize the principle of “common consent” mentioned in D&C 26:2: “And all things shall be done by common consent in the church, by much prayer and faith, for all things you shall receive by faith.” In other words, they reason that if the majority of members “consent” to a wayward path or an uninspired leader, even if they don’t realize it, God is going to respect their agency and allow them to stray. To justify this interpretation, dissenters seek scriptural examples where God gave an individual or a

group of his followers what they wanted, not what they needed spiritually. A few examples can be identified:

1. The Lord told Samuel to fulfill the Israelites' request for a king when they rejected him (1 Samuel 8:6–10).<sup>2</sup>
2. Joseph Smith was granted permission to give Martin Harris the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon even though many previous requests by Joseph had been denied (D&C 3, 10).<sup>3</sup>
3. The Lord gave the Israelites in the desert the Law of Moses when they rejected the higher law (JST Exodus 34:1–2).<sup>4</sup>

Selectively emphasizing these events supports the idea that God would let The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints go astray if the membership chose to disobey. Joseph W. Musser, a fundamentalist leader, elaborated in 1940:

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2 Joseph W. Musser taught in 1936: "We believe that he [Wilford Woodruff] signed the Manifesto discontinuing the practice of Plural marriage IN THE CHURCH because of the demand of members of the Church, who grew tired of the conflict and demanded a change, just as Israel of old demanded a king. Israel wanted to be as other people, and the Lord, after warning them, and they rejected His warning, told Samuel to give them a king. History records the terrible results thereof. And so this people, in face of the warnings of the early leaders of the Church, demanded an opportunity to live as Babylon, and the Lord yielded; for after all, the free agency of man cannot be abridged. And for this reason, and this alone, was the Manifesto permitted to be signed by Wilford Woodruff. This is the most that can be conceded that the Lord had to do with the Manifesto of 1890." Joseph W. Musser, "Slandorous Statements Refuted," *Truth* 2/8 (January 1937): 130; emphasis in original. See also David W. Jeffs, "Fulfillment of Isaiah's Words," *Truth* 6/1 (June 1940): 21, and Gilbert Fulton, *The Most Holy Principle*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Gems, 1970–75), 4:66.

3 Heber Bennion, *Gospel Problems* (n.p., n.d.), 43, 49–50; Fulton, *Most Holy Principle* 4:66; and Jeffs, "Fulfillment of Isaiah's Words," in *Truth*, 19–20.

4 Dennis R. Short, *Questions on Plural Marriage With a Selected Bibliography and 1600 References* (Salt Lake City: Dennis R. Short, 1974), 25; Joseph W. Musser, "The Aftermath of Compromise," *Truth* 18/10 (March 1953): 315; Joseph W. Musser, "What Authority Sanctioned the Manifesto," *Truth* 20/6 (November 1954): 201; Editor [Joseph W. Musser], "Editor's Comments," *Star of Truth* 3/7 (July 1955): 276; Joseph W. Musser, *Marriage – Ballard/Jenson Correspondence* (n.p., 1935), 76.

To the time-worn statement that the Lord will not permit the leaders to lead His people astray one need but reflect on the history of the past. The Saints have been led astray by their leaders on numerous occasions. The Jews were so led by the recreant High Priests in the days of Christ – indeed they were led to crucify the Savior. King Noah and the priests of his day caused the people to stray from the simple truths of the Gospel until only a few faithful ones, under the leadership of Alma remained and they were driven into the wilderness. So it is in the present day [1940], by permission of the leaders, laws and ordinances have been broken and changed to better accommodate the efforts of the Saints to be one with the world.<sup>5</sup>

Musser stretches the concept somewhat, but he affirms that church members can sustain leaders who are capable of leading them into apostasy. That is, God’s respect for free agency would prevent him from intervening if the membership sustained an uninspired leader by common consent.

Using the “Samuel Principle” logic, dissenters posit that somewhere in the last 200 years church members became disobedient and chose unrighteous leaders, and God could not and did not intervene. The dissenters, however, claim the religious high ground where apostasy supposedly has not occurred. They generally claim inspired authority and/or leadership independent of the errant church. In a few cases, like with the FLDS polygamists in Colorado City, Arizona, and Eldorado, Texas, they may also affirm to be God’s true church, having completely supplanted the Utah-based church.

Several problems can be identified with efforts to generalize the “Samuel Principle” to all places and times. First, a far more

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5 Joseph W. Musser, “Evidences and Reconciliations,” *Truth* 6/5 (October 1940): 109.

common pattern in the scriptures is for God to raise up inspired prophet-leaders to declare repentance to apostates. Second, God can maintain inspired leadership within his church without encroaching upon the free agency of the membership. And third, multiple revelations support that the church established by Joseph Smith was destined to continue and expand until the millennium.

### **God Calls Prophets to Declare Repentance when his Followers Go Astray**

The common pattern in the scriptures is for God to call prophets to declare repentance to mortals rather than respecting their wicked choices. So if the Latter-day Saints had begun to stray from the truth, the general reaction in the scriptures would have been for the Lord to raise up leaders to correct them. A classic example is the account of the Zoramites in the Book of Mormon who “had had the word of God preached unto them. But they had fallen into great errors” (Alma 31:8–9). In response to their apostasy, Alma and several other missionaries were sent to preach repentance to them (Alma 31:5–6). The Zoramites were not given a lesser law or ignored by God, who dissenters would say was bound to respect their choices. Instead they were given new inspired leaders to bring them back to truth. Multiple other examples can be found involving Enoch, Noah, Isaiah, and a host of lesser prophets (see, for example, Moses 6:27, 8:23, 2 Kings 20:1, Jacob 2:2, Words of Mormon 1:17, Mosiah 12:1, Helaman 7:2).

When early church members exhibited false practices, Joseph Smith called them to repentance:

Soon after the Gospel was established in Kirtland, and during the absence of the authorities of the Church, many false spirits were introduced, many strange visions were seen, and wild, enthusiastic notions were entertained; men ran out of doors under the influence



of this spirit, and some of them got upon the stumps of trees and shouted, and all kinds of extravagances were entered into by them; one man pursued a ball that he said he saw flying in the air, until he came to a precipice, when he jumped into the top of a tree, which saved his life; and many ridiculous things were entered into, calculated to bring disgrace upon the Church of God, to cause the Spirit of God to be withdrawn, and to uproot and destroy those glorious principles which had been developed for the salvation of the human family. *But when the authorities returned, the spirit was made manifest, those members that were exercised with it were tried for their fellowship, and those that would not repent and forsake it were cut off.*<sup>6</sup>

While there may have been a few exceptions in the religious record (like Samuel giving Israel a King), God's pattern (see D&C 52:14) is not to neglect his followers who err but to call prophets to declare repentance and lead them back to truth.

### God Can “Raise Up” Righteous Leaders and Still Respect Free Agency

But what if the followers of God sustain and support errant leaders? Isn't God obligated to follow their decisions? While on rare occasions, he has chosen to intervene so his children would learn a specific gospel principle, the scriptures demonstrate that God's purposes are not vulnerable to the choices of his followers on earth. Joseph Smith's revelations plainly teach that due to two processes, God can respect free agency and always have inspired leaders in his church if that is his design.

The first process involves God's control over when and where we are born on earth. George Q. Cannon explained that

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 213, emphasis added.

in the premortal world, “the courts of heaven were thronged with spirits anxious to take upon themselves tabernacles of flesh.”<sup>7</sup> Spirits in the primordial world are anxious to come to earth, but the timing of our mortal births is according to God’s purposes. Paul explained that the Lord has “determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of [our] habitation” (Acts 17:26). For example, Joseph F. Smith taught that certain “choice spirits” were reserved in the premortal heavens to be born in the “fullness of times” because they would be then needed: “The Prophet Joseph Smith, and ... Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and other choice spirits ... were reserved to come forth in the fulness of times to take part in laying the foundations of the great latter-day work” (D&C 138:53). Without question, the location and timing of our mortal births are under God’s complete control.

In addition, God can determine when we die (Hebrews 9:27). He “holds the destinies of all the armies of the nations of the earth” (D&C 117:6) and can end or prolong our mortal lives according to his divine will. For example, Isaiah warned King Hezekiah: “Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live” (Isaiah 38:1). Hezekiah wept and prayed: “O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight” (Isaiah 38:3). Isaiah was then instructed: “Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years” (Isaiah 38:5; see also 2 Kings 20:6). Similarly, when Joseph Smith’s enemies incarcerated him in the Liberty Jail in 1839, God comforted him saying: “their bounds are set, they cannot pass. Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less; therefore, fear not what man can do” (D&C 122:9).

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7 Jerreld L. Newquist, comp., *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of George Q. Cannon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 21.

Accordingly, the Lord determines when and where we are born and can control when and where we pass away. This power gives him ultimate control over who is guiding his church on earth. At no time does he need to tolerate an uninspired leader. He can simply bring them home (Alma 40:11), thus allowing a more righteous leader to preside in his place. Brigham Young explained:

The Lord Almighty leads this Church, and he will never suffer you to be led astray if you are found doing your duty. You may go home and sleep as sweetly as a babe in its mother's arms, as to any danger of your leaders leading you astray, for if they should try to do so the Lord would quickly sweep them from the earth.<sup>8</sup>

Wilford Woodruff echoed this concept:

The Lord will never permit me nor any other man who stands as the President of this Church, to lead you astray. It is not in the program. It is not in the mind of God. If I were to attempt that, the Lord would remove me out of my place, and so He will any other man who attempts to lead the children of men astray from the oracles of God and from their duty.<sup>9</sup>

Accompanying God's complete power over life and death is his foreknowledge. He knows "the end from the beginning" (Abraham 2:8). He assures us that "all things are present before mine eyes" (D&C 38:2). Nephi explained: "the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men; for

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8 Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:289.

9 Brian H. Stuy, ed., *Collected Discourses Delivered by President Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles and Others*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: B. H. S. Publishing, 1987-92), 2:137.

behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of all his words” (1 Nephi 9:6).

These two powers — controlling birth and death as well as knowing the future — allow God to raise up righteous, inspired leaders and believers on earth to perpetuate his work whenever he desires. God told ancient Israel: “The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee” (Deuteronomy 18:15). This process also influenced the creation of the Constitution of the United States. The Lord informed Joseph Smith: “I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose” (D&C 101:80). If God can “raise up wise men” to bring forth the Constitution, he can also assure that righteous men are always in position to guide his church on earth.

Claims from dissenters that God’s respect for our free agency renders him essentially impotent to maintain righteous, inspired leaders to guide his church after Joseph Smith’s death are unfounded and diminish his divine stature.

### **Prophecy Supports the Restored Church Will Continue to the Millennium**

Multiple revelations and statements from Joseph Smith support that the church he established will persist to the millennium. The plainest was uttered in October of 1831 in Hiram, Ohio:

The keys of the kingdom of God are committed unto man on the earth, and from thence shall the gospel roll forth unto the ends of the earth, as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth. (D&C 65:2)

Joseph Smith’s God has the power to fulfill his promises including that the gospel will “roll forth unto the ends of the earth.”

In addition, several revelations plainly acknowledge that the church established through Joseph Smith is the “last kingdom” (D&C 88:70, 74, 90:6; see also D&C 24:19, 27:12–13). That is, it would not apostatize or be given to another people.

Therefore, thou art blessed from henceforth that bear the keys of the kingdom given unto you; which kingdom is coming forth for the last time. (D&C 90:2)

For unto you, the Twelve, and those, the First Presidency, who are appointed with you to be your counselors and your leaders, is the power of this priesthood given, *for the last days and for the last time*, in the which is the dispensation of the fulness of times. Which power you hold, in connection with all those who have received a dispensation at any time from the beginning of the creation; For verily I say unto you, the keys of the dispensation, which ye have received, have come down from the fathers, and *last of all*, being sent down from heaven unto you. (D&C 112:30)

Other revelations reflect the same expectation:

And to none else will I grant this power, to receive this same testimony among this generation, in this the beginning of the rising up and the coming forth of my church out of the wilderness—clear as the moon, and fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners. (D&C 5:14; see also D&C 33:5, 109:73)

Behold, I, the Lord, have made my church in these last days like unto a judge sitting on a hill, or in a high place, to judge the nations. (D&C 64:37)

That through my providence, notwithstanding the tribulation which shall descend upon you, that

the church may stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world; (D&C 78:14)

Yea, the word of the Lord concerning his church, established in the last days for the restoration of his people, as he has spoken by the mouth of his prophets, and for the gathering of his saints to stand upon Mount Zion, which shall be the city of New Jerusalem. (D&C 84:2)

Similarly, the Prophet taught:

And again, another parable put He forth unto them, having an allusion to the Kingdom that should be set up, just previous to or at the time of the harvest, which reads as follows — “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds: but, when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.” *Now we can discover plainly that this figure is given to represent the Church as it shall come forth in the last days.*<sup>10</sup>

In summary, the “Samuel Principle” apparently applied to the unique circumstances that the prophet Samuel faced, but it does not represent God’s normal interaction with his followers on earth. The scriptures demonstrate that the Lord’s pattern is to call prophets to declare repentance. Controlling birth and death and knowing all things allow him to always have inspired leaders when he desires. Multiple revelations and declarations indicate the church established by the Prophet will continue and expand until the millennium.

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10 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 98.

## Allegations of Apostasy

Despite the weaknesses inherent in the “Samuel Principle,” dissenters may affirm that certain events in church history triggered the loss of true leaders, true authority, and/or God’s divine guidance.

### *D&C 84*

The earliest allegation historically is found in an 1832 revelation that condemned the Saints of that time.<sup>11</sup>

And your minds in times past have been darkened because of unbelief, and because you have treated lightly the things you have received—Which vanity and unbelief have brought the whole church under condemnation. And this condemnation resteth upon the children of Zion, even all. And they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon and the former commandments which I have given them, not only to say, but to do according to that which I have written. (D&C 84:54–57)

Allegedly, the Saints apostatized from the truth at that time and never recovered. This stance is contradicted by several verses in the same revelation that support that their condemnation was temporary. Earlier in verse 2 of that revelation we read: “Yea, the word of the Lord concerning his church, established in the last days for the restoration of his people, as he has spoken by the mouth of his prophets, and for the gathering of his saints to stand upon Mount Zion.” Verse 61 promises: “For I will forgive you of your sins with this commandment—that you remain steadfast in your minds in solemnity and the spirit

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11 Denver C. Snuffer, Jr., *Passing the Heavenly Gift* (Salt Lake City: Mill Creek Press, 2011), 376–85.

of prayer, in bearing testimony to all the world of those things which are communicated unto you” (D&C 84: 61). Later verses in the same revelation acknowledge that church members were still the Lord’s representatives:

Nevertheless, search diligently and spare not; and wo unto that house, or that village or city that rejecteth you, or your words, or your testimony concerning me. Wo, I say again, unto that house, or that village or city that rejecteth you, or your words, or your testimony of me. (D&C 84:94–95; see also 99:4, 124:8)

At the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in 1836, Joseph Smith prayed: “Remember all thy church.... That thy church may come forth out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners” (D&C 109:72–73). In response, the Savior declared:

Let the hearts of your brethren rejoice, and let the hearts of all my people rejoice, who have, with their might, built this house to my name. For behold, I have accepted this house, and my name shall be here; and I will manifest myself to my people in mercy in this house. Yea, I will appear unto my servants, and speak unto them with mine own voice, if my people will keep my commandments, and do not pollute this holy house. Yea the hearts of thousands and tens of thousands shall greatly rejoice in consequence of the blessings which shall be poured out, and the endowment with which my servants have been endowed in this house. And the fame of this house shall spread to foreign lands; and this is the beginning of the blessing which shall be poured out upon the heads of my people. Even so. Amen. (D&C 110:6–10)



During the dedication proceedings, multiple extra-worldly experiences were enjoyed by the Saints.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the Lord provided a name for the church in 1838, which would have been surprising if the church had been permanently rejected in 1832:

For thus shall *my church* be called in the last days, even The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Verily I say unto you all: Arise and shine forth, that thy light may *be a standard for the nations*; And that the gathering together upon the land of Zion, and *upon her stakes*, may be for a defense, and for a refuge from the storm, and from wrath when it shall be poured out without mixture upon the whole earth. (D&C 115:4–6)

Multiple evidences demonstrate that the Lord accepted his church in 1838, well after the conditional condemnation of section 84 was issued.

#### *D&C 124*

One dissenter recently criticized the Nauvoo Latter-day Saints as deeply unrighteous and “ungrateful and oblivious.”<sup>13</sup> He wrote that the time required to build the Nauvoo Temple (four years and two months) was too long, resulting in the Lord’s irrevocable condemnation.<sup>14</sup> He bases his interpretation upon D&C 124:31–32:

But I command you, all ye my saints, to build a house unto me; and I grant unto you a sufficient time to build a house unto me; and during this time your baptisms

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12 See Steven C. Harper, “A Pentecost and Endowment Indeed”: Six Eyewitness Accounts of the Kirtland Temple Experience,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2005), 327–71.

13 Snuffer, *Passing the Heavenly Gift*, 118.

14 Snuffer, *Passing the Heavenly Gift*, 96–119, 265–87. It is worth noting that the Saints settled in the Utah territory in 1847, but thirty years passed before the St. George Temple was complete. In addition, building the Salt Lake Temple took forty years (1853–1893).

shall be acceptable unto me. But behold, at the end of this appointment your baptisms for your dead shall not be acceptable unto me; and if you do not these things at the end of the appointment *ye shall be rejected as a church*, with your dead, saith the Lord your God. (D&C 124:31–32; see also 47–48)

Asserting that the church and its members in the early 1840s were so unrighteous that the Lord was forced to withdraw his Spirit and authority is difficult to sustain from a documentary standpoint. During the years the Saints settled Nauvoo, the high council aggressively disciplined all moral transgressions (see appendix to this essay). Joseph administered temple ordinances in 1842, expanding in 1843 and 1844 to include dozens of church members. He also organized the Council of Fifty in the spring of 1844.<sup>15</sup> These activities support the Lord was with his church and his prophet. On July 23, 1843, Joseph Smith declared: “I see no faults in the church. — Let me be resurrected with the saints whether to heaven or hell or any other good place — good society. what do we care if the society is good?”<sup>16</sup> Just days before the martyrdom, as Joseph left Nauvoo for the last time, he paused when they got to the Temple and remarked, “This is the loveliest place and the best people under the heavens.”<sup>17</sup> Many other evidences are available to show that in Nauvoo, the Latter-day Saints were still approved of God and

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15 As its name implies, this council was composed of fifty men but usually varied from that number. It was unique among the councils established by the Prophet in that its membership could include individuals who were not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was functioning only when church leadership were inspired to call it into activity and to direct its actions. See D. Michael Quinn, “The Council of Fifty and Its Members, 1844 to 1945.” *BYU Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 163–97.

16 Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 234, W. W. Richards reporting, 23 July 1843 (Sunday Afternoon).

17 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 379.

experiencing visions, speaking in tongues, dreaming inspired dreams, and enjoying other gifts of the Spirit.

### *1890 Manifesto*

The most common trigger-event promoted by dissenters allegedly causing the church to lose the truth is the issuance of the 1890 Manifesto. Through it, the commandment then incumbent upon church members to practice plural marriage was removed.

Fundamentalists universally vilify the Latter-day Saints in the 1890s, declaring that the Saints of that time became more concerned with their property and worldly possessions than with keeping the commandments of God. They affirm that church members were then hounding Wilford Woodruff “day and night for a declaration of recession of polygamy.”<sup>18</sup> As fundamentalist leader Joseph W. Musser stated: “It became necessary for the leaders to pacify the multitude.”<sup>19</sup> Fundamentalist “High Priest Apostle”<sup>20</sup> Lorin Woolley taught:

[Church members were writing letters] asking the leaders to do something, as the Gentiles were talking of confiscating their property in connection with the property of the Church. These letters not only came from those who were living in the Plural Marriage relation, but also from prominent men who were presiding in various offices of the Church who were not living in that relation. They all urged that something

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18 Musser, “Evidences and Reconciliations, in *Truth*, 255.

19 Joseph W. Musser, “What Authority Sanctioned the Manifesto,” *Truth* 20/6 (November 1954): 200.

20 According to Musser and Woolley, a priesthood office exists called “High Priest Apostle,” which is higher than the apostleship of the Twelve. See Joseph W. Musser, *A Priesthood Issue* (n.p.: n.d. [1948]), 10–11; Lorin Woolley quoted in “Book of Remembrance of Joseph W. Musser,” *Holograph*, 31. This teaching has been jettisoned by most fundamentalists groups today even though it ironically is the only source to which they can trace their claims to sealing authority.

be done to satisfy the Gentiles so that their property would not be confiscated. (1929 Account)

It is true that in the 1880s some church members had inquired to see if the church's position on polygamy could be changed. Others had vocalized the trials they were required to bear. However, neither of these actions should be interpreted to mean the general church membership were desirous of a Manifesto if such a doctrinal change would limit their eternal exaltation or place them condemned before the Lord. For members to state that they are enduring hardships is not tantamount to requesting that the trials be removed, especially if a spiritual penalty is attached.

Regardless, fundamentalists depict church members as demanding relief at any cost, and so in harmony with the principle of agency and "common consent" (D&C 26:2), the Lord granted it, permitting his servant to produce a manifesto independent of his will and inspiration.<sup>21</sup> Musser explained:

It is evident from what has already been written that we as a people did assume all responsibility and voluntarily surrendered plural marriage. God had nothing to do with it, only insofar as He permitted the people to use their own agency in accepting or rejecting the responsibility of His law.<sup>22</sup>

Fundamentalists suggest that after the Manifesto of 1890, the Saints rejoiced in their property and in the prospect that they would no longer suffer on account of polygamy. This idea fits well into their narratives and doctrines, but unfortunately for them it is not supported by available historical documentation. In fact, the Saints in 1890 were mostly confused by the Manifesto. They sustained it because they sustained President

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21 Musser, "Evidences and Reconciliations," in *Truth*, 60.

22 Joseph W. Musser, "Priesthood Items," *Truth* 8/9 (February 1943): 202.

Woodruff who presented it to them. The ongoing confusion prompted church leaders to explain its meaning to the people in many subsequent discourses.<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, the Fundamentalist “party line” that the Saints wanted a Manifesto at any cost to remove their persecutions is unsupported. Church members followed their leaders and accepted the counsel of President Woodruff. To reject a prophet’s instruction, is to reject the prophet. The Saints did not do this. Regarding the Manifesto, Wilford Woodruff later explained:

I have had some revelations of late, and very important ones to me, and I will tell you what the Lord has said to me. The Lord has told me by revelation that there are many members of the Church through Zion who are sorely tried in their hearts because of the Manifesto ...

Now, I want you to understand that [President Woodruff] has not lost the Spirit nor is he about to apostatize. The Lord is with him, and with this people. He has told me exactly what to do, and what the result would be if we did not do it.<sup>24</sup>

That the Lord was still guiding his church is evident in the spiritual blessing enjoyed at the dedicatory services of the

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23 See Stuy, *Collected Discourses*, 2:288–289; Durham, *Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, 218; and Woodruff, “Testimony before the Master in Chancery,” 19–20 October 1891, published in the *Deseret News Weekly*, 23 October 1891, 4–5. See also Edward Leo Lyman, *Political Deliverance: The Mormon Quest for Utah Statehood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 299.

24 Wilford Woodruff, Cache Stake Conference, Logan, Utah, Sunday November 1, 1891. Reported in *Deseret News Weekly*, November 14, 1891. Parts found in “Excerpts from three addresses by President Wilford Woodruff regarding the Manifesto,” found after Official Declaration –1, Doctrine and Covenants, 1981 edition.

Salt Lake Temple three years later. There President Woodruff disclosed a portion of what the Lord had revealed to him:

I feel at liberty to reveal to this assembly this morning what has been revealed to me since we were here yesterday morning. If the veil could be taken from our eyes and we could see into the spirit world, we would see that Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and John Taylor had gathered together every spirit that ever dwelt in the flesh in this church since its organization. We would also see the faithful apostles and elders of the Nephites who dwelt in the flesh in the days of Jesus Christ. In that assembly we would also see Isaiah and every prophet and apostle that ever prophesied of the great work of God. In the midst of these spirits we would see the Son of God, the Savior, who presides and guides and controls the preparing of the Kingdom of God on the earth and in heaven.<sup>25</sup>

To say the church was then rejected is inconsistent with these and many other experiences.

*Priesthood Keys Lost by President Grant*

Another trigger or watershed moment according to some dissenters occurred when Heber J. Grant became church president in 1918. Dissenters have claimed that President Grant never received a revelation in his life and publicly admitted the fact. Joseph W. Musser wrote:

President Grant, on numerous occasions and with commendable frankness, has acknowledged the absence of any revelation to him. He has, according

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25 Wilford Woodruff, Minutes of the Salt Lake Temple Dedication Held April 6–24, 1893 quoted in Stuy, *Collected Discourses*, 3:274. See also Archibald F. Bennett, *Saviors on Mount Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), 142–143. Also Joseph Heinerman, *Temple Manifestations* (Salt Lake City: Magazine Printing and Publishing, 1974), 118–119.

to his testimony, had no spiritual manifestations that could be interpreted as a revelation from the Lord; he has not seen an angel, nor the face of his Lord.<sup>26</sup>

On another occasion Musser wrote:

The present leader (Heber J. Grant) has recently stated to friends and associates, and even in his public addresses he has reiterated it, that he has never seen the face of the Savior, nor had any other special manifestation from the Lord; and further, said he, “I don’t know that I want any because of the great responsibility such would entail.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1882, Heber J. Grant was called to the Apostleship by a direct revelation to President John Taylor:

Thus saith the Lord to the Twelve, and to the priesthood and people of my Church: Let my servants George Teasdale and Heber J. Grant be appointed to fill the vacancies in the Twelve, that you may be fully organized and prepared for the labors devolving upon you, for you have a great labor to perform; and then proceed to fill up the presiding quorum of the Seventies, and assist in organizing that body of my priesthood who are your co-laborers in the ministry. You may appoint Seymour B. Young to fill up the vacancy in the presiding quorum of Seventies.<sup>28</sup>

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26 Joseph W. Musser, “Voting Rights of Saints,” *Truth* 6/3 (August 1940): 61.

27 Joseph W. Musser, “Continuous Revelation,” *Truth* 4/9 (February 1939):175; see also Joseph W. Musser, “Prophets, Seers, and Revelators,” *Truth* 8/8 (January 1943): 175.

28 Quoted in *My Kingdom Shall Roll Forth: Readings in Church History* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 50.

Heber J. Grant related that subsequent to his calling to the Apostleship of the Twelve he became qualified to serve as a genuine apostle:

So I went to the president's office, and there sat brother Teasdale, and all of the ten Apostles, and the Presidency of the Church, and also Seymour B. Young and the members of the seven presidents of Seventies. And the revelation was read calling brother Teasdale and myself to the apostleship, and brother Seymour B. Young to be one of the seven presidents of Seventies. Brother Teasdale was blessed by President John Taylor, and George Q. Cannon blessed me ...

I was a very unhappy man from October to February. For the next four months whenever I would bear my testimony of the divinity of the Savior, there seemed to be a voice that would say: "You lie, because you have never seen him." One of the brethren had made the remark that unless a man had seen the Lamb of God — that was his expression — "he was not fit to be an Apostle. This feeling that I have mentioned would follow me. I would wake up in the night with the impression: "You do not know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, because you have never seen him," and the same feeling would come to me when I would preach and bear testimony. It worried me from October to the following February.

I was in Arizona, traveling with Brigham Young, Jr., and a number of other brethren, visiting the Navajo Indians and the Moki Indians.... I had this feeling that I ought not to testify any more about the Savior and that really, I was not fit to be an Apostle. It seemed overwhelming to me that I should be one. There was



a spirit that said: "If you have not seen the Savior, why don't you resign your position?"

As I rode along alone, I seemed to see a Council in Heaven. The Savior was there; the Prophet Joseph was there; my father and others that I knew were there. In this Council it seemed that they decided that a mistake had been made in not filling the vacancies in the quorum of the Twelve, and conference had adjourned. The chances were the brethren would wait another six months, and the way to remedy the situation was to send a revelation naming the men who should fill the vacancies. In this council the Prophet said, "I want to be represented by one of my own on that council."

I had always understood and known that my mother was sealed to the Prophet, and that Brigham Young had told my father that he would not marry my mother to him for eternity, because he had instructions from the Prophet that if anything happened to him before he was married to Rachel Ivins she must be sealed to him for eternity, that she belonged to him.

That is the reason that father spoke up in this council to which I have referred, and said: "Why not choose the boy who bears my name who belongs to you, to be one of the Apostles?" That is the inspiration that was given to me.

I can truthfully say that from February, 1883, until today I have never had any of that trouble, and I can bear testimony that I know that God lives and that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world, and that Joseph Smith is a Prophet of the living God.<sup>29</sup>

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29 Heber J. Grant, *Conference Report*, October 1942, 24–26; see also *Improvement Era*, November 1942, 756–757.

Dissenters who declare that Heber J. Grant did not receive the required witness to be an apostle are simply denying the historical record.

### **Declaring the “Church” and the “Priesthood” are Separate Entities**

The second stratagem embraced by some dissenters in order to place themselves in a superior position to church members is the notion that the “church” is one entity and the “priesthood” is another and the two can coexist apart from one another. This reasoning serves fundamentalist purposes in several ways. First, it allows them to claim the authority needed to legitimately exist, but also allows the church to legitimately exist. Priesthood is required in order to effectuate valid ordinances. Joseph Smith taught that there is “No salvation between the two lids of the bible without a legal administrator.”<sup>30</sup> Second, they can delegate to the “church” all the priesthood duties they do not wish to perform. Most commonly they assign the responsibility to do missionary work to the church, so they do not have to do it. Fundamentalist leaders often encourage followers to proselytize new converts to their ways of thinking, but they do not send missionaries out to baptize as Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor did (see D&C 1:4, 4:4, 6:9, 18:44, 33:8–10, 42:6, 60:2, and 68:8). For many decades, temple building was also delegated to the church. Third, their “priesthood” organization is always loftier than the “church” and subtly reinforces the superiority complex they already feel over church members (more on this later).

Sometimes the dichotomy is described in confusing ways. One former member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints explained:

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30 Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 235.

The church's ordinations and ordinances remain vital to the restored Gospel, and the plan of salvation. *Whether or not there is any person in the church with priesthood power*, every person who joins the church, and keeps its ordinances will be invited through those ordinances, to come and receive the Lord.<sup>31</sup>

This counsel is very different from that revealed by Joseph Smith. When asked why rebaptism by an authorized priesthood bearer was required to enter the church, the Lord responded:

Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing; and this is a new and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning. Wherefore, although a man should be baptized an hundred times it availeth him nothing, for you cannot enter in at the strait gate by the law of Moses, neither by your dead works. For it is because of your dead works that I have caused this last covenant and this church to be built up unto me, even as in days of old. Wherefore, enter ye in at the gate, as I have commanded, and seek not to counsel your God. Amen. (D&C 22:1–4)

True priesthood is needed to effectuate any valid ordinance including those of the new and everlasting covenant. The idea that a man might not have the priesthood, but could still perform ordinances that would be recognized by the Lord is novel, but false.

Also, the doctrine that the priesthood could exist outside of the church is incorrect. Joseph Smith explained that the “priesthood continueth *in the church* of God in all generations” (D&C 84:17). He also counseled: “You will receive instructions

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31 Denver C. Snuffer, Jr., *Passing the Heavenly Gift* (Salt Lake City: Mill Creek Press, 2011), 37, emphasis added.

through the order of the Priesthood which God has established, through the medium of those appointed to lead, guide and direct the affairs of the Church in this last dispensation.”<sup>32</sup>

The connection between the priesthood and God’s church can be illustrated by observing the Pacific Naval Fleet during World War II. Towards the end of the conflict, the fleet was led by Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. At that time, the naval headquarters was not located permanently in Hawaii, San Francisco, or some other location. The headquarters for the entire Pacific Navy was wherever Admiral Nimitz was positioned. If he was on a ship, then the fleet headquarters was on the ship. If he was visiting Hawaii, then headquarters was in Hawaii.

Similarly, wherever the man holding the “keys” of the priesthood is located (D&C 132:7, 18, 19), there is God’s church. The keys cannot be in one place and the church in another. Also, it does not matter whether he has formally registered his organization with the government of that country. In God’s eyes, the followers of the key holder constitute his church (see D&C 10:67–68). Equally, if the presiding priesthood leader — the key holder — leaves a church organization, then that church organization is unrecognized and is in apostasy, and those following the priesthood key holder would become the new true church with all of the accompanying blessings and responsibilities (like missionary work). This separation has not occurred since Joseph Smith organized the church on April 6, 1830, although dissenters have posed arguments to the contrary as discussed above.

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32 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 228.

### Prophecies of a “Gathering,” a “Marvelous Work and a Wonder,” a “Sweeping of the Earth,” and a “Rolling Forth”

One problem with the dissenters’ view that describes the church as going astray involves many prophecies regarding its responsibilities in the latter-days. Christ declared there would be a final “gathering”: “I shall gather in, from their long dispersion, my people, O house of Israel, and shall establish again among them my Zion” (3 Nephi 21:1). Likewise, a “marvelous work and a wonder” will be performed: “And the Lord will set his hand again the second time to restore his people from their lost and fallen state. Wherefore, he will proceed to do a marvelous work and a wonder among the children of men” (2 Nephi 25:17; see also 27:26). In addition, “truth” will “sweep the earth”: “And righteousness will I send down out of heaven; and truth will I send forth out of the earth, to bear testimony of mine Only Begotten; his resurrection from the dead; yea, and also the resurrection of all men; and righteousness and truth will I cause to sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out mine elect from the four quarters of the earth” (Moses 7:62). And as quoted above, the gospel will “roll forth unto the ends of the earth, as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth” (D&C 65:2).

Dissenters who affirm an apostasy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints apparently embrace the position that the “gathering,” the “marvelous work and a wonder,” the “sweeping the earth” with “righteousness and truth,” and the “rolling forth” were stillborn. Or they may maintain that the church has strayed and the efforts have diminished after an initial expansion. Another view is that the efforts are sputtering forth to fill small parts of the whole earth. Or perhaps they will defend some hybrid notion that the church is in apostasy but still possesses enough truth and authority to sufficiently fulfil

these prophecies — which is impossible to do from a doctrinal standpoint, but it does conveniently absolve the critics from the need to fulfill them.

This global perspective is usually left unaddressed by dissenters who generally maintain a much smaller focus; one that commonly places them and their concerns on center stage.

### The Use of Scriptural Proof-Texts

Dissenters typically employ a set of *proof-texts* to support their view that the church is in apostasy. A *proof-text* is a scripture that is extracted from its context in order to change its meaning. Several verses of scripture have been recruited by dissidents to support the idea that Joseph Smith and/or the Book of Mormon prophesied that the church established by the Prophet would apostatize. Usually included is the idea that a remnant of true believers would exist. Of course, the dissenters promoting this view willingly imply or proclaim that they are the worthy offshoot.

#### 3 Nephi 16:10–11

Perhaps the most common verse so misused is 3 Nephi 16:10–11 where the Savior informs the Nephites:

And thus commandeth the Father that I should say unto you: At that day *when the Gentiles shall sin against my gospel, and shall reject the fulness of my gospel*, and shall be lifted up in the pride of their hearts above all nations, and above all the people of the whole earth, and shall be filled with all manner of lyings, and of deceits, and of mischiefs, and all manner of hypocrisy, and murders, and priestcrafts, and whoredoms, and of secret abominations; and if they shall do all those things, and shall reject the fulness of my gospel, behold, saith the Father, *I will bring the fulness of my gospel from among them*. And then will I remember my

covenant which I have made unto my people, O house of Israel, and I will bring my gospel unto them. (3 Ne. 16:10–11)

Dissenters label the “gentiles” in this verse as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and conclude that the “gospel” will be brought from among them — that they will apostatize. This interpretation is problematic for several reasons. First, the Book of Mormon identifies the “gentiles” generally as the Caucasian people who populated America, primarily from England, but also from other nations of western Europe (1 Nephi 13:12–15). The Book of Mormon further divides the “gentiles” into two groups: the believers and the unbelievers. Nephi explained that “as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord” (2 Nephi 30:2).<sup>33</sup>

In order to discover which group the Savior is referring to in 3 Nephi 16:10–11, readers simply need to back up two verses: “But wo, saith the Father, unto *the unbelieving of the gentiles*” (3 Nephi 16:8). In other words, the “unbelieving of the gentiles” in North America will not universally accept the restored truth. Hence, believing gentiles and converts from the “house of Israel” (Book of Mormon peoples) will redirect their missionary work to countries outside of North America — to other nations where the house of Israel descendants are living. George Q. Cannon explained:

The Prophet Joseph Smith in this translation [of the Book of Mormon], showed forth with great clearness, that the Gospel would be revealed, and that it should be received by some of the Gentiles; that when it should be received by the Gentiles, it should be carried by them to the descendants of Nephi and his brethren, who by that time should have become a filthy and a

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33 Mormon referred to the believing gentiles as “the gentiles who have care for the house of Israel” (Mormon 5:10).

loathsome people. The Indians of our continent should receive the message of life and salvation. The Gospel should be carried to them. They would receive it with gladness. They would come to a knowledge of their Redeemer, as well as to a knowledge of the principles and doctrines and covenants which their fathers understood, and which their fathers had received. Wonderful prediction! And most wonderfully has it been fulfilled....

The Gentiles did receive the Gospel of the Son of God, when it was revealed. Burning with zeal to carry this Gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue and people; inspired by the Holy Ghost, they went out among the Indian races as well as others, and fulfilled the predictions of the Book of Mormon....

When the Gentiles do reject the Gospel—as I fear they will from their conduct in the past—that is, as a nation—although I trust there will yet be many hundreds and thousands—yea, I would that I could say millions—of Gentiles gathered in by this Gospel; I trust that this will be the case, though the prospects are not very hopeful at present. It seems at present that as a nation, the Gentiles will reject the Gospel. When they do reject it, as they have in part, then God will commence, as the Savior said, to do a great work among the house of Israel. He will carry his Gospel there, and the work will commence then among all the scattered remnants of the house of Israel, over the whole earth.<sup>34</sup>

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34 George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 25:123.



Orson Pratt<sup>35</sup> and Parley P. Pratt<sup>36</sup> agreed with this interpretation.

A second problem with the dissenters' interpretation is that 3 Nephi 16:11 states the gospel will be given to the "house of Israel," which is defined in the Book of Mormon as the descendants of Lehi (2 Nephi 29:2, 2 Nephi 33:13, and 3 Nephi 10:4–5). While most dissenters would gladly claim to be the recipients of the gospel they say the church has lost, they do not qualify genealogically.

A third inconsistency is found in Nephi's description of the latter days:

And after the house of Israel should be scattered they should be gathered together again; or, in fine, after the gentiles had received the fulness of the Gospel, the natural branches of the olive-tree, or the remnants of the house of Israel, *should be grafted in*, or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer. (1 Nephi 10:14; see also 1 Nephi 15:16)

The house of Israel was going to be "grafted in" with "the gentiles [who] had received the fullness of the Gospel." The house of Israel was not to displace them. Nephi further explained:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, thus saith our God: I will afflict thy seed by the hand of the Gentiles; nevertheless, I will soften the hearts of the Gentiles, that they shall be like unto a father to them; wherefore, *the Gentiles shall be blessed and numbered among the house of Israel*. (2 Nephi 10:18)

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35 Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:133; Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 17:298–99; Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 18:27.

36 Parley P. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:200.

Fourth, the fullness of the gospel has already been taken from the “gentile” nation of North America and given to the “house of Israel” as the majority of the population of Latter-day Saints live outside of North America and the most popular language spoken in the church is Spanish— not English.

### *2 Nephi 28:11–15*

Another popular proof-text is found in 2 Nephi 28:11–15:

Yea, they have all gone out of the way; they have become corrupted. Because of pride, and because of false teachers, and false doctrine, their churches have become corrupted, and their churches are lifted up; because of pride they are puffed up. They rob the poor because of their fine sanctuaries; they rob the poor because of their fine clothing; and they persecute the meek and the poor in heart, because in their pride they are puffed up. They wear stiff necks and high heads; yea, and because of pride, and wickedness, and abominations, and whoredoms, they have all gone astray save it be a few, who are the humble followers of Christ; nevertheless, they are led, that in many instances they do err because they are taught by the precepts of men. O the wise, and the learned, and the rich, that are puffed up in the pride of their hearts, and all those who preach false doctrines, and all those who commit whoredoms, and pervert the right way of the Lord, wo, wo, wo be unto them, saith the Lord God Almighty, for they shall be thrust down to hell!

These verses severely condemn individuals whose doctrine had become “corrupted” (v. 11). Dissenters affirm they are referring to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the twenty-first century. This seems to be supported by the statement that “they have all gone out of the way” (v.

11). However, a careful reading shows that the time period described in the verses is when the Book of Mormon was to come forth to be translated and published. “Wherefore, at that day when the book shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have spoken [Joseph Smith]” (2 Nephi 27:12). 2 Nephi 28:3 reaffirms the events described are in “that day.”

*Mormon 8:32–33*

An additional popular scripture is found in Mormon 8:32–33:

Yea, it shall come in a day when there shall be churches built up that shall say: Come unto me, and for your money you shall be forgiven of your sins. O ye wicked and perverse and stiffnecked people, why have ye built up churches unto yourselves to get gain? Why have ye transfigured the holy word of God, that ye might bring damnation upon your souls? Behold, look ye unto the revelations of God; for behold, the time cometh at that day when all these things must be fulfilled.

Dissenters often assert that this condemnation is directed at the restored church. They fail to note that the statement “it shall come” refers to an event mentioned earlier in the chapter in verse 16:

And blessed be he that shall bring this thing to light; for it shall be brought out of darkness unto light, according to the word of God; yea, it shall be brought out of the earth, and it shall shine forth out of darkness, and come unto the knowledge of the people; and it shall be done by the power of God. (Mormon 8:16)

Moroni’s harsh condemnation is directed at “churches” that exist in the “day” when the Book of Mormon “shall come” or “shall be brought out of darkness” — when it is translated and published. That day is referenced in several other verses just previous to verses 32–33.

And it shall come in a day.... Yea, it shall come in a day.... Yea, it shall come in a day. (Mormon 8:27, 28, 29)

In other words, the Book of Mormon “shall come in a day” of wickedness.<sup>37</sup> Then, as verse 22 declares: “the eternal purposes of the Lord shall roll on, until all his *promises* shall be fulfilled.” His promises include the final *gathering*, the *marvelous work and a wonder*, and the *sweeping of the earth* with truth. Their latter-day beginning shall come in a day of spiritual darkness. That is, the Book of Mormon “shall be brought out of darkness unto light, according to the word of God; yea, it shall be brought out of the earth, and it shall shine forth out of darkness, and come unto the knowledge of the people” (Mormon 8:16). From there it “shall shine forth” and the gospel “shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth” (D&C 65:2).

A review of all scripture fails to identify any predictions or prophecies that the church established by Joseph Smith would apostatize or be replaced by another. Threats were made that if the Saints did not comply, consequences would have followed (see D&C 43:14, 60:2–3, 64:40, 83:2, 84:55–57, 98:19–21, 103:14, and 124:32, 46–48). However, a sufficient number of Latter-day Saints have always responded sufficiently to allow the church to continue to progress. In addition, a few scriptures can be quoted out-of-context to make it appear that a falling away might occur, but such interpretations contradict numerous other less ambiguous statements.

### Church Leaders Are Still Inspired

Without exception, dissenters today believe the leaders of the church depend on man’s wisdom to lead because they have lost the ability to converse with God and his Son. To be an

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37 See also 2 Nephi 28:11–15.

Apostle, one must be a “special witness of Jesus Christ.”<sup>38</sup> The testimonies of the apostles in the church today indicate that they do qualify in every sense of the requirement. However, the Holy Spirit restrains open discussion of sacred things. Elder Boyd K. Packer explains:

We do not talk of those sacred interviews that qualify the servants of the Lord to bear a special witness of Him, for we have been commanded not to do so. But we are free, indeed, we are obliged, to bear that special witness.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, such references are made but are just denied by unbelievers. For example, in 1971 Elder Packer declared:

I have heard one of my brethren declare: “I know from experiences, too sacred to relate, that Jesus is the Christ.” I have heard another testify: “I know that God lives; I know that the Lord lives, and more than that, I know the Lord.”<sup>40</sup>

In the April 2014 General Conference, President Packer stated plainly: “I bear my witness that the Savior lives. I know the Lord.”<sup>41</sup> Elder Russell M. Nelson testified in General Conference in 1992:

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38 Oliver Cowdery encouraged the first members of the Quorum of the Twelve to “Never cease striving until you have seen God face to face” (B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. rev. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960], 2:195–196).

39 Boyd K. Packer, *Conference Report*, Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (April 1980), 86. See also Alma 12:9; Hyrum Smith, “To the Brethren of the Church,” *Times and Seasons* 5/6 (March 15, 1884): 474; and Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:288.

40 Boyd K. Packer, *Conference Report*, April 1971, 122–25; Boyd K. Packer, “The Spirit Beareth Record,” *Ensign*, June 1971, 88.

41 Boyd K. Packer, “The Witness,” General Conference (webpage), accessed April 20, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/print/2014/04/the-witness?lang=eng&clang=eng>.

As a special witness of Jesus Christ, I testify that He lives! I also testify that the veil of death is very thin. I know by experiences too sacred to relate that those who have gone before are not strangers to leaders of this Church.<sup>42</sup>

More recently in a Regional Conference meeting, Elder M. Russell Ballard referred to Elder Richard G. Scott then sitting on the stand saying, “Few men know the Savior as well as Elder Scott.”<sup>43</sup>

Dissidents need uninspired leaders in the church to justify their claims, but if the works of the church in fulfilling the prophecies are not enough to demonstrate divine guidance, a careful listening of their testimonies verifies that they are his special witnesses today.

### Perfection Is Not Required

Dissenters often emphasize unrighteousness that exists among a portion of the membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints where weekly church attendance is around 50%.<sup>44</sup> Of those participating, only a fraction hold temple recommends and not all recommend holders are genuinely trying to keep the commandments. In addition, many of those who are inactive may flaunt the church’s standards and even those who attend may stumble and behave hypocritically.

However, to label all members as unrighteous is not accurate. It can be argued that sincere, believing, complying Latter-day Saints have always existed within the church and that their numbers have always been greater than any

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42 Russell M. Nelson, “Doors of Death,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 74.

43 Related to me by S. Johnson, a bishop who was in attendance.

44 Evaluating the attendance and apostasy figures of prominent fundamentalist groups like the FLDS and the Allred Group (AUB) would likely reveal an even smaller percentage who are actively attending their religious meetings.

group of dissenters or fundamentalists. Nevertheless, by ignoring the members who have sincerely sought to keep the commandments, dissidents can portray the whole church membership as being less faithful. This perception helps them justify their disaffection but is, nevertheless, a deception.

In addition, Joseph Smith described a God of “loving kindness and long-suffering” towards his children (1 Nephi 19:9), who is a God of “compassion,” (D&C 64:2), who is “pitiful” (1 Peter 3:8; D&C 133:53), and who is “merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end” (D&C 76:5). To ancient Israel, his hands remained “stretched out still” (2 Ne. 19:12, 17), despite their unrighteousness. When Christ appeared to the Nephites, he explained:

And many great destructions have I caused to come upon this land, and upon this people, because of their wickedness and their abominations. O all ye that are spared because *ye were more righteous* than they, will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you? Yea, verily I say unto you, *if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life*. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me. (3 Nephi 9:12–14)

The darkness and devastations that preceded Christ’s visitation to the Nephites spared the “more righteous”—not those that were nearly perfect. The level of obedience needed to avoid destruction was not perfection. And those who were “more righteous” were then invited to improve and to “come unto Christ” in order to “have eternal life.”

Similarly, through Joseph Smith, God promised his spiritual gifts “for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, and *him that seeketh so to do*” (D&C 46:9).

Joseph Smith prayed in 1836: “O Lord, remember thy servant, Joseph Smith, Jun., and all his afflictions and persecutions — how he has covenanted with Jehovah, and vowed to thee, O Mighty God of Jacob — and the commandments which thou hast given unto him, and that he *hath sincerely striven to do thy will*” (D&C 109:68). God’s gifts and blessings are not only for those who are perfect, because no mortal has been including Joseph Smith. They are for those who seek to “keep all the commandments” and who “sincerely strive” to do his will. This level of righteousness has always existed in the church and among its leaders. Never since The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized in 1830 has this earth been bereft of church authorities and members who were worthy to receive inspiration and carry forth God’s work on earth.

### Dissenters Are in Apostasy

Among Mormon fundamentalists and dissenters are many sincere people who genuinely desire to serve God. A significant percentage are willing to make almost any sacrifice in order to obtain the blessings promised to the obedient as described by the Prophet Joseph Smith. What, then, can explain their need for the church to be wrong, so they can be right without it?

Joseph Smith taught: “for nothing is a greater injury to the children of men than to be under the influence of a false spirit when they think they have the Spirit of God.”<sup>45</sup> He further warned:

Behold, verily I say unto you, that there are many spirits which are false spirits, which have gone forth in the earth, deceiving the world. And also Satan hath sought to deceive you, that he might overthrow you. (D&C 50:2–3)

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45 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 205.



The Prophet also advised that in the last days, false prophets would arise that can deceive even the elect according to the covenant. That is, those who have received the new and everlasting covenant and perhaps even the blessings of the temple can be deceived:

Behold, these things I have spoken unto you concerning the Jews; and again, after the tribulation of those days which shall come upon Jerusalem, if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there, believe him not; For in those days there shall also arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, insomuch, that, if possible, *they shall deceive the very elect, who are the elect according to the covenant*. Behold, I speak these things unto you *for the elect's sake*. (Joseph Smith–Matthew 1:21–23)

Just weeks before his martyrdom, Joseph Smith explained:

Woe to that man or woman who Shall lift up their or his hands against god's witness for the[y] are rasing their hands or arms against the power of god and the[y] will be cursed. But in these times in the last days there will many fals prophets arise and false teachers and decieve many the[y] Shall have many followers by their deceit. the[y] Strive to have power and by their pernitious ways lead of[f] many — for Brother Joseph Smith was chosen for the last dispensation or Seventh Dispensation The time the grand council Set in heaven to organise this world Joseph was chosen for the last & greatest Prophet to lay the foundation of gods work of the Seventh Dispensation.<sup>46</sup>

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46 Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 369–70.

Brigham Young encountered many who promoted doctrinal claims that contradicted his inspiration. Some would declare their own visions and visitations from heavenly messengers. How did he respond? With tongue-in-cheek he remarked: “I say to such persons, Go ahead, and get all the revelations you can. If brother Joseph visits you every night, go ahead, and tell him to bring brother Hyrum, father Smith, Don Carlos Smith, St. Paul, Peter, James, and John, and Jesus Christ, if you can induce him to do so.”<sup>47</sup> Then President Young explained:

I could almost lay my hand on that Bible and swear that the man or woman who gets such revelations has been guilty of adultery, or of theft, or has been rebellious and apostatized in feelings, but has come back again, and now professes to have such revelations. Hell is full of such revelations ... I have had men come to me and tell the wonderful great dreams and visions which they have, when those very persons have apostatized heretofore, have denied their God and their religion; and I knew it. Many come to me and tell me what wonderful visions they have – that their minds are open to eternal things – that they can see visions of eternity open before them and understand all about this kingdom, – many of whom have at some time been guilty of betraying their brethren.<sup>48</sup>

Then he added: “I never notice them much. I sit and hear them talk about their wonderful knowledge, but it passes in and out of my ears like the sound of the wind. It is for me to see to this kingdom, that it is built up, and to preserve the Saints from the grasp of the enemy. The visions of the class I have mentioned are nothing to me. They may exhibit their great

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47 Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:352.

48 Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:352.

knowledge before me; but when they have done, it is all gone from me.”<sup>49</sup>

Joseph Smith explained that individuals who criticize leaders holding higher priesthood authority are not inspired. Those voices can and will deceive:

I will inform you that it is contrary to the economy of God for any member of the Church, or any one, to receive instruction for those in authority, higher than themselves; therefore you will see the impropriety of giving heed to them; but if any person have a vision or a visitation from a heavenly messenger, it must be for his own benefit and instruction; for the fundamental principles, government, and doctrine of the Church are vested in the keys of the kingdom.<sup>50</sup>

I will give you one of the Keys of the mysteries of the Kingdom. It is an eternal principle, that has existed with God from all eternity: That man who rises up to condemn other, finding fault with the Church, saying that they are out of the way, while he himself is righteous, then know assuredly, that that man is in the high road to apostasy; and if he does not repent, will apostatize, as God lives. The principle is as correct as the one that Jesus put forth in saying that he who seeketh a sign is an adulterous person; and that principle is eternal, undeviating, and firm as the pillars of heaven;<sup>51</sup>

Such critics may publish books or post on blogs or interject their critiques in threads on the Internet, but according to Joseph Smith’s teachings, such criticisms of the church and its

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49 Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:352.

50 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 21.

51 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 156.

leaders could not be inspired by God and the proponents will apostatize, if they haven't already.

This applies to a recent movement to ordain women to the priesthood.<sup>52</sup> According to Joseph Smith's teachings, God does not inspire individuals to seek change in the Church through the processes now effectuated by the proponents of women ordinations. Whether they realize it or not, their position not only advocates female priesthood conferral but also a transformation away from the Prophet's basic teachings regarding revelation, inspiration, and order within the Church (D&C 58:55, 132:8). It is unclear whether they are ignorant of Joseph's teachings or just feel they are outdated.

In these cases, church leaders may be obligated to excommunicate these "alternate voices," so the church membership will not confuse their spurious teachings with official doctrines. Alma explained: "And now I say unto you that the good shepherd doth call after you; and if you will hearken unto his voice he will bring you into his fold, and ye are his sheep; and he commandeth you that ye suffer no ravenous wolf to enter among you, that ye may not be destroyed" (Alma 5:60). While it may seem ironic, excommunicating apostates glorifies God. Joseph revealed:

And him that repenteth not of his sins, and confesseth them not, ye shall bring before the church, and do with him as the scripture saith unto you, either by commandment or by revelation. And this ye shall do *that God may be glorified*—not because ye forgive not, having not compassion, but that ye may be justified in the eyes of the law, *that ye may not offend him who is your lawgiver.* (D&C 64:12–13; emphasis added)

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52 See, for example, Ordain Women: Mormon Women Seeking Equality And Ordination to the Priesthood (website), accessed March 31, 2014, <http://www.ordainwomen.org>.

The scriptures demand that they be “cast out” (D&C 42:20–28, 75) and their names “blotted out” (Mosiah 26:36, Alma 1:24, 5:57, 6:3, Moroni 6:7, and D&C 20:83).

Notwithstanding, the dissenter can return: “Inasmuch as they do repent and receive the fulness of my gospel, and become sanctified, I will stay mine hand in judgment” (D&C 39:18). This is the invitation to all those who have left the ranks through excommunication or disillusionment. As Joseph Smith wrote to W. W. Phelps who had previously vilified the Prophet, but repented and desired forgiveness:

Come on, dear brother [or sister], since the war is past,  
For friends at first, are friends again at last.<sup>53</sup>

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53 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 166.

## APPENDIX

## Nauvoo High Council Disciplinary Actions

	Individual	Charge	Date	Outcome
1841				
1	Theodore Turley	Sleeping with 2 females, kissing females	Feb. 6	Sustained--fellowship retained after repentance
	Unnamed	Crime or im-prudence with an unmarried woman	Mar. 2	Joseph Smith dealt with episode privately
1842				
2	Jessee Turpin	Adultery	Apr. 22	Fellowship withdrawn
3	Chancy L. Higbee	Unchaste conduct	May 20	Expelled from the church
4	Catherine Warren	Unchaste behavior	May 25	Restored to fellowship
5	Lyman Littlefield	Unvirtuous conduct	May 27	Disfellowship
6	Darwin Chase	Unvirtuous conduct	May 27	Restored to fellowship
7	Joel S. Miles	Unvirtuous conduct	May 27	Disfellowship
8	Justice Morse	Unvirtuous conduct	May 28	Disfellowship
9	Amanda Smith	Insinuating adultery	Jun. 10	Sustained but fellow-ship retained after repentance
10	Gustavus Hills	Illicit intercourse	Sep. 3	Disfellowship
1843				
11	Enoch King	Adultery	Jan. 21	Acquitted
12	Mary Eggleston	Adultery	Jan. 21	Acquitted
13	John Thorp	Adultery	Jan. 21	Cut off from the church
14	Sarah Miller	Adultery	Jan 21	Cut off from the church

15	Thomas Prouse	Adultery	Jan. 21	Disfellowship
16	Charity Thorp	Adultery	Jan. 12	Disfellowship
17	John Blazard	Adultery	Jan. 28	Cut off
18	Mrs. Pool	Adultery		Cut off
19	James Reed	Adultery		Held in fellowship
20	Mary Powell	Adultery		Held in fellowship
21	John W. Taylor	Adultery		Expelled from Church
22	Mary Cook	Adultery		Expelled from Church
23	Job Green	Attempt to go to bed two young females	Mar. 4	Not sustained
24	Jordan Hendrixson	Adultery	Apr. 1	Not sustained
25	Elizabeth Rowe	Adultery	Jul. 22	Fellowship withdrawn
26	George J. Adams	Adultery	Sep. 1	Not sustained
27	Quartus R. Sparks	Impregnating a woman	Nov. 18	Fellowship withdrawn
28	Harrison Sager	Seducing a young girl	Nov 25	Not sustained
1844				
28	Harrison Sagers	"Spiritual wives"	Apr. 13	Not sustained

Of these 23 cases, 15 resulted in discipline. Sexual impropriety has never been tolerated by leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.





# A SCIENTIST LOOKS AT BOOK OF MORMON ANACHRONISMS

*Neal Rappleye*

Review of Wade E. Miller, *Science and the Book of Mormon: Cureloms, Cumoms, Horses & More* (Laguna Niguel, California: KCT & Associates, 2010). 106 pages + viii, including two appendices and references cited, no index.

*Abstract: Anachronisms, or out of place items, have long been a subject of controversy with the Book of Mormon. Several Latter-day Saints over the years have attempted to examine them. Dr. Wade E. Miller, as a paleontologist and geologist, offers a some new insights on this old question, especially regarding animals mentioned in the Book of Mormon, including a report on some preliminary research which might completely change the pre-Columbian picture for horses in America. Overall, this is an indispensable resource on Book of Mormon anachronisms.*

Ever since the Book of Mormon came off the press in 1830, anachronisms have been some of the most common reasons given for dismissing the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient text (*anachronisms* are items that are chronologically out of place). This remains true despite the evidence that has turned up for many items once thought to be anachronisms in the text.<sup>1</sup> While some alleged Book of Mormon anachronisms are conceptual (e.g., the seemingly overt Christian concepts in

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1 For some examples, see “Howler’s Index,” at *Ether’s Cave: A Place for Book of Mormon Research*, at [http://etherscave.blogspot.com/p/blog-page\\_20.html](http://etherscave.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_20.html) (accessed March 21, 2014).

1 Nephi),<sup>2</sup> the ones most frequently brought to bear against the text are scientific. Archaeologist John E. Clark explains, “The most frequently mentioned deficiencies of the book concern the lack of hard evidence in the New World for the right time periods of precious metals, Old World animals and plants, and Book of Mormon place names and personal names.”<sup>3</sup> Aside from the absence of proper names, each of these deficiencies is, at least in part, a question of science. Were there—or at least could there have been—the right kinds of animals, plants, and materials (such as metal, glass, and certain textiles) in the Americas when the Book of Mormon took place? Dr. Wade E. Miller is certainly not the first Latter-day Saint to explore this question.<sup>4</sup> Given his particular expertise, however, his contribution is both unique and welcome, particularly when it comes to animals in the Book of Mormon.

Miller begins by mentioning the Smithsonian Institute’s history with the Book of Mormon (pp. 2–4). The Smithsonian has long gotten letters from folks asking about the Book of Mormon. The Institute used to send out a long response listing several perceived inaccuracies in the Book of Mormon but has

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2 For some brief discussion of these types of anachronisms, see Stephen David Ricks, “Anachronisms, alleged” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2003), 55–57.

3 John E. Clark, “Archaeological Trends and the Book of Mormon Origins,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2006), 95.

4 For previous treatments of anachronisms in the Book of Mormon, see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 184–187, 232–238, 278–299; Daniel C. Peterson and Matthew Roper, “*Ein Heldenleben?* On Thomas Stuart Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 189–215. Also see the following entries in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*: Daniel Justin Fairbanks, “Agriculture in the Book of Mormon,” 31–32; Brian Michael Hauglid, “Animals,” 61–62; William Revel Phillips, “Metals of the Book of Mormon,” 539–540. A more recent discussion, which incorporates some of Miller’s work, is John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2013), 302–361.

since tempered its response.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the impulse to test the Book of Mormon against science continues, and Miller seeks to contribute to the discussion. “The intent of this book is to add to the body of knowledge relating to science and the Book of Mormon using my paleontological and geological background” (p. 3). Miller also takes time to clarify that he follows John L. Sorenson in associating Book of Mormon lands with Mesoamerica (pp. 6–8).<sup>6</sup> Miller then discusses with considerable brevity matters such as steel and glass (pp. 10–13), linen and silk (pp. 16–18), and food plants (pp. 20–22). Then the remainder of the book discusses animals (pp. 24–84), save a brief summary at the end (p. 86). Miller explains, “I will discuss the animals mentioned in the Book of Mormon in greater depth than other scientific aspects because of my own research specialization” (p. 4).

Before launching into his discussion on animals in the Book of Mormon, Miller offers a couple of cautions. The first is that, “We can’t be positive that each animal with its translated name corresponds exactly to our present understanding of that animal” (p. 24).<sup>7</sup> This important point has long been derided by critics of Mormonism on the Internet, but I’ve yet to see anyone else explain just what Nephi, with his Hebrew or Egyptian language, was supposed to call a tapir or any other species discovered in his new environment for which his native language had no words. Both loan-shifting and translator’s

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5 For further information, see “Smithsonian Statement on the Book of Mormon Revisited,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 77; “FairMormon Answers: Book of Mormon/Archaeology/Smithsonian Statement,” [http://en.fairmormon.org/Smithsonian\\_statement\\_on\\_Book\\_of\\_Mormon\\_archaeology](http://en.fairmormon.org/Smithsonian_statement_on_Book_of_Mormon_archaeology) (accessed April 6, 2014). For a response to the original Smithsonian letter, see John L. Sorenson, “A New Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution ‘Statement regarding the Book of Mormon,’” (FARMS Paper, 1995), online at <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=964&index=1> (accessed April 6, 2014).

6 See Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*; Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*.

7 See discussion in Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 293–294.

anachronisms are common enough phenomena that they should not be quickly discounted, given the legitimacy of the Book of Mormon as a *translation* of a document written by Old World peoples migrating to the New. In fact, such practices are arguably *expected* in such a text.<sup>8</sup>

Some protest that the Book of Mormon is the “most correct book,” “translated by the gift and power of God,” and hence should not manifest such “incorrect” labeling. Matters of translation are complicated, however, and very often fuzzy notions of “literal” translation hinge more on unexplored assumptions than actual data.<sup>9</sup> What’s more, if the Nephites applied Old World terms meaning *horse*, *sheep*, *cattle*, or *pig* to New World species, then those were the “correct” labels within Nephite taxonomy. As such, translation using those terms is no more “incorrect” than continued American usage of terms like “robin,” “elk,” and “buffalo,” all of which originally referred to completely different Old World species before being borrowed and applied to unfamiliar animals in the New World by European settlers. In light of this, Miller’s advice that, “Care needs to be taken in the interpretation of stated animals in the Book of Mormon,” that, “It’s best to allow some flexibility in thinking” (p. 24 n. 4) seems appropriately prudent.

Miller also mentions the challenge of bone preservation. “Then, as now, the vast majority of bones left after death would disintegrate upon exposure to the elements, turning to dust” (p. 28). He points out that in Mesoamerica, “Climatic conditions

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8 For my attempt at making such an argument, see Neal Rappleye, “Anachronisms and Expectations: Assessing the Role of Anachronisms in the Debate over Book of Mormon Authenticity,” at *Studio et Quoque Fide: A Blog on Latter-day Saint Apologetics, Scholarship, and Commentary*, August 19, 2013, at <http://www.studioetquoquefide.com/2013/08/anachronisms-and-expectations-assessing.html> (accessed March 18, 2014).

9 For the most detailed study of translation and the Book of Mormon, see Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

would have been unfavorable for preserving evidences of life” (p. 29). While critics tend to see such caveats as subterfuge, recognizing the limitations and challenges of certain kinds of evidence is absolutely essential to any attempt to determine just what the evidence can and cannot tell us. Miller concludes, “Considering all the circumstances, I’m not surprised by so little evidence being available to support the animals reported in the Book of Mormon. However, some evidences do exist. These should leave open the probability of more being found” (pp. 29–30).

Miller first discusses cattle (pp. 32–37) then swine (pp. 40–42) followed by sheep and goats (pp. 44–48). Throughout his discussion, Miller draws on evidence that hints at the presence, in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, of Old World species called by these labels but also points to possible candidate species for which Old World labels may have been applied by either the Jaredites or the Nephites. In doing so, Miller shows no hesitation in drawing on species thought to be extinct by Book of Mormon times (though, in most cases, he also points to animals that still have living populations today). While this may be seen as a weakness to some, it seems sensible to ask, before quickly discounting the possibility, what Miller—an internationally recognized geologist and paleontologist—might know or understand about both the limitations and capabilities his disciplines that gives him confidence that at least *some* of these extinct species survived longer than generally believed? Perhaps there is something he has learned though decades of training and experience that is not obvious to the untrained, lay reader—especially when that untrained reader is anxious to score points against the Book of Mormon.

Miller’s discussion of elephants (pp. 50–55) is extremely informative because I had previously read on a critical website that, “All scientists agree that elephants did not exist in the Americas; however Mastodons, *which are not elephants*, did

exist in stone-age times.”<sup>10</sup> What goes unmentioned by these critics is that mammoths were also known in the Americas, and that mammoths *are* elephants. “For many years,” Miller reports, “paleontologists called mammoths elephants, as they wrote about them. Some still do.” (p. 50). Miller cites an example as recent as 1993 (p. 50 n. 7)! What’s more, Miller explains, “The Columbian mammoth of North America, based on studies of its fossils, is more closely related to the Indian (or Asian) elephant than the Indian elephant is to the African one!” (p. 50). Miller has personally been involved in excavating mammoth remains in Mexico (p. 51). He explains, “The Columbian mammoth (actually a true elephant) ... was a common animal from Alaska through Central America in the Pleistocene epoch. It apparently survived beyond this time.” (p. 54). In light of this, it seems that insisting that there *never* were any true “elephants” in the Americas, as indicated in the critic’s quote above, is entirely untenable. If mammoths can be called “elephants” by scientists in the late 20th and early 21st century, then what objection remains for Joseph Smith using the label for an American species in 1830?

There is still the issue of when the mammoth went extinct. Miller explains, “Until the last few decades, almost all scientists were convinced that mammoths did not survive the Pleistocene (Ice age) epoch. This was 10,000 to 12,000 years ago.... However, more and more datings on these fossils show that they lived much longer. How long did they survive? That question is still being debated by paleontologists.” (p. 55). Miller goes on to cite some of the late dates given, including one from Alaska that dates to approximately 3,700 years ago (1700 BC), which gets us into Jaredite times; and another from Florida that dates to

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10 “Elephants,” a sub-section of the online article, “Anachronisms,” at MormonThink, <http://mormonthink.com/book-of-mormon-problems.htm#didntexist> (accessed March 18, 2014), screenshot in my possession. Emphasis mine.

2,040 years ago, or about the time of Christ, though this date is considered questionable by most scientists, Miller adds (p. 55). While the question is not yet settled, it does not require a huge leap of faith to accept that elephants (mammoth) could have been present in Mesoamerica in Jaredite times.

Miller includes a comparably long discussion of possible candidates for the *cureloms* and *cumoms* (pp. 58–73). Part of the reason is because so little is known about these animals, there exists a broad range of possibilities. Miller wisely does not come to any firm conclusions but amply demonstrates that the single, vague mention of these animals is not problematic, since plenty of species could fit the bill. Miller simply concludes, “Unfortunately the Jaredite record keepers did not include drawings of cureloms and cumoms” (p. 73).

Perhaps the most important chapter in this book is the one on horses and asses (pp. 76–83). This is so for a couple of reasons. The first is that while several animals (such those mentioned above) are considered anachronous, the horse nonetheless tends to draw the most attention from the critics. Miller himself recognizes this, explaining, “I think that more than any other animal mentioned in the Book of Mormon, the horse has generated the most debate” (p. 78). But this chapter is also important because it presents some preliminary findings that *could*, if further testing confirms them, completely change present scientific understanding.

Like mammoths and several other animals, it is widely accepted that horses were in the Americas up until the end of the last Ice Age (p. 80). “A number of Carbon-14 dates on horse fossils,” however, “show ages extending well past the close of the Pleistocene” (p. 80). Miller cites several examples from the scientific literature on this subject before reporting on the unpublished dates of several bone specimen which he has collected and sent out for independent testing. The range of dates on these specimens goes from ca. 6,000 BC to AD 1,400

(see dates given on p. 82). Hence, Miller concludes that “small scattered populations” of horses “probably survived in North America until shortly before they were reintroduced by the Spaniards” (p. 82).

The range of dates clearly includes the Book of Mormon time period. However, we should remain cautious. First, none of the specific dates given actually falls within the Nephite period (a couple appear to be of Jaredite age), though one would assume that since there are dates from both before and after this timeframe (ca. 600 BC–AD 400), horses were in the Americas during that time. Second, none of these bone specimen come from Mesoamerica, the area widely believed to be the region where the Book of Mormon took place.<sup>11</sup> This could feasibly be chalked up to the issues of climate and bone preservation mentioned earlier, but it still provides good reason not to hang too much on this evidence just yet. Finally, this work is still *preliminary* and needs to undergo further testing, and, according to Miller, will need to be corroborated by additional finds dating to the same time period. While Miller is optimistic that this “eventually will come” (p. 82), these current limitations should be kept in mind. While caution is warranted, however, these results are promising, perhaps justifying a cautious optimism that the horse in the Book of Mormon was, in fact, what we today would call a “horse.”

Miller concludes that his mind is “satisfied” by the available evidence (p. 86). I too am satisfied, though I acknowledge that problems remain. Further work needs to be done to flesh out the picture, but the chasm one must cross with a “leap of faith” has been made much smaller by Miller’s careful treatment of these issues. This book is an indispensable resource on the topic of

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11 The locations offer no more direct support to the “heartland” model either, since none of the specimens mentioned by Miller were collected within the eastern United States.



anachronisms in the Book of Mormon. In my opinion, it ought to have much wider circulation than it has thus far enjoyed.

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# QUESTIONING THE COMMA IN VERSE 13 OF THE WORD OF WISDOM

*A. Jane Birch*

*Abstract: The 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants included an additional comma, which was inserted after the word “used” in D&C 89:13: “And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine.” Later authors have speculated that the addition of the comma was a mistake that fundamentally changed the meaning of the verse. This article examines this “errant comma theory” and demonstrates why this particular interpretation of D&C 89:13 is without merit.*

In 1921, a committee of five apostles who had recently completed a new edition of the Book of Mormon began preparing a new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C). Elder James E. Talmage, a member of the committee, noted that previous editions of the D&C contained “many errors by way of omission.”<sup>1</sup> The most significant change in this new edition was the removal of the “Lectures on Faith,” but the committee also expanded the headnotes, revised the footnotes, and divided the pages into double columns.<sup>2</sup> Numerous smaller changes were also made. As one of the many changes published in the revised 1921 edition, a new comma appeared in verse 13 of section 89,

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1 Richard E. Turley Jr. and William W. Slaughter, *How We Got the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 101.

2 Turley and Slaughter, *How We Got the Doctrine and Covenants*, 105.

also known as the Word of Wisdom. This comma was inserted between the words *used* and *only*:

Yea, flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air,  
I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with  
thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly;

And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used,  
only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine. (D&C  
89:12–13)

In his detailed analysis of the textual changes throughout the history of the D&C, Robert J. Woodford relates the following interesting story:

It [the comma] was never found in any text prior to the 1921 edition of the D&C. According to T. Edgar Lyon [prominent LDS historian and educator], [Apostle] Joseph Fielding Smith, when shown this addition to the text, said: “Who put that in there?” This is a significant statement since Elder Smith served on the committee to publish that edition of the D&C. Thus, the comma may have been inserted by the printer and has been retained ever since.<sup>3</sup>

This story supports what has become a very popular interpretation of verse 13, namely, that the inserted comma is a mistake that *reverses* the meaning of the text and that the true meaning is understood only with the errant comma removed. This interpretation suggests that the Lord is instructing us that we should not confine ourselves to eating meat<sup>4</sup> only in times of

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3 Robert J. Woodford, “The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants: Vol. II,” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 1175–76.

4 Note that while I will often use the word *meat*, the text actually refers to “flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air.” The terms are not necessarily equivalent.

winter, cold, and famine, implying that meat should be eaten at all other times as well.

Not only is this particular interpretation of verse 13 found on numerous websites, but I am aware of at least a few BYU professors who rely on this interpretation in explaining this verse to students. It is also included in a number of D&C commentaries written by LDS scholars. The following is an example from James W. McConkie's 2010 D&C commentary:

Sometimes the addition or deletion of a comma makes very little or no difference. However, in this case the use of a comma completely changes the meaning. Without the comma after the word "used" in verse 13, the revelation recommends the use of meat year round. The placement of a comma prohibits the use of meat altogether, except "in times of winter, or of cold, or famine."<sup>5</sup>

McConkie goes on to suggest that not only is the comma a mistake but that it "could very well be removed" in a future edition of the book.

Notwithstanding the popularity of this explanation and the absence of an official interpretation of verse 13, I believe that this particular reading of the text is without merit. Below I will summarize the reasons why, of all possible explanations of this verse, this one is not a worthy contender.

### Use of D&C 89:13 Before and After 1921

The theory that the added comma is problematic rests on the assumption that adding the comma *changes* the meaning of the text. Those who support this theory assert that the original and true meaning of the verse is clear once the comma is removed: the Lord is *not* pleased when we use the flesh of beasts and

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5 James W. McConkie II, *Looking at the Doctrine and Covenants Again for the Very First Time* (West Valley City, UT: Temple Hill Books, 2010), 353.

fowls of the air (meat) only in times of winter, or of cold, or of famine. The implication is that it pleases him if we use meat at other times as well.

While it is true that the comma did not appear in this verse until 1921, it is equally clear that the way the text was read without the comma in the decades before 1921 was identical to the way the text is read today with the addition of the comma. In other words, adding the comma did not change the way the text was read. In fact, Latter-day Saints who were adult members of the Church in 1921 did not remark on any change of meaning with the addition of the comma. The assertion that the text should be read differently without the comma is a much later idea, dating back to about the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

The following are examples of the way D&C 89:13 was read before 1921:

- a. In **1842**, **Hyrum Smith** was Patriarch to the Church at the time he gave a lengthy sermon on the Word of Wisdom. He states:

Let men attend to these instructions, let them use the things ordained of God; let them be sparing of the life of animals; “it is pleasing saith the Lord that flesh be used only in times of winter, or of famine” — and why to be used in famine? because all domesticated animals would naturally die, and may as well be made use of by man, as not.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The first reference I have seen in print is in the first edition of Richard O. Cowan’s *Doctrine & Covenants: Our Modern Scriptures* (Provo: Brigham Young University Division of Continuing Education, 1966). Dr. Cowan does not recall where this idea came from (e-mail message to the author, January 30, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Hyrum Smith, “The Word of Wisdom,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 15 (June 1, 1842): 801.

b. In **John Jacques's** popular **1854** *Catechism for Children*, Mormon youth are asked, "Why should flesh be eaten by man in winter, and in times of famine, and not at other times?" They are instructed:

Flesh is heating to the human system, therefore it is not good to eat flesh in summer; but God allows his people to eat it in winter, and in times of famine, because all animals suffer death naturally, if they do not by the hand of man.<sup>8</sup>

c. In **1857**, **Apostle Heber C. Kimball** said:

In a revelation which God gave to Joseph Smith, he says, "It is not pleasing in my sight for man to shed blood of beasts, or of fowls, except in times of excess of hunger and famine." Go and read it for yourselves.<sup>9</sup>

d. In **1868**, **President Brigham Young** counseled:

Flesh should be used sparingly, in famine and in cold.<sup>10</sup>

e. In **1868**, **Apostle George Q. Cannon** said:

We are told that flesh of any kind is not suitable to man in the summer time, and ought to be eaten sparingly in the winter.<sup>11</sup>

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8 John Jacques, *Catechism for Children Exhibiting the Prominent Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1854), 63.

9 Heber C. Kimball, "Shedding Blood—God's Provision for His Saints," in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:50, November 15, 1857.

10 Brigham Young, "The True Church of Christ—the Living Testimony—Word of Wisdom," in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:209, May 10, 1868.

11 George Q. Cannon, "Word of Wisdom—Fish Culture—Dietetic," in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:221–22, April 7, 1868.

f. In **1895, Apostle Lorenzo Snow** (then President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles) stated:

Unless famine or extreme cold is upon us we should refrain from the use of meat.<sup>12</sup>

There is no evidence for the idea that, before 1921, any of the literate, well-read Church leaders or Church members read D&C 89:13 in the way later supporters of the “errant comma theory” suggest the text should have been read without the comma.

Further, after the comma was inserted in 1921, no one noticed that the addition of the comma made their previous reading of the text problematic. Church members continued to interpret verse 13 the way they had before, including those who were old enough to have noticed the change. No one spoke of the meaning of the text having been “changed” by the added comma. Here are a few examples after 1921:

a. **Apostle John A. Widtsoe and Leah D. Widtsoe** wrote *The Word of Wisdom, a Modern Interpretation*. Elder Widtsoe, born in 1872, became an apostle in 1921, the same year the comma was added. In the original 1937 edition of this book and also in the revised 1950 edition, they wrote:

The Word of Wisdom ... deals only with grains, fruits, vegetables—nature’s products—and with meat to be used sparingly in cold or famine.<sup>13</sup>

b. **Apostle Joseph F. Merrill**, born in 1868, would have been fifty-three years old when the comma was added. In a general conference address on the Word of

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12 Dennis B. Horne, ed., *An Apostle’s Record: The Journals of Abraham H. Cannon* (Clearfield, UT: Gnolaum Books, 2004), 424.

13 John A. Widtsoe and Leah D. Widtsoe, *The Word of Wisdom: A Modern Interpretation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1937), 178–79.



Wisdom, he emphasized the importance of not eating meat as “freely as many Americans are doing” and stated:

[Quoting from a book] “Under conditions of extreme exposure to cold the heat [from consuming excess protein in meat] might be of service. On the other hand, in case of fever, and in hot weather, the heat excess induced by too much protein may do great harm.”

Now I read again the words of the revelation to the Prophet:

“... they [meats] are to be used sparingly; And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine (D&C 89:12–13).”<sup>14</sup>

c. **President George Albert Smith**, born in 1870, was fifty-one years old in 1921. President Smith was apparently careful about his consumption of meat. In the 1950 *Improvement Era* devoted to honoring his 80th birthday, his son-in-law reported:

President Smith’s meals are simple and nourishing. In the summer he eats no meat, and even in the winter months he eats very little.<sup>15</sup>

### Why Was the Comma Added?

If the inserted comma did not change the way the text was read, why was it added? While there is no definitive evidence of

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14 Joseph F. Merrill, “Eat Flesh Sparingly,” in Conference Report, April 1948, 75. This reads “[meats]” in the original article.

15 Robert Murray Stewart, “A Normal Day in the Home of George Albert Smith,” *Improvement Era* 53 (April, 1950): 287.

who inserted the comma and for what purpose, there are only two ways the comma could have got into that verse: either it was added intentionally or by mistake.

If it was added intentionally, Apostle James E. Talmage is the person most likely to have inserted this comma, and he is the person most often cited as being responsible for it. Because of his attention to detail, the editing of scriptural text was often entrusted to him. The manuscript containing the revisions for the 1920 Book of Mormon are all in his hand; of the hundreds of punctuation changes made to the 1920 Book of Mormon edition, all of them came from Talmage, and none was due to a typesetting error.<sup>16</sup> As Talmage was also on the same committee when they revised the D&C in 1921, it is likely he directed the punctuation changes in that edition as well, including inserting the comma into 89:13. Whether or not it was Apostle Talmage, if the comma was added intentionally, it was undoubtedly done by (or under the direction of) one or more of the original committee members assigned to the task, though apparently without the knowledge of Joseph Fielding Smith (if we assume Woodford's telling of the story is correct).

If we take Woodford's story at face value, Elder Smith had not seen the comma before it was shown to him, but this is not evidence that the comma was put in by the printer or even evidence it was put in by mistake. It is not even evidence that Elder Smith believed the comma changed the meaning of the text, especially given that he himself wrote the following in his 1947 commentary on the Word of Wisdom:

Neither is it the intent of this revelation to include grains and fruits in the restriction placed upon meats,

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16 Royal Skousen, e-mail message to the author, February 2, 2013.

that they should be used only in famine or excess of hunger.<sup>17</sup>

Without definitive records explaining the change, what can we know about why it may have been added? Modern linguists can provide a significant clue. LDS linguistics scholar Royal Skousen explains how the natural evolution of language can cause problems for our understanding and interpretation of certain verses:

A number of passages from the scriptures ... have caused misunderstanding and confusion. In each of these passages the source of the difficulty has been the language of the passage itself. Sometimes archaic words or changes in word meaning cause misunderstanding.... Much of our confusion over these passages can be resolved when we seek to determine what the words in the scriptures originally meant.<sup>18</sup>

One of the examples Skousen uses is the word *only* in D&C 89:13. He explains how the meaning of the word *only* changed over time, making it useful for the comma to be added so that modern readers would not misunderstand the verse. Skousen writes:

Now let us turn to a couple of examples from the Doctrine and Covenants. First, consider the use of the word *only* in that part of the Word of Wisdom that deals with eating meat: “Yea, flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air, I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly; and it is pleasing unto me

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17 Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1947), 148.

18 Royal Skousen, “Through a Glass Darkly: Trying to Understand the Scriptures,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 1.

that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine” (D&C 89:12–13, 1921 and 1981 editions). In editions prior to 1921, the comma before *only* was missing: “And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine” (1879 edition). A reader might interpret this as meaning that meat could be used at any time, not only in times of winter, cold, or famine.

Of course, the real problem here is in the meaning of *only*. In the last century the word *only* very often had the meaning “except.” For example, the Oxford English Dictionary quotes a use of *only* that undoubtedly means “except”: “For many years the following notice was painted up at Bolton railway station: “Do not cross the line only by the bridge.” Clearly, this is the appropriate sense of *only* in this verse from section 89. James E. Talmage put the comma in the 1921 edition, but not in order to change the meaning of *only*. Instead, the meaning of *only* had changed and the comma was put in so that the modern reader could read the verse and still get out its original meaning.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, there are many other examples throughout the scriptures where the word *only* means “except.” According to Skousen:

There are at least 10 clear instances of “only” with the meaning “except” in the Book of Mormon text.... The 1830 typesetter put a comma before 7 of the 10.... But for three instances he missed the need to put the comma.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Skousen, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 5.

20 Royal Skousen, e-mail message to the author, February 2, 2013.

The following are two examples from D&C 121 where the word *only* clearly means “except.” Note that the first example does not include a clarifying comma:

That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness. (D&C 121:36)

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned. (D&C 121:41)

Because there is no comma before the word *only* in verse 36, could we interpret it to mean that the powers of heaven *can* be controlled and handled on principles *other* than righteousness? Do we need some principles of *unrighteousness* to assist the priesthood? Clearly this does not make good sense, so we simply understand the word *only* to mean “except.”

In the second example, a comma comes before the word *only*, but even if we discovered that this comma was absent from this verse before 1921, no one would assert that the *original* meaning of this scripture was that such principles as persuasion, long-suffering, and love unfeigned are somehow insufficient to maintain the power of the priesthood. We would not be arguing that the addition of the comma *reversed* the meaning of the text. We’d simply interpret the word *only* to mean “except.”

### Greater Internal Consistency

Looking at verse 13 from a different angle, another reason cited for discounting the “errant comma theory” is that the addition

of the comma creates greater internal consistency in D&C 89. As Stephen Robinson and Dean Garrett note:

The difficulty in verse 13 lies in the comma following the word “used.” Depending upon the presence or absence of this comma, contradictory meanings may be ascribed to the text. Between 1833 and 1921, there was no comma in the text at this point in the revelation. The comma was first inserted in the revelation in the 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

However, insertion of the comma brings verse 13 into agreement with the clear sense and intent of verses 12 and 15, and without it, these would seem to contradict verse 13.<sup>21</sup>

This explanation is especially interesting in light of the fact that internal consistency is the most-cited reason for asserting that the comma is a mistake. This following example from McConkie’s D&C commentary is an example of this reasoning:

The placement of the comma in section 89 is inconsistent with some of the other revelations Joseph received. For example, in section 49 the Lord explicitly states that a person who “forbiddeth to abstain from meats ... is not ... of God.” (D&C 49:18.) Furthermore, meat is “ordained for the use of man for food and for raiment, and that he might have in abundance.” (D&C 49:19.) Timothy in the New Testament also warns that in the last days some, not of God, will forbid eating meat, “which God hath created to be received with

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21 Stephen Robinson and Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, vol.3 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 149.

thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.” (1 Timothy 4:3.)<sup>22</sup>

The assertion that the meaning of verse 13 with the added comma is in conflict with other scriptures is a matter of interpretation. The meaning of D&C 89 with the inserted comma does not “forbid” the use of meat. Rather, it seems to say that meat is ordained for the use of man, but it is to be used sparingly, only in times of winter, cold, or famine.

### No Changes to D&C 89:13 after 1921

Just as significantly, the punctuation in verse 13 has not been altered since 1921, not even during the major revision of the D&C done in 1981 when many changes were made and the footnotes were completely updated. Apparently, this was not an oversight, as verse 13 was specifically reviewed by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, who, after asking Elder Bruce R. McConkie to research the matter, “decided that the comma as it now stands was in the proper place and should not be removed.” Here is the complete account as it appears in a biography of Bruce R. McConkie:

The Brethren carefully examined the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants for printing errors and mistakes, including details as small as the placement of a comma. For example, during the committee’s work on the Doctrine and Covenants, the subject of the comma in section 89, verse 13, came up for discussion. The presence, or lack thereof, of the comma between the words “used” and “only” can drastically change the meaning of the verse. Earlier publications of the Church which contained this verse were ambiguous, as some included the comma and others did not. Elder

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22 McConkie, *Looking at the Doctrine and Covenants*, 353.

McConkie said that the subject had been discussed by the First Presidency and the Twelve a year or two earlier. At that time they asked Elder McConkie to research the subject, which he did. His findings were then approved, and it was decided that the comma as it now stands was in the proper place and should not be removed. Therefore, the Scriptures Publications Committee did not take any further action. Elders Monson and Packer, both of whom were at this meeting, concurred with the decision to leave it as is.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, it seems wise to base our interpretation of verse 13 on the current edition of the scriptures, especially in light of the fact that there is no evidence to suggest the alternative “errant comma” interpretation warrants merit. As Robinson and Garrett note in their 2004 D&C commentary:

[S]ince 1921, several different First Presidencies have had the opportunity to correct the reading of verse 13 in subsequent editions of the Doctrine and Covenants and have specifically declined to do so. At present, given our firm conviction in continuing revelation, we need to follow the reading of the most recent edition. There is no commandment or constraint on this issue, and Church leaders seem content to let the Saints apply the principle as stated here individually as guided by the Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

Robert Woodford, who in 1974 had suggested the comma was a printing error, conceded in 1979 that we should “accept the verse [D&C 89:13] as written.” He still held to the view that the comma “reverses the meaning of the verse” but noted: “[I]n

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23 Dennis B. Horne (2000). *Bruce R. McConkie: Highlights from His Life and Teachings* (Roy, UT: Eborn Books, 2000), 190.

24 Robinson and Garrett, *Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, vol. 3, 149.



actuality most Latter-day Saints' lifestyle is lived as though the comma were not there."<sup>25</sup>

### Historical Interpretations of D&C 89:13

If the "errant comma theory" is not plausible, what does D&C 89:13 mean? To date, there is no consensus of opinion. In fact, during the last eight decades the number of interpretations has multiplied. This is in contrast to the first 100 years after 1833 when there actually was a consensus on the meaning of this verse among Latter-day Saints who addressed the issue. It was a literalist interpretation that took the verse at face value: it is pleasing to God if we do not use the flesh of beasts or fowls of the air, except in times of winter, cold, or famine.<sup>26</sup>

The standard interpretation of D&C 89:13 during the first 100 years did not have a widespread impact on the dietary practices of the Saints during this time, but this is not because the Saints found this verse too ambiguous. The fact is, many Saints had a difficult time abiding by even the clearest counsel found the Word of Wisdom.<sup>27</sup> After the revelation was given in 1833, there were Saints who promoted abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea as the official standard for keeping the Word of Wisdom.<sup>28</sup> But the clarity of a standard of abstinence is quantitatively easier to understand and assess as compared to admonitions to use wholesome plants with "prudence and thanksgiving," make grain the "staff of life,"

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25 Robert J. Woodford, "A Survey of Textual Changes in the Doctrine and Covenants," in *Seventh Annual Sydney B. Sperry Symposium: The Doctrine and Covenants* (Provo, Utah, Brigham Young University Religious Instruction, January 27, 1979), 33. [unpublished manuscript]

26 This is based on my own analysis of the Word of Wisdom literature (published books, articles, and, more recently, websites) from 1833 to the present day.

27 Paul H. Peterson, "An Historical Analysis of the Word of Wisdom" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1972).

28 Paul Y. Hoskisson, "The Word of Wisdom in Its First Decade," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 1 (winter 2012): 132.

or eat meat “sparingly” and “only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine.” Even so, the process of lifting the general Church membership to even the basic standard of abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea took almost 100 years, and even now (181 years later) the task is not complete. LDS Church leaders are still working to help the Saints become fully obedient to this basic standard, even though the counsel in section 89 was specifically “adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints” (D&C 89:3).

Because Church leaders have never made verses 12–17 of section 89 part of the standard for Church worthiness, discussion of these verses has not played as prominent a role in the Word of Wisdom literature. This is particularly true of verse 13. In fact, Latter-day Saints who have addressed the Word of Wisdom during the last few decades have been more likely to emphasize the fact that meat is “ordained of God” and “not forbidden” than to suggest that Latter-day Saints should curtail their consumption, much less forego it other than in times of winter, cold, or famine.

It may be because of a disconnect between a straightforward reading of verse 13 and the dietary practices of the LDS people that alternative interpretations of verse 13 have flourished. Like the “errant comma theory,” most of the explanations of verse 13 (both before and after 1921) have been asserted without much evidence and have subsequently never been carefully analyzed for veracity.<sup>29</sup>

While it is clear that the meaning of D&C 89:13 is not critical to keeping the Word of Wisdom in terms of the worthiness standard of the Church, it may be of value to anyone who wants to better understand the Word of Wisdom, as well to those who hope to claim the full measure of the promises

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29 This is based on the author’s analysis of the Word of Wisdom literature from 1833 to the present. The author is also doing research to explore the multiple ways D&C 89:13 has been interpreted since 1833.

contained therein for those who “remember to keep and do these sayings” (D&C 89:18).

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# “AND THERE WRESTLED A MAN WITH HIM” (GENESIS 32:24): ENOS’S ADAPTATIONS OF THE ONOMASTIC WORDPLAY OF GENESIS

Matthew L. Bowen

*Abstract: In this brief note, I will suggest several instances in which the Book of Mormon prophet Enos utilizes wordplay on his own name, the name of his father “Jacob,” the place name “Peniel,” and Jacob’s new name “Israel” in order to connect his experiences to those of his ancestor Jacob in Genesis 32-33, thus infusing them with greater meaning. Familiarity with Jacob and Esau’s conciliatory “embrace” in Genesis 33 is essential to understanding how Enos views the atonement of Christ and the ultimate realization of its blessings in his life.*

Over a decade ago, John Tvedtnes and Matt Roper insightfully noted that Enos’s autobiographical description of his “wrestle ... before God” (in Hebrew: *\*lipnê ’ēlōhîm*, “to the face of God”) was a literary allusion to Jacob the patriarch’s “wrestling” with a “man” at Peniel (“face of God”).<sup>1</sup> These authors did not note, however, that the word “wrestle” itself both in the Genesis narrative (Hebrew *yē’ābēq/ bēhē’ābēqô*, Genesis 32:24-25) and in Enos’s adaptation of it in his autobiography (Enos 1:2) constitutes a paronomasia (or a pun)<sup>2</sup> on “Jacob” (*Ya’āqōb*).

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1 John A. Tvedtnes, “Jacob and Enos: Wrestling before God,” *Insights* 21/5 (2001): 2–3.

2 Richard A. Lanham (*A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed. [Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1991], 110) defines *paronomasia* as “playing on the sounds and meanings of words.”

In this brief note, I will suggest several instances in which Enos utilizes wordplay on his own name, the name of his father “Jacob,” the place name “Peniel,” and Jacob’s new name “Israel” in order to connect his experiences to those of his ancestor Jacob in Genesis 32-33, thus infusing them with greater meaning. Familiarity with Jacob and Esau’s conciliatory “embrace” in Genesis 33 is essential to understanding how Enos views the atonement of Christ and the ultimate realization of its blessings in his life.

### Enos’s Transformative Jacob-like “Wrestle”

The impact of the ancestral stories about Jacob the biblical patriarch and his personal transformation are evident in the writing of his descendant, the Book of Mormon Jacob’s son Enos, whose autobiographical introduction contains wordplay both on his name and the name of his father, Jacob:

Behold, it came to pass that I, **Enos** [*Ĕnôš*, Heb. *’ēnôš* = “man”], knowing my father that he was a just **man**<sup>3</sup> [*’iš/’ēnôš*]<sup>4</sup>—for he taught me in his language, and also in the nurture and admonition of the Lord—and blessed be the name of my God for it—And I will tell you of the **wrestle** [*\*hē’ābēq*] which I had *before God* [*lipnê ’ēlōhîm*, cf. Peniel],<sup>4</sup> before I received a remission of my sins. (Enos 1:1–2)

Enos’s introduction recalls not only Nephi’s autobiographical wordplay on his own name (Nephi-Egyptian *nfr* [neh-fee] = “good,” “goodly,” 1 Nephi 1:1)<sup>5</sup> but also the

3 Cf. the use of the phrase “just man” in Genesis 6:9: “Noah was a just man [*’iš šaddîq*] and perfect in his generations.”

4 Tvedtnes and Roper, “Jacob and Enos: Wrestling Before God.” 2–3.

5 See Matthew L. Bowen, “Wordplay on the Name Enos,” *Insights* 26/3 (2006): 2; on the wordplay in 1 Nephi 1:1, see Matthew L. Bowen, “Internal Textual Evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 2. On Nephi as Egyptian *nfr* and its pronunciation, see John Gee, “A

paronomasia on “Jacob” found throughout the Genesis narratives, especially the scene in Genesis 32, in which Jacob (*Yaʾāqōb*) “passed over the ford **Jabbok**” (*Yabbōq*) and “there **wrestled** [*wayyēʾābēq*] a **man** [*ʾiš*, cf. *ʾēnōš* with him” (32:22, 24; cf. “men,” *ʾānāšīm*, 32:28)].<sup>6</sup> In using the verb “wrestle” (Hebrew *\*ʾbq*), Enos creates an allusive pun that reminds his audience that his father, the “just man” mentioned in Enos 1:1, is named for their ancestor Jacob, who also had a “wrestle.”<sup>7</sup> Patriarch Jacob’s transformative experience will be, in some measure, Enos the son of Jacob’s experience.

### A New Name

In the Genesis narrative, Jacob refuses to break his hold on the “man” unless the “man” blesses him, whereupon the “man” bestows a new name on Jacob: “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but *Israel* [*Yisrāʾēl*] for **as a prince hast thou power** [*šārītā*, or better, **thou hast struggled**]<sup>8</sup> with **God** [*ʾēlōhīm*] and **men** [*ʾānāšīm*, plural form of “Enos”]” (Genesis 32:28). The patriarch Jacob gives Jabbok the new name “Peniel” (*Pēnîēl*,

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Note on the Name Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 189-91; and “Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name Nephi,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 1-5.

6 *ʾĒnōš* is a poetic synonym of *ʾiš* (“man”) and both share the same plural form: *ʾānāšīm*.

7 Notably, however, Jacob is not the active subject of the verb *wayyēʾābēq* in the biblical narrative, but the indirect passive object. A “man”—an *ʾiš*, the more common form or synonym of *ʾēnōš*—is the subject of the verb *wayyēʾābēq*. Enos the “man” is also the agent: “the wrestle which I had before God.”

8 There are two *\*sry* roots in Hebrew: one is a biform of *šrr* (“rule, reign”; see Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 3:1362 [hereafter cited as *HALOT*]), the other means to “strive, contend with” (see *HALOT*, 3:1354), i.e., to “struggle with.” The latter seems to best fit the context (cf. “wrestling”). The author’s use of wordplay, however, allows for both: a “new name” is not infrequently a throne name. Compare Hosea 12:3-4 version of this story, where the sense of the verb as “struggle” better fits the narrative context as well.

“face of God”)<sup>9</sup> because he had “seen **God face to face** [*’ēlōhîm pānîm ’el-pānîm*]” (Genesis 32:30), a name to which Enos alludes when he describes his wrestle as being “before God” (*lipnê ’ēlōhîm*, “to the face of God”) and “before my maker” (Enos 1:2, 4), as Tvedtnes and Roper have noted.<sup>10</sup> The men that Jacob “struggled” with include the divine “man” that he wrestled at Peniel, Esau (in the womb and afterward), and Laban, whose daughters Jacob married. Jacob is eventually reconciled to all of these “men” (*’ānāšîm*).

At the conclusion of Enos’s wrestle, he is similarly “blessed”: “Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be **blessed**” (Enos 1:5). At this point, Enos “began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren, the Nephites” (1:9), and subsequently for the Lamanites (1:11). He is a changed “man” and he seems to allude to Jacob’s new name “Israel” when he describes his and his people’s later “strugglings” on behalf of and with the Lamanites (Enos 1:10, 11, 14). Through his “struggle,” Jacob’s life is “preserved” (Genesis 32:30). Amid these “strugglings,” Enos obtains a promise that the Nephite records would be “preserved” (1:15–18) and that one day the Lamanites would come to the same “knowledge of God” that he and the Nephites possessed. In other words, the Lamanites would be eventually reconciled to God (and thus to Enos himself!).

There seems to be a further pun envisaged by the use of the verb *rā’â*, to “see” in Genesis 32:20, and the giving of Jacob’s new name “Israel” (*Yîsrâ’ēl*) in connection with the verb *rā’â*, to “see” in Genesis 32:28–30 (it is a key word that also occurs at Genesis 32:2, 20, 25; 33:1, 5, 10; cf. Enos 1:8, 19, 27). The force of this implied or hidden non-etymological pun seems to be \*’îš -*rā’â*-’ēl: A “man” (*’îš*) has “seen” (*rā’â*) “God” (*’ēl[ōhîm]*), and his “life is preserved.” Jacob’s “wrestle”—or the “wrestle” of the divine *’îš* with him—is the pivotal, transformative event

9 Or, “Penuel” (*Pēnûēl*, Genesis 32:31).

10 Tvedtnes and Roper, “Jacob and Enos,” 2–3.



in the story of Jacob's life, who goes from being a grabber of his brother's "heel" (*ba'āqēb*, Genesis 25:26) and a "supplanter" ("Is not he rightly named Jacob? **for he hath supplanted me** [*wayya'qēbēnī*] these two times," Genesis 27:36)<sup>11</sup> to one with whom his once-estranged brother can reconcile. Prior to his "wrestle" with the mysterious "man," Jacob sends a gift to Esau: **"I will appease him** [*ākappērā pānāw*, literally, "I will **atone his face**"] with the present that goeth before me [*lēpānāy*], and afterward **I will see his face** [*er'eh panāw*]; peradventure he will accept of me [*yīššā' pānāy*, he will lift up **my face**]" (Genesis 32:20). Jacob's "wrestle" at Jabbok/Peniel, in which he "prevails" with God, prepares the way for reconciliation with his brother Esau, and Enos's wrestle "before" God prepares the way for the eventual reconciliation of his brethren the Nephites and Lamanites with each other (see, for example, Alma 17–27) and God through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

### Jacob's and Enos's Atoning "Embraces"

Enos, like his ancestor Jacob and his father Jacob, longed to be reconciled or "atoned" with his brethren. After his "wrestle" with the "man" in Genesis 32, the very next pericope describes Jacob's "reconciliation" or "at-one-ment" with his estranged brother Esau. Jacob's humility is evident in his obeisance, to which Esau responds with an embrace:

And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. And Esau **ran** to meet him, **and embraced him** [*wayēḥabbēqēhū*], and **fell on his neck**, and **kissed him**: and they wept (Genesis 33:3–4).

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11 Jeremiah 9:4 [MT 9:3] also trades negatively on this wordplay on Jacob: "Take ye heed every one of his neighbour, and trust ye not in any brother: for every brother will utterly supplant [*āqōb ya'qōb*], and every neighbour will walk with slanders."

In the biblical account, the word “embraced” constitutes a paronomasia on the name “Jacob”<sup>12</sup> similar to the paronomasia on “wrestle” (*yē’ābēq*) and Jacob (*Ya’āqōb*). This wordplay is a sublime pun on “Jacob” that emphasizes his transformation from his former identity: he is no longer the “heel [-grabber]” or “usurper,” but “the embraced,” i.e., “the at-one-ed.” This pun confirms Hugh Nibley’s suggestion that “the word conventionally translated as ‘wrestled (*yē’āvēq*)’ can just as well mean ‘embraced.’”<sup>13</sup> Jesus seems to allude directly to this event in his Parable of the Prodigal Son: “And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father **saw him**, and had compassion, and **ran**, and **fell on his neck**, and **kissed him**” (Luke 15:20). The Lord, speaking to Enoch, describes a similar “at-one-ment” between Enoch’s Zion and the Latter-day Zion: “Then shalt thou and all thy city **meet** them there, and **we will receive them into our bosom**, and **they shall see us**; and **we will fall upon their necks**, and **they shall fall upon our necks**, and **we will kiss each other**” (Moses 7:63).

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12 Similar wordplay on “Jacob” in terms of embrace can be found in Genesis 29:13 and 48:10.

13 Hugh W. Nibley (*The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed. [CWHN 16; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005], 434) writes, “One of the most puzzling episodes in the Bible has always been the story of Jacob’s wrestling with the Lord. When one considers that the word conventionally translated as ‘wrestled (*yē’āvēq*)’ can just as well mean ‘embrace’ and that it was in this ritual embrace that Jacob received a new name and the bestowal of priestly and kingly power at sunrise (Genesis 32:24-30), the parallel to the Egyptian coronation embrace becomes at once apparent.” Notably, the Hebrew verbs *\*bq* (“wrestle”) and *hbq* (“embrace”) may both be related to Akkadian *epēqu(m)*, “to embrace; grow over, round.” See *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, ed. Jeremy Black, Andrew George and Nicolas Postgate; SANTAG 5 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), 74.

Following this “divine” embrace, Jacob articulates his feelings about this “reconciliation” or “at-one-ment” in words that recall his “wrestle” at Peniel (“face of God”) where he saw God “face to face” (Genesis 32:30) and his earlier words (“I will see his face, and he will [lift up my face],” 32:20):

And Jacob said, Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand: for therefore **I have seen** [*rā’itī*] **thy face** [*pānêkā*], **as though I had seen** [*kir’ôt*] **the face of God** [*pěnê ’ēlōhîm*], and **thou wast pleased with me** [or, “thou hast been reconciled to me”] (Genesis 33:10).

Enos, who goes down to the grave with the knowledge that the Lamanites will one day be reconciled to God (Enos 1:12-17),<sup>14</sup> anticipates his final “reconciliation” and “atonement” to God in words that directly recall Genesis 32:20 and 33:10:

And I soon go to the place of my rest, which is with my Redeemer; for I know that in him I shall rest. And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall **stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure**, and he will say unto me: Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father. Amen. (Enos 1:27).

Enos’s words here, adapting Jacob’s words from the Jacob-Esau story, constitute a marvelous play on both “Peniel” and “Israel.” Enos rejoices in the eventual at-one-ment of his body and spirit, i.e., his becoming an immortal man, and he foresees that when he finally stands “before” God (cf. Peniel), he will “see his face with pleasure,” just as when Jacob “saw” Esau’s “face” and was finally reconciled to him (Genesis 33:1–4). He

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14 Cf. Jacob’s words in on reconciliation and atonement in 2 Nephi 10:24–25 and Nephi’s words on reconciliation and grace in 25:21–23.

knows the Lord will embrace him (cf. 2 Nephi 1:15; 4:31–35; Alma 34:16; Mormon 5:11; Luke 15:20; Moses 7:63).

Prior to his “wrestle” before God and “strugglings” on behalf of his brethren, Enos had never “heard or seen” the Lord: “Because of thy faith in Christ, **whom thou hast never before heard nor seen**. And many years pass away before he shall manifest himself in the flesh; wherefore, go to, thy faith hath made thee whole” (Enos 1:8). However, Enos now foresees that when he is invited into the “place prepared for [him] in the mansions” of God the Father, he will have become like his ancestor Jacob/Israel, the wrestling “man-who-saw-God” (cf. Israel) and emerged transformed, “embraced,” and divine. “How is it done?”<sup>15</sup> Enos asked (Enos 1:7). It was “done” through the atonement wrought out by Jesus Christ. Enos spent the rest of his life “prophesying of things to come, and testifying of the things which [he] had heard and **seen**,” i.e., of Jesus Christ and his atonement (Enos 1:19; cf. 1:8). He too had seen God.

## Conclusion

In sum, the wordplay used and alluded to by Enos as discussed in the paper can be summarized in the following chart:

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15 Possibly implying the idea that the Hebrew verb \**ʿšy/ʿsh* (to “make” or “do”) sounds very similar to “Esau” (*ʿĒśāw*). Notably, in Enos 1:3, Enos presents himself like Esau, a hunter (see Genesis 25:27 [*ʿiš yōdēaʿ šayyīd*], 27:5, 30) or “man of the field” (*ʿiš śadeh*, 25:27). Jacob was an *ʿiš tom* (“plain man”) (Genesis 25:27).

16 Most still follow Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der Gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (BWANT 3/10; Stuttgart: W. Kolhammer, 1928), 173. See also *HALOT*, 2:872. Cf. 2 Nephi 6:2 and Jacob 1:20, where Jacob describes Nephi as his and the Nephites’ “protector.”

Name	Hebrew/Meaning	Level 1 wordplay	Level 2 wordplay	Level 3 wordplay
Jacob	<i>Ya'āqōb</i> ("May He [God] protect") <sup>16</sup>	<i>ba'āqēb</i> ("on the heel," Genesis 25:26) <i>wayya'qēbēni</i> ("he hath supplanted me," Genesis 27:36)	<i>wayyē'ābēq/ bēhē'ābēqō</i> ("and there wrestled"/"in his wrestling," Genesis 32:24–25)	<i>wayēhabbēqēhū</i> ("and embraced him," Genesis 33:3–4; cf. 29:13 and 48:10)
Israel	<i>Yisrā'ēl</i> ("El [God] struggles," "El has power")	<i>sārītā</i> (* <i>šry</i> /* <i>šrr</i> ) ("struggle" or "have power" with God, Genesis 32:28)	"struggling," "strugglings" (Enos 1:10–11, 14)	Implicit pun: <i>'iš-rā'ā -'ēl</i> ("man has seen God"; Genesis 32:30) <i>rā'ā</i> —"see" (Genesis 32:2, 20, 25, 30; 33:1, 5, 10; Enos 1:8, 19, 27)
Peniel	<i>Pēniēl</i> ("[The] Face of El")	<i>'ēlōhīm pānīm 'el-pānīm</i> ("God face-to-face," Genesis 32:30); <i>pēnē 'ēlōhīm</i> ("face of God," Genesis 33:10)	<i>lipnē 'ēlōhīm</i> ("before God," Enos 1:2) <i>lipnē</i> ("before" Enos 1:4)	The "atoned" or reconciled "face" seen (Genesis 32:20, 33:10; Enos 1:27)
Enos	<i>'Ēnōš</i> ("man" [poetic])	"just man" (Enos 1:1)	echoing <i>'iš</i> ("a man") in Genesis 32:24	echoing <i>'ānāšīm</i> ("men") in Genesis 32:28

There can be little doubt that Enos, in describing his transformative "wrestle before God" (Enos 1:2), alludes to his ancestor Jacob's transformative "wrestle" at Peniel, with a view to the name "Jacob" which was also borne by his father, whose teachings Enos also had to "wrestle" with and become reconciled to. Enos also subtly alludes to the meaning of his own name in using wordplay that recalls his uncle Nephi's autobiographical wordplay (1 Nephi 1:1) and the wrestling "man" and "men" of Genesis 32. Enos further insinuates through wordplay that he became "Israel," one who "struggled" with God and prevailed, and a "man" who had "seen" God." The breathtaking beauty of Enos's wordplay, however, cannot be appreciated until we recognize his allusions to Esau and Jacob's conciliatory "embrace" and Jacob's "seeing" the face of his brother, with mutual pleasure, as "the face of God." Enos

too became *Yiśrā'ēl* — a “man,” *'iš* or *'ēnôš* — who envisaged God and became like him through Jesus's atonement and the resurrection that Jesus brought to pass.

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# MORMONISM AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

*Rick Anderson*

*Abstract: To many outside the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (and to some of its members), the Church's teachings and practices appear not only socially and experientially constraining, but intellectually restrictive as well, given its centralized system of doctrinal boundary maintenance and its history of sometimes sanctioning members who publicly dissent from its teachings. Do these practices amount to a constraint of intellectual freedom? This essay argues that they do not, and offers several possible explanations for the commonly-asserted position that they do.*

Recently a friend from whom I had not heard in many years contacted me through Facebook. He had come across an essay I had written in which I had expressed my testimony of the gospel and described how I had come to settle on it despite struggling with certain doubts and questions. My friend had long since left the Church and adopted a lifestyle quite aggressively at odds with its teachings, and he now took the opportunity to encourage me to switch sides. He reported that the good feelings I had described as being one side effect of gospel living and spiritual communion—feelings which I largely attribute to the influence of the Holy Ghost—are equally available to people living outside the strictures of the Church and priesthood covenants and that when enjoyed outside of

that context, they come with another, more important corollary benefit, which he characterized as “intellectual freedom.”

His message amounted to a missionary epistle: looking at me, he saw a person unnecessarily constrained not only socially and experientially (denying myself the kinds of associations and pleasures that he enjoys) but also intellectually (cutting myself off from inquiry and engagements that are available to those who have escaped the restrictions of Mormon commitment).

This was by no means the first time a friend or acquaintance has expressed either bemusement or outright incredulity about my spiritual life. I grew up far away from the centers of the Church and was one of only two active Mormons in my large high school on the outskirts of a major eastern city. I served a proselyting mission in a part of the world where Mormons were little known and even less understood. I have pursued a career in academia, where, for the most part, religious belief of any kind is assumed to be, at best, a cute and mostly harmless category error and, at worst, perniciously at odds with the life of the mind and with all that is best about the human spirit. So I have dealt with skepticism about spiritual things throughout my life. Nevertheless, this communication from my friend was a first for me: a message from someone who had grown up in the Church, served a mission, and later made the conscious decision to turn his back on what he had once believed, and who was now serving as a missionary for the other side, hoping to convince me to defect.

His message was lengthy, and in it he bore testimony, explaining how he had come to know that the Church was not true and that Joseph Smith was an impostor who had gotten caught up in his own pseudo-prophetic hype (in this case, the sacred text of conversion was Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*). I had encountered, worked with, and been friends with other disaffected and former Mormons, of course, but this



was the first time I had found myself the object of a direct and unambiguous apostate proselyting effort.

His invitation was not particularly tempting to me; I found his invitation to a life of chemical experimentation and sexual libertinism unattractive at virtually every level. Nor did I find my testimony shaken by our exchange, though it did make me sad and gave me cause for reflection. One aspect of his message in particular left me with a troubling question: why do so many people—both inside and outside the Church—associate gospel commitment with a restriction on intellectual freedom?

There are a number of possible explanations for this position. Here I will suggest three: the first (correlation) based on a more charitable interpretation of the motives of those who hold it, the second (confusion) on a relatively neutral interpretation, and the last (condescension) on a more negative assessment. These interpretations are meant to be neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

### Correlation

The first answer is both obvious and reasonable: the Church is undeniably hierarchical, and its fundamental teachings are centrally determined and distributed. The “correlation” program<sup>1</sup>—so much resented by many intellectuals both inside and on the margins of the Church—is specifically designed, in part, to define what is taught by Church officers and representatives and what may legitimately be said to represent official doctrine and policy. It is undeniable that correlation (or, indeed, any officially sanctioned system of doctrinal boundary maintenance) represents restriction. As a member of the Church one may *believe*, without sanction, any number of things that fall outside the realm of official or approved

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1 Frank O. May, Jr., “Correlation of the Church Administration,” in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:323-325.

doctrine—but to *teach* such things in church as a youth leader or a class instructor or bishop would be to set oneself up for correction by those in authority over the Church. To resist such correction would mean, in all likelihood, being released from one's position as a leader or teacher, and in some cases might mean disfellowshipment or excommunication (the mechanism by which the Church separates itself from the teachings and/or behavior of a member who refuses to submit to its strictures).

Does correlation represent a restriction on intellectual freedom? In a way, yes—teaching is certainly an intellectual activity—but with two important qualifications. The Church's system of correlation puts restriction on

- a) what one may teach or publish (rather than on what one may think or believe),
- b) while one is a member in good standing of the Church (rather than on what one has the right to say or teach in general).

These two qualifications are extremely important.

First of all, it is essential to understand that members of the Church are given tremendous latitude in what they may *think or believe* as members. The Church teaches very specific things about, for example, the nature and character of God, what constitutes proper order in meetings, and how and to whom one should pray. However, members are almost never officially queried about what they believe. Some may believe that God is noncorporeal, others that it would be right and proper to open a sacrament meeting with prayer to our Heavenly Mother, others that the Church should never have renounced plural marriage. These members may harbor such heterodox beliefs indefinitely without sanction or any formal consequence, even if their beliefs are known to others. It is important to understand that while the Church espouses articles of faith, it imposes no creed. The only time a Mormon is asked by a Church authority

to account for his or her beliefs is in the interview for a temple recommend—and even in that context, the questions are mostly about behavior; those that deal with belief are strictly limited to the most fundamental truth claims of Mormonism, and address them only in very broad terms. The reality is that Mormons are free to believe all kinds of things, and many of us sitting in sacrament meeting might be surprised (and perhaps shocked) to know what private beliefs are harbored by the brothers or sisters sitting next to them.

Again, this is expected and fully tolerated in the Church. Only when heterodox beliefs are expressed as heterodox teaching does the person who holds those beliefs begin to run the risk of sanction—and even then, the risk only becomes serious if the person refuses to submit to correction by those the Church has designated to maintain doctrinal boundaries. Disagreeing with the Church is not cause for Church discipline; persisting, despite attempts at correction, in publicly teaching principles at odds with Church doctrine may be. This is not to say that what one believes does not matter; it matters very much, which is why the Church expends so much effort in teaching what it holds to be correct doctrine. It is only to point out that while the Church works hard to create belief in saving principles, it does virtually nothing either to root out or to punish incorrect beliefs that are privately held.

While disfellowshipment and excommunication may be experienced as harsh punishment by some Church members (and perhaps as a relief by others), it is important to recognize that such measures are not infringements of one's right to think or speak what one wishes; that right remains fully in place regardless of one's affiliation with the Church. It is, rather, an expression of the Church's right to decide what it will teach and who may speak on its behalf. All of us have the right to speak according to our conscience, but none of us has the right to insist on continued association with an organization whose

expressed tenets and principles are at odds with the ones we publicly teach. I can no more expect the Church to let me teach what it considers false doctrine in Sunday School than I could expect People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to let me hand out free bacon in its meetings. Correlation is, ultimately, not a restriction on intellectual freedom at all; it leaves no one less free to believe or teach whatever he or she wishes. Instead, it is a way for the Church to maintain the integrity of its teachings. Those who wish to espouse contrary teachings are completely free to do so—but the Church is also free to disassociate itself from them.

### **Confusion**

A second possible answer to the question “Why do so many people associate gospel commitment with a restriction on intellectual freedom?” may have to do with confusion about the difference between behavioral and intellectual restriction. In my experience, outside observers of Mormonism (including my apostate friend) are particularly likely to conflate the two. When confronted with a person who, by embracing a religious discipline, denies herself free and unfettered access to sexual adventure, many of these observers see someone being held back not just from the full pleasures of life (which is alarming enough) but from valuable experiences that might broaden and deepen her social development. Encountering someone who declines to experiment with mind-altering substances, they see someone who is missing out on an opportunity to expand his intellectual universe. (The latter attitude has been particularly prevalent since the 1960s and 1970s, a period during which drugs—especially hallucinogenics—were touted for their “mind-expanding” properties.)

To be sure, there is an intimate connection between experience and knowledge; someone who participates in sexual or chemical experimentation certainly gains knowledge that

those who refrain from those activities do not have. What is less clear is whether such experiences result in growth that can meaningfully be characterized as “intellectual.” Intellectual freedom must mean more than simple behavioral license. Do I constrain my children’s intellectual growth by stopping them from walking into traffic? Do laws that forbid me to shoot my neighbor represent a restriction on my intellectual freedom? There is no question that someone who survives being run over by a car and someone who kills another person with a gun have both gained knowledge and experience that the rest of us have not. But have their intellectual horizons really been enhanced? Arguably, in fact, they have. Is that enhancement sufficient to justify the abandonment of parental guidance or the repeal of laws against lethal violence? If not, then the conflation of experience with intellectual growth—while to some degree understandable and even defensible—is one that should, perhaps, be regarded with some skepticism.

### Condescension

So far I have proposed two answers to the question “Why do people associate gospel commitment with restrictions on intellectual freedom?” Neither of these two answers necessarily reflects poorly on the good faith of those who make that association; an honest person of good will might reasonably see the Church’s correlation program as intellectually restrictive, and might confuse mere behavioral license with intellectual freedom. But I see a third possible explanation for this view, and it is the more unfortunate one.

This explanation is rooted in condescension. In many cases, the conflation of religious commitment with intellectual restriction seems to arise from logic that goes like this: *No intelligent and well-informed person would believe such drivel, and no person of reasonable independence of mind would submit to correlation, so where religious belief and submission*

*are found they must be the result of ignorance and moral weakness. Religious organizations being what they are, such ignorance may not be the result of native stupidity, but probably comes from being actively kept in the dark by religious leaders, refused access to complete information about the Church and its history, discouraged from asking difficult questions, and bullied into submission.*

From this perspective, it is unthinkable that an intelligent and well-informed person might commit to the gospel *as a result of her intelligence and in light of relevant evidence*; instead, it would have to be *in spite of the believer's intelligence and the lack of evidence*. For someone committed to this view, intellectual limitation is less a consequence of religious commitment than it is an explanation for it: the idea that informed, open-minded, and strong-willed people might submit to religious discipline is absurd. For those who view religious belief in this way, the question "Why do people associate gospel commitment with a restriction on intellectual freedom?" is a virtual tautology, one as silly as asking why people associate famine with hunger or talent and motivation with high musical achievement. As one might expect, those who harbor this attitude find it threatening and upsetting when faced with what appears to be an intelligent, open-minded, well-informed believer. An encounter with such a person creates cognitive dissonance, which can be most easily resolved by attacking and discrediting the person whose presence has created it—or (less easily) by converting the believer into a nonbeliever.

I have now worked in and around academia for 25 years, as a staff employee at one private university and as a faculty member at three public universities. Throughout my career I have been dismayed by the degree to which I see this viewpoint taken as an article of faith, one built on foundational assumptions that are not to be questioned. I see two problems with this viewpoint, one superficial and one deep. The superficial

problem might be called a social one: it leads to obnoxious behavior. The deeper problem is an intellectual one: it is both uninformed and irrational. I will conclude by examining each of these problems.

As for the social ramifications of condescension: most of us (no matter what our belief system) struggle to find the right balance between, on the one hand, what we feel is an obligation to share what we believe is true and to warn others away from error, and, on the other hand, our obligation to be kind to others and respectful of their own differing beliefs. For most of us this struggle arises both from a sense that our own knowledge and understanding are imperfect (and that we should therefore be careful about getting too preachy with others) and from a desire to forge and maintain happy relationships with those around us. When we presume to know so much about the nature of reality and the universe that we can confidently correct anyone whose beliefs about these things differ from our own, we are likely to drive others away. Most of us, no matter what our religious, social, or political persuasions, do not want to do this, and so take a certain amount of care when expressing the view that we are right and those around us are wrong. Those who do not take care in that way are often difficult to be around. This is a real though fairly superficial problem.

As for its irrationality: because human perception and intelligence are limited in their scope of effectiveness, the things that can be understood and the questions that can be settled by means of logic, perception, and measurement are also limited. It should be obvious that for this reason, definitive support for a purely materialist worldview will never be forthcoming—its logic would simply be too circular. What we are capable of establishing and knowing by scientific and intellectual means is bounded by our physical and intellectual capacity. Mormonism, like most religions, deals with propositions about the existence and nature of things that are located beyond those

boundaries. This means both that the fundamental principles of Mormonism are not provable by science or logic, but also that they are not disprovable in that way.

None of this is to say that logic, physical evidence, and science have no role to play in our understanding of sacred things. If Central American archaeologists were to turn up metal plates containing the prophecies of Zenock, or if an early copy of *View of the Hebrews* heavily annotated in Joseph Smith's hand were to show up in a root cellar in upstate New York, most of us would need to reexamine some of our assumptions about Mormon origins. But neither event would definitively prove or disprove the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, or the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or the reality of premortal existence. Belief or *disbelief* in things that exist beyond the frontiers of our perceptual capacity will always be a matter of faith—faith that may be informed by more or less evidence and support, but faith nonetheless.

This is what takes anti-religious condescension out of the realm of mere rudeness and into that of irrationality. It is the condescension of one faith position towards another faith position, based on the fact that the latter is a faith position. As an intellectual stance it is internally inconsistent, bordering on incoherent. Ultimately, atheism is not logically defensible. From a purely intellectual standpoint—given the limits of human capacity—the only defensible position is agnosticism. And with agnosticism should come a certain degree of humility—enough humility, in any case, to short-circuit the kind of corrosive derision and condescension that those of the atheist faith too often direct at religious believers (and, it must be said, vice versa).

## Conclusion

For those of us who are believers—whether in Mormonism or in any other religious tradition that makes truth claims



about a reality beyond the reach of physical perception—there is a serious problem and a daily struggle. It lies in the fact that the world in which we live bombards us constantly, relentlessly, and in a million different ways with evidence of its existence. Furthermore, we are constantly shown evidence for the silliness of believing in things that cannot be demonstrated scientifically or proven logically: we see gullible people taken in by religious charlatans who prey on their credulity; we see putatively supernatural phenomena debunked by new scientific knowledge and technologies; we encounter myriad truth claims about the supernatural that are in conflict with our own beliefs but seem, on the surface at least, no less reasonable. The message that “what you see is all there is” assaults our minds and our senses constantly.

By contrast, the message that “there is something more than this” comes to us much more quietly, much less predictably, and in a manner that can easily be confused with emotion. Unlike scientific evidence and logical inference, spiritual communication cannot be generated at will; we can make ourselves more or less available to it, and can place ourselves in situations in which it is more or less likely to come, but that is about all we can do. Fortunately for us—and I see this as an example of divine grace—it is also true that the things we do as Mormons to make ourselves spiritually available, and the places we go in which to open ourselves up to spiritual influence, provide us with ancillary blessings and benefits: as we serve others, we grow in love for them and in connection to them; as we take the sacrament and serve in the temple, our hearts are calmed and our minds become reflective; as we empty our lives of that which the gospel teaches us matters least and fill it with those things that matter most, a conviction of the truthfulness of the gospel distills upon our souls in much the same way that dew accretes to the stem of a flower—not by propositions communicated through a still, small voice, but in a

manner that seems unbidden and to have come from nowhere<sup>2</sup>. These ancillary blessings and benefits create a spiritual and intellectual context that gives meaning and significance to the propositional messages of that still, small voice when they do arrive, and these experiences can create a conviction, or testimony, that these messages come from someplace other than either one's own mind or the aggressive and noisy world that badgers us so constantly to accept its authority as total and absolute.

A proselyting missionary from that world might argue that the benefits I have described are, first of all, self-deluding and, second of all, dwarfed by the pleasures and glories that the world offers. He might argue that when I serve in the Church and deny myself some of those pleasures and glories, I am simply increasing my investment in the Mormon value system and thus becoming less willing to question its validity. In strictly logical terms, I cannot muster objective and sharable evidence sufficient to prove him wrong. But in strictly logical terms, I am perfectly happy to leave the question open while I continue, in experiential terms, to reap the undeniable blessings of a life of gospel commitment. I cannot prove that the freedom (intellectual and otherwise) I experience as a Mormon is greater and deeper than the mere liberty I would experience outside the Church. But I see no reason (intellectual or otherwise) to trade the former for the latter.

Interestingly and perhaps ironically in the context of this essay, the Prophet Joseph Smith used explicitly sensory—even sensuous—language to describe what it feels like to recognize and embrace eternal truth. “I can taste the principles of eternal life,” he said,

and so can you. They are given to me by the revelations of Jesus Christ; and I know that when I tell you these

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2 See D&C 121:45.

words of eternal life as they are given to me, you taste them, and I know that you believe them. You say honey is sweet, and so do I. I can also taste the spirit of eternal life. I know it is good; and when I tell you of these things which were given me by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, you are bound to receive them as sweet, and rejoice more and more.<sup>3</sup>

I am a witness of the deep truthfulness of this statement. I cannot prove that what I am tasting are the principles of eternal life, but I can say without any doubt that they are delicious — and that their deliciousness is available to any who will come and see, and taste, and feel.

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3 Joseph Smith, Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1938, rpt. 1972), 355.



# EYE OF THE BEHOLDER, LAW OF THE HARVEST: OBSERVATIONS ON THE INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DIFFERENT INVESTIGATIVE APPROACHES OF JEREMY RUNNELLS AND JEFF LINDSAY

*Kevin Christensen*

*Review of “Letter to a CES Director: Why I Lost My Testimony,”  
Jeremy Runnells, April 2013, Updated February 23, 2014. 83  
pages. <http://cesletter.com/Letter-to-a-CES-Director.pdf>.*

*Abstract: In his Letter to a CES Director, Jeremy Runnells explains how a year of obsessive investigation brought about the loss of his testimony. In an LDS FAQ, LDS blogger Jeff Lindsay deals with all of the same questions, and has done so at least twenty years and has not only an intact testimony, but boundless enthusiasm. What makes the difference? In the parable of the Sower, Jesus explained that the same seeds (words) can generate completely different harvests, ranging from nothing to a hundred-fold increase, all depending on the different soil and nurture. This essay looks at how different expectations and inquiries for translation, prophets, key scriptural passages on representative issues can lead to very different outcomes for investigators.*

Jeremy T. Runnells is a “disaffected Mormon” who describes the grounds of his loss of faith in a website/pdf document published in 2013 called *Letter to a CES Director: Why I Lost My Testimony*. He had been an active LDS until 2012, when he read an account of a news article called “Mormonism Besieged by the Modern Age,” which claimed that Mormons

were leaving the church in droves.<sup>1</sup> Disturbed, he reports in his 83-page letter that, "All this information is a result of over a year of intense research and an absolute rabid obsession with Joseph Smith and Church history."<sup>2</sup>

Jeff Lindsay, on the other hand, describes himself as an active, believing Latter-day Saint and also an apologist who has been blogging since 1994. His website contains an extensive LDS FAQ (for Frequently Asked Questions)<sup>3</sup> which deals with all of the issues that Runnells raises and more. But Lindsay does so both at greater length, over a much broader span of time, consulting a wider range of sources, providing far more documentation, and including far more original research than Runnells. Lindsay demonstrates not just ongoing faith, but boundless enthusiasm.

Why do they come to such different conclusions in dealing with the same questions? The fact is that Lindsay has for at least twenty years confronted the same information that Runnells treats as faith-shattering over a single year. That such different responses to the same information can even exist should demonstrate that neither the issues that Runnells raises nor the information he provides is the real cause of his disillusion. What is? This is my topic.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Jeremy T. Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director: Why I Lost My Testimony," 5; <http://cesletter.com/Letter-to-a-CES-Director.pdf>, citing Peter Henerson and Kristina Cooke, "Mormonism Besieged by the Modern Age," Reuters, 30 January 2012; <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/01/30/uk-mormonchurch-idUKTRE80T1CP20120130>.

2 Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 5.2

3 See Jeff Lindsay, "LDS FAQ: Mormon Answers"; <http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/index.html>.

4 While I will discuss various complaints that Runnells makes, I do not attempt a point-by-point rebuttal. Such information is easily found, in my view, by those who seek it. See "Criticism of Mormonism/Online documents/Letter to a CES Director"; [http://en.fairmormon.org/Criticism\\_of\\_Mormonism/Online\\_documents/Letter\\_to\\_a\\_CES\\_Director](http://en.fairmormon.org/Criticism_of_Mormonism/Online_documents/Letter_to_a_CES_Director). See also Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*, 2nd ed. (Redding, CA: FairMormon, 2013).

Runnells presents his information as though making an equation:

Runnells (or anyone) + Questions + Facts = Inevitable  
Final Negative Conclusion

Comparison with the different conclusions provided by people like Jeff Lindsay, Mike Ash,<sup>5</sup> hundreds of volunteers at FairMormon, *Interpreter*, FARMS and the current Maxwell Institute, and for that matter, yours truly, well acquainted with the same issues should make it obvious that something other than simple addition of facts is involved.

Investigator [+ -] Preconceptions/(Adaptive or Brittle interpretive framework) x (Questions generated + Available facts/Selectivity + Contextualization + Subjective weighting for significance/Breadth of relevant knowledge) \* Time = Tentative Conclusion

In this more realistic equation, we have a wide range of variables. The effect of these variables means that very different reactions to the same information are not only possible, but very likely. Even if we tried to keep the Questions and Facts as constants, different Preconceptions, Selectivity, Contextualization, Valuations, and Time given to the same issues, we still ought to expect different conclusions. In the parable of the Sower, Jesus explained that the same seeds (words) can generate completely different harvests, ranging from nothing to a hundred-fold increase, all depending on the different soil and nurture. When His disciples asked Him to explain the meaning of that parable, Jesus commented, “Know ye not this parable? How then shall ye know all parables?” (Mark 4:13).

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5 See Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*.

The familiar fable of Henny Penny (also known as Chicken Little) makes a related point. In the fable, a chicken interprets the fall of an acorn as evidence that “the sky is falling!” Another interpretation of exactly the same event would be, “The sky is not falling, but just an acorn. No big deal. No crisis. Acorns fall from oak trees all the time. It’s natural and to be expected.” Another character in the more cautionary versions of the fable, Foxy Loxy, sees not a crisis, or a non-event, but an opportunity to exploit fear and ignorance for his own gain. Same data. Different interpretation. The information does not speak for itself, but must be interpreted within an informational context and a conceptual framework. By understanding the different ways in which the same information gets processed, the different interpretations and conclusions become understandable.

So one of the first things we ought to consider in approaching questions regarding the LDS (or any other) faith is the clarity of our own perceptions: “Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? ... First cast the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly” (Matthew 7:3, 5)

How clear is our vision? When we run across something that we didn’t expect, do we shatter like glass and declare that “The sky is falling!” Or do we first stop to ask, “What should I expect?” It helps to realize that information that shatters one set of preconceptions might be handled quite easily by another set: “Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved.” (Matthew 9:17). As Hugh Nibley observes, “Things that appear unlikely, impossible, or paradoxical from one point of view often make perfectly good sense from another.”<sup>6</sup>

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6 Hugh Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 65.



## Starting Position and What It Tells

So what does Runnells's *Letter to a CES Director* disclose about his conceptual framework and his method? Start with the very first issue that Runnells raises in his letter, regarding the Book of Mormon translation and "1769 King James edition errors. An ancient text? Errors which are unique to the 1769 edition that Joseph Smith owned?"<sup>7</sup> He returns to this point in his website response to FairMormon:

The presence of 17th century kjv italics and 1769 kjv errors—word for word—in the Book of Mormon is its own damning evidence. These errors totally undermine the claim that Joseph "translated" the Book of Mormon and the claim that the Book of Mormon is the most correct book on earth.<sup>8</sup>

According to Thomas Kuhn, "Anomaly appears only against the background provided by the paradigm. The more precise and far-reaching that paradigm is, the more sensitive an indicator it provides of anomaly, and hence of an occasion for paradigm change."<sup>9</sup>

For Runnells the appearance of any imperfection in the Book of Mormon translation seems scandalous to the point of being overwhelming. Betty Edwards explains how our preconceptions inevitably influence our subjective perception of significance:

Most of us tend to see parts of a form hierarchically. The parts that are *important* (that is, provide a lot of information), or the parts that we *decide* are larger,

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7 Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 6.

8 Runnells, "Debunking FAIR's 'Debunking'"; <http://cesletter.com/debunking-fairmormon/book-of-mormon.html>.

9 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65.

or the parts we think *should be* larger, we *see* as larger than they actually are. Conversely, parts that are unimportant, or that we *decide* are smaller, or that we think *should be* smaller, we *see* as being smaller than they actually are.<sup>10</sup>

If the question is the perfection of the Book of Mormon text, and *if we can safely assume* that the beholder is *infallibly capable of detecting it*, imperfection is the only decisive information—indeed, it is the only information that answers the question. Therefore imperfection has crucial importance relative to the question and is actually perceived in our minds as being large and scandalously important. Even the appearance of imperfection will loom large in our consciousness. No matter how much information might exist to support the notion of a real translation by Joseph Smith, it does not and cannot answer the question of perfection, and therefore, relative to that question, it appears less important. That is why no favorable information regarding the Book of Mormon appears in the *Letter to a CES Director*. Evidence in favor of the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith's inspiration does not answer the question of perfection, so in setting the table with what counts most to Runnells, none of that kind of information appears.

This also means that if we changed our question from the perfection of the Book of Mormon translation to the reality of the translation, then supposed imperfections would not be as crucially decisive, and would therefore have a smaller significance. The reality of Joseph Smith's inspiration is a different question than the perfection of his inspiration and leads the inquirer to different information. That is why reading books by Hugh Nibley or John Sorenson or Richard L.

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10 Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: A Course in Enhancing Creativity and Artistic Awareness*, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: P.P. Tarcher, 1989), 134.

Anderson or Richard Bushman, John Tvedtnes, John Welch, or Terryl Givens makes for a very different experience than does reading Runnells's *Letter*. They ask different questions, work with different soil, nurture the seed in a different manner, and produce vastly different harvests.

Consider the difference between perfection and reality through one of the tales of Lancelot, Chrétien de Troyes's *The Knight and the Cart*. The story involves Lancelot going on an elaborate adventure to rescue a captive Queen Guinevere. When, after overcoming many trials, dangers, and obstacles, he finally finds and frees her, she rejects him. Much later, after both the Queen and Lancelot endure more suffering and trauma due to that rejection, she finally refers to a moment, when, in order to obtain crucial information, he needed to travel via a prison cart, and thereby endure public shame. And he did so, after only a moment's hesitation. The Queen's only reaction was, "Why did you hesitate?" as though to her, only that imperfection mattered. And oddly enough, he agrees with her about the devastating significance of that single momentary lapse, based on the peculiar ideals he brings to the issue. A concern about the reality of Lancelot's effort, or even just the success of his effort, rather than perfection relative to the unrealistic ideals of courtly love, would grant weight and significance to all of his actions during his adventure, including a recognition that he overcame his own hesitation in dealing with his pride versus the need to ride the cart. So questions regarding what is real, as opposed to what appears to be perfect and or ideal, raise different issues, and call for a different kind of processing, and consideration of a much wider set of information.

In approaching the Book of Mormon, we could do what Runnells does; look for imperfection, and then display indignation and shock. Or we could ask, how does the Book of Mormon translation and treatment of internal scriptural quotation compare with scriptural quotation within the Bible

and compared to the evidence of biblical transmission and translation? Does the Book of Mormon contain information consistent with eyewitness accounts of the times and settings that it claims for itself? Does it accurately describe conditions in Jerusalem, 600 BC? Does it accurately describe cultural and physical conditions in the Arabian desert? Does it accurately describe a Bountiful area at a coastal location east of Nahom? How does the Book of Mormon describe its New World setting? Are there indications of others? What cultures does it describe and what physical settings? Does the description of Cumorah in the Book of Mormon fit the New York hill “of considerable size,” or, traditional identifications notwithstanding, should we look elsewhere? What forms of government, politics, religion, and trade does it describe? What are the patterns of warfare, including seasonality, tactics, and weapons? Do the 28 verses describing the Sidon contain enough information to narrow the range of candidate rivers for an external correlation? Can we assume homogeneity and accuracy in all cultural descriptions, that is, can we assume that what Enos says about Lamanite culture from the outside also applies to what we see later when the sons of Mosiah actually travel and live among the Lamanites? What are the best sources of information against which to test its claims? If during the course of my investigation, I run across something that I did not expect, what happens if I then pause to reflect and ask, “What should I expect?” But just as Guinevere only asks about an imperfection in the Lancelot quest, Runnells looks only for imperfection in Mormonism. The eye of the beholder crucially influences the harvest.

A narrow test for perfection brings an ever-present danger that even the appearance of imperfection seems decisive. We risk coming to a false conclusion based on a misperception. This is the theme of Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Othello*. Because of the manipulations of Iago, the innocent Desdemona appears to be

guilty of betraying Othello's trust. Doubtless the mental pain, anguish, and feeling of betrayal that Othello suffers are real (at least within the world of the play). But while Othello is busy suffering angst and murdering his innocent wife, the last thing he needs is to be surrounded by understanding and sympathetic Iagos who only want to validate his pain, perhaps suggesting that if he suffocates her sooner and faster, he'll suffer less in the long run. The tragedy of Othello is not that Iago is around to practice deception and manipulation, but that Othello's faith in Desdemona's fidelity is so fragile. He proclaims his love but makes far too little effort to come to her defense, shows no patience or tolerance or capacity for forgiveness or even simple faith, hope, and charity. He never thinks to say, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" and never stops to consider that the problem might be in his own misperception, at least, not until it is too late for Desdemona and for himself. It is also clear that after he has killed his wife, the last thing that he wants to discover is her innocence.

All of this calls for a careful examination of our own assumptions and background expectations, doing a little bit of checking our own eyes for beams before attempting mote removal on another person. Remember that Runnells's very first point depends on the un-argued and unexamined assumption that any human error in the Book of Mormon translation is "damning," and by itself sufficient to "totally undermine" Joseph's claim to be a translator. Notice too that the closest Runnells comes to actually defining *translate* is when he complains that according to unnamed "unofficial apologists" the word "translate doesn't really mean translate."<sup>11</sup> This would be a good place to explain what the word means in the context of what Joseph Smith actually did.

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11 Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 80.

We need to do a bit of eye checking here. What does it mean to translate? Runnells implies a circular definition in which *translate* should mean “translate,” which, if you actually stop to think about it, does not help much. Nor does it demonstrate any degree of introspection, self-reflection, or even inquiry. The 1828 *Webster’s Dictionary*<sup>12</sup> offers this, which actually helps a great deal.

TRANSLATE, verb transitive [Latin *translatu*s, from *trans*fero; trans, over, and *fero*, to bear.]

1. To bear, carry or remove from one place to another. It is applied to the removal of a bishop from one see to another.

The bishop of Rochester, when the king would have translated him to a better bishoprick, refused.

2. To remove or convey to heaven, as a human being, without death.

By faith Enoch was translated, that he should not see death. Hebrews 11:15.

3. To transfer; to convey from one to another. 2 Samuel 3:10.

4. To cause to remove from one part of the body to another; as, to translate a disease.

5. To change.

Happy is your grace,  
That can translate the stubbornness of fortune  
Into so quiet and so sweet a style.

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12 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “translate”; <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/>.

6. To interpret; to render into another language; to express the sense of one language in the words of another.

The Old Testament was translated into the Greek language more than two hundred years before Christ. The Scriptures are now translated into most of the languages of Europe and Asia.

7. To explain.

Here, a single word—*translate*—has several definitions. I notice that the word *perfect* does not appear anywhere in this definition of translate. Nor does even the sixth definition of *translate* say that expressing “the sense of one language in the words of another” requires that existing successful translations, with or without italicized explanatory words, should or must be completely ignored. To succeed in its purpose, a translation need not be completely original or unique or flawless.

Does Runnells provide any real-world examples or evidence of inspired translations, or transmitted scripture that demonstrates the validity of his opening complaint about what I see as a minor, cosmetic aspect of the Book of Mormon translation? Are any of his complaints about Joseph Smith accompanied by any demonstration of how actual prophets have behaved or should behave? Does he have evidence that translation from ancient languages to a modern high language is more successful when it completely ignores existing translations of the same or related material? Does the New Testament demonstrate utter perfection in quoting the Old Testament or does it contain Septuagint errors? Does the King James Translation utterly ignore the earlier Tyndale translation? Would there be any advantage in ignoring existing translations of the same material? Would a use of a well-known, existing translation impede readers in the task of coming to recognize

and comprehend what they encounter? Do the practical issues in the translation and transmission of writing from one culture to another through any human-involved means suggest that perfect translation is even possible? Does the Bible display this theoretical perfection either in its internal quotations, different accounts of the same events, or in the manuscript history or in the different translations? And, if Joseph was perpetuating a fraud, does it make sense that he would plagiarize the one source his readers were sure to recognize and regard with some heightened value?

For all these questions, the answer is no. But Runnells neither asks nor answers them. Does this save trouble, or cause it?

### On Prophets and Translations

Runnells complains about Joseph Smith as a prophet, but he never bothers to define what a prophet should be, and therefore, he does not inquire into what we should expect from one. Based on the arguments he offers his implicit definition is that prophets ought to be perfect, God's sock-puppets, and never ought to do or say or permit anything that violate Runnell's own unexamined expectations from what he learned by attending Sacrament Meetings. For my part, I did spend considerable time figuring out what I should expect, and in the process I discovered twenty-eight Biblical tests for discerning true and false prophets.<sup>13</sup> I find that they set my expectations in a very different way. For example:

We are men of like passions with you. (Acts 14:15)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

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13 Kevin Christensen, "Biblical Keys for Discerning True and False Prophets"; [http://en.fairmormon.org/Biblical\\_Keys\\_for\\_Discerning\\_True\\_and\\_False\\_Prophets](http://en.fairmormon.org/Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets).



How does Joseph Smith himself set our expectations both for himself and for his translation?

I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect; if they expected perfection from me, I should expect it from them; but if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities.<sup>14</sup>

In discussing a passage in Malachi, Joseph Smith comments that "I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purposes as it stands." (D&C 128:18). In D&C 1 as part of a formal statement of "the authority of my servants" (v. 6) God declares that the revelations "were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding. And inasmuch as they erred, it might be made known." (D&C 1:24–25). Notice that this formal statement of the "authority of my servants" describes the Church as in process, not as a stasis.

These passages introduce a different expectation, one that actually gives evidence of Joseph's robust, tolerant, and open-ended attitude about himself and his own translations and revelations, which he felt free to edit. If a prophet can accomplish what is "expedient," a word that appears many times in the Doctrine and Covenants, he can serve God's purposes, which according to Isaiah 55:8–11, are concerned with long-term processes. If a translation is good enough, sufficient, it does not have to be perfect. If a translation is imperfect, then there is nothing wrong with improving it later.

If we consider Joseph Smith's productions against the real-world examples of purportedly scriptural texts, we have the advantage of building our expectations upon a solid foundation, rather than airy supposition. John Welch in *Illuminating the*

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14 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 268.

*Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* discusses several related translation issues.

Hugh Nibley has suggested several other reasons that made the use of King James style important, if not necessary. One reason was Joseph's audience: "When Jesus and the Apostles and, for that matter, the Angel Gabriel quote the [Hebrew] scriptures in the New Testament, do they recite from some mysterious Urtext? Do they quote the prophets of old in the ultimate original? ... No, they do not. They quote the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Old Testament prepared in the third century BC Why so? Because that happened to be the received standard version of the Bible accepted by the readers of the Greek New Testament."

Another reason for the use of the style of the King James Version was the nature of the record: "The scriptures were probably in old-fashioned language the day they were written down." Furthermore, "by frankly using that idiom, the Book of Mormon avoids the necessity of having to be redone into 'modern English' every thirty or forty years." To such points, other explanations may be added, but the foregoing seem sufficient. The King James idiom yields a good translation of both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple. In fact, a study of the Greek vocabulary used in Matthew 5–7 will show that in most cases, the traditional English translation is rather straightforward. The syntax of most of the sentences is relatively simple, the expressions are direct, and most of the words and phrases have obvious and adequate primary choices in English as their translation

(although their meaning and implications still remain profound).<sup>15</sup>

If I approach Joseph's translations with a view to finding evidence of real inspiration, rather than perfection, my attention will move in different directions. I might end up noticing and valuing this discussion by Welch in his next chapter.

In one important passage, manuscript evidence favors the Sermon at the Temple, and it deserves recognition. The KJV of Matthew 5:22 reads, "Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause [*eikei*] shall be in danger of the judgment" (italics added). The Sermon at the Temple drops the phrase without a cause (3 Nephi 12:22). So do many of the better early manuscripts.

This favorable evidence for the Sermon at the Temple has the support of reliable sources. While lacking unanimous consensus in the early manuscripts of the Sermon on the Mount (which is not unusual), the absence of the phrase "without a cause" is evidenced by the following manuscripts: p64, p67, Sinaiticus (original hand), Vaticanus, some minuscules, the Latin Vulgate (Jerome mentions that it was not found in the oldest manuscripts known to him), the Ethiopic texts, the Gospel of the Nazarenes, Justin, Tertullian, Origen, and others. One may count as compelling all readings that are supported by "the best Greek MSS—by the 200 CE p64 (where it is extant) and by at least the two oldest uncials, as well as some minuscules, [especially if] it also has some Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and early patristic support." A survey of the list of manuscripts supporting the Sermon at the Temple and the original

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15 John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 187.

absence of the phrase without a cause in Matthew 5:22 shows that this shorter reading meets these criteria.

Moreover, this textual difference in the Greek manuscripts of the Sermon on the Mount is the only variant that has a significant impact on meaning. It is much more severe to say, “Whoever is angry is in danger of the judgment,” than to say, “Whoever is angry without a cause is in danger of the judgment.” The first discourages all anger against a brother; the second permits brotherly anger as long as it is justifiable. The former is more like the demanding sayings of Jesus regarding committing adultery in one’s heart (see Matthew 5:28) and loving one’s enemies (see Matthew 5:44), neither of which offers the disciple a convenient loophole of self-justification or rationalization. Indeed, as Wernberg-Møller points out, the word *eikei* in Matthew 5:22 may reflect a Semitic idiom that does not invite allowance for “‘just’ anger in certain circumstances” at all, but “is original and echoes some Aramaic phrase, condemning anger as sinful in any case” and “as alluding to ... the harboring of angry feelings for any length of time.” In light of Wernberg-Møller’s interpretation of the underlying idiom, the original sense of Matthew 5:22 is accurately reflected in the Sermon at the Temple whether *eikei* is included in the Greek saying or not.

In my estimation, this textual variant in favor of the Sermon at the Temple is very meaningful. The removal of without a cause has important moral, behavioral, psychological, and religious ramifications, as it is the

main place where a significant textual change from the KJV was in fact needed and delivered.<sup>16</sup>

Welch discusses some King James errors repeated in 3 Nephi but does so without scandal because, quite frankly, none of them change the meaning significantly. And the larger context of 3 Nephi 8-29 demonstrates remarkable inspiration in disclosing the temple background of the Sermon on the Mount. Welch's approach was impressive enough that a non-LDS press published his work as applied to the Sermon in Matthew.<sup>17</sup> Welch does not ignore the errors, but he doesn't grant them the decisive status or sole focus that Runnells does. Plus Welch makes several observations that support the Joseph Smith claims of having provided an inspired translation, which need not be a perfect translation, nor oblige the reader to bring infallible perception and comprehension to their reading.

Several LDS writers have closely examined Joseph Smith's translations, including John Tvedtnes, Royal Skousen, John Welch, Ben McGuire, and Brant Gardner. They have highlighted important information worth careful consideration. Runnells does not so much as mention the existence of their findings. It is not *ad hominem* to observe that Runnells treats a few King James errors as "damning" and "totally undermining" Joseph's claims regarding a translation. He has decided that such apparent imperfections as he presents are, by themselves, decisively important. He completely ignores all LDS scholarship that gives any evidence suggesting authentic translation.

Think about why. Where is there any manuscript evidence that demonstrates in practice, and not just in theory, that when God is involved to some degree in the transmission and translation of a sacred text, we can know this because all

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<sup>16</sup> Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*, 201–202.

<sup>17</sup> John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in Light of the Temple* (London: Ashgate, 2009).

known manuscripts and transmissions are completely perfect, error free, never dependent on any previous translations, and are always mutually consistent without any variation or editing whatsoever? Does Runnells provide any hard evidence to back up the theory? For that matter, is there any such evidence that he could have offered if he tried? Anywhere? It also turns out that had he paused long enough to clearly state that his argument depends entirely on these unstated conditions that he would also open them to critical examination. And that would not do. Who wants to publish a web document declaring that “Joseph Smith and various unofficial apologists have failed to live up to my completely unrealistic expectations.”

The New Testament itself provides examples of how Jesus and his apostles and the occasional angel all quote the commonly used Septuagint, variants, errors, and all. As Nibley and Welch and others have pointed out, Joseph Smith’s modes and means of translation have ample biblical precedent.

As Thomas Kuhn says, “In short, consciously or not, the decision to employ a particular piece of apparatus and to use it in a particular way carries an assumption that only certain sorts of circumstances will arise.”<sup>18</sup> What if the circumstances you are testing for are completely unfounded? What if, as Jesus says, the problem is the beam in your own eye? What if the experiment is poorly designed, due to unrealistic expectations? What if the focus on flaws-as-decisive has the effect of distracting a person from far more fruitful investigations and evidence?

### Texts and Contexts

Consider Runnells’s point 11, claiming that “The Book of Mormon taught and still teaches a Trinitarian view of the Godhead.”<sup>19</sup> He cites the four Book of Mormon passages with

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18 Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 59.

19 Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 17.

changes in the 1837 edition, the adding of “Son of” which he claims were “major changes” done to accommodate an “evolved view of the Godhead” away from what Runnells claims is an original Trinitarianism. Here are two of his examples.

1 Nephi 11:18 (current versification)

And he said unto me, Behold, the virgin whom thou seest, is the mother of [the son of] God, after the manner of the flesh.

1 Nephi 11:21.

And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even [the Son of] the Eternal Father!

He cites another handful of verses claiming that they represent passages that still “hold a Trinitarian view of the Godhead.” For instance, Ether 3:14:

Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters.

A Book of Mormon passage that Runnells does not cite is 2 Nephi 25:5 which explains that “there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews.”

This is actually a valid general principle that there may be differences in the comprehension of cultural outsiders and cultural insiders. Sometimes the words that mean one thing within one culture may mean something else to outsiders. For example, here are two true statements. *I’ve lived near Pittsburgh for over nine years. I once attended a professional football game.* Can you picture the game? Does your cultural background

permit you to imagine Three Rivers Stadium and the Pittsburgh Steelers? If so, you imagine wrongly. Let me add a bit more context, another true statement. *When I lived in Liverpool England, I once attended a professional football game.* A bit more context, an awareness of the relevant cultural difference, and the same phrase, “professional football game” calls forth a completely different set of rules, ball, equipment, and style of play. If context can so drastically change the meaning of a phrase like “professional football game,” how about context for “I am the Father and the Son?”

Take the same Book of Mormon proof-texts that Runnells complains about in his essay, and try reading them in the wider contexts involved: the source context rooted in Jerusalem 600 BCE, a broader sampling of Book of Mormon passages, and the translation context in Joseph Smith’s Palmyra, Harmony and Kirtland.

In *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God*, Margaret Barker explains that in “the Bible, there are those called the sons of *El Elyon*, sons of El or Elohim, all clearly heavenly beings, and there are those called sons of Yahweh or the Holy One who are human. This distinction is important for at least two reasons: Yahweh was one of the sons of *El Elyon*;<sup>20</sup> and Jesus in the Gospels was described as a Son of *El Elyon*, God Most High ... Jesus is not called the son of Yahweh nor the son of the Lord, but he is called Lord.”<sup>21</sup>

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20 See 4QDeut for Deuteronomy 32:8–9 and Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

21 Barker, *The Great Angel*, 4–5. See also Brant A. Gardner, “Monotheism, Messiah, and Mormon’s Book”; <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2003-fair-conference/2003-monotheism-messiah-and-mormons-book>. For a printed version of this paper, see Brant A. Gardner, “Excursus: The Nephite Understanding of God,” in *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:214–222.



Notice that in the Book of Mormon, during Nephi's vision, the angel says, "Blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God." (1 Nephi 11:6). The Book of Mormon takes me into First Temple Judaism, back to 600 BCE, Lehi's day.<sup>22</sup> This passage occurs in the same chapter as two of the verses that Runnells uses as proof texts for his arguments, and therefore, provides context that his proof-text reading neglects.

Runnells had complained about the verse with the change regarding the virgin as "the mother of [the son] of God."<sup>23</sup> The Book of Mormon clearly identifies Jesus as the son of God Most High. If we understand that the God of the Old Testament is Yahweh, son of *El Elyon*, then the added "son of" is just clarification, explanation for readers in 1837, not a theological change. Jesus has a Father in Heaven who testifies of him, and to whom he prays and reports. In the Book of Mormon, Jesus identifies himself as Yahweh, the LORD of the Old Testament, declaring that "I am he that gave the law, and I am he that covenanted with my people Israel," (3 Nephi 15:5). In Benjamin's discourse those who covenant with Jesus/Yahweh become "the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters." (Mosiah 5:7. Compare 3 Nephi 9:17). So Jesus both has a father who bears witness of him (3 Nephi 11:7) and to whom he prays (3 Nephi 17:14) and is a father via covenant and creation, and therefore is both a father and a son, both God (Yahweh), and a Son of God (a son of *El Elyon*, God Most High). Because I am both a father and a son, I don't find this a difficult concept. It is simply a matter of paying attention to context to understand when and how and why a particular title and role applies.

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22 Kevin Christensen, "The Temple, The Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker" in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 449–522.

23 On the mother of God in general see Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord, Volume 1: The Lady in the Temple* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

The Aramaic translations (or commentaries) of the Old Testament are called Targums and are notable for containing, in many instances, explanatory material not included in the Hebrew, but helpful for explaining the best way to understand key passages, at least by those who created that translation. And as the 1828 Webster's definition pointed out, "explain" is a valid meaning of *translate*. (A translation that cannot be understood properly is not much of a translation.) So we have both conspicuous examples of explanation being part of a legitimate translation in the Targums, and a definition of *translate* contemporary with Joseph Smith that includes explanation. In these two particular verses from 1 Nephi, I think adding "the son of" to the phrase "the mother of God" does not actually change the meaning, if you know the context—if you know that Jesus/Yahweh is God in the Old Testament, and also Son of the Most High God. The change was apparently done to appease the discomfort that those LDS of Protestant cultural heritage have felt with seemingly Catholic concepts. If you know the correct cultural context, the change was not necessary. But 19<sup>th</sup> century readers did not have the same access to that pre-exilic cultural context. Adding "the son of" to "the Lamb of God, the Eternal Father" in 1 Nephi 11:21 is, I think, a mistake, but not a serious one because it doesn't change the theology. Jesus as the Lamb/Servant of God, the Eternal Father is accurate because Jesus/Yahweh has roles as Eternal Father by way of a covenant relationship with humans, as the passages in Mosiah and 3 Nephi demonstrate. Jesus/Yahweh also has an Eternal Father, as his own prayers<sup>24</sup> and teachings<sup>25</sup> and the testifying voice<sup>26</sup> demonstrate. This is a distinction that doesn't really make a difference theologically, though it may do so referentially. But *El Elyon's* Fatherhood is not removed or compromised by

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24 3 Nephi 19:20–23.

25 3 Nephi 18:35.

26 3 Nephi 11:7

recognizing Yahweh's and vice versa. It is just a matter of us bringing the best context to our reading.

Runnells quotes from a letter published in *Dialogue* in which Boyd Kirkland argued that Mormonism has "An Evolving God." "The Book of Mormon and early revelations of Joseph Smith do indeed vividly portray a picture of the Father and Son as the same God ... why is it that the Book of Mormon not only doesn't clear up questions about the Godhead which have raged in Christianity for centuries, but on the contrary just adds to the confusion?"<sup>27</sup>

I had read Kirkland's earlier essays on the topic in the 1980s and was impressed. Then in 1999, I read *The Great Angel*, which radically changed my understanding of the Jerusalem 600 BCE context and my approach to the Book of Mormon.<sup>28</sup> Plus, in 2001 I read Bruening and Paulson's detailed essay, "The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths." In surveying a range of earlier scholarship, including Kirkland's, they observe that "most proponents of this developmental theory make the same claims and use the same proof texts."<sup>29</sup> Bruening and Paulson provide a far more detailed survey of the Book of Mormon than do these earlier writers, including Kirkland. They go beyond the usual proof-texts to provide a wider and far more telling context in support of Joseph Smith's direct statement that "I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods. It has been preached by the Elders for fifteen years. I have always

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27 Boyd Kirkland, "An Evolving God," *Dialogue* 28/1 (Spring 1995): v, cited in Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 19.

28 See for example, Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001).

29 See Ari D. Bruening and David L. Paulsen, "The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths," *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 109–69.

declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.”<sup>30</sup>

Runnells claims that “many verses still in the Book of Mormon ... hold a Trinitarian view of the Godhead.” Please keep in mind that for Runnells’s complaints to make sense, we have to assume that he is talking about a conventional creedal metaphysical Trinity which postdates the New Testament. But it helps to remember that a social Trinity is still a Trinity, since the word merely means three. The issue is whether a close contextual reading of the Book of Mormon leads to a metaphysical Trinity, or to a social Trinity. I have found that contextualizing is a much better approach than reading passages of ancient scripture in isolation, and interpreting them against what usually turns out to be anachronistic assumptions.

Runnells starts with Alma 11:38-39 and the exchange between Amulek and Zeezrom: “Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father? And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last.” In responding to Zeezrom, Amulek goes on to provide much more useful context. For example, in verses 39-40, he equates the Son of God with the Eternal Father of Heaven and Earth, the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the one who “shall come into the world to redeem his people,” to “take upon him the transgressions of those who believe on his name.” As a reader who knows about First Temple theology, and who considers many other important Book of Mormon passages that Runnells does not address, I know that Yahweh, God of the Old Testament, is a Son of *El Elyon*, God Most High, and that Yahweh/Jesus

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30 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 370.

becomes the father of humans who covenant with him. Yahweh is the creator of the earth. In light of the different context I bring to the same passages that Runnells cites, I don't have the same problems he does.

In verse 44, Amulek refers to "the bar of Christ the Son, and God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, which is one Eternal God." Later in the scenes of the resurrected Lord at the Temple, the prayer for oneness in 3 Nephi 19:23, 29 provide useful insights on what it means to be "one." So does John 16:22, where Jesus prays that the apostles may be "one even as we are one." That is, the "oneness" that Jesus asks the apostles to have is modeled by the oneness that Jesus has with his father, *El Elyon*. The menorah is a key here, one vine with branches, seven lights connected to operate as one. This makes for a social Trinity, not a metaphysical Trinity.

In the next chapter, Alma joins in, referring in verse 31 to the story of the Fall, with Adam and Eve "becoming as Gods, knowing good from evil." Notice the implied plurality of Gods, something that a social trinity permits and is consistent with Barker's temple theology. In verse 33, Alma refers to God calling upon men in the name of His Son, and having mercy through "mine Only Begotten Son." And chapter 13 includes, among other things, mentions of the Holy Ghost, Holy Spirit. So we have three divine beings who act in unity as "one Eternal God."

Earlier, 1 Nephi 11:6 has an angel commending Nephi for his belief in "the Son of the Most High God." Since Most High in Hebrew is *El Elyon*, and the Dead Sea Scrolls version of Deuteronomy 32:8–9 identifies Yahweh as a son of *El Elyon*, we have more helpful context. In the Book of Mormon, therefore, Jesus is God of the Old Testament, who gave the law to Moses, part of a social Trinity that is "one God." Jehovah has a Father, *El Elyon*, God Most High, that bears witness of Him and to whom He prays. Christ is a father to human via covenant

and therefore, “because of the covenant ye have made ye shall be called the Children of Christ, his sons and daughters: for behold this day hath he spiritually begotten you.” (Mosiah 5:7). Two Book of Mormon passages refer to “the Name of the Most High God.” (3 Nephi 4:32, and 3 Nephi 11:17.) Interestingly Margaret Barker explains, “Older texts suggest that before the reform [of Josiah] the Name has been simply a synonym for the presence of Yahweh.”<sup>31</sup> Further along she discusses later texts that suggest that “‘the Name’ was a separate being rather than just a name in our sense of the word, and that the Name was that aspect of God which could be perceived and known. The Name in its visible aspect is the Son.”<sup>32</sup>

Contextualizing properly costs some extra effort, but usually turns out to simplify issues in the long run. It’s like Nibley said, “Things that appear unlikely, impossible from one point of view often make perfectly good sense from another.”<sup>33</sup> So the point of view we adopt is crucial. Of her own approach, Margaret Barker explains, “I favour the use of context materials rather than the currently fashionable approaches such as social scientific or rhetorical studies. I believe that a careful use of the historical critical method is most useful, as it enables us to stand where they stood, look where they looked and even to read what they wrote. What we find is not always expected or even welcome. There have been several times in my own research and writing when I have been forced to abandon the very position I was trying to establish, and with it a great deal of my personal baggage, but this has always led to something even more exciting.”<sup>34</sup>

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31 Barker, *The Great Angel*, 97.

32 Barker, *The Great Angel*, 102–103.

33 Nibley, “Before Adam,” 65.

34 See Margaret Barker, “Reflections on Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century,” 8; <http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/ReflectionsOnBiblicalStudies.pdf>.

## Information, Focus, Perception, and Neglect

More Kuhn:

Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions, scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before.<sup>35</sup>

Led by the paradigms defined by the example of Biblical translation and transmission, LDS scholars have examined many aspects of the Book of Mormon that make no appearance whatsoever in Runnells's letter. As I read through the *Letter to the CES director*, I notice that I have seen a great deal of evidence and argument that does not enter on the balance scale. Say, for example *Mormon's Codex, An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, or Gardner's *Second Witness* commentaries, or *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, or *In the Footsteps of Lehi*, or interesting parallels between Abraham Apocrypha and our Book of Abraham,<sup>36</sup> or even mention of the significance of the raised leg on the figure on the lion couch,<sup>37</sup> or the recently discovered papyrus that shows a similar lion couch scene and has Abraham's name.<sup>38</sup> While complaining about the Roberts's *Study and View of the Hebrews*, he does not mention Welch's 1984 paper called "Answering B. H. Roberts's Questions and An 'Unparallel.'" I read all three thirty years ago and did not have nearly the trouble that Runnells displays. He also describes the recent claims about *The Late War Between the United States and*

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35 Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 111.

36 See John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid and John Gee, eds., *Traditions About the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001).

37 Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 25, includes four pictures showing the Anubis figure in lion-couch scenes for comparison, none of which have the raised leg that suggests life.

38 John Gee, "Research and Perspectives: Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts," *Ensign*, July 1992, 60.

*Great Britain*. This 1819 textbook was written in King James Version style language for New York state school children, “one of them very likely being Joseph Smith.”<sup>39</sup> I must mention Ben McGuire’s perceptive response to claims about *The Late War*<sup>40</sup> as well as a proper methodology for dealing with parallels, which he prepared in response to Rick Grunder, who happens to be one of Runnell’s sources.<sup>41</sup>

Does the obvious neglect of important sources and the impatience that Runnell’s displays matter? On the website response to FairMormon, Runnells says this: “I believe that members and investigators deserve all of the information on the table to be able to make a fully informed and balanced decision as to whether or not they want to commit their hearts, minds, time, talents, income, and lives to Mormonism.”<sup>42</sup> “All of the information on the table” is rather a large order. What it actually means is we all deserve “God-Like Omniscience” as a basic human right, to be provided by institutional authorities before students and investigators make any serious decision or commitment. This demand for absolute certainty and omniscience as a gift to students before they make any faith

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39 Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 15. Notice ghd rhetorically helpfully ambiguous language. That *The Great War* was written for New York school children does not necessarily mean that Joseph Smith, or anyone in Palmyra, ever saw a copy. It’s not in the Manchester Library, which may not matter since the Smith’s were not members, and the Book of Mormon was translated in Harmony, which had no library.

40 Benjamin L. McGuire, “The Late War Against the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 7 (2013): 323–355; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-late-war-against-the-book-of-mormon/>.

41 Benjamin L. McGuire, “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part One,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 1–59; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-one/>; “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part Two,” 61–104; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-two/>.

42 Runnells, “Debunking FAIR’s Debunking”; <http://cesletter.com/debunking-fairmormon/>.



decision would, by its nature, rule out the possibility of any faith decision being made. Faith decisions, by definition, are based on incomplete knowledge.

Think about it. Where exactly can we go to get that basic right of pre-digested, spoon-fed omniscience on demand fulfilled now? Does Runnells himself come even remotely close to measuring up to the standard of what he demands from even the CES or FairMormon? Does he come close to putting “all of the information on the table” in even one of the topics he treats?<sup>43</sup> Is there a single page of his essay that could even remotely be described as “fully informed and balanced” with respect to any topic that he treats? He does not put any favorable information on the table concerning the Book of Mormon or the Book of Abraham.

I have been making serious inquiries into controversial issues since 1974. Having had many more years to play in these fields, I know when Runnells is not telling me something important. And I understand how background assumptions shape his reactions to the information he does select to emphasize. Even so, I don't think that he is being intentionally deceptive, or betraying my trust. And my experience has been that those less-than-omniscient Sunday School teachers and manual writers, or whomever, who did not tell him about those sources and details, probably did not know either. It's just people being people as I have learned to expect them to behave, doing the best that they could, according to their lights and given their resources, rather than certifiably omniscient people violating a sacred trust by withholding information.

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43 Compare how Runnells sets the table regarding the Book of Abraham (basically a bowl of selectively picked cherries) with this comprehensive bibliography of relevant studies by Tim Barker, "Bibliography"; <http://thebookofabraham.blogspot.com/p/bibliography.html>.

## Absolutes and Sliding Scales

Look at his complaints about the various First Vision Accounts and the priesthood restoration. On page 22 of his *Letter*, Runnells claims that “there is absolutely no record of a First Vision prior to 1832.”<sup>44</sup> The FairMormon website response points out an article in the *Palmyra Reflector* from 1831 that indicates discussion of Joseph’s vision as early as November 1830. They also point to the allusion in D&C 20, which dates to April 1830.<sup>45</sup> Notice that in his response to FairMormon, Runnells shifts the argument regarding the First Vision from “absolutely no record” to “this actually confirms the point I’m making in that the first vision was unknown to the Saints and the world before 1832. In fact, most of the Saints were unaware of a first vision until it was published in 1842.” But of course, *that was not the point he was making*. “Absolutely no record” is the point he was making. His response swaps in a very different claim, one much easier to defend.

In his online response Runnells even brings in several accounts of visions reported by contemporaries of Joseph Smith, as though such accounts somehow negate his.<sup>46</sup> Yet according to D&C 1, such things are to be expected. Where D&C 1:17 describes the call of Joseph Smith, the very next verse matter-of-factly asserts that the Lord “also gave commandments” to

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44 Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 22.

45 See the FairMormon response at [http://en.fairmormon.org/Criticism\\_of\\_Mormonism/Online\\_documents/Letter\\_to\\_a\\_CES\\_Director/First\\_Vision\\_Concerns\\_%26\\_Questions#.22There\\_is\\_absolutely\\_no\\_record\\_of\\_a\\_First\\_Vision\\_prior\\_to\\_1832.22](http://en.fairmormon.org/Criticism_of_Mormonism/Online_documents/Letter_to_a_CES_Director/First_Vision_Concerns_%26_Questions#.22There_is_absolutely_no_record_of_a_First_Vision_prior_to_1832.22)

46 Runnells, “Debunking FAIR’s Debunking”; <http://cesletter.com/debunking-fairmormon/first-vision.html>. Compare Richard Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37/1 (1997–98): 183–204. See also Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, “Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 31–42. And see James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–62.

unspecified “others that they should proclaim these things to the world.” Far from claiming exclusive truth and revelation for the LDS, D&C 1:34 declares that “I the Lord am willing to make these things known unto all flesh.”

Runnells, like Grant Palmer before him,<sup>47</sup> refers to Joseph Smith’s 1832 history to complain about the First Vision, and like Palmer, he ignores the first paragraph in making claims about a late appearance of the priesthood restoration stories. I have bolded a key passage:

A History of the life of Joseph Smith jr. an account of his marvilous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Ch[r]ist the son of the living God of whom he beareth record and also an account of the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time according as the Lord brought forth and established by his hand firstly he receiving the testamony from on high secondly the ministering of Aangels **thirdly the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of Aangels to adminster the letter of the Gospel the Law and commandments as they were given unto him and the ordinenc[e]s, fo[u]rthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God** power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of god confered upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c <sup>48</sup>

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47 See Grant Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), pp. 215-234. Compare Steven Harper, “Trustworthy History?” in *The FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003) pp. 288-193.

48 “Primary sources/Joseph Smith, Jr./First Vision accounts/1832”; [http://en.fairmormon.org/Primary\\_sources/Joseph\\_Smith,\\_Jr./First\\_Vision\\_accounts/1832](http://en.fairmormon.org/Primary_sources/Joseph_Smith,_Jr./First_Vision_accounts/1832).

In his original *Letter*, Runnells says, “Although the priesthood is now taught to have been restored in 1829, Joseph and Oliver made no such claim until 1834.”<sup>49</sup> He uncritically repeats Palmer’s claims about an 1834 date and leaves this crucially important information from 1832 off the table. When FairMormon points out the 1832 account, he labors to devalue the significance of this passage, and of other earlier sources that FairMormon mentions: “FAIR’s above answer actually confirms my point that the general Church membership was unfamiliar with the now official story of the Priesthood restoration until 1834. The best FAIR can do after scouring through everything for their rebuttal is this?”<sup>50</sup>

Notice again *the shift from an original argument* against the priesthood restoration based on “no such claim until 1834” to a much softer complaint about the general membership being “unfamiliar with the now official story.” Since the official story comes from the 1838 account, the fact that the general membership may not have been familiar with all details should only demonstrate the obvious. On the other hand, it may be that the people who were familiar with the now official story simply did not write it down. It should also be obvious that the Book of Mormon is very clear about the need for priesthood authority, and that provides important context for the other earlier priesthood restoration documents, as well as consistency with what became the official accounts. Runnells also overlooks the important essays in the 2005 volume, *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, which includes “Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents.” Several of these accounts also predate Palmer’s claim about an 1834 invention.

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49 Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 49.

50 Runnells, “Debunking FAIR’s Debunking”; <http://cesletter.com/debunking-fairmormon/priesthood-restoration.html>.

We also have the unaddressed issue of precedent in the way God would or would not do things: “And as they came down from the mountain [of Transfiguration] Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead” (Matthew 18:9). History tells us that very often, people who have profound religious experiences do not immediately report them or even write them down. At least, history tells those who investigate.

### **Archeological Expectations and the Direction of Subsequent Investigation**

On page 8, Runnells makes a few complaints about the state of Book of Mormon evidence. I find the way that he establishes his own paradigm to be revealing. He complains about an utter lack of archeological evidence for Nephite civilization around the New York Cumorah. But is he looking in the right place? And is he looking for the right things? If he is looking for the wrong things in the wrong places, then his failure to find any evidence is inevitable rather than shocking.

He objects to “unofficial” apologists<sup>51</sup> claims that the Book of Mormon Cumorah is located in Mesoamerica, and claims that they have done this in response to this lack of archeological evidence at the New York drumlin. In truth, it was close reading of the text that has turned informed Mormon scholars towards

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51 His preference for “official” thought rather than “the best books” is telling (D&C 88:118). Also consider John Boyd’s work on the OODA loop, and the implications when “the most effective organizations have a highly decentralized chain of command that utilizes objective-driven orders, or directive control, rather than method-driven orders in order to harness the mental capacity and creative abilities of individual commanders at each level. In 2003, this power to the edge concept took the form of a Department of Defense publication “Power to the Edge: Command ... Control ... in the Information Age” by Dr. David S. Alberts and Richard E. Hayes. Boyd argued that such a structure creates a flexible “organic whole” that is quicker to adapt to rapidly changing situations.” See “John Boyd (military strategist)”; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Boyd\\_\(military\\_strategist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Boyd_(military_strategist)).

Mesoamerica. See, for instance, Sidney Sperry's personal account of what changed his mind.<sup>52</sup> David Palmer's *In Search of Cumorah* is another example of the same notion but with further refinement of the process.<sup>53</sup> Rather than uncritically accept what early LDS thought, a few people started reading more carefully. It is a matter of historical record that the first serious attempt to create an internal map, based solely on a comprehensive look at the Book of Mormon text appeared in 1937.<sup>54</sup> This means that opinions before that date were not, and could not be based on the eyewitness descriptions provided in the text, but on uncritical supposition. The record shows clearly that when LDS scholars began to read the Book of Mormon closely they realized that the description of the hill did not actually fit the New York location. And if not, where did the description fit? Only when a fitting location can be found can we have any confidence that we are looking in the right place. And once you have the right location, what should a person expect to find?

Runnells sets out his own expectations of what he expects to find around the New York Cumorah.

Compare this to the Roman occupation of Britain and other countries. There are abundant evidences of their presence during the first 400 years CE such as villas, mosaic floors, public baths, armor, weapons, writings, art, pottery and so on. Even the major road systems used today in some of these occupied countries were built by the Romans. Additionally, there is ample evidence of the Mayan and Aztec civilizations as well

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52 See Sidney B. Sperry, "Were There Two Cumorahs?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (Spring 1995): 260–268.

53 David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981).

54 See John Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*. Revised (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 22–31.

as a civilization in current day Texas that dates back 15,000 years. Where are the Nephite or Lamanite buildings, roads, armors, swords, pottery, art, etc.?<sup>55</sup>

Asking “where are the Nephite and Lamanite buildings” is a very good question, if you actually ask it first of the Book of Mormon textual requirements and then fit that description to an appropriate physical and cultural context. And then go ahead with realistic expectations of both material culture and the limits of archeology at any given time. However, if I’m standing atop Pendle Hill in Lancashire, England, asking “where are the Nephite and Lamanite buildings?” everyone would admit that it is a remarkably poor question. Runnells asks of a location that does not fit the descriptions in the text,<sup>56</sup> and he also expects that at that location Lehi’s little family group should affect New World architectural styles after the manner of a Roman invasion force that entered Britain.

Think for a moment exactly the circumstances under which Lehi’s family arrived in the New World in around 590 BCE compared to Runnells’s model of the Roman conquest of Britain. The Romans came to stay in 43 CE, and made Britain a province until 410. The Romans sent several legions, kept a constant military presence, provided ongoing population and administrative influx, as well as trade across the English channel from other, nearby, Roman-controlled territories. How well does that model of a well-supported, well-supplied invasion involving many thousands of soldiers and government officials in continuous contact with Rome over 300 years apply to Lehi’s arrival in a single isolated ship?

Archeological surveys demonstrate that when Lehi arrived, it would have been to a location with pre-existing populations,

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55 Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 8.

56 For a convenient survey of the specific Book of Mormon details, Edwin M. Woolley, “The Two Cumorahs”; [http://www.bmaf.org/articles/two\\_cumorahs\\_\\_woolley](http://www.bmaf.org/articles/two_cumorahs__woolley)

at that time consisting of small villages and hamlets.<sup>57</sup> In the Book of Mormon a ship arrives in a New World location with perhaps 15 adults and 25 children.<sup>58</sup> So here we have a picture of a small group arriving into an unfamiliar, already populated area. (Matt Roper's "Nephi's Neighbors" is essential reading on this topic.<sup>59</sup>) The locals have their own language, knowledge of local crops and other resources, which would be essential information for the new arrivals who would be foolish not to adopt working local practices. Archeologically, therefore, we should assume the newcomers would look very much like the locals because they would adopt their material culture.<sup>60</sup> Over a decade ago, Brant Gardner talked about the difference this makes in expectations and consequent perceptions:

Would I ever reconstruct Mesoamerican society in a way that appeared to represent Christianized Old World peoples? No. I wouldn't. I don't.

The rather interesting discovery made just a few years back was that I, and many other Mesoamericanists, had simply made some incorrect assumptions about the [Book of Mormon] text. The attempts of LDS archaeological apologetics was for years focused on

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57 Brant Gardner, "The Social History of the Early Nephites," at <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2001-fair-conference/2001-a-social-history-of-the-early-nephites>. Also see John Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex* (Deseret Book, Salt Lake City: 2013), 542. Also Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon vol. 1 First Nephi* (Kofford Books, Salt Lake City: 2007), 352.

58 John Sorenson, "The Composition of Lehi's Family" in *Nephite Culture and Society: Selected Papers* (New Sage Books, Salt Lake City: 1997), 22.

59 Matthew Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Precolumbian Populations" *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 91-128.

60 See Brant Gardner, "The Social History of the Early Nephites," at <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2001-fair-conference/2001-a-social-history-of-the-early-nephites>.



finding the Christian or the Hebrew—or who knows what—in Mesoamerican archaeology.

The difference came when I started looking for Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon instead of the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica. Oddly enough, there is a huge difference, and the nature and the quality of the correlations has changed with that single shift in perspective....

When I started my examination, I had no expectation of what I would find. Some of the correlation I have found came not from attempting to find some specific thing, but in realizing that the text did not say what I had thought it said—and that it really didn't make any sense until I saw it in the context of Mesoamerican culture.

When people ask me about the most important correlation I have found, I have a hard time narrowing it to just one. The most important correlation isn't a singular finding; rather, it can be seen in the many facets of the discovery that the entire text of the Book of Mormon works better in a Mesoamerican context. Speeches suddenly have a context that makes them relevant instead of just preachy. The pressures leading to wars are understandable. The wars themselves have an explanation for their peculiar features. All of these things happen within a single interpretive framework that puts them in the right place at the right time.<sup>61</sup>

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61 Email from Brant A. Gardner, quoted in Kevin Christensen, "Truth and Method: Reflections on Dan Vogel's Approach to the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review* 16/4 (2004): 309, 311–12. For the results of his approach, see his six-volume Second Witness commentaries.

That Runnells can even imagine that his Roman Britain comparison makes any kind of sense tells me a great deal about why he is disappointed. From my perspective he is looking for the wrong things in the wrong place. He is not particularly self-reflective about the situation.

With regards to the New York hill, it is fairly easy for Runnells or anyone to cite LDS authorities who confidently proclaim that the New York hill is the same as the hill described in the Book of Mormon. It is far more difficult to find any of them who accompany their assertion with a close reading of the Book of Mormon passages that describe the hill and its environs. What the historical record shows is that once the association between the Book of Mormon hill and the New York hill was made (not by Joseph Smith), almost no one thought to question it. Those that started asking the questions did so because they got around to a close and careful reading of the Book of Mormon descriptions and tried to account for what it provides. Runnells himself demonstrates exactly how the neglectful approach works:

This is in direct contradiction to what Joseph Smith and other prophets have taught. Never mind that the Church has a visitor's center there in New York and holds annual Hill Cumorah pageants.<sup>62</sup>

Notice that Runnells completely ignores what Mormon and Moroni provide as eyewitness descriptions. He makes an argument based on authority that totally ignores the two most significant eyewitness authorities. The New York hill is an important historical site for the LDS, so the fact of a visitor's center there having significance is not as much an argument as an unexamined assertion that some irrefutable argument must be there somewhere. And he also assumes that those other

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62 Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 8.

prophets and authorities who made the identification must know what they are talking about, because, as we all know prophets should be basically the sock puppets of an Omniscient God who never allows them to do or say or think anything without His approval and consent.<sup>63</sup> But don't Mormon and Moroni, the editors of the Book of Mormon text, and eyewitnesses to the events at Cumorah, count as authorities worth considering? Does Runnells, or any of the authorities he cites (or more often infers without actually citing) in support of the New York hill as Cumorah, account for the whole of what Mormon and Moroni provide?

Concerning otherwise faithful disciples who assume that they understand, and therefore, do not even think to ask, Jesus makes an important point:

And now because of stiff-neckedness and unbelief, they understood not my word: therefore I was commanded to say no more of the Father concerning this thing unto them [being the Old World disciples].... And they understood me not, for they supposed ... (3 Nephi 15:18, 22).

An important, recurring theme in Jesus' preaching concerns those who have ears but do not hear, and eyes but do not see, referring to the famous comments in Isaiah 6.

In defense of his unstated, but argumentatively essential assumptions, Runnells does not recognize the single most relevant statement on the authority held by LDS leaders, from D&C 1:6, 24–28.

Behold, this is my mine authority, and the authority of my servants....

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63 See for instance Matthew 16:22–23; D&C 3:5–15.

These commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.

And inasmuch as they erred, it might be made known;

And inasmuch as they sought wisdom, they might be instructed;

And inasmuch as they sinned, they might be chastened that they might repent;

And inasmuch as they were humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high and receive knowledge from time to time.

A large portion of the complaints that Runnells makes both in his *Letter* and his response to FairMormon works from an assumption that LDS leadership should display no weakness, have no common manner of language, never err in their statements, never need to seek wisdom since they should already have it all on the shelf, never sin and therefore never need to repent, and have all knowledge from the start so that no one, especially not Runnells, might ever need to change their thinking on any subject, no matter how trivial, especially not after having attended EFY, read some “approved” books, and served a mission.

### Science Concerns and Questions

Runnells opens with this:

The problem Mormonism encounters is that so many of its claims are well within the realm of scientific study, and as such, can be proven or disproven. To cling to faith in these areas, where the overwhelming evidence is against it, is willful ignorance, not spiritual dedication.

1. 2 Nephi 2:22 and Alma 12:23–24 state there was no death of any kind (humans, all animals, birds, fish, dinosaurs, etc.) on this earth until the “Fall of Adam”, which according to D&C 77:6–7 occurred 7,000 years ago. It is scientifically established there has been life and death on this planet for billions of years. How does the Church reconcile this?<sup>64</sup>

I don’t think that the testability of Mormon claims is a problem. Indeed, Thomas Kuhn observes that “there are values to be used in judging whole theories: they must, first and foremost, permit puzzle-formulation and solutions.”<sup>65</sup>

The tricky bit concerns the limits of verification and falsification, proving or disproving. As Ian Barbour explains, “If a deduction is not confirmed experimentally, one can never be sure which one, from among the many assumptions on which the deduction was based, was in error. A network of hypothesis and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.”<sup>66</sup>

I learned long ago to pay as much attention to the networks of assumptions involved as to the observations that are then fitted into that network. For instance, where Runnells claims that the two Book of Mormon passages that he cites refers to “no death of any kind ... on this earth,” I notice that he is not quoting either passage, but paraphrasing toward his conclusion. I don’t agree with his interpretation of these verses. Few Mormons do. In my reading, the passages refer to the Garden of Eden, not the entire globe. I don’t believe that conditions in the Garden are the same as conditions outside the Garden. The Garden is a set-off place, a bounded location for two people, in which different

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64 Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 67.

65 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 185.

66 Barbour, *Myth, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 99.

conditions apply inside than outside. What is going on outside the Garden? What was going on before the Garden? We get some helpful hints from the Book of Abraham, and Nibley's "Before Adam" talk from 1980, which was delivered at BYU, published by Deseret Book in 1986, sold in bookstores, and available online for well over a decade.<sup>67</sup>

The setting is a cosmos in which worlds without number have been created (Moses 1:33) and destroyed many times in an ongoing process. Moses is informed that he is only to be told of the earth upon which he stands, and also that when he sees many lands on that earth, that each land is called earth, all lands having many inhabitants (Moses 1:29). Adam is "many" (Moses 1:34). We get one creation account about an earth in which the man is created last, and then we get another creation account in which the man is created upon an existing earth, and placed into a garden. The Abraham account gives the important understanding that the creative periods have no time we ought worry about, except that they take "until" (Abraham 4:18), which means take all the time you need. Regarding the process involved: "And the Gods prepared the waters that they might bring forth great whales, and every living creature that moveth" (Abraham 4:21). As Nibley observes, this is "future potential tense,"<sup>68</sup> initiating a process that proceeds "until" we have the great whales and other living creatures. In discussing the process, the result of which would be creatures who are obedient to a command to "bring forth ... after their kind" (Abraham 4:24), we are told that to this process "they shall be very obedient." (Abraham 4:31). By definition "very" permits variation. So our LDS scriptures describe worlds without number, a process of creation that takes "until," creatures are formed who are to be the end result of processes that involve

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67 Hugh Nibley, "Before Adam," *Old Testament and Related Studies, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 1* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986), 49-85.

68 Nibley, "Before Adam," 70.

being “very” obedient to the command to reproduce after their kind. Elsewhere, we learn that variety gives beauty to the earth. I doubt that the geology or biology professors at BYU have the problems that Runnells has, obviously because of different observations and a different network of assumptions in the puzzle definition and testing. Nibley has also pointed out that the creation accounts are not historical treatments, but are dramatic treatments, symbolic stories performed in the temple.<sup>69</sup>

Runnells also cites D&C 77:6-7, but given that it is a commentary on Revelation, and that Revelation is a highly symbolic document, and that “thousand” applies largely to divisions within a period designated as “temporal existence,” and that LDS leaders such as W. W. Phelps, Brigham Young, and David O. McKay have been comfortable talking about much longer spans of time, I would not recommend building too much on it.<sup>70</sup> In “Before Adam,” Nibley argues that:

Man is formed of the elements of the earth like any other creature, and he lives in a very lush period, a garden, which is however reduced to an oasis in an encroaching desert. (Abraham. 5:7–10.) To this limited terrain he is perfectly adapted. It is a paradise. How long does he live there? No one knows, for this was still “after the Lord’s time,” not ours. (Abraham 5:13.) It was only when he was forced out of this timeless, changeless paradise that he began to count the hours and days, moving into a hard semi-arid world of thorns, thistles, and briars, where he had to toil and sweat in the heat

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69 See Hugh Nibley, *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 445–482.

70 David Bailey, “History of the LDS Church’s view on the age of the earth and evolution” <http://www.sciencemeetsreligion.org/lds/lds-history-evolution.php>

just to stay alive and lost his old intimacy with the animals. (Genesis 3:17–19.)

The questions most commonly asked are: When did it happen? How long did it take? Our texts make it very clear that we are not to measure the time and periods involved by our chronometers and calendars. Until Adam underwent that fatal change of habitat, body chemistry, diet, and psyche that went with the Fall, nothing is to be measured in our years, "for the Gods had not appointed unto Adam his reckoning." (Abraham 5:13.) Until then, time is measured from their point of view, not ours. As far as we are concerned it can be any time, and there would be no point to insisting on this again and again if all we had to do to convert their time to our time was multiply our years by 365,000. Theirs was a different time. The only numbers we are given designated the phases of periods of creation: "and this was the second time" (Abraham 4:8), "and it was the third time" (4:13), and so on. The periods are numbered but never measured. The Gods called them "days," but the text is at great pains to make clear that it was day and night from their point of view, when our time had not yet been appointed. "And the Gods called the light Day, and the darkness they called Night. And ... from the evening until morning they called night; ... and this was the first, or the beginning, of that which they called day and night. (Abraham 4:5.) Doctrine and Covenants 130:4–5 explains that "the reckoning of God's time, angel's time, prophet's time, and man's time [is] according to the planet on which they reside." That implies different time schemes at least.<sup>71</sup>

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71 Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 73.



I don't think I need to be bound to Runnells's readings regarding science issues. No matter how much it feeds into his network of assumptions, it doesn't count for much in my own. He also offers complaints about a global flood, fossil evidence, and early hominids, none of which cause me any trouble because I don't read the scriptures the same way he does.<sup>72</sup> Given my network of assumptions I can handle the same observations easily, as normal and expected, not as anomalous and shocking.

### Approaches to Parallels: The Late War and Others

Runnells cites the recent assertions regarding a book called *The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain*.

This was an 1819 textbook written in King James Version style language for New York state school children, one of them very likely being Joseph Smith. The first chapter alone is stunning as it reads incredibly like the Book of Mormon:

1. Now it came to pass, in the one thousand eight hundred and twelfth year of the christian era, and in the thirty and sixth year after the people of the provinces of Columbia had declared themselves a free and independent nation;

2. That in the sixth month of the same year, on the first day of the month, the chief Governor, whom the people had chosen to rule over the land of Columbia;

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72 For a range of approaches to the flood, see Duane E. Jeffery, "Noah's Flood: Modern Scholarship and Mormon Traditions," *Sunstone*, October 2004, 27–45.

3. Even James, whose sir-name was Madison, delivered a written paper to the Great Sanhedrin (*sic*) of the people, who were assembled together.

4. And the name of the city where the people were gathered together was called after the name of the chief captain of the land of Columbia, whose fame extendeth to the uttermost parts of the earth; albeit, he had slept with his fathers ...<sup>73</sup>

Since the point of *The Late War* is to imitate the style of the single most influential book in the English language, some stylistic parallels should be expected. However, there is also the matter of style versus content, surface versus substance, common place parallels versus unusual, random parallels versus convergence of connected ideas. Ben McGuire has treated these issues at length, and offers four important guidelines:<sup>74</sup>

- Differences are as important as similarities.
- Parallels need to be examined in progressively expanding contexts.
- Parallels should be discussed in a detailed and specific fashion.
- Rhetorical values, the intentions of an author, and the purposes of a text should all to be taken into consideration.

What can happen when such guidelines are ignored, as in Runnells's case, is well illustrated by examples provided by Jeff Lindsay, in his parody essays depicting the 1829 Book

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73 Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 15.

74 McGuire, "Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part Two,"

of Mormon as plagiarizing Walt Whitman's 1856 *Leaves of Grass*,<sup>75</sup> and the Moon landing.<sup>76</sup>

Numerous parallels between the history of man's voyages to the moon and the transoceanic voyages in the Book of Mormon suggest that accounts of lunar journeys may have been a primary source for Joseph Smith. Consider the following startling parallels:

- Both accounts provide detailed stories of long and dangerous journeys.
- Both accounts describe unusual compasses which were used for guidance on the journey.
- Both involved unusual ships for the journey.
- Like the astronauts of Apollo 11 and other spacecraft, the Jaredites traveled to a New World in a generally airtight vessel.
- Special high-tech lighting elements were needed for the sealed Jaredite vessels, just like the electric light sources used by the astronauts.
- In both cases, information is stored on metallic objects - brass or gold plates for the Nephites, and magnetic computer media (iron oxide disks?) for the moon voyagers.
- Both involve the discovery of a new land.
- Both involve a small group of souls departing from a proud and wicked society.

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75 Jeff Lindsay, "Was the Book of Mormon Plagiarized from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*?" <http://www.jefflindsay.com/bomsource.shtml>.

76 Jeff Lindsay, "Plagiarism in the Book of Mormon? Is it Derived from Modern Writings?" [http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ\\_BMProb3.shtml](http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ_BMProb3.shtml).

- Members of both groups engaged in prayer and respectful reference to God during the journey.
- Both groups expressed great gratitude upon reaching their destinations.
- The initial voyagers in both cases saw their journey as having great significance to future generations.
- Both groups brought objects from the old world to the new world they discovered.
- One group was guided by the strong arm of the Lord, while the other group was led by Neil Armstrong. Surely this is more than mere coincidence!
- Passages in both texts refer to astronomical terms such as the heavens, the stars, the earth, the moon, and the planets.
- The astronauts found the surface of the moon to be desolate, free of vegetation, and the Book of Mormon talks about the discovery of a similar land called the Land of Desolation.
- Some Book of Mormon names show striking similarity to names of objects on the moon. For example, the crater “Mairan” is quite similar to the Jaredite name “Moron” and may even be related to “Mormon.”
- The moon crater “Godin” is very similar to the Book of Mormon names “Gideon” and “Gadianton.”

- The moon crater “Rabbi Levi” may also account for the Jewish influences seen in the Book of Mormon.
- The Pyrenees mountain range on the moon may explain the Book of Mormon name “Pahoran.”
- The moon’s Mare Imbrium, the Sea of Rains, may account for the name “Irreantum” given to the “many waters” of the ocean by the Nephites.

Was Nephi really Neil Armstrong? Take out the “ph” from Nephi, and you’ve got the “Nei” of Neil. Was the LEM (Lunar Excursion Module) the source of the name LEMuel? Take out the central “rm” from “Mormon” and you’ve got “Moon”; take out the “r” and “i” of Moroni and you’ve got “Moon” again. Yikes—it’s all beginning to make sense!

Both McGuire and Lindsay offer many insights on dangers of uncritical parallelomania, present thoughtful recommendations for better results, and refer to a great deal of information that Runnells does not consider regarding *The Great War*, *View of the Hebrews*, and various other proposed sources for ideas leading to the Book of Mormon.

### **The Book of Abraham as Smoking Gun**

Runnells says that:

Of all of the issues, the Book of Abraham is the issue that has both fascinated and disturbed me the most. It is the issue that I’ve spent the most time researching on because it offers a real insight into Joseph’s *modus operandi* as well as Joseph’s claim of being a translator.

It is the smoking gun that has completely obliterated my testimony of Joseph Smith and his claims.<sup>77</sup>

I find it interesting that his response for this most crucial and time-consuming issue consists of six pages, mostly involving large graphics lifted from an anti-LDS site.<sup>78</sup> Most of the critical information is attributed to unnamed “Egyptologists”:

Egyptologists state that Joseph Smith’s translation of the papyri and facsimiles are gibberish and have absolutely nothing to do with what the papyri and facsimiles actually are and what they actually say. Nothing in each and every facsimile is correct to what Joseph Smith claimed they said.<sup>79</sup>

Leaving aside, for the moment, whether Joseph Smith’s Abraham is gibberish, and whether Joseph even tried to translate the *Hor Book of Breathings*, or what that text actually offers in its own right, or whether Joseph’s explanations have “absolutely nothing to do” with the facsimilies, we arrive back to the same kind of absolute claim that Runnells offered for the First Vision and the priesthood restoration.

Consider Michael Rhodes on the Facsimiles:

But is there any evidence that, even in distorted form, these illustrations were associated with Abraham anciently? There is indeed. I will discuss each facsimile in turn.

*Facsimile 1.* In an ancient Egyptian papyrus dating to roughly the first or second century AD, there is a lion-couch scene similar to the one shown in facsimile 1. Underneath the illustration, the text reads “Abraham,

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77 Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 30.

78 [www.MormonInfoGraphics.com](http://www.MormonInfoGraphics.com)

79 Runnells, “Letter to a CES Director,” 27–28.

who upon ....” There is a break in the text here, so we do not know what word followed. The key point, however, is that an ancient Egyptian document, from approximately the same time period as the papyri Joseph Smith had in his possession, associated Abraham with a lion-couch scene.

*Facsimile 2.* Egyptologists call documents like facsimile 2 a hypocephalus, Greek for “under the head,” since the document was placed under the head of the deceased in the coffin. Over a hundred examples of them are located in museums around the world.

On an Egyptian papyrus of the early Christian period is the phrase “Abraham, the pupil of the eye of the Wedjat.” In the 162d chapter of the *Book of the Dead*, which tells how to make a *hypocephalus*, the Wedjat eye is described, and the *hypocephalus* itself is called an “eye.”

The *Apocalypse of Abraham*, a pseudepigraphical text dating from the early Christian era, describes a vision Abraham saw while making a sacrifice to God. In this vision, he is shown the plan of the universe, “what is in the heavens, on the earth, in the sea, in the abyss, and in the lower depths.” This language is very close to the phrase found in facsimile 2 (figures 9, 10, and 11), which reads, “O Mighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, of the hereafter, and of his great waters.” In this same text, Abraham sees “the fullness of the universe and its circles in all” and a “picture of creation” with two sides. The similarity with the hypocephalus, which for the Egyptians represents the whole of the world in a circular format, is striking. There is even a

description of what are clearly the four figures labeled number 6 in the Joseph Smith hypocephalus. It also tells how Abraham is promised the priesthood, which will continue in his posterity—a promise associated with the temple. He is shown the “host of stars, and the orders they were commanded to carry out, and the elements of the earth obeying them.” This language shows a remarkable parallel to the wording in the book of Abraham.

*Facsimile 3.* In the *Testament of Abraham*, another pseudepigraphical text of the early Christian era, Abraham sees a vision of the Last Judgment that is unquestionably related to the judgment scene pictured in the 125th chapter of the Book of the Dead, thus clearly associating Abraham with this ancient Egyptian work. One of the Joseph Smith papyri is, in fact, a drawing of this judgment scene from the 125th chapter of the Book of the Dead, and facsimile 3 is a scene closely related to this.

The important point here is that we find ancient Near Eastern documents that are roughly contemporary with the hypocephalus and the other Egyptian papyri purchased by Joseph Smith that relate the scenes portrayed in facsimiles 1, 2, and 3 with Abraham, just as Joseph Smith said. Significantly, none of these documents had even been discovered at Joseph Smith’s time.<sup>80</sup>

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80 Michael D. Rhodes, “Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles,” *Religious Educator* 4/2 (2003): 115–123; [http://rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/TRE4\\_2.pdf](http://rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/TRE4_2.pdf).



Runnells provides none of this relevant information in his letter. Uninformed readers will not learn about the existence and work of people like Hugh Nibley, Michael Rhodes, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, Blake Ostler, Will Schryver, John Tvedtnes, and Kevin Barney, to name just a few of the important LDS commentators. When I read, I bring my knowledge of their work with me, and as a consequence, I have a different experience than Runnells intends when he offers complaints like this:

1. Joseph misidentifies the Egyptian god Osiris as Abraham.
2. Misidentifies the Egyptian god Isis as the Pharaoh.
3. Misidentifies the Egyptian god Maat as the Prince of the Pharaoh.
4. Misidentifies the Egyptian god Anubis as a slave.
5. Misidentifies the dead Hor as a waiter.
6. Joseph misidentifies—twice—a female as a male.<sup>81</sup>

Jeff Lindsay has a section on his website on these complaints, citing a range of previously published material:

Let's consider both charges. First, critics charge that Joseph's interpretation of Facsimile 3 is wrong because the enthroned figure is Osiris, not Abraham. As we have already seen in the discussion of Facsimile 1, humans can represent Osiris. Indeed, McGregor and Shirts point out that Joseph has actually scored a surprising bulls eye here:<sup>82</sup>

Notice that Joseph Smith says figure 1 is "Abraham.... with a crown upon his head, representing the Priesthood, as emblematical of the grand Presidency in Heaven." Now interestingly, in Facsimile 3 we have

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81 Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 28.

82 McGregor and Shirts, 213–214.

Osiris enthroned as Osiris Khenty-Amentiu. This name means, and I quote, “First (or President) of the Westerners.”<sup>83</sup> Osiris, as Lord of the Dead, is called Khenty-Amentiu. Khenty means “Before, earlier,” as the Egyptologist Alan Gardiner noted,<sup>84</sup> or preceding, that is, the president, as Hugh Nibley has noted. Joseph Smith is right on the money here.

Second, anti-Mormons also mock Joseph for identifying in Facs. 3 the obviously female figures 2 and 4 as males. Critics such as James R. Smith ask how Joseph possibly could have missed it - suggesting that such terrible blunders show how uninspired Joseph was. McGregor and Shirts provide several pages of information and documentation showing what is very well known about ancient Egypt,<sup>85</sup> concluding with this:

The ancient Egyptians dressed in costume during their rituals, coronations, and funerals and took on the roles of the deities whose robes they wore, whether male or female. It is that simple. And there is rather an abundant amount of evidence to demonstrate this these days.

An excellent source on the very Egyptian nature of Joseph’s interpretation of Facsimile 3 is found in Hugh

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83 Oman Sety and Hanny El Zeini, *Abydos: Holy City of Ancient Egypt*, Los Angeles: LL, 1981, 7

84 Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar: Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, 130, 133, 156, 529, 585, 613.

85 McGregor and Shirts, 214. See also 213–217.

Nibley's old but valuable work, *Abraham in Egypt*.<sup>86</sup> With abundant documentation, Nibley illustrates that Egyptians indeed mixed gender roles and linked humans and gods in ritual scenes like that of Facsimile 3. Joseph's interpretation is patently absurd based on our standards and what any school child could see in Joseph's day or ours: those identified as a prince and a king by Joseph are clearly women. And the person on the throne should be the king, not Abraham, and an obviously important central figure should be someone important, not just a household waiter. But as absurd as Joseph's explanation sounds to us, it makes a great deal of sense in light of what we now know about the ancient Egyptians.<sup>87</sup>

Runnells links only to Wikipedia articles for Osiris, Isis, Maat, and Anubis. Lindsay provides a range of sources. As has become typical, the differences in time, effort and sources consulted are telling.

### Free Service or Personal Search?

A bitter complaint in *Letter to a CES Director* is that "I never heard about this or that" and as a consequence, asks:

How am I supposed to feel about learning about these disturbing facts at 31-years-old? After making critical life decisions based on trust and faith that the Church was telling me the complete truth about its origins and history? After many books, seminary, EFY, Church

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86 Hugh W. Nibley. *Abraham in Egypt. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 14. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2000, 382-465.

87 See Jeff Lindsay, "LDS FAQ: Mormon Answers, Questions About the Book of Abraham, Part 2, Evidences for Plausibility"; [http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ\\_Abraham2.shtml](http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ_Abraham2.shtml).

history tour, mission, BYU, General Conferences, Scriptures, *Ensigns*, and regular Church attendance?<sup>88</sup>

Runnells wants his readers to comprehend and sympathize with his feelings of shock and betrayal. Let's put aside the irony of his complaints about important information having been overlooked, and consider his question. How should he feel about it? The answer to this question is closely tied to how a person defines "the Church" and what we can then expect to be provided by that entity, body, or collection of bodies. I'll return to what "the Church" is to me shortly.

Back in 1974, when I was on my mission in England, we were invited to show a film, "Meet the Mormons," to a group of middle-schoolers in Colne, Lancashire. As the movie went on, we could see these kids, younger than we, passing around what were obviously anti-Mormon pamphlets. During the Q&A, I ran into some questions I was not prepared to answer. I had been active all my life, and had attended all sorts of meetings from primary, MIA, Sunday School, priesthood, sacrament, to conferences, road shows, institute. I had read the Book of Mormon four or five times, and part of the D&C and New Testament. I calculated that at times, I was involved in LDS sponsored activities for fifteen hours a week. And here some kids passing around their first anti-LDS pamphlets asked me some questions I could not answer. How should I feel?

I learned that I could not trust the institutional arms of the Church to provide me with all the information I might need. If I wanted to know, to be prepared, I had to take personal responsibility. In retrospect, my program involved three elements. Keep my eyes open. Give things time. And re-examine my own assumptions now and then. The alternative is to not pay attention. Insist on final answers now. And never

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88 Runnells, "Letter to a CES Director," 80.

re-examine my own assumptions. Either choice on these three points has consequences in life.

Sixteen or seventeen years later, while I was living in California, I met a disillusioned member who had his beliefs shattered by an encounter with books from Jerald and Sandra Tanner. He loaned me *The Changing World of Mormonism*, which I promptly read and which at that point in time, gave me no trouble. (When I more recently read *Letter to a CES Director*, I thought of it as Tanners Lite for the Twitter generation, and in that sense, all “old news” to me.) The young man who loaned me the book was incredulous at my reaction. “How can you know what you know, and believe what you believe?” he asked. I still think it was a very good question, worth serious consideration.

In the sixteen or so years up to that point, I had been busy learning on my own initiative. I started with the scriptures, not just reading to get through pages, or to memorize important proof texts, but pursuing my own questions. A year later, a member loaned me Hugh Nibley’s *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*. The experience of reading that remarkable book expanded my mind and enlarged my soul (as Alma 32 puts it) and left me hungering for more. When I got back home, I noticed in a low bookshelf in the family room, stacks of old *Ensigns*, and older *Improvement Eras*. As I browsed, I noticed the Nibley series on Enoch, and decided to read them. Then in the older *Improvement Eras*, I found most of the twenty-nine part series on “A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price.” I read them with pleasure and excitement, and a good bit of embarrassment on realizing that they had been coming into my home for years, and I hadn’t so much as given them a glance. Whose fault was that?

The unavoidable answer to that question is why I personally cannot share the disillusion that Runnells displays. Besides reading through neglected resources at home, I also bought books, prowled the stacks in libraries, read the back issues of

*BYU Studies*, *Dialogue*, *The Improvement Era*, and *Sunstone*. I used the things I learned from the best books and journals to further direct my learning. A friend told me about the newly organized Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, and I began acquiring as many reprints as I could afford and read everything in their journals and then their books. I found that I could see a lot further by standing on the shoulders of giants than by crouching shoulder to shoulder with pygmies. So by the time I encountered the Tanners, I was well prepared by my previous readings. I have consistently found that I learn far more about the arguments of the critics by reading the best apologetic writings, than I learn of the arguments of the defenders by reading critical writings. When I did finally read something that gave me trouble for a few days, the resolution turned into my first essay in LDS letters.<sup>89</sup> I read the work of the best LDS scholars with pleasure, excitement, and faith, and every now and then found that I had something to offer.

So why does my faith expand, when Runnells's faith shatters?

Brittle things are far more prone to shattering than flexible things. Consider how traumatized Runnells is when he mentions his encounters with non-correlated thinking,—that things might be different than he had understood—and this, from Joseph Smith:

But there has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation. It has been like splitting hemlock knots with a corn-dodger for a wedge, and a pumpkin for a beetle. Even the Saints are slow to understand.

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89 Kevin Christensen, "New Wine and New Bottles: Scriptural Scholarship as Sacrament," *Dialogue* 24/3 (Fall 1991): 121–129.

I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all.<sup>90</sup>

A quality that permits any mind to expand rather than shatter must be a certain amount of flexibility. Remember the earlier quotation from Ian Barbour: “If a deduction is not confirmed experimentally, one can never be sure which one, from among the many assumptions on which the deduction was based, was in error. A network of hypothesis and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.”<sup>91</sup>

Look at again at Runnells, and check for any flexibility in his network of observations and hypotheses.

I was amazed to learn that, according to these unofficial apologists, translate doesn’t really mean translate, horses aren’t really horses (they’re tapirs), chariots aren’t really chariots (since tapirs can’t pull chariots without wheels), steel isn’t really steel, Hill Cumorah isn’t really in New York (it’s possibly in Mesoamerica), Lamanites aren’t really the principal ancestors of the Native American Indians, marriage isn’t really marriage (if they’re Joseph’s marriages? They’re just mostly non-sexual spiritual sealings), and prophets aren’t really prophets (only when they’re heretics teaching today’s false doctrine).

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90 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 331.

91 Barbour, *Myth, Models, and Paradigms*, 99.

I've already pointed out the problem with his approach to the word "translate." If you follow the link he provides in his complaint that to apologists, "horses aren't really horses," we come to a Maxwell Institute article<sup>92</sup> that demonstrates a flexibility of thought and observation that Runnells does not pass along. The article describes some existing evidence for horse bones, which means, the Book of Mormon mention of horses just might be the horses he expects. It also describes the common practice of loan-shift, "well known to historians and anthropologists who study cross-cultural contact." Runnells misrepresents both the hypotheses and the observations made in the essay, overlooking a clear description of real possibilities in favor of an inaccurate and brittle declaration of unacceptable and unreasonable identity. He filters the flexibility and the reason out of the essay when making his own summary. The same mental inflexibility colors every phrase in the paragraph, every page of the letter, and, consequently, Runnells tends to misrepresent every apologetic argument and supporting observation that he complains about. The end result is obvious brittleness.<sup>93</sup>

Compare Alma 32:18, and Alma's contrast between people who want to "know" with absolute finality, and those who settle for open-ended "cause to believe." Closed brittle thinking, contrasted with open-ended, tentative thinking. In describing how faith works, Alma describes how the planting and nurturing of a seed initiates a process in which change in the original seed is a sign of success. Swelling, sprouting, till,

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92 "Horses in the Book of Mormon"; <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1055&index=1>

93 As an exercise for the interested, map his story and my story to the Perry Scheme for Cognitive and Ethical Growth. See <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/22100469/Perry%20Scheme.pdf>. I've grown to prefer the 9 Position Perry Scheme to the Iron Rodder/Liahona dichotomy that has been floating around in LDS circles since the 1960s. See Richard Poll, "What the Church Means to People Like Me," *Dialogue* 2/4 (Winter 1967): 107–117.



“your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand.”<sup>94</sup> Runnells appears to want an experience in which he plants a seed, comes back to wash off the mud and dirt to find that it remains the same as it ever was. No swelling, no unexpected sprouts, roots, leaves, branches, growth, and certainly no unexpected fruit. To him, nothing that looks or acts differently than the original seed can be good. Expansion, change, growth can only shatter him, like gentle grass bursting through asphalt.

### Victims and Survivors

Runnells basically describes himself as a victim of the Church. I don't see myself as a victim of the church, despite my own experience in finding myself unprepared to deal with unexpected and difficult questions. But I do remember that the young man who gave me *The Changing World of Mormonism* actually had a difficult time talking with me because doing so would draw him back into the trauma of his loss of faith. Now, I would recognize what he was experiencing as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And now, one of the books I recommend to people I work with as part of my current church calling includes this kind of advice for dealing with trauma:<sup>95</sup>

- Find initial support immediately
- Re-establish safety
- Practice good self care
- Create boundaries between yourself and the trauma
- Counter dissociation
- Begin emotional processing and grieving
- Use grieving and processing methods to help heal.  
(consider EMDR)

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94 Alma 32:34.

95 Barbara Steffens and Marsha Means, *Your Sexually Addicted Spouse: How Partners Can Cope and Heal* (Far Hills, NJ: New Horizons Press, 2009). I'm the Addiction Recovery Representative for my stake.

- Develop personal empowerment
- Develop healthy communication skills
- Develop healthy conflict management skills
- Reframe yourself as survivor rather than victim
- Consider forgiveness
- Find positive life purpose

Notice that part of healing from trauma involves reframing yourself as a survivor rather than a victim, and that doing so involves a sequence of positive actions. Victimhood simply involves the ongoing nurture of grievances and no movement in the direction of healing.

### **What a Church Has and What a Church Is**

So what is the Church? What should I expect from it? A church has many things but the church is not the things that it has. Our Church has a headquarters, leaders, members, employees, buildings, educational materials, missionaries, beliefs, ordinances, properties, scholars, critics, and so forth. But the things that the church has are not what the church is.

Runnells's expectations of the Church were that members have a rightful expectation that all knowledge must be provided to us, presumably by certifiably Omniscient Sunday School teachers, and all-knowing Primary teachers, and all-seeing Sacrament meeting speakers, all through official channels and approved books. The church did not meet his expectations, and consequently, he has resentments. Part of recovery involves dismantling the grievance story and letting go of resentments.

To me, the church is an assembly of people who have made covenants with God: people of all different ages, temperaments, cultures, experience, understanding, maturity, spiritual gifts, and personal resources. Because of the diversity, I do not expect that any administrative materials or programs can possibly address the widely divergent needs that different members have with a one-size-fits-all solution. That is just to help us get

started, to provide a foundation to build on, or, as Alma puts, it, to provide seeds for us to nurture. So, one of the covenants we make with God (not with each other) is to “sustain” one another. This is another place where my wife and I found our minds and souls enlarged by turning to a dictionary.

#### Sustain<sup>96</sup>

1. To keep up; keep going; maintain. Aid, assist, comfort.
2. to supply as with food or provisions:
3. to hold up; support
4. to bear; endure
5. to suffer; experience: *to sustain a broken leg.*
6. to allow; admit; favor
7. to agree with; confirm.

This means that I as a member of the gathering, as part of the church, when I raise my hand to sustain other members in their callings, I promise God that at the very least, I will put up with whatever difficulties arise. We all have choices to make in dealing with people who don't live up to our expectations. One involves whether to adjust our own expectations. Another involves whether to resent people for being human, or to forgive them, as well as ourselves, for being human. Our choices turn out to affect the quality of our lives as well as our faith.

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96 World Book Dictionary, s.v. "sustain."

of Mormon Studies, Insights, the Meridian Magazine, the FARMS Occasional Papers (Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies), Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem, *and in collaboration with Margaret Barker, an essay in* Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries. *He lives with his wife Shauna in Bethel Park, PA.*

# RESTORATION: A THEOLOGICAL POEM IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Val Larsen

*Abstract: The distinctive Mormon conception of God makes possible a logically coherent reconciliation of the facially incompatible laws of justice and mercy. The Book of Mormon prophet Alma clearly explains how these two great laws may be reconciled through the atonement and repentance that the atonement makes possible. Alma artfully illustrates the relationship between justice and mercy in a carefully crafted theological poem.*

An important distinctive feature of Mormon theology is its conception of God as a being who is finite and subject to natural law.<sup>1</sup> Among other things, this distinctive understanding makes it possible to give a logically coherent account of what *justice* and *mercy* are and of how these facially incompatible laws can be reconciled. It provides a framework for fully understanding why both grace and works are necessary for salvation. Though it is sometimes suggested that this finite

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1 Eugene England, "The Weeping God of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35/1 (2002): 63–80; Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965); Max Nolan, "Materialism and the Mormon Faith," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 22/4 (1989): 62–75; Blake T. Ostler, *Of God and Gods, Exploring Mormon Thought* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008); B. H. Roberts, *Joseph Smith the Prophet–Teacher: A Discourse* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1908); Garland E. Tackemyer, "Joseph Smith and Process Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 17/3 (1984): 75–85.

conception of God was not part of early Mormonism,<sup>2</sup> it was actually present from the beginning of the Restoration as an important element in the teachings of Alma in the Book of Mormon.

Understanding as he did that God was subject to natural law, Alma also deeply understood the nature of justice and mercy and beautifully illustrated their relationship in an artful theological poem. Justice and mercy are reconciled, he taught, when human agents choose to respond to the atonement by repenting of their sins and becoming perfect in Christ. These agents then justly receive the natural consequences of their state of being — exaltation. While other Mormon scripture provides supplementary information that clarifies aspects of the relationship between God and man and justice and mercy, these key concepts in Mormon theology are nowhere more thoughtfully and artfully discussed than in the writings of Alma.

### Justice as Natural Law

Alma's thoughts on these topics are expressed in a theologically profound message to his wayward son Corianton. The meaning of *justice*, in particular, is more thoroughly discussed by Alma than by any other ancient prophet. Almost one-fourth of all occurrences of the word *justice* in the standard works appear in Alma's relatively brief message to his son.<sup>3</sup> In this teaching, Alma responds to Corianton's belief "that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery" (Alma 42:1). Alma helps Corianton understand that the punishment of sins

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2 Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone*, July–August 1980, 24–33; Mark Thomas, "Scholarship and the Book of Mormon" in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 72–73.

3 Alma chapters 41 and 42 contain 24 percent of all occurrences of the word *justice* while being just .13 percent of the chapters in the standard works.

is inevitable. It is required by justice, the most fundamental, inescapable law of the universe.

To illustrate the importance of justice, Alma emphasizes that it is prior to and more basic even than the existence of God. Three times Alma mentions that if God were to abrogate justice, he would cease to be God (Alma 42:13, 22, 25), a statement that has profound theological implications. The most important implication is that justice is a kind of natural law (cf. Alma 42:12, 13) and that God is God because he is in full harmony with that natural law. He has no discretion in the application of justice.<sup>4</sup> The universe is not his *ex nihilo* creation and creature that he can change at will. His power flows from his complete acceptance of and harmony with antecedent reality, not from ontological priority to all other existing things. Thus, God does not have the ability to save his children by violating justice. Nor does he have the desire to do so. Though he weeps when we willfully sin (Moses 7:28-40), he honors both our agency and justice by letting us experience the consequences of our actions.

So what, exactly, is justice? The short answer is that it is causation. Reality is substantially defined by a set of inescapable causal relationships. Causes have inevitable effects. Acts have inevitable consequences. Alma repeatedly emphasizes this point. Justice dictates that our actions determine our destiny: “evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish — good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous;

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4 The atonement paradox of Trinitarian Christianity inheres in the fact that God is the ground for all that exists and thus has complete discretion on whether suffering will be demanded. It is He who requires punishment for sin and He who — contravening all ordinary notions of justice — chooses to bear the punishment in the place of those who have earned it. The atonement thus appears to be an exercise in masochism. If, as in Mormonism, the just requirement that punishment follow sin is grounded outside of God, this paradox and the masochism disappear. For a good summary of traditional theories of the atonement, see Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. by A. G. Herbert ((London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937).

just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful” (Alma 41:13). We cannot blame God if bad consequences are visited upon us. What we get is what we have chosen to receive by acting as we do. The only way we can have different consequences is to act differently.

In addition to being unable to change the network of causes and effects that we call justice, God is unable to change the *intelligence* or choosing essence of each human being. Like justice, intelligence is uncreated: “intelligence ... was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). This locus of choice at the heart of each of us is coeternal with God. He can expand the scope of our choices and our capacity to choose by clothing our intelligence in a spiritual and then a physical body. But he has neither the desire nor the ability to dictate what we choose. Our innate, uncreated, eternal intelligence is the wellspring of all our choices. We thus play an important role as co-creators of the world in which we and others live. The natural consequence of righteous choices is an expansion of the range of options open to us and others; the natural consequence of wickedness is a contraction of the set of choices available to us and others around us.

This doctrine also has great theological importance. It provides the only fully satisfactory explanation for the problem of evil.<sup>5</sup> And it further defines the ontological context, the set of constraints, within which God must work as he labors to save his spirit children. He cannot directly affect our *nature*. The only option open to him is to somehow change our *nurture*. And a change is desperately needed. In combination, justice and uncreated human nature put all of us, through an inexorable chain of cause and effect, on a course that leads to our inevitable

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5 Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1966); David L. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil,” *BYU Studies*, 39/1 (2000): 53–65. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps*, (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012), 52–54.



damnation. Defects in our character ensure that we will sin, and our love for and fear of God ensures that we cannot bear to be in his presence as sinners and must, therefore, be separated from him forever to minimize our pain (Alma 12:13-15).

### **The Original Lie**

Ironically, Corianton, like many others, seems to have been influenced by his father's most important theological opponent, Nehor, who taught "that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life" (Alma 1:4). This claim that all will be saved is not new. It is the original plan of Satan that we rejected in the preexistence. There Satan promised, "I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost" (Moses 4:1). Nehor and Corianton are belatedly embracing what they did not accept in their first estate — Satan's plan for the salvation of humanity.

This plan shows up repeatedly in the Book of Mormon. It is the "eat, drink, and be merry" doctrine mentioned earlier by Nephi: "God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God" (2 Nephi 28:8). It is the view of Lamoni and his people, who "believed in a Great Spirit [but] supposed that whatsoever they did was right" (Alma 18:5). It is the false gospel the masses embrace in the time of Samuel the Lamanite: "But behold, if a man shall come among you and shall say: Do this, and there is no iniquity; do that and ye shall not suffer; yea, he will say: Walk after the pride of your own hearts; yea, walk after the pride of your eyes, and do whatsoever your heart desireth, ... ye will receive him, and say that he is a prophet" (Helaman 13:27).

Unsurprisingly, this idea has many seductive modern variants as well that Mormon may have foreseen and sought

to address through Alma's message to Corianton, e.g., the doctrine Dietrick Bonhoeffer has called "cheap grace" — the popular Christian belief that a single act of confessing Christ saves one regardless of what one subsequently chooses to do.<sup>6</sup> Or the teachings of sophisticated pastors (e.g., Richard John Neuhaus), popular pastors (e.g., Rob Bell), and Christian philosophers (e.g., John Hick), who suggest that God's infinite love ultimately guarantees all will be saved.<sup>7</sup> There is an atheist variant of the idea: no matter what people choose to do in this life, all end up exactly the same — dead; so do as you please (Alma 30:18). There is even a Mormon variant: progression from the telestial to the celestial kingdom is possible, and all God's children will ultimately be saved in the celestial kingdom regardless of what choices they have made during probation in their "second estate," the period that extends from birth to final judgment, resurrection, and assignment to a kingdom of glory.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Dietrick Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 43–56.

7 Richard John Neuhaus, "Will All Be Saved," *First Things* (August/September 2001); Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011); John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 326.

8 The idea of progression between post-mortal kingdoms is a common theme of some Mormon speculative theologians. It is sometimes coupled with the logically related idea of universal salvation. (Cf. supportive opinions of Dan Wotherspoon, Jared Anderson, and Danielle Moody in *Mormon Matters*, "LDS Salvation Theology and Practices," podcast 108, <http://mormonmatters.org/2012/06/28/107-109-lds-salvation-theology-and-practices/>). Terryl and Fiona Givens also entertain the idea of universal or near universal salvation in a chapter titled "None of Them Is Lost" in *The God Who Weeps*, 77–102. While D&C 138 makes it clear that repentance may continue in the post mortal Spirit World, scripture suggests that exaltation requires faithfulness during one's second estate (e.g., Abraham 3:26). This probationary period extends beyond this life but, nevertheless, has a finite duration. Like the first estate (which revealed that Satan and his followers were eternally unwilling to do what one must do to be exalted), the second estate adequately reveals the eternal preferences of all who qualified to experience it through faithfulness in their pre-mortal first estate.

The perverse consequences of these ideas are apparent if we follow the logic of the Mormon variant. If murderers and adulterers and all who engage in the most vile of sins are guaranteed salvation, these sinners might seem to be the most wise of human beings, for it is they who have chosen to have the full spectrum of possible human experiences. They will plumb the deepest depths of hell, suffering even as the Savior did both body and spirit (D&C 19: 16-18) and yet, nevertheless, ultimately taste the exquisite joy of the celestial kingdom. The sweetness of heaven will be for them all the more sweet for having also, like Christ, fully experienced eternal damnation (2 Nephi 2:11; Alma 36:21). By contrast, the experience of the righteous who quickly and fully repented of their sins on earth will be stunted and incomplete, their joy less exquisite for being less starkly framed by the misery of eternal damnation. Of course, it is hard to imagine that any doctrine could be more damnable than this, more out of harmony with the spirit and letter of all scripture or more akin to the plan of Satan in the preexistence.

God rejects all the variants of this Satanic plan because they would “destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3). The way in which these plans would destroy human agency is often misunderstood. It is sometimes suggested that Satan would have deprived humanity of agency by depriving them of choice. He would have compelled every action and assured that it was good, thus guaranteeing the return of all humanity to heaven. Much more seductive and clearly popular is the false doctrine Nephi and Samuel mention and that Nehor peddles — that one can do as one pleases and still be guaranteed salvation in the kingdom of God.

Greg Wright and Terryl Givens<sup>9</sup> demonstrate that this doctrine which flatters and indulges also destroys agency,

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9 Greg Wright, *Satan's War on Free Agency* (Orem, UT: Granite Publishing, 2003); Terryl Givens, “Agency and Atonement,” *Meridian Magazine*,

because all actions ultimately produce the same consequences. If all of our choices lead to the same end, we no longer determine our own destiny. We have agency, power to choose meaningfully for ourselves, only if our actions have important consequences. Alma profoundly understood this principle and clearly taught it to Corianton. The eternal reward we ultimately get, he insisted, will be determined by our own desires and actions (Alma 41:3-5).

So agency and justice are linked. We cannot choose for ourselves unless our actions have important and differentiated consequences. Satan, who is the father of all the false gospels mentioned above, would abrogate the justice that delivers these consequences. He is a romantic who lives in a fantasy world<sup>10</sup> in which his personal will is sovereign, in which actions can be severed from consequences if he wills it so.<sup>11</sup> His impossible plan was rejected by God, who is, by contrast, the ultimate realist. It was also rejected by the two-thirds of God's spirit children who understood that they could never comfortably return to their Father's presence as a sinner (Alma 12:14-15). These God-fearing spirits accepted the alternative plan, which fully acknowledged the claims of justice and the inherent

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Wednesday, March 9, 2011; <http://www.ldsmag.com/article/7616>; Givens and Givens, *The God Who Weeps*, 91-92.

10 Adam S. Miller sagely observes that when we escape into fantasy, we replicate Satan's error and sin:

"Something is given that I do not want.... A sinful response to what is given would involve my withdrawal from this difficult present moment. As a natural man, I would naturally take refuge from the difficulty in fantasy, memories, distractions.... However, to withdraw in this way would be sinful. Whatever my preferences, the present is imposed unconditionally, absolutely, and to flee its givenness ... is to choose the path of the undead rather than the path of life." Adam S. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), p. 15.

11 Blake, Shelley, Byron, and various less prominent Romantic poets admired Milton's Satan and thought him preferable to Milton's God. See Adriana Craciun, "Romantic Satanism and the Rise of Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry," *New Literary History* 34/4 (2003): 699-721.

weaknesses of the two-thirds — weaknesses that would justly condemn them — but provided a merciful way for them to repent, keep commandments that prescribe God’s manner of living, and thus justly deserve to live like God in the beloved presence of God (Abraham 3:23-28). But Satan has not given up and continues to persuade many people, including Corianton for a time, to believe on earth the doctrine that they rejected in heaven.

### Mercy Catalyzes New Choices and Consequences

While the defining characteristic of the universe is causal justice, God’s defining characteristic is infinite love and the mercy that is its fruit. Love we may instinctively understand, but what is mercy? Mercy exists when one person provides for another to receive an outcome that is better than the just result the person him or herself deserves. Thus mercy seems to be logically incompatible with justice.

Fortunately, justice and mercy can be reconciled by *atonement* and *repentance*, which are, in turn, facilitated by a certain temporal slippage that separates act and consequence in the natural execution of justice. While the justice that constitutes natural law ensures that in the long run “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10) and righteousness is never misery, it is a matter of commonplace observation that in the short run the wicked are sometimes happy and the righteous sometimes miserable.<sup>12</sup> Consequence doesn’t always immediately follow act.

This temporal lag between act and consequence is critically important for the full flowering of agency. Without it, we would be like rats in a maze which are controlled by operant

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12 While the wicked are probably not *happy* in the most profound sense of that word, even in the short run, they are at least happy in the ordinary senses of the word, just as the righteous are sometimes unhappy in the ordinary sense of that word.

conditioning, with instant punishment for bad and instant rewards for good behavior. This lag is also critically important for the possibility of atonement and repentance, for it creates what Alma calls in his teaching of Corianton “a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God” (Alma 42:4). The catalyst for that repentance is the *event* we call the atonement.

As Adam S. Miller notes in an implicit discussion of justice and mercy, we are all embedded in a temporal configuration in which there is “an inexorable movement from cause to effect to effect. Time appears flat, two-dimensional, and determined.... Both the present and the future groan under the fully decisive weight of the past.” But God mercifully intervenes to disrupt this homogeneous flow of cause and effect with an event, the atonement, which reconfigures history to include “not only those actualized possibilities ... but the unrepresented wealth of possibilities that have failed to be actualized in the past and that appear to be unactualizable in the present or future. An event marks the moment in which these present but unrepresented possibilities break up a situation’s apparently smooth chain of cause and effect, and reveal the possibility of the previously impossible.... As a result of this recovery, an event can momentarily shock time and arrest the chain of causality, making room for something new.”<sup>13</sup>

Our choices and the causal process called justice lead inexorably to damnation. While temporal lag has delayed that consequence, our final destination has been determined and is sure. But God mercifully intervenes and shocks time. He interrupts the inexorable causal sequence by interposing an uncaused event. Using the temporal lag between act and consequence, he redirects the suffering that will be caused by our sins from us to our Savior, Jesus Christ, who voluntarily receives it. Christ’s suffering has no just cause. It is motivated

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13 Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, pp. 77-78.

by love. It is commensurate with our sins but is not their just consequence, because Christ himself is sinless. The existence of this event makes the universe a different place and, as Miller suggests, opens up new pathways and destinies for any who are affected by it. Thus, with the nurture of the atonement, some who by nature would have been lost may be mercifully saved.

To be saved, one must respond to this new fact which God and Christ have created. The hardhearted do not respond.<sup>14</sup> When they hear about or contemplate the suffering of Christ on their behalf, they are unmoved and are thus unsaved by Christ's act of love. For them, the causal chain is undisrupted, so they must suffer for their own sins. But some are deeply touched. As they contemplate what their Savior was willing to do for them, their heart is broken and their spirit is contrite (2 Nephi 2:7). The enabling power of the atonement that is rooted in their deep spiritual and emotional response to Christ's generous act enlarges their capacity to keep God's commandments.<sup>15</sup> They are born again as a child of Christ who has "no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). They repent of past behavior. They give up their sins and, as they remain engaged with Christ, shine "more and more unto the perfect day" (Proverbs 4:18). Repentance, Alma stresses in his teaching of Corianton, reconciles justice and mercy (Alma 42:13). Made perfect by their response to the atonement — this merciful new fact created by the love of God and Christ — they escape the just consequences they, of themselves, would have received

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14 All human beings are touched by Christ's generous act at least to the extent of coming into the world with the light of Christ (Moroni 7:16-18). But the hardhearted do not fully receive the atonement and are thus not fully saved by it (D&C 88:33).

15 The theory proposed here on how the atonement works is called the "moral influence theory." It is the atonement theory that was most widely, indeed, almost exclusively believed by early Christians. See A. J. Wallace and R. D. Rusk, *Moral Transformation: The Original Christian Paradigm of Salvation* (New Zealand: Bridgehead, 2011), 250-271.

and receive the just reward of the perfect person they have now become through grace-enabled repentance — exaltation in the kingdom of God. Through mercy, they become a mirror image of God and Christ.

### Alma's Theological Poem

Alma expresses these ideas about justice and mercy succinctly and beautifully in a chiastic poem that is embedded in his message to Corianton. The beauties of modern poems tend to be found in their imagery. The beauties of this poem are architectural and theological. The structure of the poem is artful, and the poem constitutes a kind of extended theological metaphor.

- A The meaning of *the word restoration* is to bring back again
- B evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish —
- C good for that which is good;
- D righteous for that which is righteous
- E Just for that which is just;
- F merciful for that which is merciful.
- F' Therefore, my son, see that you are merciful unto your brethren;
- E' deal justly,
- D' judge righteously,
- C' and do good continually;
- B' and if ye do all these things
- A' then shall ye receive your *reward*;
- F'' yea, ye shall have mercy *restored* unto you again;
- E'' ye shall have justice *restored* unto you again;
- D'' ye shall have a righteous judgment *restored* unto you again;
- C'' and ye shall have good *rewarded* unto you again.
- B'' For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be *restored*;
- A'' therefore, *the word restoration* more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all.



**Alma 41:12-15<sup>16</sup>**

The most important structural and theological elements of this poem are the A lines and the F lines, the outer and inner boundaries of the poem. The A lines articulate the principle of cosmic justice, the eternal, natural, causal law of the universe that Alma calls *restoration*. This law bounds and encompasses all that exists. The F lines are where we find God, whose defining characteristic is mercy, which is inseparably linked to the atonement. As Alma tells Corianton in 42:15, “mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made.” God, mercy, and atonement, like all other things, must exist and act within the bounds of cosmic justice. Nothing exists outside those bounds but empty fantasy. This truth is reflected in the structure of the poem.

The cosmic justice and divine mercy that bound the poem are both associated with three contrasting moral attributes. Associated with cosmic justice and mentioned twice in line B are evil, carnality, and devilishness. Associated with mercy and mentioned twice in lines C through E are goodness, righteousness, and personal justice. Each good attribute associated with mercy is a kind of opposite of its corresponding bad attribute associated with cosmic justice. Thus good and evil are opposites, as are righteousness and carnality. Devilishness and personal justice also stand as opposites if we remember that the devil, Satan, is defined primarily by his desire to abrogate justice by separating acts from consequences.

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16 Other readers have construed the structure of this poem essentially as I do here but have not discussed in detail how the structure communicates meaning. See for example John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structure, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), 207; H. Clay Gorton, *A New Witness for Christ: Chiasmic Structures in the Book of Mormon*, (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1997), 209; Jeff Lindsay at <http://www.jefflindsay.com/chiasmus.shtml>.

The antichrist figures who have influenced Corianton — Nehor and perhaps Korihor — deny that any merciful atonement will later occur. Alma's poem reveals what would happen if they were right, if there were only justice without mercy. Thus the poem contains an alternative inner boundary and pivot point, the B lines, which show the behavior and destiny of any human being who ignores or rejects the atonement. In this ABBABA poem where there is justice but no mercy, all are condemned and lost.

**A** The meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again

**B** evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish —

**B'** and if ye do all these things

**A'** then shall ye receive your reward;

**B"** For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored;

**A"** therefore, the word restoration more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all.

Fallen humanity is “carnal, sensual, and devilish,” Alma tells Corianton (Alma 42:10). If they are left to themselves, if there is no merciful atonement, cosmic justice restores to them what they send out, evil for evil, carnal for carnal, devilish for devilish. Their own nature and behavior are their destiny. Restoration condemns them and justifies them not at all.

But if the atonement is not denied, if the C through F lines are not excised, an alternative destiny is open for humanity. Line B', “if ye do all these things,” has dual reference. It can refer either to its structural equivalent in line B, “evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish” or to the lines that immediately precede it, F' through C': “you are merciful unto your brethren, deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually.” We all get to choose which of those two patterns of

behavior will characterize us. This choice is open to us because of the merciful atonement.

John Welch notes the special importance of the center lines in a chiasm: "An emphatic focus on the center can be employed by a skillful composer to elevate the importance of a central concept or to dramatize a radical shift of events as the turning point."<sup>17</sup> Thus it is no accident that *mercy* lies at the heart of this poem. Mercy, as embodied in the love of God and the atonement of Christ, is the turning point, the event that radically changes the universe and shifts the course of any life that is open to it. The importance of mercy is reflected in the poem's structure. All good things human beings experience or do flow from it.

The three sets of lines that mention good things each present a different aspect of the attributes they mention. In lines C, D, E, and F, each attribute is mentioned twice and is presented as a kind of Platonic abstraction: goodness, righteousness, justice, and mercy as such, the attributes as they are fully, perfectly, and eternally embodied by God. The sequence of those lines may suggest that mercy is the product of the Goodness, Righteousness, and the personal Justice of God, which all precede it.

In lines F', E', D', and C' the perfect, divine attributes mentioned in F, E, D, and C are mirrored in the life of the redeemed disciple of Christ that Alma is urging Corianton to become. But this time, they begin with mercy and flow out of it. Thus the perfect mercy of line F makes possible and requires of Christ's followers concrete acts of mercy for fellow human beings.<sup>18</sup> Through the enabling power of the atonement, the

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17 Welch, "Introduction," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 10.

18 Christ breaks the causal chain of just retribution by voluntarily suffering the injury that is the consequence of our sins without resenting us or seeking retribution against us, though we caused his suffering. The dominant theme of Christ's Sermon on the Mount is that to be redeemed, we must likewise forgive the trespasses of others against us. In the Celestial Kingdom, we will

disciple must deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually, thus becoming a mirror image of his Savior.

Alma's artistic skill is most manifest in how he handles the temporal lag between act and consequence that is so essential to the exercise of agency, to the existence of a probationary state, and to the disruption by the atonement of the inexorable movement from cause to effect that ends in damnation. This lag and the associated reconciliation of justice and mercy are signified by the dual returns in the poem.

As noted above, each admirable attribute is mentioned twice in its initial Platonic or divine presentation. But as it is mirrored in the lives of individual human beings, the dual appearances of goodness, righteousness, justice, and mercy split. Each appears one time in lines F' through C', which describe acts of a once carnal and devilish person who has been touched by Christ's atonement and born again. Corianton, "my son," is a stand in for all who now imitate the example of their Redeemer. The mercy, justice, righteousness, and goodness mentioned here are acts of faith, uncoupled with any immediate reward. The enabling power of the atonement has created a new person on this new path that leads to perfection. The word *continually* in line C' may signify the completion of the process of sanctification that makes the disciple, through grace, a perfect copy of his or her master.

Cosmic justice is inescapable and asserts itself in the lagged second return of lines F" through C", where each of the divine attributes is again mentioned one time. In this second return, justice and mercy are reconciled. The person who has been made merciful, just, righteous, and good through the atonement now receives the just consequences of his or her actions. The word

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be surrounded by former sinners who have repented. We must join Christ in mercifully breaking the causal chain that is justice by voluntarily and joyfully forgoing retribution against those who have injured us but then have repented and been born again as one who no longer commits such sins.

*restored* (*rewarded* in C”), which signifies cosmic justice, is coupled with each divine attribute. Perfected in Christ, being one who now sends out only that which is good, the disciple now has mercy, justice, righteousness, and goodness restored to him again as the just consequence of his actions and being. The lag makes it possible for us who were once sinners to receive the just consequences of our new, redeemed, perfected selves.

Line B” also makes this point. It initially echoes B’ both in substance and in function. The first half of the line, “that which ye do send out,” has a dual reference to the wicked behaviors in line B and to the alternative righteous behaviors in lines F” through C”. But the second half of B” contains the word *restored*, just as lines F” through C” do. For the unrighteous, this *restored* invokes the justice visited in line B, and for the righteous, it caps the reconciliation of justice and mercy in F” through C”. If “that which ye do send out” is the righteous behavior of lines F” through C”, then mercy, justice, righteousness, and goodness “shall return unto you again, and be restored.” If “that which you do send out” is the evil, carnality, and devilishness of line B, then that is what will be restored to you.

If we think of justice as an abstract principle that requires balance in a kind of cosmic accounting ledger, the balance is achieved because the punishment of Christ is commensurate with our sin. But justice doesn’t seem to be an abstract principle. It describes, rather, the concrete causal linkages between real acts and real consequences of those acts. Christ makes us concretely worthy of exaltation rather than damnation by enabling us to repent, and thus justly merit exaltation.

It is worth noting that in the poem, mercy is doubly framed by justice. As discussed above, the A lines make cosmic justice, *restoration*, the overarching context within which all things occur. But mercy is more intimately framed by the personal justice of God in E and of humanity in E’ and E”. In our interactions with the strong and good, we must be

just to be worthy of heaven. Justice is a personal attribute of exalted beings. In our interactions with the weak and sinful, we must be merciful and hope that as the mirror image of our Redeemer, we may help catalyze a new capacity for strength and righteousness in our fellow fallen children of God.

### Conclusion

In his teaching of his son Corianton, Alma offers the most profound theological reflections in scripture on the nature of justice and mercy. In his carefully crafted chiasmic poem, he succinctly and beautifully expresses the essence of the gospel. In the commentary that immediately follows the poem, Alma calls the gospel “the plan of mercy” (Alma 42: 15), then in the next verse “the plan of happiness” (Alma 42: 16). The structural equation of *mercy* and *happiness* suggests, as does the poem, that the merciful atonement of Christ is the font of all human happiness.

*Insightful comments of Dr. Peter Eubanks improved this article.*

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# READING THE SCRIPTURES GEOGRAPHICALLY: SOME TOOLS AND INSIGHTS

Taylor Halverson

*Editor's Note: Because the black and white hardcopy version of the journal cannot do justice to the numerous color figures in the article, only the abstract is reproduced here. For the full article, see the Interpreter website.*

*Abstract: The purpose of this article is to provide several examples of how meaning, understanding, and interpretation of scriptures may be enhanced when scriptures are read in their geographical context. Many scholarly articles seek exclusively to break new ground in meaning and meaning-making, to essentially produce new knowledge. This article hopes to break new ground both in terms of new knowledge (insights) as well as in the pragmatics of giving readers additional tools and opportunities for exploring the scriptures in fresh ways. In particular, this article will also highlight several free geographical tools that can improve one's learning with the scriptures, with particular focus on Google Earth and the BYU scriptures.byu.edu/mapscrip tool (hereafter referred to as Google Earth Bible or GEB). The hope is that this article will, through the tools discussed, create opportunities for others to create new knowledge for themselves through scripture study.*

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