MORMON EXPERIENCE SCHOLARSHIP ISSUES & ART

REFRAMING THE BOOK OF MORMON
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Trent D. Stephens
Ralph A. Olsen
C. Jess Groesbeck
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A PLACE CALLED LITTLE UTAH by H. Parker Blount (p.12)

POSE, an England essay contest winner by Jana Bouck Remy (p.10)

Barry Laga considers Mormon metaphors (p.46)

FALSE POSITIVE Brown fiction contest winner by Mari Jorgensen (p.54)

The Passion of the Christ, reviews by Robert A. Rees and Eric Samuelsen (p.66)

NEWS Church leaders speak out against gay marriage; Excommunicated fundamentalists fight back; Guns barred from LDS chapels; Mormon studies controversy; BYU digitally erases tattoos and covers midriffs; much more! (p.72)

March 2004—$5.95
CALL FOR PAPERS
2004 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium

11–14 August • Sheraton City Centre Hotel, Salt Lake City

THE SALT LAKE SUNSTONE SYMPOSIUM
The symposium is an annual gathering of Latter-day Saints, scholars, and others interested in the diversity and richness of Mormon thought and experience and who enjoy pondering the past, present, and future of the unfolding Restoration. Hosting discussions from all disciplines and presentations of all kinds, the symposium is based upon the principles of an open forum and the trust that both the cause of truth and the society of the Saints are best served by free and frank exploration and discussion. Sunstone welcomes proposals for this year’s event, expecting that all who participate will approach every issue, no matter how difficult, with intelligence and good will.

FORMATS
Sessions may be scholarly papers, panel discussions, interviews, personal essays, sermons, dramatic performances, literary readings, debates, comic routines, short films, art displays, or musical presentations.

SUBMITTING PROPOSALS
Those interested in being a part of the program this year should submit a proposal which includes a session title, 100-word abstract, a separate summary of the topic’s relevance and importance to Mormon studies, and the name and a brief vita for all proposed presenters.

In order to receive first-round consideration, proposals should be received by 15 May 2004. Sessions will be accepted according to standards of excellence in scholarship, thought, and expression. All subjects, ideas, and persons to be discussed must be treated with respect and intelligent discourse; proposals with a sarcastic or belittling tone will be rejected.

PRELIMINARY PROGRAM MAILING LIST
This year’s preliminary program will be included in the July issue of SUNSTONE magazine. If you are not a subscriber or do not expect to purchase a copy of the magazine, or if you would like multiple copies to share, please contact the Sunstone office to receive a program. You may request a copy by phone, mail, fax, or email (see below). When the program becomes available, you may also visit <www.sunstoneonline.com> to view it and receive symposium updates.

ART EXHIBIT AND SALE
High-quality art by Mormon and regional artists will be exhibited at the symposium and sold at affordable prices. Donated works are needed. Bring your friends to enjoy wonderful works; encourage your firm to acquire office art at reasonable prices! Sale proceeds benefit Sunstone.

STUDENT REGISTRATION AND GRANTS
Thanks to generous donations, student registrations will be underwritten again for this year’s symposium, allowing students to attend for free. If you are a student, please consider proposing or organizing a panel for the symposium. In addition, some help toward travel expenses is available for college students participating on the program. Please inquire about these scholarships early in the proposal process.

LOCATION:
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HOTEL REGISTRATION. Enjoy the convenience of staying at the Sheraton City Centre Hotel, the site of this year’s symposium. Special conference rates are: $99 for single and double occupancy; add $10 per person for each additional person. Rooms fill up quickly, and you must make your reservation by 24 JULY 2004. For reservations, call toll free (800) 325-5535 or, if local, (801) 401-2000. To guarantee these prices, be sure to ask for the Sunstone Symposium room rates. Conference parking at the hotel will be $4 per day and includes exit and return privileges.

VOLUNTEERS. Sunstone needs volunteer office help in the weeks leading up to the symposium. During the conference, we also need help staffing registration and sales tables and taking tickets. Volunteer hours may be redeemed for free session tickets, cassette recordings, Sunstone T-shirts, back issues of the magazine, or lengthened subscriptions. If you can help, please call Sunstone at (801) 355-5926.

The immense popularity of Dan Brown’s novel, The DaVinci Code, has created a rethinking of and resurgent interest in the “divine feminine.” For this year’s symposium, we encourage proposals that focus on the divine feminine in Mormonism and the place of women’s spirituality in the early Church and today’s Latter-day Saint community.

As always, we welcome reflections on all contemporary moral and ethical issues and their intersection with Mormonism. In addition, we are interested in studies of historical and contemporary figures and events, popular culture, and the arts. Please submit a proposal! We’re looking forward to a very exciting symposium!
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The mission of The Sunstone Education Foundation is to sponsor open forums of Mormon thought and experience. Under the motto, “Faith Seeking Understanding,” we examine and express the rich spiritual, intellectual, social, and artistic qualities of Mormon history and contemporary life. We encourage humanitarian service, honest inquiry, and responsible interchange of ideas that is respectful of all people and the values they hold sacred.

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Due to a printing error, several pictures and images in the previous issue (SUNSTONE, December 2003) were marred with smeared ink or otherwise appeared darker than normal. Of the items most affected by the error, the image of Natalie Palmer Sheppard (page 77) has made everyone involved in the printing and shipping process feel the worst. Our sincere apologies to our readers, and especially to Natalie and the other authors whose work may not have looked as nice as it should have.

YOUNG JARED CHRISTENSEN IS TO BE commended for his courage in sharing his current doubts and hopes for future resolutions and faith (“My Great Dilemma,” SUNSTONE, December 2003). While most of his questions are not ones on my doubt-faith border, I feel a kinship for him, as I suspect many others also do.

His desire to “prove contraries” in the service of finding truths will be rewarded in quiet ways, with no fanfare or acclaim. But the contents of his faith will be earned rather than just asserted without having been extensively tested. His stance and determination are a tribute to his parents, both his lovely mother, still living, and his remarkable father, tragically killed by a selfish egomaniac.

RICHARD WRIGHT
Phoenix, Arizona

OUR OWN CHURCH PLACE

Since reading your last issue (SUNSTONE, December 2003), I’ve been thinking about Rebecca Chandler’s childhood feeling of having a place in the Mormon church. And I’ve thought about Lynne Whitesides wanting the Church to feel like home but sensing the absence of the female in it.

I remember how the “absent female” almost estranged my brother. Because he wasn’t then married, he was told he wouldn’t be called to the elders quorum presidency after all. Maybe the Church has certain places only for certain people and lets those who don’t fit fall through cracks.

Singles are shoved out of singles wards on that crucial 40th birthday. Financial correlation clipped organization leaders of control over their own funding and spending.

Some such cracks may be what Armand Mauss meant by the “unintended consequences” (SUNSTONE July 2003) of efforts to create communities around commonalities such as single, ethnic, and retiree wards.

More and more, we lock-step through the block system, followed by choir practice. “Brothers and sisters, please clear the chapel for Church.”

I remember how the “absent female” almost estranged my brother. It was a fact of his life and on page 43, it should probably be “Bette” Davis and on page 44, it should be “Betty” Davis. And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church, Our little Sexton sings. God preaches, a noted Clergyman—And the sermon is never long, So instead of getting to Heaven, at last I’m going all along.

GALE STRINGHAM
Los Angeles, California

BLOOMING DIVERSITY

Concerning Steven Fales’s one-man play, “Confessions of a Mormon Boy” (SUNSTONE, December 2003): Preciate ya, but on page 43, it should be “Bette” Davis and on page 44, it should probably be the theatrical “trouper” instead of the highway “trooper.”

Still, who can wait to get to heaven to meet our fabulous “mother of all creation?”
This glorified resurrected diva has celestial tea parties and sneaks cigarettes. She lacks her own Internet address but has learned Heavenly Father’s password and sends inspiration to her children whenever the heck she likes. But she has to wear a veil.

Say, except for the cigarette and password part, have mortal Molly Mormons been pretty much gender-rolled into living likewise? Remember Luke gave Martha a bad rap for trying to be domestic. Well, even worse, Martha Stewart now faces jail time. But Fales’s play repeatedly reminds us that the purpose of mortality is to suffer.

Nevertheless, rejoice in the spring that has brought not only the daffodils that Fales favors, but crocus, hyacinths, and tulips plus bushes and trees laden with glorious blossoms of many colors. Maybe the diversity can take our minds off stereotypes and the confinement they cause.

JAN OLDS
Denver, Colorado

TESTIFYING BY PRESENCE

THE PERSPECTIVES IN THE “WHY WE Stay” essays (SUNSTONE, October 2003) illustrate very well how common sense, community, faith, and hope can trump obstacles.

From Toby Pingree: “I am buoyed up whenever I gather with the saints, be it in a high priests group meeting in the Andes, in testimony meeting in my home ward, or an open discussion group like Sunstone where I learn from others and my voice is respectfully heard.”

From Mary Anne Hunter: “I remain active in the Church in spite of its flaws because it is unthinkable to do otherwise. Full participation makes me happy. I enjoy going to Church and to the temple. And as I try to live according to principles of the gospel and exercise faith, I experience peace and joy.”

From Bill Bradshaw: “I now find myself in the very paradoxical state of being less sure about a whole lot of things but having greater faith. I used to view the statement, ‘Have faith in Christ,’ as. . . You’d better have faith or else. Now I see it as a simpler description of the way things are, the way this life works.”

From Grethe Peterson: “My life experiences have taught me the beauty and value of diversity. We may not look or think alike, but we are all God’s children. We are all equal before our Lord, so our ability to reach out to one another brings us closer to heaven.”

From Tom Rogers: “The restored gospel’s explanation of life and human destiny satisfies my contemplative mind. It appeals to me much like Joseph described certain truths as ‘tasting good.’”

Recently my spouse said, “I must find another Sunday School class. Brother ‘Bland’ puts me to sleep. I try to come open to learn and help others have a spiritual experience, but I’d be better off at home reading the Book of Mormon on my own.”

“I know. His voice is soft, and I lose track, too. You notice I’m often reading the scriptures on my lap or—dozing,” I said.

But we keep coming. We’re supposed to be in church at that hour, and when we are, our presence, our willing countenance, may encourage someone else. We come seeking to learn, worship, renew covenants, receive guidance, comfort, and inspiration to live and serve better. And if we pay attention during the three-hour block, we at least renew our covenants and reflect on Christ’s gift. We may also learn of the newest birth or mission call in the ward. Both testify of God’s continuing faith and hope in us.

Keep SUNSTONE coming.

LEIGH WALKER
Seattle, Washington
FROM THE EDITOR

ON BEING “INVESTIGATOR-SAFE”

By Dan Wotherspoon

Two experiences have had me thinking lately.

EXPERIENCE 1: In making several new acquaintances at the recent Association for Mormon Letters annual meeting, I was asked about Sunstone’s mixed reputation among Church members. Perhaps it was the way the question was posed, somehow differently than in the past, but I found myself answering it with an angle I hadn’t really tried before. In essence, I speculated that that feared too often people will hear that something was printed in the magazine or said at a symposium that would be worrisome if it were the “first thing” someone would hear about Mormonism or the Church. In other words, Sunstone forums are not to be trusted because they’re not “safe” for investigators.

EXPERIENCE 2: Just a week ago, I was merrily lurking on the LDS-Phil email list, reading the various discussions, noting interesting ideas or jotting down potential angles of response for when and if I found the time to participate more actively. LDS-Phil is a list of some 120 or so members, most formally trained or good, though non-professional, philosophers and theologians. In the middle of a discussion that had been prompted initially by a non-LDS participant, a post appeared that startled me because of the way it began: “Sorry for butting in, but I have been skimming through this thread just to see what kind of missionary work we’re doing on the net.”

GOOD conversations at the AML conference followed when I responded the way I did. And, as we discussed Sunstone a bit more, both my conversation partners and I agreed that it isn’t fair to ask that every discussion that takes place everywhere in Mormonism be “investigator safe.” And for forums such as Sunstone—whose constituency, as our recent survey suggests, is made up primarily of Latter-day Saints who are college-educated (89 percent with bachelor’s degrees or more), who are active or formerly active Latter-day Saints (94 percent), and who are not newbies to our discussions (90 percent)—it would be especially burdensome to ask all of our articles and symposium presentations to be bound by an implied “Careful: remember potential converts may be listening.”

A good exchange also followed from my response to the LDS-Phil post described above. Out of curiosity, and also because my AML conversations were still in the back of my mind, I queried list members if, when posting to the list, they ever worried about what someone investigating the Church might think were they to read their posts. I especially wanted to learn if such a concern ever inhibited them from posting an imaginative or speculative thought they otherwise might have liked “to put out there” for response. A few list members bit on my invitation to share their thoughts, saying essentially that no, they hadn’t really considered potential missionary opportunities when they participated in the LDS-Phil discussion.

Just as in my AML discussions, I was relieved to have additional confirmation that people I respect and enjoy also believe that claiming a space for more adventurous conversations about gospel and Church topics is a perfectly acceptable thing to do. I believe they, just as I do, would qualify their affirmation by stating that there still need to be ground rules for the conversations. For instance, we should feel free to speak honestly but always remain respectful of other positions. We must begin with the assumption that faith matters and should be honored, and even as we offer critiques, we need to make our constructive intentions as transparent as possible. (Sorry. So far, these principles are well-worn ground in Sunstone discussions, I know.)

But one response to my LDS-Phil post came at my query from an interesting angle, one worthy of more reflection. From good friend Charles Randall Paul (Randy):

I usually have someone in mind who I am trying to persuade to see things more the way I do. This someone is often a composite of people on this list and others I have met who have challenged me. For example, I always seem to wrestle with an invisible Bruce Lincoln, a brilliant Marxist critic at Chicago, who goads me to try to persuade him that all is not reduced to social/economic power and self interest. I once wrote out a list of fifteen books and/or authors who I think most influenced me for good. I often write trying to persuade those authors (as if they were observing) that I have honored their way of thinking and doing. I also find myself trying to persuade the Lord that my view on something is one He really enjoys more than most.

This last bit, about trying to persuade the Lord, is quintessential Randy—an idea deeply embedded in his larger and wonderful views about mutual persuasion in mediating interreligious conflict—but I don’t want to focus there. Instead, I’m excited about notions Randy’s post implies that I believe might be helpful to forums such as Sunstone—forums that are mostly-insider-but-still-public. (I say “mostly insider” because some folks really might be listening in for whom our discussions are a first brush with Mormonism.) I think Randy’s approach could help us move toward constructive discourse without having our impulses checked so much by “rules of engagement” as by our hope to honor the ways of thinking and doing of those who have influenced us for good. There’s a tinge of “What would Jesus do?” in this idea, but I think it has much more to it.

A recent Sunstone survey revealed, most of us listening in to Sunstone discussions have had at least some college experience. To get to the point I’m moving toward, I’ll mention one aspect of my college experience that I’m certain others have also reflected upon but which is worth highlighting. It is the transformation from being a learner to becoming a contributor, from being a student to becoming a teacher.

Fairly early on in my BYU experience, I sensed that whatever I might want to do with my life and career would involve having to go to graduate school. And that thought scared me because I knew graduate students had to write—a lot. The writing itself didn’t really worry me as much as the question, What is there to write about that could feel new and interesting? This idea must have been on my mind for a while because I somehow stumbledly mentioned it to one of my favorite professors, Tom MacKay, who broke into a great big smile. “Don’t worry,” he assured me, “when you start taking more classes in your field, you’ll find plenty of interesting things to write about—too many, in fact!” He then hinted that the key to un-
locking the floodgates lay in our own autobiographies. “We all come at the world and issues from different angles. Your upper-division and graduate courses will show you that, and you’ll gain confidence that you have plenty to say.”

And he was right. Once we push past the broad survey part of an academic subject, it all breaks open. And then everything from our basic temperaments, to whom we’ve been reading or what two or three classes we’ve been taking that happened to cross-fertilize, to personal relationships with fellow students, to family or other loyalties, all combine to create perspectives that can advance the discussion. And that’s what graduate seminars, especially, are all about—identifying those places in the field where our particular sensitivities or idiosyncratic twists of mind might contribute, and then learning how to present our ideas persuasively while still honoring the scholarship and standards of the field and the people whose work has influenced our thinking.

I loved that process of first learning and then learning to contribute back. Each class, each seminar, brought new somethings and someones into my universe, and in speaking up, I gave newness back. I still love this process! Each essay, article, story, poem, play, letter, or symposium presentation brings angles and quirky calculus, other brains and the souls operating those brains into my personal galaxy, and through my editing nudges (usually gentle, but not always!), or my reactions and questions, I get to give back to the whole. Just as my wife feared I wouldn’t, I’ve never left school!

I AM certainly not suggesting that organizations such as Sunstone, AMI, LDS-Phil, and other independent forums are the perfect or only settings for Mormon “graduate studies,” but much like graduate seminars, the forums they create give us a chance to discuss ideas in ways we don’t often get to in official Church settings where there is a justifiable pressing concern for meeting the basic needs of investigators or new converts. Still, though, how do we walk that line of making our discussions interesting and primarily for the already-understand-the-basics folk while not ignoring the possibility that, because we’re public groups, some might be meeting Latter-day Saintness (Saintliness?) through us for the first time?

I believe Randy Paul’s post suggests a good approach: We think of those we are discussing things with as intelligent friends, people of good will who’ve caught our attention with interesting questions or ways of being in the world. Because we respect them and the ways their life experiences have shaped their minds and souls, we try to contribute something new for them to consider—whether it is an idea, a practice, or a general challenge to broaden their horizons by simply sharing our particular story that might not track with their previous conceptions of things. And we try to persuade them in the spirit, mode of life, and careful methods of those we most admire, those who’ve best been able to break through to touch our individual heart and soul. If we keep these things in mind, I think it will be pretty hard to go wrong.

Hang on! Maybe the conclusion I was heading toward is more along the lines of “What would Jesus do?” after all!

NOTES
1. See SUNSTONE (December 2003), 6–7.
2. Charles Randall Paul is the president of the Foundation for Interreligious Diplomacy. A glimpse of his approach to interacting with others in a stance of loving persuasion can be found in his article, “Does God Always Reveal the Same Thing to Everyone? On Sustaining Peaceful Contests over Religion,” SUNSTONE (May 2003): 58–63.

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Twenty Years Ago in Sunstone

IT DOESN’T APPLY AT THIS ALTITUDE

James N. Kimball’s “J. Golden Nuggets” was one of the most popular regular columns of SUNSTONE past. In each installment, Kimball, a nephew of the colorful early Church leader would share classic “Uncle Golden” stories. The following favorite was printed originally as “Words of Wisdom” in the Autumn 1984 issue.

One of the best kept secrets in the Kimball family was Uncle Golden’s problem with the Word of Wisdom. He struggled with it all of his life, and his diary reveals some very interesting insights into his handling of this problem. He said that by the time Heber Grant got serious about it, it was a little too late. He had been drinking coffee since he was a young boy working in the Bear River Valley driving mules. He said oftentimes that’s all there was for breakfast. Even in the mission field, he relates that if he ever had a dime in his pocket, which was very rare, he would take a nickel of it and buy a stamp and write his mother and take the other nickel and buy a cup of coffee.

When he heard that President Grant was changing the emphasis in the Church and making the Word of Wisdom a matter of enforcement, his diary states that Golden went to the President, saying, “Hell, Heber, what are you doin'? You know my problem with this.” President Grant reportedly said, “Well, Golden, you do the best you can.”

Later on in life, Uncle Golden said, “Well, I’ve almost got the problem licked. I’m eighty now, and in a few more years, I think I’ll have it completely under control.”

Golden sometimes said, “If it weren’t for my nephew, Ranch Kimball, it would be a lot easier for me to overcome this habit of drinking coffee. But Ranch comes down and picks me up at the Church Office Building every now and then, and on a nice day, we drive all the way up City Creek Canyon, way up to the top. Nobody’s there; we’re just by ourselves, and on a beautiful day...”

POVERTY AND INCOME IN COLORADO CITY & HILDALE

According to the 2000 Census, poverty rates and use of public assistance are much higher than state averages in the polygamist communities of Colorado City and Hildale situated on the Arizona/Utah border.

Results from the 2000 Census show that household income is also somewhat below the state averages in those polygamist communities. But household size is large in these communities, so that per capita income is only about one-fourth of the state average.
day we’ll park and Ranch’ll put a pot of coffee on. When it perks, he’ll pour out two tin cups full, and we’ll sit there and drink coffee and reminisce about the family, the days in Round Valley, and the things that are happening in the Church and in the world. I remember one day Ranch turned to me and said, ‘Uncle Golden, does this bother you sitting up here and drinking coffee with me and being a General Authority?’ and I said to him, ‘Hell no.’ And he said, ‘Why not?’ and I said, ‘It’s simple, Ranch; the eighty-ninth section doesn’t apply at this altitude.’

But then Uncle Golden went on to say that it wasn’t always that easy for him. For example, in the winter months, he could hardly get started in the morning without a little stimulant, and sometimes it was a source of great embarrassment to him. He tells the story of President Grant’s calling him on the telephone one winter day and asking him to go up to Brigham City to a Deseret Sunday School conference. Golden was to take the new superintendent of the Deseret Sunday School that President Grant had just set apart that day. Uncle Golden asked who it was and was told the man’s name was David O. McKay. “You take him along, Golden, and you break him in,” said President Grant. “He’s a nice young man.”

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At 4:00 a.m. the next morning, Brother McKay and Uncle Golden left Salt Lake and drove with a team of horses north to Brigham City. In some places where there were heavy snow drifts, they had to get out and change from a wagon to a sled borrowed from a farmer. Finally about 8:00 in the morning, they got to Brigham City. It was cold, and Uncle Golden was frozen right to the bone. He said he needed a little stimulant to get him going, but he didn’t know quite how to handle it with Brother McKay. The meeting didn’t begin until 9:00, and Uncle Golden noticed a restaurant, the Idle Isle, on Main Street. He turned to Brother McKay and said, “Why don’t we go over and have a little breakfast; we’ve got an hour, and it’s not fast Sunday.” Brother McKay thought it a marvelous idea.

When they went into the restaurant, no one else was there. The waitress came up to their table and said, “What could I get for you two gentlemen?” According to Uncle Golden, Brother McKay blurted out, “Well, we’ll have some ham and eggs and two cups of hot chocolate, please.” Uncle Golden almost died; this wasn’t what he had in mind at all.

But after a few minutes, an idea came to him. He excused himself, saying he needed to go to the men’s room. Golden then walked back into the kitchen and grabbed that waitress and said, “Say, would you mind putting a little coffee in my hot chocolate, please?” She said no, she wouldn’t mind at all; they did that kind of thing all the time up in Brigham City.

Golden washed his hands and went back to the table and sat down. In a few minutes, the waitress came with the ham and eggs and the hot chocolate. When she got up to the table, she looked at both men and said, “Now which one of you wanted coffee in his hot chocolate?” Flustered, Uncle Golden looked at her and said, “Ah, hell, put it in both of them.”

Golden later related that Brother McKay thought that was awfully funny, and he laughed so hard and so long that he couldn’t even eat his breakfast. But the problem was that after that, Brother McKay would go around the Church and every time he was asked to speak, he would tell that story to people.
In his diary, Uncle Golden wrote he wished McKay would keep his damn mouth shut, but then added, “Maybe Heber will release him, and we won’t hear any more about him.”

As he got older and later on in his life, Uncle Golden said that people began to tell him what a marvelous person he was. He remarked that no one ever said a damn thing like that until he got old and ready to die. But on one occasion, a group of non-Mormon businessmen had a dinner to honor Uncle Golden. It was at the Rotisserie Restaurant on south Main Street, just below Broadway. Uncle Golden attended and was a little embarrassed by it all because they had a big banner up on the wall which read, “Golden Kimball: Friend of Man.” He said they were all Gentiles there, but they were all his friends. He sat at the head table. Next to him was the gentleman in charge of the dinner and master of ceremonies. He and Uncle Golden were talking when the waiter came up to take their order. When asked what he’d like to drink, Uncle Golden said, “I’ll have some water.” But the friend grabbed the waiter and said, “No, you bring Mr. Kimball some coffee; he likes coffee.”

In a later scene, Jim catches Gus with—gasp!—McDonalds!

JIM: “Hey Gus! Isn’t that eternal damnation you’re chowing down there?”
GUS: “You can’t tell Michelle.”

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The film never mentions whether Gus confess his infidelity to his bishop.

In the recent Sony Pictures release, S.W.A.T., a brash young officer, Jim (Colin Farrell), is temporarily busted down to managing the team’s equipment room following a disastrous mission. Once there, Jim quickly learns his new partner Gus (James DuMont) is a Mormon convert with a wife who is very serious about the Word of Wisdom.

JIM: “You’re a little too attached to that soda, Gus.”
GUS: “I love that stuff. My wife would have my behind if she caught me sucking that down.”
JIM: “Why, is she a Mr. Pibb fan?”
GUS: “You know the deal, Jim. When we got married, I converted to Mormonism. We can’t consume anything that alters our state of mind. We treat our bodies with respect.”

In a later scene, Jim catches Gus with—gasp!—McDonalds!

JIM: “She won’t smell the fries on your breath?”
GUS: “That’s why God invented mouthwash.”
JIM: “Gus, you’re cheating on your wife with fast food.”
GUS: “You’re absolutely right!” (He shudders and, realizing his sin, shoves the food away.)

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Two decades ago, my sister left the Church without much of an explanation apart from an extensive list of horrific anecdotes from her year at BYU. I was a pre-teen at the time, but I clearly remember her angry tirades against the hypocrisy in our religion: unrighteous dominion, false doctrine, rampant gossip, common cruelty. As the little sister, I would sit respectfully and listen attentively to her warnings against being as ill-treated as she had been, but her experience was foreign to me, and I remember feeling chronically perplexed by her passionate angst.

I remained somewhat distanced from her disenchantment until just recently when she revealed that her clearest memory of growing up Mormon is an overwhelming fear of an ever-lurking God who was anxiously awaiting to assign punishments to the very least of her sins.

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FEAR AND TREMBLING THE MORMON WAY

I sense much of fear in the contemporary landscape. Having lost the ancient sense of fear as a healthy dose of reverence and wonder, we are left with only the negative connotations of the word. The “fear of the Lord” spoken of in the Bible as the “beginning of wisdom” becomes incomprehensible; instead of opening us up, allowing us to explore our capacity for devotion in the presence of something larger and wiser than ourselves, fear is seen as something that shrinks us, harms us, and renders us incapable of acting on our own behalf.

—excerpt from Amazing Grace by KATHLEEN NORRIS

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My sister came of age during the fervor of the 1970s, part of the “Lost Generation,” raised in the backlash against the upheaval of the 60s, during the ERA and Zero Population Growth movements. Church leaders seemed to be fairly free- and heavy-handed with political and cultural edicts during that period, which may have seemed to deemphasize free agency and grace, and to harshly reinforce retribution and justice.
True to the “contemporary religious landscape” that Kathleen Norris observes, I realize now that my sister felt unprotected, unloved, unacceptable, endangered by her own imperfections, and totally unempowered to speak against the doctrine of fear that was being taught in too many meetings on too many levels.

I WONDER WHAT the correct uses of fear are in the current LDS context. In our Bible dictionary, fear has dual and opposing definitions: both as a synonym for “reverence,” “awe,” and “worship” and as “something unworthy of a child of God, something that ‘perfect love casteth out.’” But in the hymn, “How Firm a Foundation,” the voice of God assures us:

Fear not, I am with thee;
Oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand.

As a parent and frequent teacher of children and youth, I find myself talking a lot about choices and consequences (both positive and negative, but nonetheless unavoidable). And I wonder if there is a way to tame the natural person and foster an earth-shattering amazement of the Divine while avoiding fear’s debilitating, intimidating twin on our journey toward worship and self-governance. In my classes, love and preparation are the motivator and method toward eternal life, but I gather from my students that the “hellfire and brimstone” brand of instruction widely persists in Mormon culture even into the twenty-first century. Could recasting fear as a feeling of “reverence and wonder” be a more effective means toward righteousness than wielding a fear of cosmic castigation?

My model of encouraging a love-based fear—as depicted in the hymn “I Stand All Amazed”—is taken from the advice, caution and reassurance given in D&C 38:30: “Wherefore, treasure up wisdom in your bosoms, lest the wickedness of men reveal these things unto you by their wickedness, in a manner which shall speak in your ears with a voice louder than that which shall shake the earth; but if ye are prepared ye shall not fear.”

In our search for the “beginning of wisdom,” perhaps one point of “wickedness” that we should wisely avoid is teaching a “fear of God” that is based on a misperception of Him as an arbitrary, punitive character. In our lifelong preparation to “meet our Maker,” perhaps it would be more effective and fitting to “fear and tremble” before God purely out of our wonder-filled, awe-struck devotion to the Divine Being who knows us best and loves us most.

—ALISON TAKENAKA
Essex Junction, Vermont

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POSE OF A CHILD. Balasana. Sitting on knees, forehead to the floor, arms at my side. A child. Curled inside an egg and doesn’t want to hatch. Warm, dark and close. I don’t want to raise my arms like the others. Ujjayi exhale. Hot and hard and whistling against the back of my throat. I lift up my head and reach toward the sky. I open my eyes and see the fireworks.

July Fourth, 1984. I am twelve years old. The view is spectacular from the fourth floor of the downtown hospital. Sitting in a wheelchair at the window, I can see the fireworks all over the city of Denver. Popping, exploding, lighting up the sky. I look at the reflection in the plate glass window and see my dad, standing tall behind me, his hands resting lightly on the back handles of the wheelchair. He is quiet. Staring out the window but not seeing.

I wish now that I had held my leg in my arms and told it goodbye, that I had taken a picture or asked for my ashes. But there had been so many prayers and much fasting. My father had assured me that when the surgeon opened my leg, the cancer would be gone and he wouldn’t have to amputate. My patriarchal blessing, given a month before, had said: “You will have the faith to be healed.”

MOUNTAIN POSE. Tadasana. Standing tall, back straight, arms at sides, weight even on each foot. Eyes half closed, body strong and tall and straight. Immovable, like a mountain.

Mom is in the kitchen preparing dinner. I’m alone in the rocking chair, and I want to walk. I stand up, trying to shift my weight from my left to my prosthetic foot. I stand there, trying to move my intention to my artificial leg. I put the foot out in front of me and will myself to step down on it, to move forward. I stand there. Stand there. Stand there. I can’t seem to make my brain or my hips or the muscles understand what my mind sees so well. I need to walk. I want to walk. I have faith I can walk. I stare at the bubble-gum pink toes of the fake foot. God, let me walk.

When my Mom comes to get me for dinner, she doesn’t understand why I am slumped in the rocking chair crying. She picks up my crutches from the floor, puts her hands around my shoulders, and helps me to stand up.

WARRIOR POSE. Virabhadrasana. Legs spread out, chest turned to one side, arms reaching out—one long and straight in front, one in back. The balance is difficult, but I breathe and concentrate. I can maintain the pose. I am a warrior. If I doubt, I will waver. Tilt. Sometimes fall.

I am pregnant now, almost due, despite the doctors’ fears that the chemotherapy left me infertile. The ultrasound shows a healthy boy. I cry when I see his two beautiful legs. The technician takes a picture of them for me. I love their fragile symmetry. I can’t wait to see my son, the one that will look like his father, the one who defies the odds of ten years since my cancer. In my ninth month, my dad tells me he has been diagnosed with incurable pancreatic cancer. He will fight it with chemo, radiation, surgery. He is sure he will be healed.

Four months later. Dad’s breath, slow and deep, continues on as I put ice chips on his tongue and refresh the cool cloth on his forehead. My son nurses at my breast and sleeps at my father’s side, cradled by the hand with the IV needle for morphine. My brother returns early from his mission to Belgium. We sing “I Stand All Amazed” in French for Dad: Oh! que c’est merveilleux. Que son amour pour moi l’ait fait mourir pour moi. Oh! que c’est merveilleux, merveilleux pour moi.

FISH POSE. Matsyasana. Supine, chest arching to heaven, shoulders and head pulled back and top of the head on the floor. I am floating, weightless as the water pulls me with its current. My heart is high and open.

I slide an unlabeled videotape in the VCR and push play. The screen flickers on, and I see myself standing at a picnic table. It is my son’s birthday, and I’m trying to light the candles on his cake as the wind blows them out. I am laughing, working hard to shield the cake with my body, trying to improvise a screen of cardboard, and at the same time re-singing the birthday song. Tendrils of brown hair escape from my ponytail and slip over my face and blow in the wind.

I want to be repulsed when I see myself walk, the ungainly shift of shoulders and stiff-legged limp that I have learned not to watch in mirrors or plate-glass windows because I hate the
difference. But I am surprised that I’m not conscious of the limp in this moment of joy. In the wind, everything is moving—the air, trees, the trees and me, rocking gracefully between cake and child.

SUN SALUTATION. Surya Namaskar. I bring my arms high over my head, then bend at the waist and drop my hands to my ankles. I repeat, inhaling, exhaling, pulling the brightness in from the sun as I bring my hands to my chest in prayer position. I exhale, reach my arms up again, and repeat the dance.

Clinging to the wall of rock, searching for another handhold. I lunge higher and miss a seam, dropping into my harness. I anchor my feet back on a thin ledge and reach again. I am breathing fast and shallow. Every muscle is straining. Instead of a regular prosthesis, I wear a metal pylon with a rubber plunger that can grip the rock face. My skin is hot, flushed. The tension building like an orgasm, but with no climax, only the continual joy of strain and pull. I am tall and free as I hang in the air and move and stretch as I wish I could on the ground. With no fear of a fall.

When I rappel down from the rock, I shake so hard that I can’t untie my shoe. My husband helps me, and I don’t care. Tears run down my cheeks. Tears of joy.

CORPSE POSE. Savasana. Lying flat on the floor. I am cold. I pull a woolen blanket up to my chin, rest my hands on my abdomen. Feel the belly rise and fall as I breathe deeply to relax.

My yoga instructor comes over to where I am lying. She puts a hand on my forehead and one behind my head. She gently twists my neck and pulls it straight. Then she kneels at my side and holds her hands in the air over my artificial leg, palms down. Her eyes are closed, and she is concentrating, perhaps praying. She knows I am exhausted from a morning of physical therapy, of effort to use my new bionic leg. Every time I take a step, I must trust the computer that controls the knee. I need faith so I can walk better. But I can’t move forward without remembering first.

As my teacher steps away, I realize I want her to stay. I need someone to pray for me, to touch me. I want her to grieve with me. To help me find my leg. To be healed.

-MARK KLEIN

CYCLONE OF VOICES

Imagine a quartet of women whose mouths are the origin of cyclones singing into the mics take after take until the human music of the sky is perfect, the sound of unearthly wind. Afterward, they go to their homes of the 1930s where history does not record them standing in the dark by a window.

I live in that small room, rock back and forth while the twister takes the house. Farm animals, picket fence and Elmira Gulch float past the window. Somewhere in the harmony the storm is a rage of judgment, but somehow the rough landing leaves the house intact.

—LEONARDO DELLAROCCA
“What is man,’’ said Athos, ‘‘who has no landscape? Nothing but mirrors and tides’.”

A PLACE CALLED LITTLE UTAH

By H. Parker Blount

“A home place is as vital and necessary as the beating of your own heart. . . . If you do not have a home place, very little will ever . . . really belong to you in the world.”

HE COASTAL PLAINS OF GEORGIA EMERGED, eons ago, from the receding waters of the Atlantic Ocean. It is a landscape of sandy soil often as fine as sea salt, cypress swamps of tea-colored water, rivers snaking their way to the ocean, and savannahs of scrub oak and yellow pine, now dotted with farms. It is a beautiful place, but a tropical paradise it is not. Gothic shapes emerge from its nature as effortlessly as water moccasins glide among the cypress knees of the misty swamp. Summer days linger, with temperature and humidity hovering at nearly the same level. Insects are legion. It is a geography and climate that is not timid in molding the lives of its inhabitants.

That was the landscape of my youth. I grew up like most South Georgia boys of my day—barefoot all summer, in and out of the creeks and rivers, swimming and fishing, working in the fields for money for school clothes. We went to fish fries and barbeques, and on Saturdays, we went to the movies (or, as we called it, “the show”). Most of us went to church. There is where my life differed from that of my friends: I was a Mormon.

In the South, one is first and foremost a Southerner. Being a Southerner isn’t something one consciously constructs; it’s rather the byproduct of the way geography shapes culture. But in the LDS Church, one is first and foremost a Mormon. In our little congregation, our allegiance and loyalty was to the LDS Church, but we could no more escape being Southerners than the coastal rivers can escape the rise and fall of the tides. One can choose to be Mormon; one cannot choose not to be a Southerner. But growing up in the ’50s, I didn’t realize that by choosing to be Mormon, we would, in time, have our indigenous Southern culture supplanted by a stronger Utah Mormon culture.

Our little congregation emerged on the Coastal Plains landscape on 9 January 1905, when Morning Parker Davis was baptized along with her daughter, son-in-law, and three others. They formed the nucleus of a group of Church members that officially was known as the Satilla Branch, named after the river that flowed nearby and which served as the baptismal font for many years. In time, the Satilla Branch became the Axson Ward of the Jacksonville Stake (the first stake organized in the South). But among locals—members and nonmembers alike—our branch was known as “Little Utah,” “Utah Church,” or simply “Utah.”

In the rural South, all churches, regardless of the denomination, had names much like the one ours took on. One didn’t just attend the Baptist Church, for example; one belonged to Pisgah, or Mt. Zion, or Bushy Creek. Thus, Satilla Branch was Little Utah, and the Douglas Branch, some twenty miles away, was Cumorah. Though the doctrine was LDS, in many respects Little Utah was just another Southern country church. It was shaped by the same forces of geography that shaped the others. And its story, like those of other denominations, is the story of a place and the interaction of that place and its people. It is primarily a story of belonging. But the biography of Little Utah is also the story of the loss of place in the modern LDS Church.

SOUTHERN WAYS

TO UNDERSTAND THE story of Little Utah, one must understand something about the South. People are not entirely wrong when they say that North, East, and West are directions, while South is a place. And in the South, place is crucial. One indicator of that importance is the concept of “home place.” In his, A Childhood: A Biography of a Place, Harry Crews writes, “I come from people who believe the home place is as vital and necessary as the beating of your own heart.” He continues, “Such a place is probably important

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to everybody everywhere, but in Bacon County [Georgia]—although nobody to my knowledge ever said it—the people understood that if you do not have a home place, very little will ever be yours, really belong to you in the world. Even when the home place was no longer in the family, it still was talked about, driven by, and kept alive through memories. It was a source of identity and belonging. Or, as Eudora Welty has written,

There may come to be new places in our lives that are second spiritual homes—closer to us in some ways, perhaps, than our original homes. But the home tie is the blood tie. And had it meant nothing to us, any other place thereafter would have meant less, and we could carry no compass inside ourselves to find home ever, anywhere at all. We would not even guess what we had missed.

Much of the work of the small Southern farm of the last century was solitary. So the Southerner of that day learned solitude, and with that solitude, for many, came a spirituality and reverence for a world larger than self. People were also gregarious, and as opportunities arose, they gathered together and told stories. Southerners certainly aren’t the only storytellers, but storytelling is particular to the way of life Southern geography demands. All of us who are old enough and lived in farming communities have childhood memories of sitting on someone’s front porch listening to adults tell stories to the background music of night creatures, the steady rhythm of rocking chairs, and the distinctive frog-croaking creaks of the porch swing.

Those Southerners told stories to break the silence of their lives. But they had learned to live with and in the silence. They had learned from solitude that life has its rhythm and that most things will wait for you. In a hot country, the art of conserving your energy is highly refined, including even how you modify your speech. All of that influenced the Southerner’s belief in and approach to God.

On the other hand, Mormonism grew up in the cool climate and protection of the mountains, producing an energetic faith and, over time, I would argue, governance as “firm as the mountains around us.” At the turn of the previous century, the growing restored Church was introduced to the deep South. There in that hot and languid country where passion for the cloven tongues of Pentecost runs as hot as the Fourth of July—or perhaps the 24th of July, which is even hotter—pockets of acceptance developed.

For the first few years, most converts emigrated West, mainly to the San Luis Valley in Colorado. When the call for emigration ended, permanent congregations were established, and for more than half a century, there was a Southern version of the Church—warm of heart, slow, perhaps sluggish, and a bit charismatic—that contrasted with the cool and energetic Western version. The difference was not in doctrine, even though there were probably instances of differences in doctrinal interpretation. After all, this was a land where grace predominated. The differences can be seen as a reflection of climate and geography. Life could be hard in a climate that could sap your strength before the sun rose. Southerners loved God, but they had made their peace with Him. This truce consisted of agreeing not to make too many demands on each other. The LDS Church, however, has a way of demanding much of people. And in a small place like Little Utah, demands increase because the prescribed Church jobs remain constant regardless of the numbers available to fill them. But somehow those slow-speaking folks found ways to deflect many of the demands. They did it not because of a lack of testimony, but from, I think, a deep belief growing out of their solitude that worship and religious practice were inevitably private and personal.

Out of this view of worship grew a certain independence collectively reflected in their church buildings. In the rural South, the construction of a meeting place was a fairly simple affair. A group of like-minded believers would decide they needed a place of worship, and they would build one. They constructed a building in terms of the knowledge and monies available to them. Typically, those church buildings were simple, rectangular, one-room structures. No matter how plain, the buildings reflected the resources available to the congregation, but perhaps most important, a building reflected its congregation’s independence. They didn’t need anyone’s permission to build a church.

In 1886, my Baptist-professing great-grandfather became the pastor of a country church set deep in those Coastal Plains. The Jones Creek Baptist Church had been founded in 1810 when twenty-one men and women wrote and signed a “Church Covenant.” It reads in part:

We the inhabitants of the vicinity of Jones Creek . . . Do Covenant and agree in a Solemn Gospel engagement to give ourselves up to God and to one another to walk together in the fear of God and in Christian love one with another. . . .

They built a small meetinghouse that served them for several years until they outgrew it. “Hendley Foxworth Home, a member [of the congregation] . . . submitted a design for a large, box-like building and, after some deliberation, his plan was adopted.” Money was raised, and the building built. Its simple frame construction was much like the church building I call mine.

Little Utah’s history is similar. Those LDS converts wished to have a place to meet and worship. Just months after that January 1903 baptism, Morning Parker Davis’s son-in-law deeded two acres of his six-hundred-acre farm to the church for the construction of a building and a cemetery. The rustic building served as both church and school. When the building became too small, a new building was constructed on the site in 1918. Though still quite plain and simple, this newer building reflected the enlarged membership and increased resources. Still, it was a reflection of that community of Saints and their larger Southern context.

During the early 1950s, a friend’s family moved into a small rural Southern town. There was a small LDS branch there, and my friend’s father was called as branch president. One of his first acts was to release the sister who had served faithfully and
well for many years as branch clerk. My friend’s father served as branch president for only a short time before employment took him elsewhere. One of the first actions of the man who succeeded him (a long-time member of the branch) was to recall the sister as branch clerk.

This kind of independence is also illustrated by the experience of my friend’s father when he called the Church building department in Salt Lake seeking help regarding a problem with the building. “What building?” he was asked. “We don’t own a building in that place.”

“That may be,” he said, “but we meet in it every Sunday and have for years, and everybody in town thinks it belongs to the Mormon Church.” Apparently when the church was constructed, no one knew it should have been deeded over to the Church.

I relate these instances to suggest that LDS congregations were not in many respects different from their Protestant neighbors. What the Mormons and the Baptists of Jones Creek knew was that they needed a place to meet. They desired the association of like believers in their pursuit of salvation and a place in which that association could take place. They didn’t feel they needed anyone’s permission to build a meetinghouse. With that came a sense of ownership. It was their place of worship. In that context, both individuality and independence in worship and belief flourished.

This desire to join together with others in communal worship is obviously not confined to any one geographic region. People of like minds come together every day and establish meetinghouses where they can worship as they believe. It just doesn’t happen in the LDS Church any longer. That fact, I suspect, shapes our conception of the purpose of our church buildings and the nature of our worship there. But we at Little Utah were grounded in our religious life by a place.

RAY ELLIS, AN artist who has painted many scenes of the tidewater low country of Georgia and South Carolina, named one of his paintings, Morning Prayer. It depicts the interior of a Southern country church. There two women in their Sunday best, hats included, sit side by side in the otherwise empty building.

Embraced by the diffused early morning light, the women are dwarfed by the building. The place looms about them with its unadorned, handcrafted simplicity. Yet their presence brings life to the painting, just as the building gives life to them. They worship and are the embodiment of worship in a place of worship. They and the building have separate biographies, yet their stories converge, just as my story merges with that of Little Utah.

Morning Prayer opens a window into those intersecting stories. It does this in part because of what Ellis did not include in his painting. He did not paint that portion of the building where the pulpit is located. He painted the part where the people congregate, the pews and the potbelly stove at the rear of the building.

I can’t say what Ellis had in mind, but I believe that by both the title, Morning Prayer, and the absence of the pulpit, he is saying that there is nothing, or no one, between the two women and God. They are in their sacred place petitioning the Lord in the purest and simplest way. It is primal individual worship, with hints of community.

There is, of course, a larger congregation of which the women are a part. Each member of the congregation voluntarily comes together in individual pursuit of the sacred but believing they will benefit individually by sharing collectively. The church as a building and institution exists for the congregation, not the other way around. The church is not that which is worshiped, though it may be loved. The function of the church is to facilitate the individual’s pursuit of salvation.

There should never be confusion between the individual’s primary role and the church’s supporting role.

I came to love the unique, little white frame building that was distinctly ours. The building meant more to me than a place to attend meetings or be instructed in how to live the
Mormon life. The building was the embodiment of my belief, implanted there, that my spiritual growth was my individual domain, though I could join with others in a collective effort to know and understand God and his plan of salvation. My individual responsibility for spiritual growth, for knowing God’s will for me, could never be subjugated or abdicated to a group, or an institution, or another person. The flow of my church cultivated a current of belief that our worship was defined by ourselves.

In those days at Little Utah, Church headquarters and leaders were far away, and consequently the influence Church leaders exerted was different in the South than in the West. The president and prophet was held in high esteem, and the concept of twelve apostles served to underpin the truthfulness of the Church. But the persons of the twelve apostles played a less important role, with the exception of LeGrand Richards and Charles A. Callis, who were both past presidents of the Southern States Mission.

Another difference resulting from distance was found in attitudes about temple participation. Temple marriage was perceived to be of value, but few managed it. Couples who went to the temple did so generally later in life, and it was a one-time trip. When possible, the children were also sealed then, but that didn’t always happen.

The membership of the ward was interesting. In almost every case, one spouse in each couple was a convert. Marrying outside the Church was the pattern, and it reflected not so much a lack of testimony as the way geography and the larger Southern culture negated aspects of the Mormon belief system. That is, for the most part, we were farmers and sons and daughters of farmers. Farm life and the community growing out of it had its own way of forming relationships that transcended the marriage guidelines that came from Utah headquarters.

The absence of temples also meant an absence of annual temple recommend interviews with the bishop and stake president. Consequently, and significantly, there was less emphasis upon allegiance to Church leaders and Church procedures than there is today. Although we sustained the Church leaders at stake conferences (at least those did who made the two-hundred-mile roundtrip to attend), they were removed from our lives. Somehow, I believe, we thought we determined our needs and how to meet them. I am not sure we would have understood the reasoning behind having everything programmed in Salt Lake. The Church in the South was perceived as a vehicle, a tool and implement, less defining and demanding than it appears today. The focus was upon, to use scriptural phrases, “trusting in the Lord,” “relying upon the Lord,” “walking with the Lord.” The heart of the matter was what existed between the individual and God.

And the stories we told were different from those told in the center stakes. As youngsters, we heard stories of human nature in the context of hunting, fishing, and farming. We didn’t hear stories about ancestors crossing the plains, since there were none. There were no stories of Uncle Heber or Uncle Golden. Nor were there stories about missions, since none had served missions. The only Church stories we heard, and they became increasingly frequent as I grew older, were those in Sunday School and priesthood manuals. We may have heard a few stories about Morning Parker Davis and her descendants and some of the other early Coastal Plains saints, but somehow they were squeezed out over time, replaced by the larger stories blessed by headquarters.

WHEN A PLACE IS NOT A PLACE

I GRADUATED FROM high school and went away to college in the West. Mormon churches stood on every corner, but none of them looked like mine. I went on a mission, returned home, resumed college, graduated, and went to graduate school in the Midwest. Somewhere in all of this, I realized that once you had seen one LDS church, you had seen them all. I began to wonder how someone could develop any feelings at all for his or her place of worship when it looked like every other place of worship. Where was the attachment?

At the same time, Main Street U.S.A. was becoming increasingly standardized. In every town of any size, there are streets that are copies of each other. There are the franchise eateries and chain-store businesses. Look-alikes, they are the streets where you can be lost and at the same time be on familiar territory. They are the streets where you can walk into a store and realize that you could be any place in the country, and now the world. The Israeli geographer David Newman calls it the “McDonaldization of the world’s landscape.”

What do these places offer us? They give us the comfortable assurance that there will be no surprises. The products we receive will vary little no matter where we are. So when we travel cross-country and see the familiar sign of a fast food establishment, we already know both the menu and the taste. We are comforted, but there are no risks. And there will never be intimacy with place. We may love Burger King, but there will never be “our” Burger King to love, “our” Taco Bell that will become the subject of memories and stories. With these changes, we have lost part of what makes our identity.

The Church seems to have traveled a road similar to that of Main Street U.S.A. Both the Church and corporate America have decided they prefer identical-looking buildings. These serve the purpose of being easily recognized no matter where one is. And of course, having standardized buildings is economical, saving time and money. For the Church, it eliminates the potential problem of a local congregation that might get out of hand with its building. This program eliminates the problem of the haves building elaborate showpieces and not welcoming the have-nots to participate, as apparently happened in the Book of Mormon. Unfortunately, the program also results in people feeling detached from their place of worship just as people feel detached from fast food eateries.

Another similarity between the Church and corporate America is management strategies. In the world of chain store businesses, planning is done at the corporate office by the major officers. Products are selected at that level, and they vary
very little from store to store. Few decisions need to be made at the store level. There, the manager makes sure there is sufficient inventory of the centrally approved merchandise and that there are enough employees to distribute the product. Store-level work tends to be routine and consists of following directions. If everyone follows the guidelines from headquarters, the store should be successful, that is, profitable.

In the case of the Church, all lessons, meetings, and programs are planned or outlined in Salt Lake City. Stake- and ward-level leaders implement the programs with little freedom to vary from them. Bishops and stake presidents make few decisions beyond staffing the programs and holding the specified meetings within the specified time format. They essentially manage a corporate-owned store. Certainly bishops and stake presidents provide spiritual succor to the members. Their congregants are regularly inspired and encouraged through individual counseling. Still, leaders’ work and the kinds of direction they give generally follow the guidelines of a framework generated elsewhere. And the organization fosters a sense that the “success” of local units can be measured by statistics that function in much the same way as do production quotas.

So we attend meetings in our respective congregations where the format is the same. In sacrament meeting, the speakers have usually been assigned their topics. We have recycled lessons in our various classes. And we do all of this in meetinghouses that all look essentially alike. Not only do our buildings look alike and our services follow the same pattern, but so do the members. We look alike and dress alike and talk alike in almost every way. There is little diversity among those who regularly attend LDS meetings. Those who are different most often conform or drift away. We are institutionalized, and if the program doesn’t fit, the individual or congregation needs to change. We have reached a point where we have very little voice in our church activity, let alone ownership.

To be sure, we are encouraged to be close to the Lord, so he can guide us in our personal lives and church assignments. But because of the repeated admonition that one should never seek a position or calling in the Church, along with the directive that one should never turn down an assignment or calling, we have effectively curtailed personal inspiration. We have made inspiration the purview of someone else in that large area of our lives that is under the umbrella of the Church. Upon reflection, it seems quite strange that we have effectively prohibited the Lord from revealing to the individual where he or she is to serve.

In making these claims, I am not saying that Mormonism is the only tradition that has been influenced by the corporate model. Wendell Berry, who has written so much from his farm in Kentucky about place and community, says most modern churches look like they were built by robots without reference to the heritage of church architecture or respect for place. Modern Christianity has become as specialized in its organizations as other modern organizations, wholly concentrated on the individual shibboleths of “growth,” counting its success in numbers, and on the very strange enterprise of “saving” the individual, isolated, and disembodied soul. Certainly, not all churches, not even all LDS buildings, fall under Berry’s indictment. In recent years, I have had occasion to attend two different Protestant churches. I was struck by the contrasts I felt and saw with what I presently experience and have experienced in nearly all LDS meetinghouses I’ve attended since leaving Little Utah. In the first building, I attended a wedding and later a funeral. Both times, I was moved by the simple beauty of their worship area, what is often called the
sanctuary. It came from the simplicity and naturalness of the setting. Its design allowed the beauty of a wooded lot to be seen through large, plate glass windows, without the distraction of nearby busy streets. In addition, natural light flooded the room, making it, I felt, a wonderful place in which to pray, sing hymns, study the scriptures, and, yes, even to say farewell to a cherished friend.

In contrast, the chapel of my ward building has no windows and is lighted artificially. It seems to me now dark and confining. Putting doctrine aside, the chapel in my meeting-house does not facilitate the joy of worship or the restoration of one's soul, as did the Protestant church I just mentioned.

Later, my wife and I attended a community-sponsored workshop at another local church. This building was not elaborate and was, in fact, a metal prefab. But the story the interior told was that it was home to an involved congregation. The members clearly perceived that the building was more than a place to simply attend meetings to receive instruction on one's duties and responsibilities. This place seemed to be a center for the here and now as well as for hope in the future. There were tables with pamphlets and flyers about community activities that might interest the members. The walls contained artwork by one of the members. And the classrooms and corridors were full of the drawings and thoughts of the children. It reminded me of the refrigerator door of families with young children. It all verged on clutter, but it wasn't distracting. It looked lived in. I mentioned to my wife that this building looks used and enjoyed, whereas our tradition's philosophy seems to be to make our buildings look as though we have not yet moved in.

UNSETTLED CONCLUSIONS

I MAY SEEM to have come down pretty hard on the standardization of the Church or, to paraphrase Newman, the McDonaldization of the Church's landscape. Newman also states that “a globalized world is not a multicultural world. It is one in which uniform standards are imposed by a small elite upon the rest, normally for their own economic benefit.”

None of us would accuse the Church leaders of establishing such a strong, centralized Church government for personal economic gain, or even for personal gratification. But we might rightly ask how it has occurred. Or why. It is fair to ask what was gained. Of several reasons as to how it might have occurred, I will mention two.

The first, of course, is that the Lord revealed it to the prophet. Obviously, if I thought that, I would not be writing this essay. But being the well-trained Mormon I am, I might well give that answer if the question came up during a priesthood class. However, I am not aware of any revelation or set of revelations that would lead to the level of organizational specificity and centralization we have today. (As an aside, such revelations would not require pilot programs.) I don't have any real evidence for why I don't think there are one or more revelations that suggest the level of standardization we see in the Church. So with one final observation, I will simply move on to what I see as the main reason this might have occurred: most General Authorities come from corporate or management backgrounds.

I think the most likely reason the Church has become comfortable in its standardization has to do with what I have heard referred to as a “gospel culture.” The proof text might be Paul's statement in Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Those arguing for standardization might extol the beauty of the idea that as we become one in Christ, we are freed from the limitations of local and regional cultures. And the evidence of our success in moderating diversity is the fact that a church of so many millions apparently needs only one international magazine to promote the gospel culture around the globe—outside the English-speaking world, that is.

In a practical sense, the gospel culture prescribes acceptable behavior for Church members, making it easy for them to fit in, no matter where they go. A family can move from one part of the country to another and never be strangers in their relationship to the Church. All they need to do is identify the ward whose boundaries their new residence falls within, attend that first Sunday, and they are home. They are no more strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints. That is a remarkable organizational achievement and certainly a benefit. The next step is for the family to patiently wait for the Lord to reveal to the bishop in what capacity they are to serve. That, too, is a powerful organizational concept that contributes to operational orderliness.

I believe there is a gospel culture, and it is related to being one in Christ. I can't imagine a higher aspiration than yearning for that unity. Nor could anything be more fulfilling than a brotherhood and sisterhood, no matter our other differences, sharing that yearning. But operational orderliness is not necessarily indicative of a gospel culture centered in Christ. I wonder even with the numerous benefits of homogenization if we are curtailing what the Apostle Paul calls “the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:10). I am afraid that too many of us experience church rather than the deep spiritual things, in the same sense that Wendell Berry writes of experiencing the freeway rather than the landscape.

[I was] hardly aware of the country I was passing through, because on the freeway one does not have to be. The landscape has been so subdued so that one may drive over it at seventy miles per hour without any concession whatsoever to one's whereabouts. One might as well be flying. Though one is in Kentucky one is not experiencing Kentucky; one is experiencing the highway, which might be in nearly any hill country east of the Mississippi.

Similarly, in church, we will receive the same fare in nearly any meeting in any state of the union. Why do we think that a group of professional women on the Wasatch Front needs the same Relief Society lesson as a group of farm wives on the banks of the Satilla River? How can we experience God when everything is already worked out for us? Even the young
people sixteen and seventeen years of age, as I discovered from teaching Sunday School, are persuaded that all of the answers are already given. They may not have the answers themselves, but they are convinced that the bishop or the prophet has them, and should they, the youth, ever need or want the answer to a troublesome question, it can be readily obtained. Or if an answer is not forthcoming, it is because it isn't needed. As one of my Sunday School scholars said when I asked if they ever wondered about their standing with the Lord, “It crosses my mind, but I figure that as long as I am worthy to receive a temple recommend, I am OK.” That came from a young man heavily recruited by BYU for an academic scholarship.

Are we truly secure in a transcendent gospel culture, or are we edging closer and closer to not knowing where we are, or perhaps who we are? In response, I hear a voice declaring that the Church and the members are faring quite well, thank you very much. But I am not personally reassured. I am even less reassured when I think of the lines from the second verse of our hymn “The Wintry Day”:

I cannot go to rest, but linger still
In meditation at my windowsill,
While, like the twinkling stars in heaven’s dome,
Come one by one sweet memories of home.
And wouldst thou ask me where my fancy roves
To reproduce the happy scenes it loves...?

I do not know what scenes of home, what happy memories the youth of today will reproduce when they reach my age. They most likely will not have a Church home place as I do.

WHAT IS THE final chapter of Little Utah’s biography? The building was sold several years ago to another denomination, and it was moved to another site. The LDS congregation moved to a new standard-issue building in town. There they do all they can to accomplish the tasks that others set for them. The meeting place in town is not called Little Utah, but the Pearson Ward. Little Utah Church was never a little Utah; however, the church in town is more Utah in culture than Southern, drawl aside, and could easily be known as a little Utah, as could the other wards of the stake.

At the old site where the country church sat, a monument has been erected in memory of those early members who raised the money and built the church as a home for their fledgling religious community. It is fitting, I think, that the monument was conceived, financed, and erected by descendants of those early members. It is disconcerting that no such monument was conceived, financed, and erected by descendants of those early members. It is fitting, I think, that the youth who today will reproduce when they reach my age. They most likely will not have a Church home place as I do.

NOTES

5. Ibid., 6.

IN THE DARK, THE WORLD ENDS AT THE WINDSHIELD

The Atlas is under my foot. The wheels rotate silently. His voice slithers lazily over me, drowsy hands pampering the wheel. You understand? Silence. Do you understand that I might lose control and hurt you if you don’t learn to respect me? Yes. I know my body has finally come around since the days when nightmares paralyzed me; fear rocketed up my legs. We pass the corner where the kid threw me on the ground and twisted my arm behind my back as I returned home from school. My friends scattered in all directions. I didn’t cry until they looked back afterwards, saw me, and kept going. So it is not that I am unaware I do not deserve to live, rather I calculate that my father cannot hurt me now. He has to drive the car, and I am expected at my friend’s house soon. We only live three blocks apart, but who knows what could happen in this world, what with it being dark. I almost grin, like Hansel when he first foiled his parents into loving him, and away I am, three blocks apart, but who knows what could happen in this world, what with it being dark. I almost grin, like Hansel when he first foiled his parents into loving him, and away I am, outside in the perilous night and ringing the doorbell. Inside, I tell the story to my friend, who can’t ring the doorbell. Inside, I tell the story to my friend, who can’t ring the doorbell. Inside, I tell the story to my friend, who can’t ring the doorbell. Inside, I tell the story to my friend, who can’t believe it. Then he smiles. I can break the cycle, he suggests, inspired, but I look down, shaking my head silently from side to side. I know I do not possess the power to give life. We head down to the basement. The Indy Circuit is always ready for new drivers to explode onto the scene, and who can tell when we will become champions?

—MICHAEL COLLINS
BOOK OF MORMON studies are at a crossroads, and the issues and debates are becoming more public, reaching new ears both outside and inside Mormonism. With the recent publicity over DNA studies that have confirmed long-held scientific notions that Amerindians descend from Asian—not Middle Eastern—peoples, those who hadn’t already been thinking about the Book of Mormon’s claim to be a literal history of the indigenous peoples of the Americas have begun to pay attention. The news has spread like wildfire among various Christian groups eager to win the souls of potentially disillusioned Latter-day Saints. More important, perhaps, is the questions produced by these studies have also begun to reach Latter-day Saints in the pews.

In the wake of this new attention, LDS scholars, particularly those at FARMS and BYU, have scrambled to educate lay Latter-day Saints on where Book of Mormon studies currently stand. For the past twenty-five years or so, believing Book of Mormon theorists have been steadily attempting to work out the details of a new paradigm for the Book of Mormon—one that shifts Book of Mormon events from a full-hemispheric to a limited-geography model. In other words, instead of Book of Mormon events taking place in North America (the land northward), South America (the land southward) and Central America (with the Isthmus of Panama being the “narrow neck of land”) as had traditionally been envisioned, scholars now suggest the Book of Mormon took place in a relatively small locale in Mesoamerica. These scholars have vigorously refuted suggestions that the DNA findings constitute a dilemma for believers in the Book of Mormon, citing their own work pointing to new populations of Native Americans. Implicitly, Metcalfe poses the challenging question, “Is the tail wagging the dog?” in current Book of Mormon studies. Are these LDS apologists, rather than Church leaders, creating new doctrine, and, if so, by what right?

In the second essay, Latter-day Saint scientist Trent D. Stephens helps clarify some of the issues surrounding the DNA findings. More importantly, he also weighs various practical approaches to science-versus-religion questions, ultimately arguing there is still an important place for faith.

The final two articles, by chemist Ralph A. Olsen and psychiatrist C. Jess Groesbeck, differ from the others by offering alternate framings for the Book of Mormon. Olsen’s proposal, although startling in many ways, may nevertheless hold a certain appeal for readers who believe the Book of Mormon to be literal history. Exhausted from trying to reconcile inconsistencies between Book of Mormon accounts and the favored Mesoamerican settings for the book’s events, Olsen proposes an alternative that he believes accommodates all the textual and logical requirements for Book of Mormon lands: the Malay Peninsula!

Deeply influenced by Jungian psychology with its ideas about archetypal patterns in human experience, and by his own lifelong interest in shamanism and ancient healing practices, Groesbeck advances a grand theory of the Book of Mormon as “symbolic history.” In dialogue with historians of religion and students of mythic structures, Groesbeck’s article lays the groundwork for understanding the Book of Mormon as powerful and true in the most important ways while explaining the limitations facing all approaches that attempt to fix the Book of Mormon to any literal historical or social setting.
Are apologetic theories of Lamanite identity consistent with the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic legacy?

REINVENTING LAMANITE IDENTITY

By Brent Lee Metcalfe

I find every Sect, as far as Reason will help them, make use of it gladly: and where it fails them, they cry out, ’Tis matter of Faith, and above Reason.1

—JOHN LOCKE

We are witnessing the reinvention of the Book of Mormon—not by skeptical critics, but by believing apologists. Most Mormons likely believe what the Book of Mormon introduction teaches—that “the Lamanites...are the principal ancestors of the American Indians.”2 They hold this belief oblivious to the fact that over the last few decades LDS scholars at Brigham Young University and elsewhere have substantially altered this traditional view.

Findings from multidisciplinary studies of the Book of Mormon have increasingly led LDS scholars to shrink and dilute the book’s American Israelite (or Amerisraelite) population. Apologetic scholars now recognize (1) that Book of Mormon events could not have spanned North, Central, and South America, and (2) that modern Amerindians are predominately of East Asian ancestry. Confirmation of both acknowledgments is found in DNA analyses that establish an Asian, not Middle Eastern, genetic signature for the overwhelming majority of Amerindians.3 As BYU geneticist Michael Whiting stipulates, a hemispheric colonization model for the Book of Mormon “is indeed incorrect” and “appears falsified by current genetic evidence.”4

Many LDS apologists envision the Book of Mormon’s founding Israelite colonists as a small group who interacted in varying degrees with the vast indigenous populations of Mesoamerica. In time, sustained widespread exogamy with these “others” effectively extinguished the Israelites’ unique Middle Eastern genetic signature. Accordingly, Lamanites and Nephites are defined by something other than Israelite ancestry. Such theories turn traditional understandings of Book of Mormon lands and peoples, including Joseph Smith’s revelations, on their head.

While perhaps affording revisionist Book of Mormon studies a veneer of scientific respectability, these apologetic efforts to reinvent Lamanite identity face some formidable challenges, a few of which follow.

CHALLENGES FROM CRITICAL READING

Where can Book of Mormon readers find the throngs of indigenous “others” who revisionist scholars claim intermingled with the Jaredite and Amerisraelite societies? Those who uncover “others” lurking in the narrative often perceive them buried in subtle, or even problematic, rhetorical nuances. Hugh Nibley and John Sorenson, for example, discover non-Israelite “others” in a prayer offered by Alma on behalf of the Zoramites: “O Lord, their souls are precious, and many of them are our brethren” (Alma 31:35, emphasis added). Nibley and Sorenson read “many” (i.e., not all) as an indication of “other [non-Israelite] things going on”5 and “ethnic variety.”6 Despite its appeal, Nibley and Sorenson’s interpretation is unsound.

A slightly different, yet significant, rendition of this prayer is preserved in the Book of Mormon original manuscript, print-
er’s manuscript,7 and 1830 edition: “. . . and many of them are our near brethren.”8 In other words, “many”—but not all—of the Zoramites are close relatives of Alma and some of his companions.9 Amulek employs the same usage in his recollection, “As I was journeying to see a very near kindred . . .”10 A rigorous evaluation of Alma’s supplication provides no evidence for an awareness of non-Israelite “others” in the promised land during the Nephite reign.

Indeed, a careful reading of the Book of Mormon reveals that the narrative says nothing of indigenous “others” and in fact prophetically precludes them. After their arrival in the Americas but before they divide into competing factions, Lehi delivers a divine promise about the Israelite immigrants: And behold, it is wisdom that this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations; for behold, many nations would overrun the land, that there would be no place for an inheritance. Wherefore, I, Lehi, have obtained a promise, that inasmuch as those whom the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves . . . and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance; and they shall dwell safely forever.11

Other non-Israelite nations would eventually come, but even then God must “bring” them because, in harmony with God’s pledge to Lehi, they know nothing of the promised land much less inhabit it: “But behold, when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief . . . [y]ea, he will bring other nations unto them, and he will give unto them power, and he will take away from them the lands of their possessions, and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten” (2 Ne. 1:10–11, emphasis added).

Prophecies by his son Nephi anticipate Lehi’s prophetic promise. Nephi sees in an eschatological vision “many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise” and “the seed of [his] brethren; and they were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten.”12 The Amerisraelite promised land is expansive, encompassing North American venues for the arrival of British and European settlers, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the construction of the New Jerusalem.13 Other Nephite prophets and even the risen Book of Mormon Christ reaffirm that the latter-day American remnant of Israel would be scattered and smitten by future Gentile colonists.14

When ancestry is identified, all post-Jaredite peoples—Nephites and non-Nephites, good and bad, groups and individuals—consistently trace their pedigree back to the founding Israelite immigrants. Ammon, for instance, says that he is “a descendant of Zarahemla” (Mosiah 7:13; see also v. 3) who “was a descendant of Mulek, and those who came with him into the wilderness” (Mosiah 25:2), and Mulek was “the son of Zedekiah” the Jewish king (Hel. 6:10; cf. Omni 1:15). Nephite dissident Coriantumr “was [also] a descendant of Zarahemla” (Hel. 1:15).

Alma is “a descendant of Nephi” (Mosiah 17:2), and the Nephite kingdom is conferred only on “those who were descendants of Nephi” (Mosiah 25:13). Amulek touts his Israelite heritage: “I am Amulek; I am the son of Giddonah, who was the son of Ishmael, who was a descendant of Aminadab . . . And Aminadab was a descendant of Nephi, who was the son of Lehi, who came out of the land of Jerusalem, who was a descendant of Manasseh, who was the son of Joseph who was sold into Egypt” (Alma 10:2–3). Mormon proclaims himself “a pure descendant of Lehi” (3 Ne. 5:20) via Nephi (Morm. 1:5), a fact proudly reiterated by Moroni: “I am the son of Mormon, and my father was a descendant of Nephi” (Morm. 8:13).

Lamanite king Lamoni, readers learn, is “a descendant of Ishmael” (Alma 17:21; cf. v. 19). Centuries after the Lehiites disembark on their new promised land, a group of Lamanites “who joined the people of the Lord” did not include Nephite dissenters “but they were actual descendants of Laman and Lemuel” (Alma 24:29). The two thousand stripling warriors are “descendants of Laman, who was the eldest son of our father Lehi” (Alma 56:3).

Lamanite doesn’t necessarily refer to a descendant of Laman, nor Nephi to a descendant of Nephi—but they are universally described by Book of Mormon narrators as Israelite. To distinguish between those “who are friendly to Nephi” and those who “seek to destroy the people of Nephi,” Jacob labels the two competing factions “Nephites” and “Lamanites” respectively (Jacob 1:13–14). Jacob explicitly states that Lamanites and Nephites consisted of familial groupings bearing the names of Israelites introduced in 1 Nephi.15 By Jacob’s definition, a Lamanite is someone who sought “to destroy the people of Nephi” (Jacob 1:14), a view similar to Nephi’s (2 Ne. 5:14).

Yet Lamanite isn’t merely an exonym used by Nephites to generically reference outsiders. It is an ancestral insignia that its bearers wear with honor. In a letter to Moroni, chief captain of the Nephite military, king Ammoron proclaims: “I am a bold Lamanite” (Alma 54:24), “a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem” (v. 23). Ammoron’s purpose in waging war on the Nephites is to avenge such familial injustices (v. 24; cf. Alma 20:13).

Book of Mormon readers are repeatedly told that the Lamanites are descendants of the founding Israelites. For instance, the narrator says that “the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers” who rebelled against “Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph, and Sam” (Alma 3:6, emphasis added). Readers also learn of a “land which was called by the Lamanites, Jerusalem, calling it after the land of their fathers’ nativity” (Alma 21:1, emphasis added).

Moreover, Nephites don’t label as Lamanite every non-Nephite they find. Amaleki, for instance, details Mosiah’s discovery of “a people, who were called the people of Zarahemla,” not Lamanites (Omni 1:14). Consistent with Lehi’s prophetic promise (2 Ne. 1:9, and passim), these people “came out from Jerusalem . . . brought by the hand of the Lord” (Omni 1:15–16). Amaleki adds that “their language had become corrupted” so that neither Mosiah, nor the people of Mosiah, could understand them.”16 This is a clear example of a Nephite
encounter with a foreign group of “others”—not considered Lamanite or Nephite—but Israelite nevertheless.

Book of Mormon readers are not told of a single Nephite or Lamanite who descended from anyone other than an Israelite. Some scholars have tried to mitigate this anomaly by suggesting that indigenous peoples became Israelite through “adoption” into the Abrahamic covenant or that the Nephite “ancestry” is so ethnocentric that it obscures non-Israelite denizens. Such suggestions, however, have no real explanatory power since both the Amerisraelites and the pre-Israelite Jaredites fail to mention indigenous “others,” and the Amerisraelite narrators exhibit no difficulty recognizing the Jaredites as non-Israelites who formerly inhabited the promised land.

Book of Mormon narrators are well aware of global diversity. Both Gentiles and other Israelites are said to inhabit distant lands across “large,” “many,” or “great waters” (1 Ne., preambles; 13:10ff; 17:5; Omni 1:16), and the Ten Tribes are off in yet another region. In the Book of Mormon, these are distinct and distinguishable groups who await their latter-day gatherings to their respective lands of inheritance. This is one reason the Book of Mormon’s failure to mention indigenous non-Israelite populations who lived concurrently with the Nephite reign is so problematic. The Book of Mormon tells of non-Israelites inhabiting the promised land and interacting with the Amerisraelites, but these are always the latter-day Gentiles whom God must “bring.”

CHALLENGES FROM PROPHETIC AUTHORITY

Joseph Smith, The Book of Mormon translator, effectively eviscerates the apologetic reinvention of the Jaredite/Amerisraelite story. Smith plainly taught that the Book of Mormon recounts the origin of modern Amerindians who anciently populated the Western Hemisphere.

In response, apologists emphasize not only that prophets are fallible but also that Smith expressed or authorized divergent opinions about the Book of Mormon setting and peoples. Despite his theological evolution, Smith unfurled his tale of Mormonism’s foundational text with considerable consistency. In 1833, he wrote newspaper editor N. C. Saxton that “[t]he Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western Tribes of Indians . . . By it we learn that our western tribes of Indians are descendants from that Joseph that was sold into Egypt, and that the Land of America is a promised land unto them, and unto it all the tribes of Israel will come.”

But Smith didn’t stop there. He often claimed divine sanction for his interpretations, appealing to the same revelatory source by which he had dictated the Book of Mormon. For example, when Saxton failed to print Smith’s 1833 letter in toto, Joseph replied: “I was somewhat disappointed on receiving my paper with only a part of my letter inserted in it. The letter which I wrote you for publication I wrote by the commandment of God, and I am quite anxious to have it all laid before the public for it is of importance to them.”

In Smith’s canonical revelations, God identifies Amerindians as “Lamanites,” a remnant of “the Jew.” God’s edicts provide the impetus for the first mission to the Lamanites, or as Oliver Cowdery dubbed them: “the delawre Nation of Lamanites.” God even confirms that no other nations inhabited the promised land during the Nephite occupation:

Yea, and this was their [i.e., Nephite prophets and disciples] faith—that my gospel, which I gave unto them that they might preach in their days, might come unto their brethren the Lamanites, and also all that had become Lamanites because of their dissensions. Now, this is not all—their faith in their prayers was that this gospel should be made known also, if it were possible that other nations should possess this land; And thus they did leave a blessing upon this land in their prayers, that whosoever should believe in this gospel in this land might have eternal life; Yea, that it might be free unto all of whatsoever nation, kindred, tongue, or people they may be.

Smith also delivered extracanonical revelations about Amerindian identity and origins. On 3 June 1834, Smith and a few Zion’s Camp recruits disinterred a skeleton from an earthen mound. Among other things, Smith said the bones were the remains of a “white Lamanite” named Zelph, a warrior under the prophet Onandagus. Wilford Woodruff later gave his eyewitness testimony that Smith received Zelph’s biographical sketch “in a vision.”

Word of Smith’s Zelph revelation soon began to circulate among non-Mormons. In November 1834, Eber D. Howe published an important account of the Zelph episode:

A large mound was one day discovered, upon which Gen. Smith ordered an excavation to be made into it; and about one foot from the top of the ground, the bones of a human skeleton were found, which were carefully laid out upon a board, when Smith made a speech, prophesying or declaring that they were the remains of a celebrated General among the Nephites, mentioning his name and the battle in which he was slain, some 1500 years ago. This was undoubtedly done to encourage the troops to deeds of daring, when they should meet the Missourians in battle array.

Howe’s recital involving Nephites is corroborated by Joseph Smith himself, who provided the context in which he received his vision. In a missive to his wife, Emma, on 4 June 1834—the day after Zelph’s disinterment and the attending vision—Smith depicts his troops as “wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionally the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as a proof of its divine authenticity.” Zelph, a white Lamanite, was grandly positioned against this grisly yet awesome Nephite backdrop.

Throughout his prophetic tenure, Smith insisted that he first learned about the gold plates from an angel on the autumnal equinox of 1823. Mormon tradition usually identifies the angel as Moroni, a Nephite author and redactor. In 1835,
Smith related that the angel said “the Indians were the literal descendants of Abraham.” Smith later explained that according to the angel the metallic record gave “an account of the former inhabitants of this continent and the source from whence they sprung.”

In 1842, Smith added that during his 1823 vision of Moroni he “was informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country; and shown who they were, and from whence they came,” including “a brief sketch of their origin, progress,” and so on. Armed with this insight, Smith “was also told” by the angel “where there was deposited some plates on which were engraved an abridgment of the records of the ancient prophets that had existed on this continent.” The persistent angel appeared to Smith three times that night, “unfolding the same things” each time. Smith was clear: the Israelite “remnant are the Indians that now inhabit this country.”

According to his own testimony, Joseph Smith knew, based on God’s revelations, that the Amerindians were of Israelite origin and that Nephites anciently roamed the Illinois River Valley.

GALILEO WHISPERS

In 1845, THE publication of Proclamation of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ, of Latter-day Saints codified Joseph Smith’s understanding of Amerindian origins. Following Smith’s martyrdom and before the formation of a new First Presidency, the governing Twelve Apostles, three of whom would later become Joseph’s successors, explicitly endorsed a global proclamation entreat ing the United States government to continue to gather together, and to colonize the tribes and remnants of Israel (the Indians), and also to feed, clothe, succor, and protect them, and endeavor to civilize and unite; and also to bring them to the knowledge of their Israelitish origin, and of the fulness of the gospel which was revealed to, and written by, their forefathers on this land; the record of which has now come to light.

The apostolic body further decreed: “[God] has revealed the origin and the Records of the aboriginal tribes of America, and their future destiny.—And we know it.”

Smith’s successors, from Brigham Young to Gordon B. Hinckley, have buttressed his view of the Book of Mormon as an etiological saga of ancient America. And the tradition continues. In a recent Ensign article, LDS convert Hugo Miza tells of “a special connection between the Book of Mormon and [his Mayan] tribe.” Miza reflects, “I felt the Book of Mormon explained where our Cakchiquel tribe came from and who our ancestors were.”

Clearly, not all believers have been persuaded by, or are even familiar with, apologetic efforts to reinvent Lamanite identity. Scriptural literalists may revolt, castigating revisionists who reframe traditional Book of Mormon geography and Lamanite ancestry as wolves in sheeps clothing. Some devout members may choose to follow in the footsteps of more liberal biblical scholars who maintain, “Even if it didn’t happen, it’s a true story.” Still others, though appreciative of Smith’s aptitude for crafting sacred literature, will conclude that the Book of Mormon is neither ancient nor divine.

Whatever the outcome, apologetic scholars have an arduous task ahead of them. They have yet to explain cogently why all Book of Mormon characters—God included—seemingly know nothing about the hordes of indigenous peoples that the revisionist theories require; why Joseph Smith’s revelation of the Book of Mormon is trustworthy enough to extract a detailed limited geography, yet his revelations about Amerindian identity and origins are flawed, if not erroneous; and why their word should count more than that of LDS prophets on the one hand, and that of secular scholars on the other.

Sooner rather than later, history will reveal whether the apologetic reinvention of the Book of Mormon is a warrant for faith or merely another artifact of humanity’s irrepressible will to believe. Or perhaps a fresh, reinvented faith will emerge in the wake.

NOTES


7. I am indebted to Van E. Hale for alerting me to this variant in the printer’s manuscript.

8. Alma chapter XVI, p. 313 (1830 edition). Royal Skousen renders the original manuscript, “& many of them are our [re/T/e/s]in near Breth [re/thit]” (Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon—Typographical Facsimile of the Exact Text* [Provo: FARMS, 2001], 297, virgin line break added), and the printer’s manuscript, “& many of them are our near brethren” (Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Part Two, Alma 17–Mormon 10—Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts* [Provo: FARMS, 2001], 553); “near” is absent in the 1837 edition Book of Mormon.


10. Alma 10:7, emphasis added. This usage of near also appears in the KJV (see Lev 18:6, 12–13; 20:19, 21; 2 Ruth 2:20, 3; 12; 2 Sam. 19:42).


12. 1 Ne. 13:14, emphasis added; see also v. 34; 15:13–17; 22:7–8.


14. 2 Ne. 10:18; 26:15, 19; 3 Ne. 16:7–9, 20:27–28, 21:2; Morm. 5:9, 15, 19–20. In his treatment of Lehi’s prophetic promise, Matthew Roper neglects this eschatological context of Amerisraelites being scattered and smitten by Gentiles (Matthew Roper, “Nephis’ Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-

27. Wilford Woodruff, Journal, [3 June 1834], LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City; see also Susan Staker, ed., Waiting for World's End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 4. Woodruff's journal was combined with Heber C. Kimball to form the 3 June 1834 entry in the History of the Church (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 2:79–80. Like Woodruff, Kimball also observed that “Brother Joseph had enquered of the Lord” about Zelph's identity “and it was made known in a vision” (Heber C. Kimball, “Extracts from H. C. Kimball’s Journal,” Times and Seasons 6, no. 2 [1 June 1843]: 788). Woodruff recounted Smith's Zelph vision several times throughout his life. Ruben McBride penned a similar eyewitness account—so similar that in some instances his recollection of Smith's language is identical to Woodruff's (Ruben McBride, Sr., Journal, 3 June 1834, pp. 3–4, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City).


29. Joseph Smith to I. Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844, (Joseph Smith to I. Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844, underline emphasis in the original, (Woodruff, Journal, [3 June] 1834, emphasis added; Woodruff may have won-1842): 707 (a.k.a. the Wentworth Letter); see also Jessee, Personal Writings (2002), DVD 1; see also Joseph Smith—History 1:34; Jessee, Personal Writings (2002), DVD 20; see also Jessee, Personal Writings (2002), 105; Dan Vogel, ed., Early Mormon Documents (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:44.


31. Joseph Smith, Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, p. 5, dictated c. 1838–39, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, available on Selected Collections (2002), DVD 1; see also Jessee, History 1:34, Jessee, Personal Writings (2002), 234; Vogel, Mormon Documents (1996), 1:64. Roper's anecdote involving the "origin" of his Whetney ancestry is analogous since Smith claimed to know the origin of what he all-inclusively called "the Indians that now inhabit this country," the former inhabitants of this continent, our western Tribes of Indians, and the aboriginal inhabitants of this country—not merely the origin of one familial branch in the vast pedigree of Native Americans (see Roper, “Nephis’ Neighbors” [2003], 95). See also Jessee, Personal Writings (2002), 243–44, Vogel, Mormon Documents (1996), 1:70–71. Smith composed this sketch of Mormon beginnings for John Wentworth, editor and owner of the Chicago Democrat.

Portions of Smith's 1842 account rely heavily on the writings of Orson Pratt (see Orson Pratt, A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records [Edinburgh: Ballentine and Hughes, 1840], 14–15). Smith didn't share the sort of missgivings Matthew Roper seems to have about his use of Pratt's wording (see Roper, “Nephis’ Neighbors,” [2003], 97–98). In fact, Smith thought so much of his 1842 account that in 1843 he repurposed it for publication by Daniel Rupp (see 1. Daniel Rupp, He Pasa Ekklesia: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States (Philadelphia: J. Y. Humphreys, 1844), 404–07; see also Vogel, Mormon Documents [1996], 1:183–86). After receiving a copy of Rupp's tome, Smith returned his profound gratitude for "so valuable a treasure. The design, [my emphasis] the propriety, the wisdom of letting every sect tell it [J] own story, and the elegant manner in which the work appears, have filled my breast with encomiums upon it, wishing you Godly speed. ... I shall be pleased to furnish further information at a proper time" (Joseph Smith to I. Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844, underline emphasis in the original). Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, available on Selected Collections (2002), DVD 20). Three short weeks later, Smith was murdered.

33. (New York: Pratt and Brannan, “Prophet” Office, 6 April 1845). The Proclamation is addressed “To all the Kings of the World; To the President of the United States of America; To the Governors of the several States; And to the Rulers and People of all Nations” (ibid., 1) in accordance with divine directive (D&C 124:2–5). Wilford Woodruff alluded to this revelation when he wrote that the Proclamation fulfilled "an express commandment of God" (Times and Seasons 6, no. 10 [15 December 1845]: 1068, reprinted from Millennial Star 6, no. 9 [15 October 1845]: 136).

34. Although Apostle Parley P. Pratt authored the Proclamation, Brigham Young wrote to Pratt affirming the Twelve's endorsement. "We have to say in relation to your proclamation that we approve of it and are pleased with it" (Brigham Young to Parley P. Pratt, 26 May 1845, Brigham Young Letterpress Copybook [27 August 1844–25 May 1853], p. 14, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, available on Selected Collections [2002], DVD 21). Young signed the letter: "Done by advice of the Quorum of Twelve. Brigham Young Pres[iden]t[=] (ibid., p. 16). On the day he received the Proclamation, Apostle Wilford Woodruff ordered 20,000 copies and recorded: "This is the proclamation to All the Kings of World & rulers & people of All nations. May the Lord make it a blessings to All nations. This Proclamation is made by the Twelve Apostles in fulfillment of the Revelations & Commandments of God. See Doctor[en]s & Covenants sections III: i paragraph Math 22 ch. 5 vers. This is A warning to the whole gentile world that they may be left without excuse in the day of Gods Judgment upon the nations. I thank God that I am instrum-ent in his hands of printing & circulating this important Proclamation through Britain & Europe." (Sturtevant, Worlds End [1993], 88).


36. Proclamation (1845), 11.

37. Ibid., 13, emphasis in the original. At the twilight of the nineteenth century, scientific evidence supporting an Asian ancestry for Amerindians continued to mount. As the twentieth century dawned, a handful of LDS apostles departed from their nineteenth-century counterparts, allowing for Jaredite survivors or small non-Israelite incursions to account for evidence of Asian descent.

38. Hugo Miza, “Deep in the Mountains,” Ensign 34, no. 2 (February 2004): 33. Miza also notes, “I felt that I was part of the fulfillment of the promises God made to Levi, Nephi, and other Book of Mormon prophets about their children being preserved.”


40. A few years back I formulated the scientific complication of the sancta simplicitas of theology into what I dub a Galileo Event. As I define it, • A Galileo Event occurs when the cognitive dissonance between empirical evidence and a theological tenet is so severe that a religion will abandon the tenet, acquiescing to the empirical data.

Religions have undergone numerous such events—some large, some small. Amerindian genetic studies stand to force a Galileo Event for the LDS community (cf. “DNA and Lamanite Identity: A Galileo Event,” panel discussion with D. Jeffery Meldrum, Thomas W. Murphy, and Trent D. Stephens, moderated by Brent Lee Metcalfe at the 2001 Sunstone Symposium; panelist Stephens acknowledged that the shift from a hemispheric to a limited Book of Mormon geography is a Galileo Event in its own right). Contrary to Daniel Peterson's hyperbole, I would not char-acterize a Galileo Event as “a wonderful, atheist-making event” since, by my defin-ition, this type of event involves a theological facet, not the totality of a theological system (see Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor's Introduction: Of Galileo Events; Hype, and Suppression: Or, Abusing Science and Its History,” FARMS Review 15, no. 2 [2003] x). In Peterson’s assessment, I’m “critical of fundamental” (interesting word choice) “Latter-day Saint beliefs” (Peterson, “Hype” [2003]: ix). Ironically, despite his rhetorical posturing, Peterson has used “Galileo Event” approvingly (see Peterson, “Random Reflections on the Passing Scene,” delivered at the 2003 FAIR Conference). Quite obviously, my modest definition of Galileo Event doesn’t entail ecclesiastical hoobgoblins masquerading as “repressive, obscurantist clergy” (Peterson, “Hype” [2003]: x [and passim]) who are “benthearted and corrupt” (Glen M. Cooper, “Appendix—On Aping Aristotle: Modern-Day Simplicios,” FARMS Review 15, no. 2 [2003] ii [and passim]).
The Book of Mormon purports to present a history of three major groups of people who migrated to the Americas from the Middle East. The first group, the Jaredites, apparently annihilated itself. The second group split into the Nephites and Lamanites. The third group, the Mulekites, merged with the Nephites. Shortly after his mission in the Middle East, the resurrected Jesus Christ appeared to descendants of those people. As a result of Christ’s teachings, the people became united into one group. Eventually a division again occurred, and a group referred to as Lamanites (unbelievers) split from those referred to as Nephites (believers). Ultimately, the Lamanites destroyed the Nephites and remained as the only representatives of Middle Eastern colonization in the New World.

In contrast to this account, data from numerous molecular population genetic studies suggest that the ancestors of extant Native Americans came from Siberia. No genetic evidence specifically supports the hypothesis that Native Americans descended from Middle Eastern populations. Furthermore, there is little reason to assume that additional data will reverse the current conclusions. In light of these data and conclusions, which challenge the keystone of our faith, many Latter-day Saints and other interested people may ask, “Now what? How do we deal with this new information?” Some have referred to this quandary as a “Galileo Event.”

The nature of a sound scientific hypothesis is that it can be easily tested by observation or experimentation and that such tests can invalidate the hypothesis. A good scientific hypothesis relevant to the topic at hand might state that all living Native Americans descended from Middle Eastern populations. Such a hypothesis could be tested by comparing genetic markers in Native American populations to markers from Middle Eastern populations. Such a test has never actually been rigorously conducted because such a scientific hypothesis has never been advanced. Rather, an alternative hypothesis has been advanced. That hypothesis is that all living Native Americans descended from Asian populations. The test of that hypothesis, comparing genetic markers from extant Native American populations to those of extant Asian populations, has been repeated many times and supports the stated hypothesis. The most parsimonious conclusion resulting from the test of that hypothesis is that alternative, competing hypotheses, such as one proposing a Middle Eastern origin of Native Americans, are rejected by the data.

Now what? What is one to do with these results, which cast doubt on the authenticity of The Book of Mormon? The implications may be numerous. Most of them, not being based on the formulation of testable hypotheses, fall outside the realm of scientific investigation. In light of the Book of Mormon story, people might react to the data concerning Native American origins in four different ways:

• One—The data refute the historic authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Therefore, belief in the book is unfounded and should be abandoned.
• Two—The data may be ignored. In spite of the data, people may continue to believe that the Book of Mormon is true and that all pre-Columbian Native Americans were descended from people of Middle Eastern descent.
• Three—People may take a wait-and-see attitude. Future data may exonerate their belief that the Book of Mormon is true and that all pre-Columbian Native Americans were descended from Middle Eastern populations.
• Four. The Book of Mormon story is still true. However,
the data refute the notion that all pre-Columbian Native Americans were descended from people of Middle Eastern descent. Middle Eastern colonization in the Americas may have been very small compared to the remainder of the population, and, as a result of two major bottleneck events, no genetic evidence of a Middle Eastern origin is present in the extant population, nor is such evidence likely to be forthcoming.

None of those four postures constitute a scientific hypothesis: none of them can be tested by experimentation or observation. Rather, because the implications are beyond the scope of physical science, they fall into the realm of metaphysics. Metaphysical debates are of the nature to continue, without satisfactory conclusion, for centuries or even millennia. The debate resulting from the apparent conflict between the Book of Mormon story and the genetic data is likely to be one such contest.

REJECTING THE AUTHENTICITY of the Book of Mormon because its story is not supported by scientific evidence may be the most practical and rational choice. Similar conclusions have been drawn for biblical issues such as the lack of evidence that a large number of Israelites ever lived in Egypt or spent an extended amount of time on the Sinai Peninsula. Furthermore, no scientific and little historical evidence exist to support the existence of an actual person known as Jesus Christ. The trend in modern society is to reject all religious stories as myth. Indeed, had the Book of Mormon story been verified by scientific data, such verification would have placed the Book of Mormon in a class by itself relative to other religious texts.

On the other hand, holding to the notion that all Native Americans were descended from only Middle Eastern populations, and rejecting the scientific data, is the least practical and most irrational choice. The bulk of the “creationist” movement is based upon just such an approach. Such a concept doesn’t allow one to reinterpret Book of Mormon or Biblical texts in light of scientific data. Rejection of scientific evidence while holding to traditional interpretations of scripture tends to place one into the realm of religious fanaticism. Such fanaticism stoned Stephen, silenced Galileo, fueled the Inquisition, and founded creationism.

The third choice, a wait-and-see attitude, is probably not bad advice in any controversy. However, those who choose such an approach should expect that they eventually may need to capitulate. With the significant number of studies that have already been conducted concerning the genetic profiles of extant Native American populations, it does not seem likely that additional studies of this kind will present new data that differ significantly from that already accumulated.

The last reaction, not to reject the Book of Mormon, but to modify our interpretations of it in light of scientific data, seems a reasonable compromise for anyone who attempts to espouse both science and Mormon theology. This is the same compromise that may be and has been extended to the biblical account of the creation and Israelite history.

For example, shortly after his family arrived in the “land of promise,” Lehi observed,
Many of us choose to seek harmony between science and faith, believing that both aspects of our lives are valuable. Faith without fanaticism, mixed with patience and a lot of humility, may be the key to a peaceful coexistence between science and theology.

In taking such a position, we may recognize the limitations of both science and religion. For example, if we accept as a premise that a historical person named Lehi actually stood somewhere in the Americas when he said, “I, Lehi, prophesy according to the workings of the Spirit which is in me . . . ” (2 Ne. 1: 5–6), we can examine the possibility of losing or confusing the facts of his existence and prophecy more than 2,500 years later.

First we may examine the scientific facts. If we had been present when Lehi spoke, we could have actually seen him. We would have had first-hand, eyewitness evidence. Within seconds to minutes, however, that form of evidence is gone. If no one saw Lehi, does it negate his existence? No, the absence of such data cannot refute the possibility of his existence; it can only fail to support it. If within hours to days we could reach the spot where Lehi made his statement and had a bloodhound that had been sensitized to Lehi’s scent, we could present indirect evidence that he had been there. Within days, however, such a scent would be gone. Fingerprints at the scene would also be gone within days. It is irrational to believe that because no such physical evidence exists, Lehi could not have been there. We clearly understand the limitations of physical evidence.

People are less often familiar with physical evidence that has a longer half-life. For example, what if Lehi had built a house on the site where he made his prophetic statement? The material from which the house was built, the environment in which it was built, and subsequent use of the house or building materials can all affect the longevity of such evidence. In archaeology, there are many well-known cases in which every trace of a dwelling is gone after one to two hundred years of disuse. Lack of physical evidence does not establish that no such house existed. It only indicates that its existence cannot be confirmed.

Genetic evidence of Lehi’s presence follows the same logic. If Lehi had no children at or near the site of his prophecy, no genetic evidence would exist that he was ever there. If he had children and those children had all died without issue, again, no evidence of his presence would exist. If his family was extremely small compared to the surrounding population, say one per million, the probability would be extremely small of ever finding any genetic evidence of his presence.

This problem is confounded by the fact that at least two major bottleneck events occurred after Lehi is purported to have arrived in the promised land. First, according to the Book of Mormon account, in about AD 421, a large portion of his descendants were destroyed in a series of great battles. We have no idea how many survived. Second, in the sixteenth century, 90 percent of the pre-Columbian population died from conquest and disease. We have only some idea how many survived. Second, in the sixteenth century, 90 percent of the pre-Columbian population died from conquest and disease. We have only some idea how the populations before and after that bottleneck may have differed. Although some pre-Columbian burial sites have been sampled, we have little information concerning regional genetic diversity before the sixteenth century. Obviously, if there were no other surrounding population and Lehi’s descendants proliferated, genetic evidence of his existence could persist for thousands of years. However, even in that case, the problem is somewhat like that in the bloodhound example. If we had no genetic markers that could be specifically linked to Lehi, how would we know his descendants when we found them?

The function of science in dealing with these issues is to draw rational conclusions that have a reasonable probability of being accurate. For example, with a number of large studies completed that show the same genetic markers in extant Native American populations as in extant Asian populations, it is logical to conclude a relationship between those two populations. However, it is not rational, and beyond the scope of the scientific data, to extend such conclusions to state that the data preclude the possibility that any other populations ever existed in the Americas. As Francis Bacon stated, “They are ill discoverers that think there is no land when they can see nothing but sea.”

Second, we may examine Lehi’s religious experience. In order for a revelation to come from God to humans through a
prophet, many transitions often may occur. First, God either must appear to the prophet and give him a message, send a messenger (angel) to deliver the message, or send the message to the prophet's mind by revelation or inspiration. Such information transfer is not as straightforward as might appear (cf. D&C 9). The next step is for the prophet to write down the revelation, or tell the revelation to someone else, who then writes it down. The latter process may extend through generations and centuries. No matter how the revelation is transferred to readable form, at least one human mind must intervene. The human mind is wonderful and complex but far from perfect. Many exercises have been devised that show how seeing is not always believing. In the case of a prophet, the vision may be difficult to understand and explain (cf. the revelations in Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Revelations).

Once the revelation has been recorded, translations and editorial changes over long periods of time may have profound effects on the text and its meaning. The text is then read, and another mind must interpret that text into concepts related to the revelation. That interpretation is not performed in a vacuum. It is based, rather, on the person's prior beliefs and assumptions. For example, when they read Lehi saying “this land,” many people raised in the Church immediately picture North, South, and Central America. The simple fact that we are a society used to looking at maps affects our thinking.

As an exercise, we can follow the term “this land” through the process just described. When God revealed “this land” to Lehi, was there any interpretation in Lehi's mind? What did he think of when the concept of this land was introduced to him through “the workings of the Spirit which is in me?” Was he thinking of North, South, Central America? Lehi had probably never seen a map of any kind, let alone one showing the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, as Lehi's language was Hebrew, the term “this land” was clearly not given him in that precise form, if the idea came in the form of words at all. Next, Lehi apparently did not record this revelation; it was recorded by Nephi, presumably in reformed Egyptian. Then, when Joseph Smith translated the writings, he apparently did not just read them and give the English equivalent (cf. D&C 9); rather, the translation may have come to him more in the form of concepts, which process itself has been the topic of much discussion. Now, when we pick up a new edition of that translation, how certain are we that what God intended by “this land” is exactly what we understand? (cf. the revelations in Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Revelations).

As new scientific discoveries continue to challenge theology, one can choose to abandon religion, believing only that which can be proven by science, or one can ignore science and cling to traditional religious beliefs. On the other hand, many of us choose to seek harmony between science and faith, believing that both aspects of our lives are valuable. Faith without fanaticism, mixed with patience and a lot of humility, may be the key to a peaceful coexistence between science and theology, including Mormon theology.

NOTES

1. I have made the comment that I do believe a “Galileo Event” is occurring today. I believe the Galileo Event is the shift from a hemispheric understanding of Book of Mormon lands to one that views it through the lens of a much smaller geographical setting and population. My comment was in response to Brent Lee Metcalfe’s definition: “A Galileo Event occurs when the cognitive dissonance between empirical evidence and a theological tenet is so severe that a religion will abandon the tenet, acquiescing to the empirical data.” (See Brent Lee Metcalfe, “Reinventing Lamanite Identity,” this issue of SUNSTONE, page 25, footnote 39.)

Consider the situation with Galileo and compare it with the present shift in understanding Book of Mormon lands:

A. Former understanding—the geocentric universe:
   • Most people in Galileo's time believed the earth to be the center of the universe. They believed the Bible required such a belief. There have been a number of papers indicating that the geocentric universe was not actually universally accepted before Galileo.
   • Most Latter-day Saints today believe the Book of Mormon to be hemispheric. They believe the Book of Mormon requires such a belief. Several papers indicate that the hemispheric model has not always been universally accepted in the Church.

B. Data forces a change in both situations.

C. Effect on faith from the new understanding:
   • The Galileo Event did not disprove the authenticity of the Bible.
   • This new Galileo Event does not disprove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.


What should someone do when a long-held hypothesis fails? In seeking a setting for Book of Mormon events that matches the text’s descriptions, one Latter-day Saint found himself looking in a very surprising part of the world.

A MALAY SITE FOR BOOK OF MORMON EVENTS

By Ralph A. Olsen

We owe almost all our knowledge not to those who have agreed but to those who have differed.
—C. C. COLTON

THE BOOK OF MORMON IS A SCRIPTURAL ACCOUNT of three small groups of Middle Easterners who migrated to a “land of promise.” To date, the site of Book of Mormon events has not been found. Without strong physical evidence indicating the actual existence of the peoples and happenings described in the Book of Mormon record, many have found it difficult to accept the book as genuine scripture or Joseph Smith as a prophet of God. The quest for a suitable site matching Book of Mormon descriptions—of the geography, climate, cultural traits, and so forth—is therefore of great importance to those, like me, who believe scripture should be taken at face value as much as possible.

No revelation regarding the site has been received. As LDS Book of Mormon scholar John Sorenson states: “Church authorities from the time of Joseph Smith to the present have come to no consensus, made no authoritative statement, and reported no definitive solution to the question of Book of Mormon geography.”

Initially, Book of Mormon lands were thought to occupy all of South America—“the land southward”—and North America—“the land northward”—with the Isthmus of Panama understood to be the “narrow neck of land” connecting the two. Those who have followed Book of Mormon scholarship for the past few decades have become aware of problems with this view. Indeed, a whole range of problems and difficulties, already well documented in many books, articles, and essays, make both the hemispheric and limited geography models seem untenable. Recent DNA studies of Amerindians have also convincingly shown that most of them are descended from peoples from Northeast Asia, not from the Middle East.

Taken together, these problems have caused me to wonder for some time why very few researchers seem to have considered the possibility that Book of Mormon events occurred somewhere other than in America. In the physical sciences, when evidence indicates flaws in an accepted hypothesis, even if the inconsistencies might at first seem slight, researchers actively seek a better hypothesis. Mormonism’s Ninth Article of Faith reminds us that many truths are yet unknown, and Apostle John A. Widtsoe has encouraged honest inquiry: “There can be no objection to the careful and critical study of the scriptures, ancient or modern, provided only that it be an honest study... a search for truth.” In the sciences, as in life, there is no shame in trying and sometimes failing; the shame comes in not trying at all.

Strengthened by sentiments like Elder Widtsoe’s and aware of the difficult problems with the settings currently being proposed as the site of Book of Mormon events, I have for some time now been actively searching for a more suitable location.

And my search has led me to a surprising candidate: the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia.

In presenting what I label the “Malay Hypothesis,” I realize I am suggesting that studies aimed at locating Book of Mormon lands and accurately identifying the descendants of Book of Mormon peoples would need to undergo a radical paradigm shift—one that many would consider quite far-fetched. I am fully aware that no Church leader, Joseph Smith included, has pointed toward a Southeast Asian setting, but neither have they made statements which rule it out.
I began developing this hypothesis many years before DNA studies began pointing toward Asian origins for Amerindian peoples, and the Malay Hypothesis does not rely upon those findings. Still, I hope the results of that research might embolden some advocates of the various Western Hemisphere sites to seriously consider the Malay Peninsula (hereafter, Mala).

I have developed the Malay Hypothesis in great detail,7 but in this short essay, I will present only a very brief introduction and overview of some of its interesting matches with the Book of Mormon text. I present Mala for consideration, but I do not undertake any detailed discussion of deficiencies in the predominant models.8 My hope for this presentation is to “prime the pump,” asking for a fair hearing and for interested readers to look at my longer study and, perhaps, read for themselves the Book of Mormon with Mala in mind.9 Because I believe the Book of Mormon is a genuine record of actual peoples and events, not merely a metaphorical or spiritual record, I believe the quest for discovering the lands and peoples described is a very valuable one.

THE JOURNEY

ACCORDING TO MY reading of the Book of Mormon, sometime between 3000 and 2500 B.C., the Jaredites walked to Nimrod (Ether 2:1) near the upper Tigris River. (See current day maps of Iraq.) They built barges on which they floated down the “many waters” of the river (Ether 2:6) to the Persian Gulf, “the sea which divideth the lands” (Ether 2:13). There they built new barges to cross an ocean (Ether 2:16). The Lehites’ voyage began about 600 B.C., from the nearby southern coast of Arabia (1 Nephi 17:5–8). They also made their way to the land of promise by means of an ocean voyage.

The following is a partial list of interesting factors to consider in hypothesizing about Book of Mormon journeying.

• In their travels to the ocean, the Jaredites were getting farther away from America but closer to the Mala. If we grant that the Lord was directing the Jaredites, having them travel west from Nimrod via the Mediterranean Sea would have been a far shorter and more sensible route if the land of promise was to be somewhere in the Americas. It would have been even more sensible for Nephites originating near the sea in Jerusalem.10

• Under precarious conditions—with families and livestock aboard, and with no experience, no maps, no navigational skills, and no technical equipment—a 4,000 mile voyage to Mala would have been far more likely to succeed than a 16,000 mile voyage to the Americas (which actually takes them past Mala).

• To avoid becoming separated (in the case of the Jaredites) and to replenish requisite supplies of food, feed, and water, coast-hugging voyages seem to make the most sense. A journey toward Southern Asia meets this ideal, but one that continues across the Pacific, with only occasional islands as potential stopping places, does not.

• The Book of Mormon makes no reference to sickness, fatalities, drownings, shipwrecks, food, feed and water shortages, nor to serious mutinies or despair. Perhaps relatively short voyages on one of the earth’s calmer oceans are indicated.11

• Joseph Smith is quoted as saying: “Lehi went down by the Red Sea to the great Southern Ocean, and crossed over to this land.”12 From Arabia, the “great Southern Ocean” extends eastward to the Malay Peninsula but not to the Americas. There are coordinated currents (gyres) going past Arabia and as far east as the Malay Peninsula. These would have been crucial to the sail-less, drifting Jaredite barges. Getting through the Indonesian isles alone (past Mala) would require skilled guidance and some means of propulsion.

GEOGRAPHY

A S A CANDIDATE for the land of promise, Mala has many significant geographical features matching Book of Mormon descriptions. As readers consider the points that follow, it will be helpful to refer to the map on page 32. The following list of advantages for the Malay Hypothesis is not exhaustive, and although I don’t argue in any detail against the various proposed American settings, each “positive” for Malay listed here solves a related problem in many of the other settings:

• Peninsulas and Orientation. As a peninsula, Mala is “nearly surrounded by water” (Alma 22:32). The leading proposed Mesoamerican site, on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, is nearly surrounded by land and has no terminus at all. Mala is also oriented northward-southward, as Book of Mormon descriptions state, whereas the Isthmus of Tehuantepec extends east-west.13 I see no reason to believe that Book of Mormon directions are not the same as ours. The Liahona served as a compass, and the Lehites knew they were going south-south-east along the Red Sea (1 Nephi 16:13). For Mala, directions are not a problem. For the dominant Mesoamerican hypothesis, many places where Book of Mormon authors mention directions are seriously skewed counter-clockwise.

• Seas. Seas to the east and west predominate in Mala but not in many of the favored Mesoamerican proposals.14

• Boundaries. In Mala, the land southward would be present-day Malaysia, the land of Bountiful would be Thailand, and much of the land northward would be Myanmar (Burma). Could it be that ancient boundaries have been retained?

• Land of Bountiful. In the Mala setting, the land of Bountiful can correctly occupy the entire narrow neck of land and extend from sea to sea (Alma 22:29–33; 50:8–11, 32–34).15

• Width and length. A Nephite could cross the northern end of the narrow neck in 1.5 days (Alma 22:32). In going from Zarahemla on the land northward (through the narrow neck of land), Nephites traveled “an exceedingly great distance” (Helaman 3:3–4). As seen on the map (page 32), Mala provides the requisite geography.

• Inlet. Mala has an inlet of the west sea by the narrow neck of land, which would account nicely for a reference to a place near the narrow neck “where the sea divides the land” (Ether 10:20).

• The land southward. The land southward was nearly surrounded by water with a small neck of land extending northward (Alma 22:32). This matches a Mala setting.
SUNSTONE

ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE FOUND many evidences in Palestine that support biblical accounts. As scholars have noted, the few evidences found in support of Book of Mormon events occurring in Mesoamerica are mostly circumstantial and unconvincing. By contrast, the Malay Peninsula has much in its cultural history that aligns with Book of Mormon peoples and events, including:

- **Jewish affinities.** Hugh Nibley has noted that the Karens of Burma “have displayed such astonishing cultural affinities with the Jews that some observers have even claimed them to be of Jewish origin.” There are also striking resemblances between Karen beliefs and those in the Book of Mormon.

- **Script and languages.** Nibley also reports that writing in the India-Burma region (directly north of the Malay Peninsula) “was actually derived from Aramaic and Phoenician forms ultimately taken from the Egyptian.”

- **Mining, metallurgy, tools, and weapons.** In a 1979 study of Thai metallurgy, D. T. Bayard reports that bronze may have been in use as early as 3,000 B.C. The introduction of iron tools has been dated at about 1340 B.C. These dates match the chronology and activities of the Jaredites (Ether 10:23–27) and Nephites (Jarom 1:8).

- **Inscribed metal plates.** The Karen tribe (mentioned above) made metal plates not only of copper but of gold. In nearby India, copper plates, inscribed, perforated, and linked together by metal rings have been found.

- **Animals for food.** Book of Mormon peoples are described as having domesticated cattle, oxen, cows, sheep, goats, swine and other animals (Ether 9:18). All of these animals are indigenous to the Old World (none in America). Evidence for pigs, dogs, fowl, goats, and cattle during Book of Mormon times has been found in Southeast Asia.

- **Animals for work.** Book of Mormon peoples are described as having horses and asses, and the more useful elephants and cureloms and cumoms (Ether 9:18). Horses and asses and elephants are indigenous to the Orient. Mala also has water buffalo and other bovines (could these be cureloms and cumoms?) which are more useful than horses and asses in the Southeast Asian climate and for indigenous forms of agriculture.

- **Grains.** Middle Eastern grains included wheat, oats, barley, rye, millet and possibly rice. Successful production requires tillage operations using farm implements and work animals. Wheat, barley, and other cereal grains have long been cultivated in Southeast Asia. There is no evidence of their cultivation in Mesoamerica.

**SUNSTONE**
Fruits. Valued Middle Eastern fruits included apple, pear, plum, cherry, apricot, peach, fig, persimmon, melon, quince, pomegranate, banana, orange, lemon, lime, and date. An early naturalist in the southern Burma area found pineapple, grape, banana, coconut, breadfruit, plum, apple, orange, lime, citron, and many other fruits under cultivation.

Silk. The Book of Mormon describes an abundance of silk (Alma 1:29; Ether 10:24). The silk arts were developed in neighboring China about 2,600 B.C. As a way to reconcile Book of Mormon terms with other settings, some have suggested that the terms may not have been translated correctly: maybe “silk” doesn’t really mean silk. However, I prefer that terms be interpreted literally, if possible. The Introduction to the Book of Mormon quotes Joseph Smith as saying that the Book of Mormon is the “most correct of any book on earth and the keystone of our religion.” I believe we should not simply reinterpret or assign vague meanings to those parts of the book that do not fit our preconceived notions.

Volcanic explosions. The Book of Mormon reports that at the time of Christ’s crucifixion, devastating events took place in the land of promise (3 Nephi 8). The effects are so catastrophic, I believe they can best be explained by an explosive volcanic event (not simply an extrusion of lava). The Malay Peninsula provides a good setting. For example, the Krakatoa (1883) and Tambora (1815) explosions both in Indonesia, just south of the proposed Mala site, caused huge quantities of material to be blown into the atmosphere, leaving calderas. There were tempests and thunderous noise and frightful earthquakes and lightning, and fires and tsunamis, all of which killed tens of thousands of people. The accompanying darkness lasted for several days and affected the entire world with low temperatures, hurting crop yields. The days of darkness were to be a sign of the crucifixion to those on the isles of the sea (1 Ne. 19:10). With many islands nearby, the Malay Peninsula provides a good setting for the events.

Place names. Palestine still has many place names which existed in Biblical times. One might reasonably expect a comparable array of place names in the Book of Mormon to exist in the land of promise. The proposed Mala setting is intriguing for this reason. Owing to disension and incessant warfare, groups of people from the peninsula are thought to have “hived off,” and it is natural that they would not travel farther than necessary.

On or within reasonable distances from the peninsula, the twenty-two place names listed on the map (page 32) can be found on modern-day maps. Not only are the names comparable to Book of Mormon names but the locations match Book of Mormon accounts. For example, in Ether 13–15, we read that in the final battles, the Jaredites fought near Moron (Manoron) and then went eastward to a seashore through a range of hills and fought near a Hill Ramah (Hill Maw). The priceless plates of Mormon—the “records which had been entrusted [to him] by the hand of the Lord” (Mormon 6:6)—may still be there.

Another possibility: Madagascar was settled by people from the Malay area between 300 and 500 A.D. This was about the time Moroni, and possibly other survivors, were fleeing for their lives from the victorious Lamanites. Could it be possible that this is the reason that a city of Moroni is found on an island off the shore of Madagascar? Another possibility: Polynesian origins. “A basic view held in the Church is that Polynesians have ancestral connections with the Book of Mormon people. . . .” Church leaders have indicated that among Polynesian ancestors were the people of Hagoth who set sail from Nephite lands about 54 B.C. (Alma 63:5–8). Migrations westward into islands of the Pacific are obviously proposed in the various American-setting hypotheses.

In an overview of perspectives about Polynesian origins, Russell T. Clement, a special collections librarian at BYU-Hawaii, writes: “In few cases is the Mormon Church at such odds with the learning of men as in its answers to the intriguing questions of Polynesian origins and migrations.” Clement then quotes from a statement representative of the widespread scholarly consensus on the subject: “What seems beyond question is that, wherever the Pacific peoples might have come from in the first place, they reached the Pacific by way of Asia.” I’ll share two items from the very long Polynesia section of my larger work that support the Malay Hypothesis:

(1) Hawaiians claim they came from a great and huge land (compared with their islands?) joined by an isthmus; the east and west sides were washed by oceans. Coupled with the scholarly consensus that their ancestral home was Asia, the Malay Peninsula is a nice fit.

(2) Easter Island, off the coast of South America, is said to have been settled about 600 A.D. by Polynesians who migrated from the west. The people were called “long ears” by some for their custom of piercing their ear lobes and using weights to induce them to grow to shoulder length. Malaysians practiced the same custom. Also of interest is a legend that the first king on Easter Island brought seven tribes with him: the Nephites recognized seven subdivisions (Jacob 1:13). On Easter Island, seven huge stone structures were erected in honor of the seven tribes. These statues “stare out beyond the island across the ocean to the west, remembering where they came from.”

DNA. A traditional LDS belief is that all Amerindians are descendants of Book of Mormon people. As mentioned earlier, DNA evidence suggests that most descended from Asian peoples. The Malay Hypothesis is compatible with this belief, for it postulates that small groups of Book of Mormon peoples fled Southeast Asia and arrived at many sites in the Americas.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

O THE BEST of my knowledge, all Book of Mormon accounts can be reasonably accommodated to the Malay Hypothesis. This hypothesis seems to me to work much better with statements that the people of Babel, the House of Israel, and even the Lehites themselves “should be scattered upon all the face of the earth” (1 Nephi 10:12–13; Ether 1:33). The Malay Hypothesis proposes that there are many cherished lands of promise (or Zions) throughout the world, not just one.
The Malay Hypothesis has not been sanctioned by the Church. As Brigham Young states, “We are to judge opinions of leaders about geography or other matters for ourselves.”

As an old chemist meddling in hallowed ground, I have undoubtedly made mistakes. But I’ve done my best. I hope and pray that others will help in determining its validity. If true, the potential spiritual benefits to brothers and sisters now and in the eternities to come are immense.

NOTES
6. In particular, I’ve focused on the problems associated with the Mesoamerican setting proposed by John L. Sorenson in Ancient American Setting (and many other books and articles), which is currently the hypothesis driving most geographical studies conducted by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). So entrenched is this Mesoamerican hypothesis that Sorenson was led to say that “the prospect that any other part of America than Mesoamerica was the scene of Book of Mormon events is so slight that only this obvious candidate will be considered here.” John L. Sorenson, The Geography of Book of Mormon Events (Provo: FARMS, 1990), 407.
7. Ralph A. Olsen, The Malay Peninsula as the Setting for the Book of Mormon, 1997, unpublished. Copies are available in libraries at Montana State, Utah State, and the University of Utah. My family and I are considering options for making this study available online or in some more easily accessible way. We will decide soon and notify the SUNSTONE offices. In the meantime, those interested may email Sunstone, info@sunstoneonline.com, to be put on a contact list.
8. I am not the “discoverer” of the many problems with the proposed Mesoamerican and other American settings, nor am I unaware of the many studies and articles which have attempted to defend against the various deficiencies. I respect these scholarly attempts, but many of the solutions proposed seem strained to me, requiring a great deal of effort to accept. My hope in presenting Mala is that, when someone looks hard at it as a potential site, it will be seen as the more parsimonious explanation. As William of Occam suggests, “One should not increase, beyond what is necessary, the number of entities required to explain anything.”
9. For copies of my study, see the information above in footnote 7.
10. Skeptics are encouraged to try to repeat the Jaredite voyage under comparable adverse conditions. Under far more favorable circumstances, only two of Magellan’s five ships managed a comparable voyage to the Philippines. The crews experienced many of the problems listed above. Encyclopedia Britannica (2003), s.v. “Ferdinand Magellan.”
12. Because of space limitations for this article, and because this article is focusing on Mala and not particular critiques of the Mesoamerican hypotheses, we’ve reproduced Mesoamerican maps here. One can view two different maps of Mesoamerican proposals that postulate an Isthmus of Tehuantepec setting in Metcalf, ed., New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, 274–75.
13. BYU archeologist John E. Clark concludes that “Any geography that tries to accommodate a north and south sea is doomed to fail.” John E. Clark, review in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon, vol. 1 (1989), 65. Unless one tries to understand certain Book of Mormon references as metaphorical, which ultimately is Clark’s strategy for dealing with this issue, the proposed Mesoamerican setting is not a good candidate for Book of Mormon events.
15. Mala’s width is thirty miles, whereas the narrowest point on the Mesoamerican model is 130 miles.
17. Central America, for example, has many rains scattered throughout a highly diverse terrain and no natural boundaries to delineate Book of Mormon lands. As indicated by several hypotheses, there are many possible ways of juggling proposed locations of Book of Mormon lands. Each hypothesis has some advantages, but none match very well. See Deanne G. Matheny, “Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography,” chapter 7 in New Approaches to the Book of Mormon; and Glenna Nielsen-Grimm, “The Material Culture of the Book of Mormon,” delivered as the May 1992 Sunstone Book of Mormon Lecture (tape BM92–005).
18. Hugh Nibley, Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980). 121. Karen historical events match those of the Book of Mormon peoples to an amazing extent. The Karens (Lamanites)? lost their copy of Y’wa’s book. The white brothers (Nephites?) carefully preserved their copy. As a result, white people became righteous and are known as “guides to God.” They sailed away in ships with “white wings” but will return with Y’wa’s “white book.” Some traditions say the book would be of gold or silver. See Don Richardson, Eternity in Their Hearts (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981), 74.
36. Trachtman, 94 (emphasis added). Of additional interest to readers might be the extensive list of similarities between Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and the western shores of America published in John L. Sorenson and M. H. Raish, Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans (Provo: FARMS, 1990), sections F-217 and F-034B. These include: shell trumpets and other similar musical instruments, pellet bows, barkcloth, blowpipes, games, the use of jade, arch calendaring, porcelain, makara, elephant motif, artistic depictions of the cosmic tree, crouching human figures, human sacrifice, animal deities, Quetzalcoatl, hand symbolism, serpent dragons, and tiger demons.
37. John A. Widtsoe, Discourses of Brigham Young (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 135.
What is it about the Book of Mormon that has led so many to sacrifice lives and careers to share its message or attempt to prove its divine or human origins?

THE BOOK OF MORMON AS A SYMBOLIC HISTORY:
A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON ITS PLACE IN HISTORY AND RELIGION

By C. Jess Groesbeck

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION NEARLY 175 YEARS AGO, the Book of Mormon has attained a prestige of sorts in American as well as world history, mainly for its use and promulgation by religious groups, primarily Mormons from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Yet more than ever, people from many quarters are raising questions about what the book really is and what it represents. Except among Mormons, hypotheses and studies supporting the Book of Mormon as a literal ancient history or as a translation from an ancient text have not found a great deal of acceptance in scientific, anthropological, sociological, psychological, or wider religious worlds. Other studies, increasing in recent years, have attempted to place the Book of Mormon in its nineteenth century context, basically as a document written by Joseph Smith. Such inquiries have resulted in its being called everything from a fabrication or a pious fraud, to a fanciful, romantic book, or even a serious work of fiction. Another group of studies focuses on Joseph Smith’s life in an attempt to explain the Book of Mormon as a psychohistory that reflects many of the young prophet’s internal conflicts and difficulties within his family and environment.¹

So, the question persists, “What is this book?” Clearly, it is time for a new and integrative view of the Book of Mormon.

1. SYMBOLIC POWER AND SHAMANIC BALANCING
The genesis of a “divine third”

THE BOOK OF Mormon came forth first and foremost as a claimed religious history of the Americas and their native peoples. It appeared in the context of an uneasy interface between two cultures—the primarily white, Anglo-European immigrants to the North American continent and the Native Americans who were already at home in the land. Interactions between these cultures required a tremendous amount of assimilation for both.

In this setting of peoples in tension and uncertainty, a young man, Joseph Smith Jr., published a book that without question—even if every other issue were to remain forever unsettled—provided a remarkable cultural and symbolic bridge between these two groups. As such, might it not then be important to consider the Book of Mormon as a symbolic and mythic history religiously oriented, instead of spending so much energy on questions about its ancient or modern origins? What might we learn by bringing the book and its claims into dialogue with ethnographers, symbologists, and historians of religion who have developed powerful tools and insights for understanding religious texts?

In connection with the work of these theorists, I contend in this article that Joseph Smith operated in much the same way as a shaman does in many world cultures. That is, through his many gifts and spiritual sensibilities, Smith was able to access...
at a deep subconscious level all the fragmented traditions, problems, expectations, dreams, and needs of his time and place, and, through the Book of Mormon, to weave them together in an immensely satisfying way.

This claim that much of the book’s power arises from its function as a cultural-symbolic bridge connects with themes touched upon in other Book of Mormon theories; however my development of that claim here in conjunction with Smith’s shaman-like role and the shamanic way in which the book mediates the tensions extends further than any previous study. But I also contend that viewing the Book of Mormon primarily as a symbolic history offers a genuinely new alternative for understanding why no other approach to the question, “What is the Book of Mormon?” has been able to triumph. The Book of Mormon contains and weaves together a remarkable number of shamanic “hits”—points upon which it strikes deep and archetypal “chords”—but these instances of deep connection are symbolically true, not literally true. Nevertheless, in Smith’s time and still today, these strikes are so psychologically powerful that it is understandable why dedicated students of the Book of Mormon find strong connections between it and ancient, modern, geographic, linguistic, psychological, social, and cultural contexts, yet are ultimately frustrated when they try to fit them convincingly within overarching frameworks that require the book to be literally this or that.

A. SYMBOLS, ARCHETYPES, AND THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

To understand my claim that the Book of Mormon should be understood primarily as a symbolic, not literal, history, we must look at the way we as humans structure our worlds through myths—the highly symbolic narratives that speak of origins and primordial powers but also weave the disparate elements of our experience in such a way that we can understand our place within an overarching story. All mythos has a structure, an internal logic that helps us feel oriented within the world.

One major way people in archaic societies, and even each of us today, make sense of the world is by conceiving of it as a microcosm, a pocket of order and structure within a larger, undifferentiated and chaotic sea. On the inside of the microcosm—the known side, the inhabited sphere, the familiar space—is the world of our waking experience. This is the side most of us feel most comfortable in. We prefer order; we feel our best when the world makes sense. But just on the edge of the microcosm, we sense the presence of the looming “unknown,” the outside, the dangerous region of demons, ghosts, the dead, foreigners, chaos, and night. It is in this untamed realm that our imaginations soar; we touch it with our hopes and travel in it as we fantasize and dream. But it is also where we bury our anxieties and push away that which is unsettling.

Our myths create and maintain the microcosm. The primary ingredient of myths are symbols. Symbols manifest themselves as images, as in dream, fantasy, or artistic creation; affect, as in overwhelming awe or intense emotion when viewing a beautiful painting or sunset; numinous or intense emotion; ideas or concepts, as in narrative; and as behavioral action, such as ritual with specific patterns. As most definitions of the term suggest, symbols are also most often connected with known objects or reference points that are imbued with a sense of connection with something invisible, something more. By association or resemblance, symbols represent ideas whose full expression, we recognize, is beyond our current ability to comprehend or convey.

But, as pioneering psychiatrist Carl Jung adds, true symbols need to be distinguished from mere “signs.” Symbols do much more than represent something else; they are “live,” “pregnant with meaning.” They are the “best possible expression . . . for a fact as yet unknown or only relatively known, . . . not yet clearly conscious.” To which Jung then adds the key point: “Whether a thing is a symbol or not depends chiefly on the attitude of the observing consciousness.”

Historian of religion Mircea Eliade contributes further to our understanding by noting that symbols are multivalent, that is, they have the capacity to express simultaneously several meanings, the unity of which is not evident or possible in the plane of immediate or literal experience. He also suggests that symbols can bring together diverse realities or fragments of experience, integrating them into a larger system—something that can’t be done by fully circumscribed, specific, and factual entities and events.

Each of these capacities of symbols bears important weight in my contention that the Book of Mormon is foremost a symbolic history, providing a integrative and healing bridge for cultures in tension. But what of the “history” part of my claim? How might something be both symbolic and have a historical or a patterned structure of sorts?

To understand this, we need to turn to Jung’s concepts of the archetype and the collective unconscious. Jung’s work suggests that the “unknown” realms, those regions outside the boundary of the microcosm, are not completely unstructured or without a historical or patterned aspect.

Jung coins the term archetype—arche meaning beginning or primary cause, and type meaning imprint—to denote very deep “nuclear elements” of the primordial (outside or unconscious) realm. He sees an archetype as an inherited predisposition to experience typical or nearly universal situations or patterns of behavior. He defines the archetype as an instinct’s image of itself and states that there are as many archetypes as there are typical universal situations in life. He feels these archetypal patterns are, in fact, manifested through genetic coding. However, he adds, these inherited patterns are molded and individualized, given the specific environment and the personal activities of the individual involved.

Jung also contends that unconscious activity takes place in two levels of the psyche of every individual. The first, the personal unconscious, is related to specific, personal experiences. The second level, what Jung names the “collective unconscious,” contains the deeper structures of the archetypes. By stating that influence comes from the collective unconscious, Jung means that in responding to life, all people share inher-
Anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff states: "way which still honors the fullness of their power."

The primitive and elemental with the ultimate and sublime in a draw upon a culture's deepest symbols if he or she is to unite righteousness, integrity and fragmentation, wholeness and good and evil, light and darkness, health and disease, sin and
larities which can create intolerable tension in human life: maintain its own psychic integrity. The shaman reconciles po-
the microcosm. More particularly, the shaman functions to re-
port with the supernatural world on behalf of an individual
help of guardian spirits, obtained ecstasy in order to create
Hulkcrantz, the shaman is "a social functionary who, with the
world for the benefit of the community. According to Ake
that particular type of medicine man or woman, holy person,
or healer who controls and mediates realities of the other
region of such a condition, for he stands at the juncture of
hate. But the shaman reminds us of the impossibility
for opposing forces, the coincidentia oppositorum, and his
dialectical task is continually to move between these
opposites without resolving them. Yet he resolves
them paradoxically in his and others' experiences."

Shamans have many roles: as diviners or "seers," they
prophesy the future; as healers, they travel to the spiritual
world, find the cause of sickness, and re-
turn with a cure; as judges, they settle po-
itical disputes or questions of law; they
lives and find the cause of lost property. When a
culture, clan, family, or group is out of bal-
ance, they call upon the shaman to restore
helps make sense of the opposites in such a
way that they can be successfully held in
tension, and he or she helps others do the
same.

Through ritual, often involving trance (created in a variety
of ways, such as prayer, dance, drumming, or by use of divination
tools or psychotropic agents), the shaman travels in the rich, highly symbolic pri-
ordial or chaotic realms, creating sacred experiences out of
which he or she evolves a myth of healing or meaning that
shamans create a living religion.

Because these polarities are irreconcilable, the shaman must
draw upon a culture's deepest symbols if he or she is to unite
the primitive and elemental with the ultime and sublime in a
way which still honors the fullness of their power. Anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff states:

Shamanic balance is a particular stance. It is not a bal-
ance achieved by synthesis, nor a static condition
achieved by resolving oppositions. It is not a compro-
mise. Rather, it is a state of acute tension, the kind of
tension which exists when two unqualified forces en-
counter each other, meeting headlong, and are not
reconciled but held teetering on the verge of chaos,
not in reason but in experience. It is a position with

In bringing forth the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith brilliantly accomplished the major shamanic task of successfully synthesizing a near-impossible set of polarities.

In part two of this study, to be published in a future issue of SUNSTONE, I will demonstrate the many ways in which Joseph’s responses to personal and family crises fit classic shamanic patterns. In this installment, I focus solely on how, in bringing forth the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith brilliantly accomplished the major shamanic task of successfully synthesizing a near-impossible set of polarities. In so doing, Smith also created a religious system that has aided millions with similar struggles—one that, through the symbolic power
of the Book of Mormon, continues to bless us even to the present day.

C. CULTURES IN CRISIS

WHEN THE BOOK of Mormon came forth, tension and uncertainty reigned in the fledgling United States. Jan Shipps describes the general tenor and mood in the young nation during the decades immediately following the American Revolution: The situation throughout the union was unsettled and things were extremely fluid in this period when all America seemed to be streaming westward after the Revolution. A new physical universe was there to contend with. A new and somewhat uncertain political system existed and Americans had to operate within it. The bases of social order were in a state of disarray, and as a result of the nation’s having cut its ties with England and her history, a clear lack of grounding in the past was evident. That uncertainty placed in jeopardy the religious dynamic that for centuries had passed from one generation to the next a body of unquestioned information about divinity, humanity, the system of right relationships that created the social order, and the nature of experience after death.

Among the most difficult questions in the search for a “system of right relationships” was how might it be possible to integrate a predominantly white European culture, with its Judeo-Christian religious background, with the many tribes of Native Americans, each with its own powerful culture and religious sensibility. The situation was problematic on many levels and especially in regions such as Joseph Smith’s upstate New York, where interactions with native peoples were a regular feature of life and where Indian religion and lore fed great excitement about buried treasures from lost civilizations.

Dan Vogel in his Indian Origins of the Book of Mormon carefully looks into cultural issues such as these. He notes, for example, that the discovery of the New World inspired a whole series of questions and debates about the Indians: Where did they originate? How and over what route did they travel to the Americas? How did they receive their skin color? Who were the builders of the many mounds and ruined buildings which the early colonists found?

A smaller subset of religiously motivated people also pondered more theologically oriented questions: Who were the Indians? Did they have souls? Were they men, and thus descendants of Adam? Or were they of some other lineage? What was Christian Europe’s obligation to them? Were they to be civilized first or Christianized? Could Christians morally justify seizing Indian lands?

In attempting to resolve these issues, some people tried to use biblical creation and flood stories to link the Indians to Old World lineages. One of the strongest theories of all was that the Indians were actually a part of the Lost Ten Tribes, whose whereabouts had been a burning theological question for many centuries. Some drew strong connections between the Indian and Hebrew cultures of the past. This view is particularly conveyed in Ethan Smith’s View of the Hebrews.

What is important for our purposes is simply to note the great ambivalence about the Indian. For some, he was the “noble savage,” the child of Adam, one of the Lost Ten Tribes who needed to be helped, saved, Christianized. For others, he was the savage warrior of a different race, not a descendant of Adam, perhaps not even human, who could be taken advantage of and, in fact, who had to be fought or even destroyed.

In any assimilation process between widely different cultures, many significant changes take place. Jung argues that the mind as well as the body is shaped by the earth and the living social arrangements between people. He notes, for example, that if a nation is transplanted to a strange soil and another climate, this human group will inevitably undergo certain psychic and even physical changes in the course of a few generations, even without the mixture of foreign blood through literal inheritance. He cites research among Australian aboriginals who assert that one cannot truly conquer foreign soil because in it dwells strange ancestor spirits who reincarnate themselves in the conquerors.

Jung postulates, however, that even though diverse groups often succeed in their mutual accommodations one with the other, a very serious and dangerous “split” often occurs between conscious attitudes or daily life interactions and what is going on in the individual and group unconscious. In the case of the white European needing to accommodate his experiences to Indian cultures, the split was such that, on one level, the foreigners unconsciously felt overwhelmed, unable to assimilate within their worldview their powerful experiences with Native American religion, spirituality, and approach to life. The white European recognized the strength and power of the native’s way of relating to the world. On the other hand, the Europeans’ collective conscious attitude included a sense of innate superiority and a need to control things; this was an absolutist self-consciousness which led them to develop sources of power the natives did not have—i.e., guns and other means of exercising dominance. This ambivalence toward the Indian and other complexities in the conscious/unconscious split in the white European psyche are articulated wonderfully in the words of Luther Standing Bear, a nineteenth-century Sioux shaman:

The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. He is too far removed from its formative processes. The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil. The white man is still troubled with primitive fears; he still has in his consciousness the perils of this frontier continent, some of its vastness not yet having yielded to his questing footsteps and inquiring eyes. He shudders still with the memory of the forbidding mountain-tops. The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien. And he still hates the man who questioned his path across the continent. But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it
will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm.13

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a virtual crisis existed, a crying need for accommodation between the two groups as white Europeans began to colonize and move across the North American continent. In New England and New York—where Joseph Smith and his ancestors lived—the Christian influence of the Puritans and European fathers was, in the minds of many of the foreign settlers, beginning to take second place to the native consciousness. Fascination with the New World, with Indian and Spanish treasures, and with the magic of shamanistic medicine men was beginning to dominate—something that was intolerable to Christian leaders.14

D. Answering the Call

Whenever one finds an intense need for assimilation between two or more powerful forces that appear to be irreconcilable, what comes to the fore is the pressing need for a symbol. Again, as noted before, only powerful symbols can unite polarities that seem on the surface un-unitable without one of the poles being crushed. Symbols can bridge differences and create a “third,” a sense and vision that allows the parties to accommodate one another even as psychic integrity is restored or preserved intact. And, as history shows, when psychic situations reach a critical mass, prophets and seers come forth, who, through their visionary experiences and calls, begin to lead the way in reorganizing the collective cultural spirit.

If such a symbolic answer could arise during the time of intense psychic dissonance in which Joseph Smith lived, what would it include? Certainly, the following issues seem to be pertinent:

- If two cultures so disparate as the white European and American Indian were to find an acceptable accommodation, there would have to be some way to find common ground in their relationship, perhaps by establishing a similar genealogical heritage.
- There would need to be some harmonization of their religious views, suggesting ways they might work helpfully together.
- The answer would need to include a plan or program whereby each would be able to fit into the other’s way of living.

With these criteria in mind, let’s take a close look at the Book of Mormon as a symbolic historical answer to this critical problem of cultural assimilation. How does the Book of Mormon perform this symbolic function?

First, it states that the American Indian (again speaking of native peoples collectively and not individually, even though as tribes they are quite different) and the white European have a common ancestry in that they both go back to Israelite origins. The book addresses the question of whether or not the Indian is a child of Adam. It weighs in on the “Lost Ten Tribes” issue by saying, no, the Indian is actually closely related to Ephraim; he is also a son of Joseph through Manasseh. The book teaches that America is a promised land to both the Indian and the European, as both were led to its shores by the hand of God.

Second, it states that the Indian and the European ultimately have the same God: Jesus Christ, the God of the Christians who is also the god who came to visit the Americas and the ancestors of the Native Americans.15 In other portions of the book, Ammon and Aaron teach the Lamanites that the “Great Spirit” whom they worship is really the same God the Nephites worship. In asserting the commonalities in who they worship, the Book of Mormon follows one of the Apostle Paul’s strategies for creating a basis for genuine brotherhood. As he stood on Mars’ hill declaring the “unknown God” whom Paul believed the Athenians ignorantly worshiped, he stated that this was the God who “made one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26). Through understanding that they shared the same God, Paul felt he and his listeners could have brotherhood with each other.

As a Mormon missionary, I went into the hills of Guatemala in 1955 and found the Mayans to be a hard-working, dedicated people, who, although culturally different from me, were seeking similar solutions to their own lives and self-identity. In the process of coming to know them and communicating to them the story of the Book of Mormon, I felt an almost indescribable excitement, thrill, and sense of brotherhood.

Late one night, by candlelight, my companion and I met with a man in his hut. I will never forget how he cried when we presented him the Book of Mormon story. He stated that throughout his life, as long as he could remember, he had been searching for his ancestors, wanting to know who they really were. Where did the Mayans really come from? Who was their God? The Book of Mormon message was like a divine answer from the other world. So powerful was this experience that my companion and I walked an extra hour and a half that night to make sure he’d have a copy of the Book of Mormon to take on an upcoming week-long journey.

But this experience with the Mayans did not operate in just
one direction, we teaching them. In our exchanges, we too were opened spiritually to another culture, and to new people, new ways, new thoughts and dreams. As a result, throughout my life since, I’ve been profoundly influenced by spiritual knowledge, background, and wisdom from other cultures. In my interactions with the Mayans, I became part of a deeply shared symbolic experience, uniting what would otherwise have been un-unitable. As Jung says, symbols bring together disparate parts that alone cannot be integrated.

Finally, through its speaking “from the dust,” the Book of Mormon restores a knowledge of how both parties can freely relate in a meaningful and humane way with one another. In its stories of Alma the younger and the sons of Mosiah, and especially the depiction of a Zion society in 4 Nephi—a society in which there was not “any manner of -ites”—the Book of Mormon depicts principles by which the groups can successfully live together in peace and as “one, [the] Children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God (4 Ne. 1:17). But even as it models successes, the Book of Mormon also warns of mutual destruction should we fail to heed its many lessons.

E. Black Elk: A Parallel

Perhaps the best example of a vision that performed a similar functional task, but weighted this time slightly more toward the Indian’s psychological adaptation, is the one received and taught by the Native American healer Black Elk. Black Elk’s vision of a greater reality that unites all peoples functioned as a compensating response to the Anglo-White’s attacks and destructive moves against his people, the Oglala Sioux, and other Native American tribes in the Black Hills. Losing his father’s leadership (to a broken leg, sustained in battle, that left him unable to provide consistent guidance) and watching his people starve and die set the background for his great vision at age nine, and also for his later life as the Sioux were gradually encroached upon and subjugated. Black Elk’s vision became a means by which the Sioux maintained their identity for the next four or five generations even as it simultaneously served as a message that all peoples are united under one sacred canopy.

In the early part of his vision, the young Black Elk is shown his six great-grandfathers and is told by his first great-grandfather of his calling to lead the people: “You shall see and have from them my power, and they shall take you to the high and lonely center of the earth that you may see, even to the place where the sun continually shines. They shall take you there to understand.”

Later on, he is given his people’s symbols of power, the nation’s hoop and a bright red stick that flowered. And in vision he then rides to the center of his village and puts the flowering stick in the center of the nation’s hoop, thrusting it into the earth in symbolic ritual form as a centerpiece or center tree for the world.

Finally, in the culmination of the vision, he has the following experience:

When I looked down upon my people yonder, the cloud passed over blessing them with friendly rain and stood in the east with a flaming rainbow over it. Then all the horses went singing back to their places beyond the summit of a fourth ascent, and all things sang along with them as they walked.

And a voice said,

All over the universe they have finished a day of happiness, and looking down, I saw that the whole wide circle of the day was beautiful and green with all fruits growing and all things kind and happy.

And then a voice said,

Behold this day, for it is yours to make. Now you shall stand upon the centre of the earth to see, for there they are talking to you.

In his vision, Black Elk then rides in formation with his ancestors toward the east. He says,

I looked ahead and saw the mountains there with rocks and forts on them, and from the mountains flashed all colors upward to the heavens. Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, round-about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world, and while I stood there, I saw more than I can tell, and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as straight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw it was holy.16

F. A Divine Third

So far the focus of this article has been the Book of Mormon’s function as a symbolic bridge in mediating tensions between two disparate cultures. But of course, this does not exhaust the issues and themes the book helps hold in a shamanic-like balance. As Jan Shipps argues,

The Mormonites, as their contemporaries called them, moved out of the chaos of the early national period in America into a new dispensation of the fulness of times. This they did by accepting a complex set of religious claims that brought speculation about the origin of the American Indian and America’s place in the grand scheme of things into synthesis with the story of the Hebrews, generally as redacted by New Testament writers but with some Masonic lore worked in. Set out in a book whose origins rested, in turn, on a synthesis of folk magic and visions and revelations that were religious to the core, these claims formed the basis of a new mythos in which the coming forth of the book served as the agent that opened what had been closed and ushered in the new dispensation. . . .17

As I’ve argued above, I believe that through its stories and teachings, the Book of Mormon became for its time, and still is
today, a “divine third,” a spectacular example of a highly symbolic solution that allows for accommodation of polar opposites without compromising the integrity or power of either. It is a cultural-symbolic bridge that performs a wondrous shamanic balancing act. It was brought forth through the powerful healing gifts of a young shaman, who grew up in a region of a fledgling nation in particular tension, not only between Native Americans and the European immigrants, but between the power of Indian spirituality and treasure lore and the totalizing message of the Christian gospel. Besides its many other functions, of which Shipps hints above, the Book of Mormon, taken from gold plates dug from a hill, is also a “third” for the disrespected, treasure-seeking Smith family, a symbolic assertion of the value and power of both their folk and Christian traditions.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE ATTRACTION
Symbolic functioning in competing theories

In my introduction, I stated that one of the main benefits of seeing the Book of Mormon primarily as a symbolic, not literal, history is that this view allows us to understand why no single answer to the question, “What is the Book of Mormon?” has been able to truly win out over all the others. In making my argument about why this is so, I need to briefly revisit the discussion of symbols and how they function in relation to archetypes and the collective unconscious. Four points from Jung about the power and energy of symbols and what triggers their vitality in human lives are crucial:

1. “Considered from the standpoint of realism, the symbol is not of course an external truth, but it is psychologically true, for it was and is the bridge to all that is best in humanity.”18

2. “The symbols it [the psyche] creates are always grounded in the unconscious archetype, but their manifest forms are moulded by the ideas acquired by the conscious mind. The archetypes are the numerous, structural elements of the psyche and possess a certain autonomy and specific energy which enables them to attract, out of the conscious mind, those contents which are best suited to themselves. . . . The symbol works by suggestion; that is to say, it carries conviction and at the same time expresses the content of that conviction. It is able to do this because of the numen, the specific energy stored up in the archetype. Experience of the archetype is not only impressive, it seizes and possesses the whole personality, and is naturally productive of faith.”19

3. “Therefore, if some great idea takes hold of us from outside, we must understand that it takes hold of us only because something in us responds to it and goes out to meet it.”20

4. “[A living symbol] touches an associated chord in every psyche. Since, for a given epoch, it is the best possible expression of what is still unknown, it must be the product of the most complex and differentiated minds of that age. But in order to have such an effect at all, it must embrace what is common to a large group of men . . . [It must be] still so primitive that its ubiquity cannot be doubted. . . . Herein lies the potency of the living, social symbol and its redeeming power.”21

A. STRIKING CHORDS, UNLEASHING ENERGIES

A more robust understanding of symbols, then, must include the following ideas:

1. Symbols can be “true” without necessarily being tied to actual historical facts or metaphysical truths. Jung is always careful when speaking about this issue, for it is a very touchy thing to assert that something can be “psychologically true” but not “literally true,” because someone will inevitably cry foul: “Psychological truth by no means excludes metaphysical truth, though psychology, as a science, has to hold aloof from all metaphysical assertions. Its subject is the psyche and its contents. Both are realities, because they work.”22

2. Symbols are bound closely with archetypes, the deep, inherited patterns in the unconscious which, because they are essentially well-ingrained behavioral reactions to universal life situations, have tremendous energy associated with them. Because of this power, when a connection is made that triggers a reaction, the attendant energy unleashed is very impressive, even awesome, and “naturally productive of faith.”

3. Symbols are essentially dormant—their energy is only potential—until our conscious mind forms an idea or a framework that touches on the deeper patterns, opening the flow of power from the deep well of the unconscious. As Jung states, a symbol lies quietly until “something in us responds to it and goes out to meet it.” John Weir Perry, a follower of Jung who, through working with psychotic patients, built upon Jung’s concept of archetypal symbolism, adds: “Any description of what [symbols] mean psychologically necessarily leaves them dangling in the mid-air of generalizations and abstractions. Only when a person gives some personal associative context to
the elements of the image do we get the sense that there is a meaningful definition of what we are actually dealing with emotionally.23

(4) The imagery, feelings, actions, and concepts symbols express will be made up, content-wise, of both the most reflective or highest and the most primitive or chaotic of human experience. A symbol must have content that can be understood and reflected upon, at least to some degree, by the conscious mind, but only by also having roots deep, deep within will it have enough power to reach and affect large numbers of people in the group or culture in which it operates. In other words, for a symbol to “work,” to truly affect and change people in their human experience, it must strike chords which dwell at the instincual or most primitive levels of the human psyche.

B. LITERALIZING SYMBOLIC PROCESSES

CALLING THE BOOK of Mormon a symbolic history, then, means much, much more than saying it performs the shamanic function of a bridge between the white European and Native American. As symbolic history, the Book of Mormon is a work of such tremendous power— with so many unifying, satisfying, synthesizing symbols that hit upon and trigger deep, immensely potent energies—that it actually creates what we choose to fix as historical or metaphysical reality. In its symbolic function, the Book of Mormon takes images and concepts we bring to it and fits them concretely to our preformed notion of what it is, whether we imagine it as a literal translation of an ancient record, a nineteenth-century work of creative fiction, a psychobiography of its author, or a prophetic book specifically directed to crises and issues of our present day.

THE BOOK OF MORMON AS ANCIENT RECORD. Currently, most Book of Mormon studies are being performed by theorists whose strong faith has fed their desire (1) to prove the Book of Mormon is a translation of an ancient document, and (2) to locate the events it depicts in a particular geographical setting. These students of the Book of Mormon have compiled lists of “hits” for everything from the book’s having many “Hebraisms” (expressions, names, grammatical structures, that fit well when the book is considered as a translation from ancient Hebrew), to its depiction of customs that fit ancient patterns, to analyses of ruins and particular archaeological finds dating to Book of Mormon times, to specific land forms and topography which match descriptions in the book’s pages. These theorists are energized by the milieu of faith and expectations with which they were raised and/or by powerful spiritual experiences they’ve had as they’ve read and studied the Book of Mormon; but they are also activated by a spiritual desire springing forth from the book itself that makes them want to wed it to concrete reality—to a specific time and place. And they can enjoy success as they invest the theory with energy— both from the data matches and the divine or numinous energy that is released when one touches on archetypal patterns—to the point where they are convinced of its historical reality.

Wonderful things can come out of this desire and energy. One example is the work of my friend Cordell Anderson, a Mormon who, following his mission to Central America, felt inspired to dedicate his life to restore the Lamanite people to greatness as taught in the Book of Mormon. He took his wife and children to Northern Guatemala and has been convinced by Book of Mormon archaeologists that his ranch there is the actual location where Ammon lived and worked. This idea of actually living in Book of Mormon lands has moved him and his family to brave many dangers and live courageous lives in service to the lost descendans of the Book of Mormon.

I believe attempts to prove the book’s ancient roots through comparative evidence with particular Hebrew or ancient Middle-Eastern patterns are guilty of making a category mistake, for they are attempting to literalize what is better understood to be the result of symbolic processes. While comparisons to the ancient world can make impressive sense and give satisfaction to the originators of these theories, they do not prove literally what is claimed. I believe it is better to see these connections as evidence that the book strikes symbolic chords and taps into archetypal patterns and their attendant energy, rather than as data capable of historically or scientifically proving such origins.

The same is true with regard to grounding the Book of Mormon in a particular geographical location. According to noted Book of Mormon scholar, John L. Sorenson, there are currently more than seventy theories about where Book of Mormon events took place.24 Through very similar processes, the proponents for each geographical area have come to see enough connections in patterns and events depicted to convince them that theirs is the most likely site. But from the sheer number of distinct theories alone, it is clear that the Book of Mormon touches broad enough social and cultural themes (e.g., family structure, governmental forms, monetary systems, agriculture forms, plant and animal usage) and archetypal patterns so as to fit any number of actual earthly locations, but to a limited degree.25

This is precisely how symbolic processes work. Symbols take images and patterns and fit them concretely to historical reality in ways that possess great coherence and meaning for the theorizer. This is what happens with accurate dream interpretation. Because the symbols that dominate our dreams are bound up with specific events of our lives, when we come to recognize these connections, we are able to unlock powers and resources for solving the dilemmas or issues which brought the symbols into our nighttime wanderings in the first place. These are important processes; we all employ them. But it is a mistake to take them as revealers of literal, concrete, historical truths.26

THE BOOK OF MORMON AS NINETEENTH-CENTURY CREATION. The same forces are at work for those who believe they’ve found evidence that the book should be seen purely as a product of the nineteenth century. Pointing to such things as similarities between the conversion patterns depicted in the Book of Mormon and those in Joseph Smith’s day, to specific
thematic connections between Book of Mormon teachings and
issues animating early nineteenth-century religious dis-
cussions, to telling facts about the way certain Old and New
Testament scriptural passages are quoted or framed in the
Book of Mormon, these theorists find confirmations of the
book’s modern origins. Impressive research, such as that done
by David Wright, Stan Larson, Dan Vogel, and Brent Lee
Metcalfe gives us much to reflect on concerning the Book of
Mormon’s possibly being a product of Joseph Smith’s upstate
New York historical and social milieu. In many ways, the
theses I advance in this article also fit within this same general
way of viewing the Book of Mormon.27

But ultimately, all of these things force us to recognize that
we must view the book on a larger plane, that the symbolic
process is never exact when it comes to matching concrete,
historical reality. Just like the strongly felt connections with the
ancient world or specific geographical locations, these modern
“hits” are also striking archetypal chords—universal patterns
which naturally possess numinous energy that leads to “faith”
in their being literally true. That such diverse people are
having similar experiences of excitement while coming to
completely opposite conclusions is alone evidence that the
Book of Mormon requires a more expansive view if we are to
come to terms with it.

THE BOOK OF MORMON AS PSYCHOHISTORY. Another
group of researchers apply modern psychological theory
to the origins of the Book of Mormon, attempting to
base the book on the experiences of Joseph Smith’s life.
And there certainly do seem to be elements in the Book
of Mormon that bear striking similarities to Joseph
Smith’s own experiences. In approaching the Book of
Mormon as essentially a Smith “psychobiography,” these
theorists connect the Nephi/Lehi relationship in the
book to Smith’s feelings and interactions with his own
father, or Book of Mormon characters to people in the
young prophet’s life who share similar traits. Such theo-
rists also examine the way many Book of Mormon
events fit as classic “compensations” for Smith’s deep-
seated frustrations (e.g., these passages give him a
chance to rewrite stories from his life, but this time with
him acting with strength or even heroism).

I believe these theorists—who again include me,
given the work I’ve done with “family systems” dy-
namics applied to the Smiths, or even this article’s con-
tention that Smith is helpfully seen as following a
shamanic archetype—have much to offer in under-
standing the Book of Mormon. However, I do not be-
lieve these quite hit the mark. The book is far grander,
much broader, and its internal logic and power go well
beyond the life of Joseph Smith. All sacred texts contain
traces of the personal life of the writer, visionary, or
prophet who brought them forth. Psychohistory is lim-
ited by specific theories of human development, yet too
often the applications venture outside the scope of the

*KBYU hits on a great new programming idea.*
derful Book of Mormon applications to twentieth and twenty-first century problems. Among other connections, readers see in the book predictions of the rise of communism and the genocidal threats we are all too familiar with in our present day and age. They find similarities between the Book of Mormon’s depiction of Gadianton robbers and today’s gangs and the operations of secret societies. But, as mentioned earlier, many also find hope and guidance in the way portions of the book teach the principles of building a Zion society.

If we understand the book as symbolic history, we can easily see how these views make a great deal of sense, how the book gives support to such views. But, again, it is important not to literalize these connections too much. Any comprehensive theory of the Book of Mormon must honor the autonomous power of these insights, just as it must acknowledge the energy and satisfactions triggered in tracing ancient, geographical, modern, and psychological patterns.

III. MORE IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS
“A bridge to all that is best in humanity”

I HAVE EXAMINED the Book of Mormon as a product of grand symbolic processes that touch on archetypal themes in the collective unconscious and unleash associated energies in the way described by Jung. Though the Book of Mormon’s specific origins can be located in the tensions between European and Indian cultures, it is clear from its far-reaching influence that it can also be applied helpfully to issues in hundreds of cultures and without regard to particular historical contexts. Much as Black Elk’s vision of the six grandfathers and the many sacred hoops of the world gave hope and identity to his people, the Book of Mormon has shown a similar ability to bring peace and a sense of belonging to many people in many places.

Regardless of one’s reaction to my overarching thesis that the Book of Mormon is best understood as a symbolic history capable of uniting the un-unitable in shamanic balance, I believe there are more important questions to reflect upon than whether the Book of Mormon is literally an translation of an ancient record or literally a product of nineteenth century or psychological influences. These more important questions center on why it is that the Book of Mormon occupies such an important place in the collective psyche of so many. Instead of worrying about its ancient, modern, or psychological origins, we should be asking what it is about the book that has had power to motivate millions of people to spend their time and energy—some even sacrificing careers and fortunes—in efforts to share this book with others.

However one frames one’s answer to such questions, I believe we will find that the core truth has something to do with the book’s message of human brotherhood and sisterhood, the basis of which recognizes the dignity and worth of all peoples. “For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 28:9). Jung argues that symbols ultimately function as “a bridge to all that is best in humanity.” Perhaps putting more of our energies in service of that message is an idea whose time has really come.

NOTES

1. For representative examples of each of these approaches, see: Noel B. Reynolds, ed., Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited (Provo: FARMS, 1997), Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002); Robert D. Anderson, Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999).

2. Joseph Campbell notes that the first function of a mythology is to awaken and maintain in the individual a sense of wonder and participation in the mystery of our inscrutable universe. The second function is to help the receivers and believers of the myth create a cosmological view of the universe. See Joseph Campbell, The Way of the Animal Powers, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 6–9.


14. It is striking, for example, that Lumon Walters, a significant magical-religious-shamanistic figure, was strongly influential in the Smith family. D. Michael Quinn has documented magnificently the whole shamanic magic worldview back-ground that the Smiths grew up in. Theirs was not in any way a world dominated solely by Christianity (See D. Michael Quinn, Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, rev. ed. [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998]). It is also important to note that in the early history of the colonization of the North American continent, there are virtually no stories of Native Americans who voluntarily wanted to integrate and live the European white man’s way of life, but there are many stories of white Europeans who went on to live with native tribes and adopt their lifestyles. I believe this shows how powerful and dominating the native spirit was to the white European coming to America.

15. Terry O’Brien’s monumental research and book, Fair Gods and Feathered Serpents: A Search for Ancient America’s Bearded White God (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1997), show that the most prevalent myth among the Indians of the Northwest, Central, and South America is that of the white bearded God who came and is to return. As he’s portrayed in the Book of Mormon, Jesus Christ fits this image and pattern perfectly.


Another example from Native-American history of how a vision can bring about renewal is illustrated by the experiences of Hansom Lake of the Seneca and Iroquois tribe in the 1800s. His culture had suffered a great decay, almost to the point where it had ceased functioning as a culture.

Risen under these conditions, Hansom Lake began to suffer deeply from reavement at the death of a niece, and he sank into bitterness and depression. In a state of drunkenness, he became so deeply ill that he thought he was dying. Coldness swept over his body, with only a single spot on his chest remaining hot. In the midst of a death-like coma, he had several visions.
First, three angels came and gave him directives from the Creator telling him how things must be among the people, naming the various evils to be abolished. He then entered ecstatic states, like shamans and prophets of old, wherein he ascended to Heaven and was taken by the Great Spirit on a sky journey, as if he were going to his death. He traveled a bright road which he found to be the Milky Way, and on it, he discovered the tracks left by human souls at their death. He beheld before him a brilliant light. The way divided into a wide path at the left leading to Hell and the land of the punisher, and a path to the right leading to Heaven, the land of the Creator. He then was presented with the real possibility of world destruction (something that regularly occurs in prophetic experiences). In the eastern sky, Lake was shown two drops of fire—one red and one yellow—which threatened to ascend and spread death and the great sickness over the world.

He learned that his mission was to prevent this catastrophe. He would not be alone, however, for he would have the help of three angels and the Great Spirit, who would also reassure him of his support by placing a large white object in the western sky. At this point, Lake was shown the task of throwing off the yoke of white dominance and oppression through a curious framing—the appearance of two foremost revolutionaries, Jesus Christ and George Washington, who encouraged him to set about winning independence. He was also given some ritual instructions to preserve the ceremonial traditions of his people. But more urgently, he learned that a great sacrifice needed to be made to avert the great sickness that should otherwise bring an end to the world.

Following these revelations, Hansom Lake took as his high mission in life—perhaps with too grand a spirit—to persecute alcoholics and others. But in a third vision, three angels set him on the right way again, this time turning his attention to codifying his revelations and reviving certain ceremonies. The Seneca needed leadership and government, and he appointed members of his family to the office.

The outcome of Lake’s visions and their impact on his nation was no small achievement. The visions and Lake’s efforts were the catalyst to the revival of the Seneca nation. The Seneca have remained a self-respecting people since that time. See John Weir Perry, The Heart of History: Individuality in Evolution (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 28–29.

17. Shipp, Mormonism, 35–36.
25. New hypotheses for Book of Mormon lands are arising all the time. Ralph A. Olsen has done considerable work attempting to show the events of the Book of Mormon took place on the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia. See this issue, SUNSTONE (March 2004): 30–34. Utilizing his knowledge of African languages and tribal histories, Canadian resident Embaye Melek in his research, the thesis that the Book of Mormon was set in Africa. Melek in his research, the thesis that the Book of Mormon was set in Africa. Melekin writes on his website, www.veltainer-n-d-p.com, that “the fate and salvation of Africa and the black race depends on the unraveling of the book of Mormon (sic) . . . as that of the history of our forefathers and our journey with the Almighty God.”

26. Jung does not claim that dreams can reveal literal history (i.e., historical facts that can be literally confirmed) but both he and John Weir Perry have done remarkable work showing how, in a symbolic way, a history can be recreated that would be similar in pattern to an ancient or actual historical text! This ability of the unconscious mind, working with archetypal images and energies, to create plausibly structured, patterned, and psychologically convincing “history” lies at the heart of my claims about the Book of Mormon. It feels like history. We can sense ancient influences and even find “teasers” of premodern forms of writing, speech, and prophecy: But ultimately these are the result of symbolic processes, and we will be disappointed if we attempt to nail them down as concrete, literal history.

I was not able to include Jung and Perry’s work on dream interpretation nor develop this thesis due to space considerations for this article. I am currently in the process of preparing a manuscript which deals with this at great length.

28. This approach, and also its limits, are represented well in the works of Richard D. Anderson and William Morain, who utilize classical psychoanalytic theory to explain Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. These works are helpful in revealing patterns and connections between Smith’s life and the Book of Mormon, but much in their books is speculative and left without explanation. Applying psychoanalytic theory to Smith as though the Book of Mormon were essentially a dream becomes problematic when they consider only personal and historical events as possible sources for what appears in the book’s pages. I believe seeing the Book of Mormon as “symbolic history” that touches on themes beyond Smith’s own autobiography offers a far wider and more comprehensive theory for understanding Smith and this remarkable book. See Robert D. Anderson, Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), William D. Morain, The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr. and the Dissociated Mind (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1998). Fawn McKay Brodie, in her classic No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith (New York: Knopf, 1945), and Dan Vogel, in Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet, also make much of this approach in trying to understand the Book of Mormon.

### RECIPE FROM A FAMILY FILE

The smell burns my nostrils.

Lye soap, made from rendered fat and kerosene, stirred with a stick in a giant tub over the old woodstove out back.

Then it is cooled for hours, tipped from the tub onto a board spread with a sheet, scored into bars to last all year.

Meaner than dirt, healing any grease or cow dung, savour of clothes in a wringer washer. Stronger than bleach or sun.

After the bar smooths in the wash, I reach in, grasp the slick oval moon, scour my hands until they resemble sliced bread, the backs sunslapped, curved palms opening white from the lye knife.

—VICTOR W. PEARN
How do the metaphors we use shape our relationships with God and those around us?

CULTIVATING IDENTITIES:
REFLECTIONS ON OUR MORMON ROOT METAPHORS

By Barry Laga

Dreaming and desiring, praying and weeping . . . are a passion for the beyond, au-delà, the tout-autre, the impossible, the unimaginable, un-foreseeable, un-believable ab-solute surprise . . .

—John Caputo

LIKE ALL RELIGIOUS PEOPLES, WE LATTER-DAY Saints immerse ourselves in metaphor, swimming in figurative language the way a fish swims in water that it doesn’t quite perceive. We compare scriptures to iron rods, bodies to temples, and missionary work to sowing seeds. Baptism is analogous to death and resurrection; white clothes suggest purity; and we clothe ourselves with the “armor of righteousness.” In the temple, we figuratively move from one realm to another, and the sun, moon, and stars invoke post-mortem kingdoms. Feeling the Spirit is like a “burning in the bosom,” a “small voice,” or a “gentle wind.” I have not exhausted the possibilities here, and we can easily recognize that we employ metaphor at every level of our liturgy and even in our casual conversations. From sacred texts to Ensign articles, from conference talks to sacrament meeting talks, we convey our spiritual experiences through metaphorical language.

Despite its omnipresence, metaphor is not a mere matter of ornamental embellishment or poetic flourish. Instead, metaphor identifies who we are, defines our relationships with others, and marks at once an inability and a desire to touch the divine.

FRAMING OUR EXPERIENCES:
CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS AND IDEOLOGY

THE USE OF metaphor, the attempt to express intangible, abstract, spiritual experience by comparing it to something more familiar, seems inevitable, for we make spiritual experience accessible to others by using language. Language is the link that mediates between nature and society, our biological existence and our cultural experience, our spiritual experience and our temporal experience. Put another way, when we use metaphor, we are translating an elusive, raw, and emotive experience into a tangible, orderly, and concrete experience. We often compare the unfamiliar event with a familiar experience, guiding and assisting our readers or listeners in the process.

The analogies we hear over the pulpit are often modeled for us in sacred texts. As David Tracy points out, “most of the major New Testament parables are introduced by the words, ‘The kingdom of God is like…’.”

A parable, or any form of comparison or classification, is a “mythos (a heuristic fiction) which has the mimetic power of redescribing human existence.” The “re” of “redescribing” is significant in that the “re” reminds us that mimesis, the act of imitating or representing raw experience, involves an act of mediation. We are always and inevitably one step removed from the raw event, no matter how vivid, how sensory, how tangible our description. We can understand why Plato was wary of language and its inability to represent the “real.” While language enables us, it simultaneously limits us, for we cannot avoid language’s mediating influence.

Although metaphor is the fundamental building block of language, I’m less interested in localized or specific metaphors, metaphors that we often associate with poetic speech. Instead, I want to focus on “root” or “conceptual metaphors.” This form of metaphor frames our identity, guides our behavior, and mediates our experience in less conscious ways. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point out that our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities.

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To demonstrate conceptual metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson provide the example of “argument is war,” pointing out how we will often say: “Your choices are indefensible. He attacked every weak point in my argument. His criticisms were right on target. I demolished his argument. I’ve never won an argument with him. You disagree? Ok, shoot. If you use that strategy, he’ll wipe you out. He shot down all my arguments.” What we need to recognize is that this way of speaking is the normal way of talking about arguments. Despite the implicit use of metaphor, we are not being self-consciously poetic if we say, “I lost an argument. My ideas were weak.” Rather, we talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way, and we act according to the way we conceive of things. We can, for example, imagine how arguments themselves—the very way we argue with each other—would change if we replaced war metaphors with dance metaphors: “He side-stepped my argument. That was a graceful point. Her ideas made a pirouette after my clumsy leap in logic. His points stumbled before he could dip his final idea. He lost his balance. Her organization is out of line.” The point of “arguing” would change from beating or subduing an opponent, boot in the face, to working harmoniously with a partner, hand in hand. Argument would be an art form, and, if we had to proclaim a winner, the criteria would be based on elegance, grace, and movement instead of, say, an inability to respond with a counterattack. Because the idea of “argument as war” has grown so natural, normal, and commonsensical to us, it’s not surprising that a switch in metaphor would change how we experience arguments. These sorts of shifts and their effects should interest us, for they define and shape our relationships with others. Like a director during a stage production, a conceptual metaphor asks us to play a role within a larger drama.

Gospel commentary is a rich source of these kinds of conceptual metaphors. For instance, during the 1997 sesquicentennial celebrations, we were inundated with encouragement to become “pioneers.” This does not mean we are supposed to rewalk the plains (although many did), but we are supposed to be pioneers in our schoolwork, Church tasks, jobs, and families. “Pioneer” is a clear example of a conceptual metaphor because it answers, “Who am I?” “What is my relationship to others?” and “How should I behave?”

While Church leaders have foregrounded the metaphor “pioneer” in recent years, we certainly have a range of choices when it comes to root metaphors. Tracy reminds us that books codify conceptual metaphors. In particular, because scriptures are shared texts, they present certain metaphors as normative for the religious community. Sacred texts guide a community’s “basic understanding and control of its root metaphors and thereby its vision of reality.” We need not look far to recognize these metaphors: Among other identities and roles, Christ is father, lord, shepherd, lamb, king, wise counselor, gardener, captain, brother, son, carpenter, and bridegroom. Based on these comparisons, we in turn become children, servants, sheep, fellow lambs, vassals, petitioners, plants, soldiers, brothers and sisters, tools, and brides. But there are more abstract analogies that convey mere qualities—Christ is light, truth, the way, life, love, wisdom, charity, or sacrifice—and these metaphors make it easier to view ourselves (or others) as dark, false, lost, dead, hateful, foolish, greedy, and selfish. And worshippers are also often compared to saints and pioneers without necessarily creating a corresponding identity for God or Christ.

Although scripture provides metaphorical norms, we are producers in our own right, generating metaphors that classify Christ and assign value. For example, we need not stray far to hear people compare Christ to a warrior, pilot, coach, friend, boss, or, in the fiction of Levi Peterson, a cowboy. We generate these new metaphors because, among other factors, changes in our economic structure and technology encourage us to reclassify and reconceptualize our relationship with Christ using more familiar experiences. The notion of “lord” was certainly more meaningful to those who worked within a feudal economic system than the term is to us. On the other hand, I have heard Christ being compared to a great CEO, a comparison that reflects our contemporary historical context but preserves something of the sense of “lord” or “master.”

We need to recognize that each conceptual metaphor we employ suggests its own set of attributes. If we are pioneers, ideally we lead others and blaze trails, marking the way for others to follow. We should be brave, courageous, and hard working. We must be willing to sacrifices personal ambitions for the good of the community as we seek out and explore new frontiers. If we see ourselves as Christian soldiers, then we will defend the faith and justify being aggressive and even combative. We must confront the enemy, wielding our scriptures and teachings as weapons against an adversary who seeks to destroy us. If we see ourselves as sheep, we remain weak and willingly follow our loving shepherd who cares for us. If we are subjects to a heavenly king, we should foremost be loyal and submissive servants. If we are children, we should be attentive to the teachings of our heavenly parents.

Consider a hypothetical example. Imagine three missionaries. One sees herself as a Christian soldier, the other sees herself as a sheep following her shepherd, and the other sees himself as a submissive child. If these missionaries encounter someone who is antagonistic to their evangelizing efforts, they will respond differently because the conceptual metaphor they embrace will shape their responses. The soldier will fight, using her scriptures as weapons. The sheep will be passive, awaiting protection from her shepherd, and the child might patiently suffer, humbly seeking guidance while expecting protection. In other words, each missionary will justify and legitimize a response based on her or his conception of Christ, for that conceptual framework defines a role to play and encourages specific forms of behavior. This process is often subconscious, so subtle and ingrained that one’s own approach seems commonsensical, natural, or normal.

We could multiply examples, of course, but what I want to stress is that how we envision God and Christ, how we conceptualize our relationship with them, determines how we see ourselves; and how we see ourselves shapes the way we respond to Deity and to others around us. Again, metaphor is not a mere matter of ornamental flourish. Instead, metaphor
defines who we are and encourages us to act in certain ways. Metaphor becomes ideological in that it valorizes a particular set of attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, and hierarchies.

LANGUAGE MATTERS: CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS AND EVERYDAY LIFE

In some ways, the conceptual metaphors that we embrace seem like rather benign affairs. These metaphors almost seem analogous to the clothes we wear. Who cares if one sports a charcoal gray suit or a navy blue skirt? Who cares if we wear a scarf with the blouse or not? We choose, voluntarily and freely. What counts is that we wear clothes, right? But, as I have tried to point out above, the clothes metaphor is misleading because it does not acknowledge how profoundly conceptual metaphors shape our identity, our relationships, and our reality. Root metaphors don't hang on us like ornaments on a Christmas tree; instead, and as “root” implies, they define who we are and provide the source of our actions and values. I want to draw attention to several ripple effects.

One consequence is how the conceptual metaphors we use to define ourselves affect our estimation of others. In his “What the Church Means to People Like Me,” Richard Poll wrote to define ourselves affect our estimation of others. In his “What the Church Means to People Like Me,” Richard Poll wrote

As a compass, however, the Liahona pointed to the destination but did not fully mark the path; indeed, the clarity of its directions varies with the circumstances of the user. . . . The Liahona Saint . . . is preoccupied with questions and skeptical of answers; he finds in the Gospel—as he understands it—answers to enough questions so that he can function purposefully without answers to the rest. Poll is careful to remind us that neither metaphor should be equated with “good” members versus hypocrites, nor “active” versus “inactive” members, for both the Iron Rod Saint and the Liahona Saint are committed, involved, and faithful members of the Church.

Poll suggests that competing conceptual metaphors make us prone “towards misgivings about the legitimacy, adequacy, or serviceability of the commitment of the other.” In other words, we often think less of those who do not share our own conceptual metaphor. “To the Iron Rod, a questioning attitude suggests an imperfect faith; to the Liahona, an unquestioning spirit betokens a closed mind. Neither frequent association nor even prior personal involvement with the other group guarantees empathy.”

I can certainly identify with Poll’s description. I must admit that I see myself as a Liahona, and I struggle with those who insist on being an Iron Rod. “Can’t you see,” I say to my Iron Rod friends, “that God values listening to the Spirit more than mere obedience?” “Can’t you see,” my Iron Rod friends reply, “that obedience is the first law of heaven and is all that God asks?” Even as I write, I can hear echoes of acquaintances who deny the mediating force of language, who tell me that “I’m on dangerous ground” the moment I question their literal reading of the scriptures, ponder the purity of divine revelation, or multiply the meanings embedded in a metaphor. Poll concludes that despite the differences in perspective, Liahonas and Iron Rods are ultimately united in that they are part of “an association of kindred spirits, a sub-culture, a ‘folk’—and this is the tie which binds Iron Rods and Liahonas together as strongly as the shared testimony of Joseph Smith.”

But Poll’s observations also make me wonder if we are all as united as he claims. I wonder if the shared statement “I have a testimony of Joseph Smith” really indicates shared views. I wonder if we really express gratitude to the same modern-day prophet and if we worship the same God or same mediator. Some worship a banker to whom we are all in debt. Some pray to a kind, gentle, and forgiving Father. Some bend their knee to a great creator, a gift-giver, or even a disciplinarian, rod in hand, who demands our strict attention. Therefore, if someone invokes the name of Christ in sacrament meeting, the person sitting next to me potentially sees Christ in a way that radically departs from my own vision. This process of personalizing Christ is inevitable, if not healthy and productive, but it certainly makes me question the possibility of creating a unified community, of being “one in Christ,” for the term “Christ” becomes metaphorical in its own right, and as a result, the term encourages a proliferation in meaning. For example, if someone pointed out that, say, “Emma” is “Christ-like,” we wouldn’t agree as to what that comparison suggests. Is Emma kind, forgiving, or self-sacrificing, or is Emma brutally honest,
that one metaphor is never comprehensive or complete. For
could somehow catalogue the multiple meanings within the
cloud our vision or multiply possibilities, metaphor is also al-
different foods, but blood flows through all of us, and we all pro-
may speak different languages, live in different areas, eat dif-
ural, normal, and necessary. Urine and blood are universal. We
recodes its original meaning. However, I can't help but think of
altar—and represents it in new ways and in a new context that
Christ” as blasphemous because Serrano pries free or liberates
it touches into a toilet, a waste receptacle. Many perceive “Piss
"Piss Christ" also illustrates to a degree the “catch-me-if-you-
glass we peer through may be dark, but the indeterminacy of
indirect to the point of evasion, or all-powerful and all-
knowing? Metaphors, so vital to understanding and communi-
cation, make the term “Christ” ambiguous and indeterminate.
While awareness of root metaphors helps us make sense of
our relationships with others, it also complicates our relation-
ship with Deity. Knowledge is always, only, and inevitably ap-
proximate. We are reminded yet again that we see through a
“glass, darkly” (I Cor. 13:12). As with translation, the use of
metaphor is a process of substitution of non-identical items. To
complicate matters, as noted above, different readers make
sense of metaphors differently, thus multiplying meaning. I can
think of no better example than Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ”
(1987), a photograph that created no small stir among tradi-
tionalists. On the one hand, the photograph is rather conven-
tional. An eerie yellowish-red tint surrounds a kitschy plastic
Jesus on a wood cross. Bubble clusters are scattered across the
image. The cross itself seems dramatically luminescent, of-
fering us diffused boundaries instead of hard and recognizable
edges. The photo seems honorific and reverential, part of a
long line of sympathetic representations of Christ. On the
other hand, the rub is that the yellowish-red glow is the result
of photographing a crucifix submerged in Serrano’s own urine
and animal blood. It doesn’t take an art expert to see why, in
1989, Jesse Helms and the American Family Association
wanted to withdraw public funding from the NEA.

But urine and blood are complex metaphors. Urine is a
waste product, a liquid we need to expel. People often urinate
on objects and on other people as a sign of degradation, for the
act of urination desacralizes what it touches. It turns whatever
it touches into a toilet, a waste receptacle. Many perceive “Piss
Christ” as blasphemous because Serrano pries free or liberates
the crucifix from its original context—that of the church
altar—and represents it in new ways and in a new context that
recodes its original meaning. However, I can’t help but think of
how conventional the image still is. Urine and blood are nat-
ural, normal, and necessary. Urine and blood are universal. We
may speak different languages, live in different areas, eat dif-
ferent foods, but blood flows through all of us, and we all pro-
duce urine and blood. They are signs of our shared hu-
manity, a shared humanity in which Christ participates. As a
result, we can read “Piss Christ” as yet another homage to a
long tradition of honorific representations of Christ that cele-
brate his universality and our humanity. Wasn’t it Augustine
who said that we are all born between urine and feces? The
glass we peer through may be dark, but the indeterminacy of
“Piss Christ” also illustrates to a degree the “catch-me-if-you-
can” quality of the divine. Like pushing mercury on a sweaty
palm, or like trying to find a friend in a funhouse hall of mir-
rors, our use of metaphor always foregrounds one aspect as it
hides another.

But the ripples fan out even wider. While metaphor may
c loud our vision or multiply possibilities, metaphor is also al-
ways and inevitably incomplete. In other words, even if we
could somehow catalogue the multiple meanings within the
same metaphor, a quixotic quest at best, we must acknowledge
that one metaphor is never comprehensive or complete. For
example, we may compare Christ to a shepherd, highlighting
his role as loving steward, but that metaphor blinds us to, say;
Christ’s role as sacrificial lamb as well as his role as judge, law-
giver, and brother. We can sympathize with Isaiah who gives
us a long, breathless list: “For unto us a child is born, unto us
a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder:
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The
mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace”
(Isaiah 9:6). One metaphor, one comparison, is not compre-
hensive enough. Christ is worthy of astonishment and admira-
tion. He is wise, powerful, authoritative and propagator of di-
vine offspring, and the source of peace and harmony; therefore,
we choose metaphors that suggest those different
traits. But Isaiah’s list merely reminds us of the incompleteness
of comparisons. Isaiah merely reinforces one aspect of what I
am suggesting: metaphors are limited and limiting. If not so,
why the long list?

But if we are to be “Christ-like,” if we are to emulate Christ,
then Isaiah’s list, along with other scripturally based
metaphors, cannot help but suggest a form of situational
ethics. In his discussion of Richard Rorty and the notion of
contingency, Scott Abbott notes that “an awareness of contin-
gency in fact enables ethics, delivering us from the domi-
inating, dehumanizing insistence on exclusive views of ab-
solute truth.” Conversely, insisting on a code of ethics based
on what is natural, normal, or commonsensical actually en-
courages us to take less responsibility for our actions. We
therefore become less accountable for our behavior: we don’t
make the laws; we merely enforce them. Jane Flax points out
that “one of the dangerous consequences of transcendent con-
ceptions of justice or knowledge is that they release us as discrete
persons from full responsibilities for our actions.” As a result,
if we recognize that we actively contribute to the shaping of so-
cial attitudes, behavior, and values that justify our economic
systems, inform our foreign and domestic policies, and influ-
ence our educational systems, then we are always complicit
and therefore responsible for those social arrangements.

This ability to selectively choose and construct an identity is
simultaneously liberating and troubling, for it suggests that
our identity is constantly in flux, that we are not tied to one
mode of being or ethical approach. As a professor who teaches
courses on postmodern culture, I find this familiar and ap-
pealing territory. The “self” is not an inert product, but a
process that experiences constant reconstruction. We don’t
discover our identity as much as we construct and reconstruct
it with the tools our culture provides. The familiar archaeologi-
cal metaphors that encourage us to find ourselves, look deeply
within ourselves, and look beyond the surface, no longer sat-
isfy in this postmodern world.

While I find the notions of a continually reconstructed self
and situational ethics appealing, necessary, and even healthy,
for several reasons, I don’t find them comforting. I flinch at
the potentially dangerous consequences. For example, is it po-

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tion is appealing to those who contextualize their behavior and ethical codes. Different situations demand different responses. There are moments when I need to lead and moments when I need to follow. We need to envision ourselves differently so that we can respond to ever-changing situations.

I remember a vivid scene from my experience as a student in the teacher education program at BYU. We were discussing ways to handle discipline problems, and the conversation focused, appropriately enough, on disciplining as Christ would discipline. We discussed the usual metaphors, especially Christ as shepherd, an analogy that would ask us as future teachers to see ourselves as loving and caring stewards who lead students to green pastures. Our task is to guide, but also prod and recover those left behind. As the conversation developed, our professor contributed by saying, “But don’t forget: Christ used a whip on the temple grounds!” Given that reading of that biblical reference, we have license to be coercive disciplinarians, our violence justified by righteous indignation.16

While this anecdote illustrates the flexibility of situational metaphors, our identities, in the Old Testament or the New Testament, a stable, unchanging, and unitary Truth, and, as a result, we cannot test our notions of Truth. Put another way, we can never “know ourselves” or “know Christ” because we never have unmediated access to an external measuring stick. Our knowledge is always and forever filtered, and our metaphors are never innocent or neutral. They cannot help but privilege a particular way of seeing that was developed in a particular time and place.

And this list of choices often leads to contradictory messages. We tell our youth to be meek as children as we tell them to put on the armor of God and fight the infidels. How can one be a pioneer and a follower at the same time? Should we celebrate obedience, loyalty, submissiveness, justice, charity, humility, leadership, action, or mercy? Is the Christian soldier compatible with the peacemakers, the obedient sheep, the trusting child, the growing and tender seed? Do we find our metaphors, our identities, in the Old Testament or the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, Church history, or in metaphors we generate ourselves? The scriptures offer contradictory identities that cannot, in my view, be reconciled because the scriptures are a compilation of different writers who value, understand, and celebrate different attributes and qualities. I’m not surprised that Moroni and Mormon have a penchant for war metaphors, and I’m not surprised that an agrarian like Alma uses agricultural metaphors to explain gospel principles. I am no less surprised when my computer science friends compare God’s plan to some kind of mega-computer, all decisions governed by 1 and 0, while my colleagues in biology trace their own spiritual “evolution.” These insights are not revolutionary, for I am, in many ways, merely echoing Stephen L. Richards. In “An Open Letter to College Students,” Richards encourages students to acknowledge the limiting effect of language:

What if Hebrew prophets, conversant with only a small fraction of the surface of the earth, thinking and writing in terms of their own limited geography and tribal relations did interpret Him in terms of a tribal king and so limit His personality and the laws of the universe under His control to the dominion with which they were familiar? Can any interpreter even though he be inspired present his interpretation and conception in terms other than those with which he has had experience and acquaintance? Even under
the assumption that Divinity may manifest to the prophet higher and more exalted truths than he has ever before known and unfold to his spiritual eyes visions of the past, forecasts of the future and circumstances of the utmost novelty, how will the inspired man interpret? Manifestly, I think, in the language he knows and in the terms of expression with which his knowledge and experience have made him familiar.17

We can conclude that the metaphors we employ—whether originating from the mouths of prophets or Primary teachers—reveal more about us and our cultural baggage than they do about the divine. And so, the phrase, “We make God in our own image,” seems to make a little more sense, especially if we rewrite that sentence along the lines of, “We make sense of the unfamiliar by associating it with the familiar.” I can understand why Jewish law prohibited the making of graven images, for not only do we have a penchant for worshiping our own concepts of the divine, but a graven image is but a suggestion of a possibility. We need only observe a sampling of western paintings of Christ to identify a Euro-American bias in terms of physical attributes. As a result, we never experience the divine. We merely experience what we already know. We merely experience more of the same.

For some believers, the fact that we can and do embrace multiple conceptual metaphors testifies to the complexity and mystery of religious faith: God and Christ exist in the gaps. We could reformulate the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s famous phrase, “I am where I think not” as “God and Christ are where we think not.” They are beyond language, beyond knowing, beyond articulation. While this way of conceptualizing the divine may add to the mystery and perhaps power of godly beings, it also challenges direct experience. We should never be so presumptuous as to think that our metaphors, our attempts to confine the divine, can contain anything that we find around us. Our comparisons are nothing but pale versions, creative fictions, familiar but incomplete associations. In a beautiful but haunting description, Jean Améry reminds us of language’s limitations, of its inability to fully convey physical sensations. As a victim of the Holocaust, Améry was often asked to describe the torture he experienced. He responded by pointing out that

It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me. Was it ‘like a red-hot iron in my shoulders,’ and was another ‘like a dull wooden stake that had been driven into the back of my head?’ One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate.18

At the bare minimum, we are left with raw, unarticulated, unassimilated, incomprehensible experience, and the moment we begin to articulate, assimilate, and comprehend that experience, we begin to change and alter it. Truth—if we mean “complete accuracy”—is forever deferred. In other words, saying that “I learned X and Y from the Spirit” is simply naive, for cultural baggage—language, discourse, previous experiences—comes between ourselves and raw experience as well as our expression of that experience.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE,
THE INEVITABILITY OF FAITH

This impossibility of knowing Truth because of all that we bring with us to every encounter with the divine is yet another reminder that faith is the most fundamental principle of a spiritual life. There is no “knowledge” if by “knowledge” we mean certainty, for language and the conceptual systems language creates always limit our experience and our understanding. John Caputo helps us see the necessity and value of uncertainty when he reminds us that uncertainty actually serves religious causes. Uncertainty is not the antithesis of religion, but the essence of it. Caputo echoes Meister Eckhart, who asserts that love is “letting the other be” and then offers this clarification:

To love is to respect the invisibility of the other, to keep the other safe . . . . To love is to give oneself to the other in such a way that this would really be giving and not taking, a gift, a way of letting the other remain other, that is, be loved, rather than a stratagem, a ruse of jealousy, a way of winning . . . .

Perhaps another way to phrase this insight is to suggest that when we attempt to make sense of the divine by using language, we are changing the nature of the divine. We are not loving God or Christ on their own terms, but changing them to fit our own notions, our own conceptual or interpretive frameworks. We are comforted when we talk about Christ as our brother, as our shepherd, or as our guide, for these roles are familiar to us. We are not bewildered when we are asked to be pioneers, or sheep, or plants that need cultivation. My concern, however, is that these terms become too solidified, and they become seemingly literal descriptions rather than earnest but limited attempts to make sense of the otherworldly, the surprising, the unimaginable, the unforeseeable.

I must confess that I often feel paralyzed as well as lonely by accepting such a conclusion. I’ve certainly built my house on sand instead of stone, but I would build on stone if I could find some. Again, the very notion that reality is thoroughly contaminated by my own cultural baggage makes me uneasy, but it reminds me of a rather ordinary conclusion that bears repeating: we need to be humble.

Landing on familiar territory does not necessarily lead to worn-out responses. That is, recognizing our limitations, even our exile from Truth, need not celebrate self-flagellation, escort us to an empty plain where we annihilate the self, or submit ourselves to a brooding darkness. Acknowledging that our root metaphors misguide us or at least provide incomplete understanding encourages us to consider at least three more potential paths.

Recognizing our inability to escape metaphor, accepting the
slipperiness of Deity, we might be tempted to become iconoclasts, destroying all representations in an effort to preserve the *au-delà* nature of the divine. We extend the second commandment’s prohibition of images to all representations:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them . . . (Exodus 2:4).

Following this precept, we resist the urge to generate, use, and revere our linguistic or visual representations, for any metaphor is a mere image of the divine, a mere copy with no original against which to measure the accuracy of our copy. The divine remains present only in its conspicuous absence. We do have a model for this practice: nearly every celestial room in the temple system is void of any representation of the divine. At most, the divine is conveyed abstractly in that the rooms merely express simple utility and order (chairs, couches, tables with flower arrangements) and fine craftsmanship (albeit a bit baroque) in furniture and architectural and interior design. Celestial rooms encourage participants to merely sit and reflect with a minimal amount of distraction or interference. The relatively sparse room is a striking departure from the previous rooms that present either a barrage of slick images and surround-sound available in newer temples or the elaborate, sensory-rich murals and live dramas in older temples.

While the use of abstraction in celestial rooms seems to work rather well, I doubt that iconoclasm is even possible outside that sanctuary. First, even if we could eliminate all representations of the divine, the practice is neither practical nor wise, for a “respectful silence” does not differ greatly from a “silence of neglect.” As a result, the divine may simply, perhaps inevitably, fade from view and thought. Second, destroying images of the divine, as the Taliban regime did in Afghanistan, amounts to destroying our history, our complex and contradictory identity. Purging ourselves of contaminants leaves us with nothing, for we are little more than a collection of our past. Worse still, this empty space is prey to nostalgic manipulation. As Eva Hoffman points out, a “lost homeland becomes sequestered in the imagination as a mythic, static realm. That realm can be idealized or demonized, but the past can all too easily become not only ‘another country’ but a space of projection and fantasies.”

If iconoclasm silences, erases, and distorts us, we can, perhaps, respond to indeterminacy by focusing on process, not product. That is, rather than seek out absolute “truth,” “knowledge,” and “wisdom,” as heavy weights capable of anchoring our drifting boats, we should question our very methods of inquiry and modes of expression, shifting the question from “What do I know?” to “How do I know?” We should engage in a constant process of self-examination and self-reflexive behavior. However, we must go about this analysis keenly aware that we are not outside looking in, but inside looking around, thus shaping and being shaped by what we see and what sees us. Put another way, although we can ever fully “know” our selves, intentions, desires, and motives, we can always acknowledge that any claim we make, any behavior we engage in, is justified only by our own desires and needs and the social and linguistic contexts that give them form and meaning. We need to be ever vigilant as we trace the source of those desires, needs, and behaviors, always keeping in mind that Church practices and leaders are equally implicated and complicit in this process. While we cannot rely on the “true” to help us out, we can at least become hyper self-conscious, always in a state of reflection and wariness.

And if an attention to process makes us feel too claustrophobic and paralyzed, even weary from intense and constant introspection, we can then expand outward, multiplying metaphors, reveling in the sheer abundance of our creative ability to construct reality and relationships. Isaiah’s long list of conceptual metaphors drives us toward the conclusion that a multifaceted identity is the reason we need to multiply the metaphors we use to describe Christ. Multiplying metaphors helps us gain a better sense of Christ’s complex identity as well as of our own, and the practice may extend our community by offering metaphors that encourage others to join us. We need not ask, “Is this metaphor true?” We ask instead, “Is this metaphor useful? What are the gains and limitations of this particular way of seeing? What is the effect on me and the community if I embrace this particular conceptual metaphor?” Why does this or that person want me to accept this representation as true?”

We thus give up the need and desire for absolutes, keeping in mind that truth is contingent, negotiable, and laden with heavy baggage. But saying that truth is contingent doesn’t mean that “anything goes” or that constructed knowledge is not binding. Instead, the insight simply suggests that truth grows out of a specific situation and will inevitably celebrate some values while demoting others. And acknowledging complicity is vital to an ethical community: We must, at every turn,
practice a degree of humility, for knowledge and authority are in a constant state of negotiation, flux, and revelation. And what is a belief in revelation but a radical awareness that our language and perspectives are limited and require additional language and ways of seeing? Eva Hoffman reminds us that “To lose the ability to describe the world is to render that world a bit less vivid, a bit less lucid,” a21 an insight that encourages us to take upon ourselves the role of revelators, never ceasing to generate root metaphors that render the world ever more vibrant, ever more luminous.

NOTES

3. Ibid., 98.
5. Ibid. 3.
6. Tracy, 96.
8. Ibid., 16.
9. Ibid., 15.
10. Ibid., 16.
11. Ibid., 20.
12. Chris Ofili’s “The Holy Virgin Mary” displayed at the “Sensation” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art is an even more recent example of ambiguity and multiple meaning. Elephant dung is as multivalent as urine and blood.
13. I can’t help but think of the Ensign’s attempt to prevent this proliferation of meaning. In their presentation of magazine art work, Ensign editors consistently tell readers what an artist intended, what the art work is supposed to mean, thus limiting a reader’s response.
16. I’m reminded as well of Nazi concentration camp commandants who read Goethe and listened to Wagner in the morning, then executed Jews in the afternoon—art aficionado one minute, agent of genocide another.

Congratulations to the winners of the Eugene England Personal Essay Contest

FIRST PLACE, $200
“Pose,” by JANA BOUCK REMY, Irvine, California

SECOND PLACE, $150
“Waiting,” by LARA BURTON, Sundance, Utah

THIRD PLACE, $100
“Crests,” by LISA DOWNING, Heath, Texas

Watch for these essays in this and coming issues of SUNSTONE.
Hey have become a cliché. At best, an acronym. Yuppies: Young Urban Professionals. A couple of free birds with their candy-apple red Jeep and their golden retriever named Scout and their Arts and Crafts bungalow in the Sugar House area of Salt Lake City. Or maybe Dinks is a better term—Double Income No Kids.

But in reality, Melanie thinks. In reality she spends her days sidestepping stacks of back splash tiles and layers of sheetrock propped against their bedroom wall. Weekends she wades through Gary's gallons of eggshell paint with their names as soft and round as poetry: Potter's Clay, Amber Harvest, Claret Jug. In reality, she is trying not to leave him.

Not that it's the fixer-upper's fault. Or Gary's. Or anyone's, as far as Melanie is concerned, except perhaps God's. And what's the point of ever trying to pin anything on him? Still, she needs to tell Gary. She had planned on doing it tonight, after her draining series of parent-teacher conferences, but now as she's pulling into the driveway, her headlights catch her brother's Nissan pickup. It gleams softly in her halogen lights but is hard and real as the feeling of despair she carries around inside her chest cavity day after day. What can she do? She can't very well leave her husband in front of her brother.

"What the hell?"

Sam's voice reaches her first, after she's slipped through the back door and, in deference to Gary's newly lacquered floors, out of her loafers.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Trying to get myself killed; what do you think?"

"Well, you're doing a bang-up job. You've got to figure out the pattern."

"No duh. What do you think I'm trying to do?"

They're playing Super Nintendo. Leaning against the living room door frame, Melanie can't help thinking what a cozy picture the two of them make. Her husband, thin and boy-like, hunched over the game's controls, and her brother propped against the far wall, his toes hooked into the oriental rug (one of Gary's famous flea market finds), eating chocolate pudding with his finger. For a moment, there is only the cozy picture the two of them make and the canned music of the game and the little running man in his world of dangers: deadly turtles, swinging bars, cliffs, and pitfalls. Who, Melanie can't help thinking, made up this game? And what was he thinking when he did it?

"Hi, honey," Gary says.

"Hi," Melanie says. "What are you guys doing?"

"Oh, you know," Sam says, "mildewing."

Seeing him here like this, cracking jokes and eating a Jell-O pudding cup with his finger, licking globs of it off his knuckles, Melanie feels a mass of tenderness well up inside her. She can't help it.

You and your sisters, Gary is always saying. I hope you know you're all half in love with Sam. I feel sorry for the woman he marries because whoever she is, she won't be good enough. And it's true. Melanie adores her nineteen-year-old brother, not only because he is charming and good-looking, but also because he is good. Once when she dropped by his apartment toting a pan of homemade lasagna, Sam's roommate, clad only in boxers and with hair that would have made his mother crazy, answered the door.

"I don't know about that brother of yours," he said, lifting the pan from her hands in one smooth motion. "I mean what kind of guy gets up at the crack of dawn just to go drive some chick home from her night-shift job? And not even someone he's interested in, either. A real dog, actually."

Now, still warmed over the cozy picture the two of them make, Melanie moves towards Sam. She steps over Scout, who is snoozing in his usual place squashed against Gary's side. She edges past the scent of citrus stripping agent Gary's been using lately on the house's wood trim. It lingers in his clothes and his hair and on his skin. A part of him.

"Hey, watch it," Gary says. "I've only got one life left."

"I hope you know." Sam is standing to hug Melanie. "I am
kicking your husband’s butt.”

“Put a sock in it.” Gary says. “You can’t come into my house and eat my pudding and give me that kind of lip.”

“So?” Melanie says to Sam. “Any news? Any mission call looming?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, let us know. And when you go on your mission, I want to borrow your laptop. Okay? I call dibs on your laptop.”

“If I get to go on my mission,” Sam says.

“What?” Melanie says.


“Listen,” Sam’s hands are on Melanie’s shoulders. His skin, she notices, doesn’t smell like chocolate pudding, or like stripping agent. It smells like the outdoors, like basketball leather and Taco Bell.

“Listen, Mel,” he says. “I came here tonight to tell you something. And I don’t want you to freak out, okay? Promise me you won’t freak out.”

“What? Tell me.”

“Promise.”

“Okay, whatever.” Melanie raises her right hand.

“Okay, here goes. I went to the plasma center the other day—”

“Sam,” Melanie says, “if you needed money—”

“No. That’s not it. That’s not what I’m telling you. What I came to tell you, to tell both of you—and you can’t tell Mom or Dad, you have to swear—is that the plasma center ran its usual battery of tests and one of them came up positive.”

His eyes, Melanie notices, are hazel with flecks of gold. Their father’s eyes. “Which one?” she says.

“The one for HIV.”

IN REALITY, MELANIE lives her life in cycles. Days three through seven of each cycle, she swallows a tiny white pill which causes her ovaries to inflate inside of her like two diminutive balloons. It always surprises her how she can feel exactly the location of her ovaries, those two organs she never before gave a moment’s notice to. On day twelve, she lies on a paper sheet in her specialist’s office while he studies the monitor on which is pictured the bulbous arc of a follicle that looks ready to erupt, like a miniature volcano, and emit the only cell in the human body visible to the naked eye. “Looks ripe and ready to go,” the specialist always says, which causes Melanie to picture her reproductive organs as tender pieces of fruit, drooping on a vine.

Days twelve through fourteen of each cycle, Melanie urinates on a test stick twice a day, waiting for the blue line which would indicate her luteinizing hormone surge—the optimum time for conception to occur. On the fourteenth day, when the blue line fails to appear, Gary gives her an injection in her hip, and twelve hours later they “have relations,” which Melanie tracks on a grid the doctor’s office provides. Then for two weeks it is nothing but waiting, of monitoring her body for the signs she remembers from her first pregnancy: the swollen breasts, the fatigue, the pressing need to urinate. It always amazes Melanie how well she knows her body during these weeks. The things that carry her through her days—her bones and organs and blood and skin—become, in a sense, an entity apart from herself. An enemy.

“Remember the good old days?” Gary says on the morning after Sam dropped his bomb. He is perched on a stool in the kitchen eating Lucky Charms. “Remember,” he says, “back when these little marshmallow things in Lucky Charms all had one thing in common? They were lucky charms?” He pinches a piece of dehydrated marshmallow between his thumb and forefinger and dances it towards his mouth. There are droplets of milk on his chin. “I mean, really, red balloons? And how, pray tell, is a balloon supposed to be lucky?”

Melanie just stares, her glass of orange juice poised halfway to her lips. “I don’t know,” she says.

“Oh!” Gary hops off his stool. “I want to show you something.”

Melanie allows her husband to cup her elbow in his palm, steer her through their obstacle course of a house. Through the kitchen with its newly installed granite counter tops and rebuilt weight-and-pulley windows. Past their bedroom with its
lath and plaster walls that Gary is in the process of taping and sanding in preparation for their treatment of topping compound. Past the bathroom with its refurbished clawfoot tub and pedestal sink. It frightens Melanie that she knows these terms. Lath and plaster. Knob and tube. Tongue and groove. True divided light. They are like so many words in a strange incantation. They are Gary’s words.

“Welcome,” Gary says, with a flourish of his hand, “to the conservatory.”

“The conservatory?” They have arrived in the addition at the back of the house, where Gary has installed new washer/dryer hook-ups to save Melanie from having to lug baskets of laundry downstairs. “And who are you? Colonel Mustard?”

Okay, then.” He grins, his teeth overlapped slightly. “The mud room.”

He steers her towards the room’s fireplace, one of the house’s many oddities, installed by a previous owner and of no apparent function, and shoves aside the cherry mantel he has taken down so he can strip it and gouge it with a carrot peeler in order to give it that “distressed” look. This isn’t what he wants to show her, he says. What he’s really pumped about are the three tiers of crown molding he’s built into the wall above the fireplace. He’s painted them a glossy white, the color of whipped meringue, and set on them the four Kokopelli statues he’d brought back from his mission to Arizona years before.

“Well?” he says. “What do you think?”

Melanie has never liked the Kokopelli statues. Their circle eyes and stick arms and tiny primitive instruments—they give her the creeps. But she does have to admit that they add something to the room. An intangible aura of artiness. Of coolness. She does have to admit that Gary possesses a certain knack. “It’s great,” she says. “Just great. What’s not to like?”

Melanie used to love the phrase “leap of faith.” It sketched in her mind images of harrowed-up souls and expanses of cool, lifeless darkness and limbs teetering on the slick cusp of the abstract while a hand, cupped in the midst of the abyss, waited to deliver up the faithful. But that was before. Before the baby she and Gary had spent two years trying to conceive had died prior to being born. Before she’d seen the look on her husband’s face as he gazed down at the fetus that lay curled like a question mark on the disposable blue chuck the hospital had provided. Before her mother, standing at her bedside in the hospital room (not a delivery room, since the doctors knew there would be no live baby to deliver) said, “It looks like someone took some clay and tried to form a little person out of it.”

It was a fluke, the doctors had said. A trisomy on the eighteenth chromosome. A one-in-a-thousand chance of it happening to anyone. Never compatible with life.

Fluke, Melanie later learned, was not the correct word. It was the word the doctors—the perinatologist and her own OB/GYN—used to describe her situation. But a fluke, Melanie learned later by looking it up in the Oxford English dictionary, is an accidental stroke of good luck.

The shower is her favorite place to cry. She uses a nub of almond-essence soap (somehow it’s always a nub, never a new bar) to rinse away the salty residue of what she can’t control. She doesn’t just cry over the expected disappointments, either, like the image of her almost-baby on its disposable blue hospital chuck, or the prospect of her handsome and charming brother contracting AIDS—a disease with a name spelled all in capital letters, as if it is to be screamed—she also cries over the less obvious. She cries, for instance, over the Olympics. On the afternoon she sees how that shrimp of a girl saves the U.S. women’s gymnastics team from losing the gold to the Russians—after she watches her vault herself into a nearly perfect dismount despite the torn ligaments in her ankle—Melanie steps into the shower and sags against the wall. Power to women, she murmurs to herself.

After her cry, after she is weak with weeping, she steps from the shower and finds Gary in their bedroom applying topping compound to the walls. “You okay?” he says when he sees her. Melanie knows her eyes are red-rimmed and puffy: a dead giveaway. He drops his putty knife into a bucket of topping compound and slides his dust mask to the top of his head, so that he looks like a nurse in an old film. “Melanie?” he says.
Approaching the wall, Melanie rubs her palm over a strip of embedded tape. She is stalling, measuring the weight of her words, assessing whether or not they are of such a heft that they will, in fact, crush him. Perhaps, she will say, it’s time to call it quits. But he will not understand. After five-and-a-half years of marriage, Melanie is almost a hundred percent sure of this: he will think she’s referring to their attempts to conceive. Perhaps he’ll assume she’s suggesting adoption. But even so, Melanie knows, now is the time to speak. Gary is, after all, waiting for it. She should speak now. The fixer-upper isn’t to blame, she might say. Nor are you. Nor is anyone, as far as I’m concerned, except perhaps God. . . .

But no words come. Instead, she picks at the strip of tape beneath her fingers. She digs at the topping compound with her nails until, with a puff of white dust, she has ripped the tape free from the wall. After five-and-a-half years of marriage, she would have bet on Gary’s trying to stop her. Or at least launching into a detailed explanation on the necessity of mesh tape when patching lath and plaster walls, that without it the topping compound would be of no use: the cracks would come back full force. Melanie has heard it all before. But, to her surprise, Gary doesn’t say a word, doesn’t even flinch, in fact, while she makes her way around the room, standing on Gary’s unopened buckets of compound when necessary, and tearing fragments of tape from the walls.

Soon she is smeared with plaster dust. The towel she is wearing is sopping with a mixture of her water and sweat and plaster dust. Melanie doesn’t care. She doesn’t even try to push down the feeling of glee that bubbles inside her like a malignant wave. She continues to attack the walls, ravages them with her nails, yanks away every last strip of mesh tape until, suddenly, Gary’s mouth is on hers.

“It’s not true,” he says, pulling her close. “It’s a mistake. He’s lying.” He shakes her towel aside and presses himself against her. She doesn’t resist. The water on her skin mingled with the powder from the topping compound is creating a sticky paste between them. His hands move over her body .

“I’m telling you, Mel, none of the rules have changed. The re-

At first, Melanie cannot cope with happy. The best she can do is wonder how her mother, a relatively unassuming and narrow-hipped person, could possibly have pushed into the world someone so sturdy and splendid and good.
T HE TERM “Galileo Event” owes its origin to Book of Mormon scholar Brent Lee Metcalfe, who, at the 2000 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, proposed the following definition: “A Galileo Event occurs when the cognitive dissonance between empirical evidence and a theological tenet is so severe that a religion will abandon the tenet, acquiescing to the empirical data.” Earlier that year, Metcalfe had invited me to prepare an essay summarizing existing genetic research of Native American origins and its implications for the Book of Mormon. Near the beginning of the following year, I submitted a draft of the essay for peer review. In August 2001, the essay, now reviewed and modified, appeared online at http://mormonscriptures.com as “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics.” At the Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium that same month, I joined Trent D. Stephens and D. Jeffrey Meldrum in a panel discussion, moderated by Metcalfe and entitled “DNA and Lamanite Identity: A Galileo Event?” Following the panel discussion, I agreed to the inclusion of my essay in a forthcoming anthology, edited by Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe, entitled American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon. The anthology appeared in print in May 2002.

In this short essay, I hope to deconstruct the image of a “Mormon Galileo” by showing that it is rooted at least as much in the social dynamics of media reporting, Latter-day Saint boundary maintenance, and exaggerations by apologists and a Christian ministry as it is in any inherent conflict between science and religion.

The early uses of the term “Galileo Event” did not include reference to any particular individual who might play the role of Galileo. Instead, the emphasis was on the accumulation of scientific evidence to an extent that would necessitate a change in Mormon beliefs about American Indians. For example, I used the term “Galileo Event” as a heading for the subsection of my essay devoted to discussions of DNA research in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, at the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR) conference, and at the Sunstone Symposium. I defined the event as a “shift in the foundations of Mormon beliefs about Indians.” In order to avoid unnecessary conflict between science and religion, I advised against confusing a spiritual witness of the Book of Mormon with scientific evidence. Despite my effort to be clear in conveying what I was and was not saying, and after someone sent a copy of “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics” to my stake president, I found myself summoned to a disciplinary council on charges of apostasy.

The first time I heard anyone single out an individual as Mormonism’s Galileo was during a telephone interview with William Lobdell of the Los Angeles Times during the first week of December 2002. Lobdell was interviewing me about the upcoming disciplinary council that my stake president, Mathew Latimer, had scheduled for 8 December. The charge in the case was “apostasy” for my conclusion that a nineteenth-century origin for the Book of Mormon is the most parsimonious explanation of the scientific evidence, as expressed in my recently published essay. During the interview for the Times, Lobdell asked what I thought of being called the “Mormon Galileo.” My immediate response was, “That’s a bit presumptuous!” I was not comfortable with the label at that time, nor do I endorse it today. Nonetheless, Lobdell proceeded with the storyline he had apparently constructed prior to speaking with me, printing LDS researcher Maxine Hanks’s endorsement of and BYU zoologist Michael Whiting’s objection to that label. He neglected to note my reticence to being so labeled. Whiting contributed to the hype on 29 January 2003 during a public lecture at BYU on DNA and the Book of Mormon. There, in a fabricated parody of so-called “critics,” he declared, “We are the modern Galileo. Hear us roar!”

Whiting’s caricature owes more to his fertile imagination than to the facts in the case. For example, I saw an abstract of Whiting’s lecture a few days before the event and responded by sending an open letter, via email, outlining his misrepresentations of my research and asking him to correct the errors in his abstract and the presentation. In this letter, I discouraging Whiting from personalizing the issue by identifying nine prominent geneticists who had similarly challenged the Mormon belief that American Indians came from Israel. Furthermore, I drew his attention to my statements about the limitations of genetic research and my consideration in my original article of limited geographic settings for the Book of Mormon. Nonetheless, in that lecture and a subsequent article in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, Whiting continued to misrepresent my essay, suggesting that I have announced “that modern DNA research has conclusively proven the Book of Mormon false and that Joseph Smith is a fraud,” that I hold “the naïve notion DNA provides infallible evidence,” that I ignore the limitations of genetic research, and that I tout my conclusions as being “assumption free.”

To the contrary, I believe that fallible humans interpret DNA evidence, and such interpretations are inevitably affected by cultural assumptions and preformed expectations. It would be an abuse of science to contend that one has conclusively proven anything. Thus, I have maintained that a nineteenth-century origin of the Book of Mormon is the most parsimonious explanation of existing scientific and historical data. The scripture, though, may be historical fiction and still contain inspired spiritual truths emanating from a prophet of God.

Whiting’s misrepresentations of my conclusions have been repeated and exaggerated in Daniel C. Peterson’s recent articles in FARMS Review. Peterson asserts that in “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics,” I announced “that science has now definitely proven the Book of Mormon historically false.” Later in the same article, he alleges that I have embraced the role of a Mormon Galileo and falsely claims that I have attempted to “show that the Book of Mormon cannot be reconciled with the findings of contemporary biology” and that I
have sought to “block off any avenue of escape” from what I purportedly believe “to be an utterly devastating case.”11

To the contrary, I believe that we can reconcile the biological evidence with the Book of Mormon by approaching the scripture as nineteenth century pseudepigrapha and through recognizing that prayer is not a reliable means of investigating historical and scientific questions. As I have previously noted, “Spiritual witnesses may reach beyond science, but they should not be confused with it.”12 The Book of Mormon, like the book of Genesis, need not be historically accurate to have important religious value.13

When William Lobdell asked me what I thought of being dubbed the Mormon Galileo, perhaps I should have responded thus, giving one attack I’ve seen made against my credentials: “A comparison with Galileo would be inappropriate because, well, . . . you see, I teach at a community college, . . . and I’m the only full-time faculty member in my department.”14 Seriously, though, a number of legitimate reasons distinguish my experience from that of Galileo.

First, more than a century before I was born, the anthropological community, on the basis of archaeological, cultural, and linguistic evidence, had already rejected the idea that American Indians originated in Israel.

Second, many other Mormon scholars during the twentieth century have drawn upon anthropological research to raise questions about the validity of a hemispheric model of the Book of Mormon.15

Third, as scholars at FARMS are fond of pointing out, I am not a geneticist. Instead, I am a cultural anthropologist whose primary research interest is in Mormon representations of Native Americans.16

Fourth, more than a year before my article appeared, Simon Southerton, a geneticist and former LDS bishop, published conclusions similar to my own.17

Fifth, I never claimed to have conducted a scientific experiment using DNA to test hypotheses about Book of Mormon historicity. That I purported to have done so is another straw man Michael Whiting appears to have manufactured for rhetorical purposes. Instead, I summarized scientific studies performed by other researchers and discussed the implications of that research for Mormon views of Native Americans. In that summary, I correctly predicted, “If the embrace of DNA research has an impact on Mormon views, it will likely propel new approaches to scripture and history already underway in Mormon intellectual circles.”18

In both Galileo’s situation and my own, the apparent conflict between science and religion appears to be primarily, if not exclusively, a byproduct of social factors.

LATTER-DAY SIMPLICIOS

There might actually be one appropriate comparison with Galileo’s experience. Glen M. Cooper, a LDS historian of science, alludes to the importance of “another group, strident and obnoxious, involved in the Galileo affair.” This group, he contends, “was responsible for inciting the trouble [against Galileo] and pursuing it to its conclusion.” The real lesson in my story, Cooper continues, can be found in a comparison of “the role of this group in those epoch-defining events to their analogue in the present situation.”19 Let’s review Cooper’s summary of this group that he calls the Simplicios, after one of Galileo’s interlocutors, “Mr. Simpleton,” in Galileo’s Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems.

Cooper describes the Simplicios as “a group of intellectuals—the academic philosophers—whose influence was disproportionate to their size or actual understanding of the relevant issues.” These men advanced doctrines over “sense experience” and “followed a kind of a priori, prescriptive science by which they sought to prove what they already believed rather than to learn anything new about the way the world works.” Cooper finds “an example of the pernicious influence of this group” in Cosimo Boscaglia’s denunciation of Galileo in front of his employers. “This cabal,” Cooper explains, “hatched a plan to thwart him in every way possible, and its members sought a priest who would denounce him and his followers as heretics.” In the trials that followed, “these professors were only too willing to provide the church with incriminating evidence against Galileo.”20

Sound familiar?

It certainly sounds familiar to Cooper, but in his interpretation, he equates the LDS Church, not with the Catholic Church as one might expect, but instead with Galileo. The role of the Simplicios, he contends, “is taken by the self-styled intellectuals, the critics of the church and the Book of Mormon.”21

Cooper came very close to seeing the obvious, but he apparently failed to look in the mirror. A mirror, of course, would reverse the image.

There may be a better analogue at BYU for Latter-day Simplicios. Scholars at FARMS explicitly acknowledge their a priori, prescriptive methodology with statements such as, “The work of FARMS rests on the conviction that the Book of Mormon and other ancient scriptures are authentic historical documents written by prophets of God.”22 In my scholarship, on the other hand, I have not set out to defend a preconceived religious belief. In fact, I have come to seriously question the assumptions with which I was raised. My willingness to question led someone, as yet unidentified but probably not associated with BYU, to send a copy of my article “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics” to my stake president, Mathew Latimer.23 I neither sought nor desired disciplinary action. In fact, I adamantly opposed it. When my efforts to avoid a disciplinary council failed, I chose to share the story with the press.24

To my knowledge, William Lobdell of the Los Angeles Times was the first to suggest a similarity between my situation and that of Galileo. During the interview, I sensed that he had formed the outline of his story before talking with me, and my reluctance to endorse such an approach went unnoted in his
article. Michael Whiting exacerbated the situation by falling too easily for Lobdell’s storyline. Rather than defuse the situation by emphasizing his agreement with my conclusion that current genetic evidence pointed to an Asian rather than Middle Eastern origin for Native Americans, Whiting parodied an imagined acclamation of a modern Galileo and distorted my published essay to construct a set of straw men that he then attacked for greater effect. Allen Wyatt of FAIR joined the fray with an error-ridden essay on my “Motivation, Behavior, and Dissension,” later cited approvingly by the editor of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies. John Tvedtines, senior resident scholar at the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (ISPART), the BYU institution that houses FARMS, brought the dispute to my employer during the midst of my tenure review, alleging in an email message to my dean that I was simply parroting the work of “an avowedly anti-Mormon writer,” and that I lacked qualifications to lecture on either genetics or the Book of Mormon. When these facts are taken into account, certain apologists appear to fit the model of Simplicios more closely than do the so-called critics.

Despite the case with which Cooper’s portrait can be reversed, scholars at FARMS and I agree with each other far more than we differ. The same appears true for nearly all the Latter-day Saint scientists who have written or commented on the issue. Thus, I would echo the words of Daniel Peterson, “To the best of my knowledge, no serious Latter-day Saint scholar or scientist contends that, to date, research on Amerindian DNA provides significant affirmative support for the Book of Mormon. We basically agree that there is no genetic evidence to support the Book of Mormon, and most of us do not expect it to be forthcoming. This emerging scholarly consensus, if fully embraced by the Church, would, in fact, constitute acquiescence to science. Genetic research, conducted by other scientists and only summarized by me, appears to be a catalyst that has accelerated a process in the Mormon intellectual community that began a century ago, after archaeologists discredited the myth of an ancient white race of mound builders.

Apologists are not the only ones to misrepresent my research for their own religious advantage. Living Hope Ministries of Brigham City, Utah, has similarly misled the viewers of a video documentary, “DNA vs. the Book of Mormon” by carefully editing out statements by scientists (including me) that conflict with their worldview. While the video includes several clips from scientists acknowledging an Asian origin of American Indians, the editors did not include any statements identifying the likely time range of those migrations. The first such migration likely occurred 13,000 to 20,000 years ago, well outside the range of dates acceptable to “young earth” creationists. Similarly, Pastor Joel Kramer and his crew edited out statements that discussed archaeological problems undermining literal views of the historicity of the biblical narrative. They also avoided any discussion of the nearly 99 percent similarity between human and chimpanzee DNA. Finally, this Christian ministry cut my statements suggesting alternative responses to genetic data Mormons might employ instead of leaving the Church. I suggested that other possible responses include challenging the scientific data and/or reconsidering our understandings of scripture, prayer, and prophecy. In this case, the conflict is not between science and religion; rather, it is between two religious worldviews, both of which may eventually need to reconsider older views in light of the discoveries of the scientific community.

While I repeated Metcalfe’s description of this “Galileo Event” in my publications as a way to describe a pending abandonment of traditional views of American Indian origins, the designation of a specific person as a Mormon Galileo is a byproduct of a controversy-hungry press that capitalized on an apparent effort, or efforts, to discredit me in front of my Church. After that effort failed, at least one scholar at ISPART sought, unsuccessfully, to discredit me in front of my employer. Sadly, scholars at FARMS have undertaken considerable effort to challenge the image created by the press and Living Hope Ministries, yet in the process, they have perpetuated the portrait they are trying to discredit, while failing to distinguish between the actual conclusions drawn from my research and those they read into it. In both Galileo’s situation and my own, the apparent conflict between science and religion appears to be primarily, if not exclusively, a byproduct of social factors.

NOTES


2. Thomas W. Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics,” American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon, ed. by Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 63–66. It is worth noting that this description of a Galileo Event is a far cry from the “atheist-making event” alleged by Peterson, “Galileo Events,” x, 1, for one, am not an atheist. It appears to me that, at the very least, we have to acknowledge that gods of all religious traditions are powerful social forces that must be reckoned with, not denied.


4. Like many others, I have heard rumors that someone associated with FARMS sent the article to my stake president. I have not, however, seen any affirmative evidence to support those allegations. On 11 March 2004, I sent the following email inquiry to President Latimer. “Rumors have been circulating in the Mormon intellectual community that accuse one or more individuals at BYU of sending you a copy of ‘Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics’ and encouraging you to take disciplinary action against me. One of those individuals has asked for my help in dispelling such rumors. I do not know if you are at liberty to disclose who might have sent you the article, but is there anything you can say that would help dispel such rumors?” Ten days later, he replied, “I’m not inclined to discuss specifics on how I became aware of the material at issue. As you know, your papers are publicly available, and you have openly discussed these matters in several venues. While it may be intriguing to think that a member of the so-called ‘intellectual community’ turned you in, I can assure you my involvement in this matter arose out of much more mundane circumstances. In the end, our discussions were never about suppressing academic freedom or honest inquiry—despite what your supporters may believe. It was about encouraging repentance, correcting error, and, hopefully, rekindling faith in Christ. For me, it remains so.” Mathew Latimer to Thomas Murphy, “Re: Dispelling Rumors,” electronic mail, 21 March 2004.

5. It is important to note that my publications were publicly available and, although someone was involved in alerting my stake president to their existence, ultimately President Latimer must take responsibility for his decision to call a disciplinary council. In consultation with Kerrie Murphy (my spouse) and me on 2 October 2003, President Latimer acknowledged that responsibility and expressed his regret for his decision to call a disciplinary council, referring to that decision as an error in judgment and an example of his own fallibility.


8. I am fully aware that this position is fraught with its own set of difficulties. In interviews with William Lobdell of the Los Angeles Times and Joel Kramer of Living Hope Ministries, I have acknowledged, when pressed, that treating the Book of Mormon as fiction may require a recognition that, at a few specific times, Joseph Smith may have attempted to deceive people into thinking that the gold plates were genuine ancient artifacts. It is in this sense, that one could use the word “fraud” to describe Joseph Smith, but my personal preference is to see Smith as a pious pseudopigrapher. For a fuller discussion of the complexities of such a view, see Robert M. Price, “Joseph Smith: Inspired Author of the Book of Mormon,” American Apocrypha, 321–66.

9. Peterson, “Galileo Events,” xii. This characterization appeared after I had pointed out Whiting’s error in print. See Murphy, “Simply Implausible,” 110, note 6. Peterson was aware of this article, for he quoted from its footnotes elsewhere in his piece.

10. My acknowledgments that others have applied the label of a Mormon Galileo to me should not be seen as an endorsement of the attribution. Such acknowledgments have appeared in Thomas W. Murphy and Simon Southerton, “Genetic Research a ‘Galileo Event’ for Mormons,” Anthropology News 44, no. 2 (February 2003): 20; Murphy, “Imagining Lamanites,” 301; and http://faculty.edcc.edu/~tmurphy.


12. Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis,” 68. For another expression of the same argument, see Murphy, “Simply Implausible,” 109–10, 130.

13. Although this choice to follow the lead of others in separating the “historicity” of a religious text from its “value” is deliberate, I recognize that it is fraught with its own set of difficulties. In the case of the Book of Mormon, these include but are not limited to the following. How do we deal with the claims of Joseph Smith and others to have handled actual plates? How can we reconcile such a position with a long history of Church leaders insisting upon the historicity of the Book of Mormon? What about Native Americans who have come to believe they are Lamanites?

14. Surprisingly, this is an actual argument advanced in a sidebar apparently authored by S. Kent Brown, editor of Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 12, no. 1 (2003): 37. The full text of this ad hominem “editorial” reads: “The major work that attacks the Book of Mormon on the grounds of supposed DNA evidence is that of Thomas W. Murphy, Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics, a chapter in American Apocrypha, edited by Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002). Murphy recently completed a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Washington, and he currently teaches at Edmonds Community College in Lynnwood, Washington, where he is the only full-time member of his department. His skills are in the cultural heritage of Native Americans, and he has little or no scientific background. For more on him and the media attention that his work has received, consult http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/murphy.pdf. — ED.”

The editor’s claim that I have little or no scientific background is simply false. He is apparently unaware that training in anthropology in most U.S. universities includes natural science courses in biological anthropology. Not only do I have such training, but I also teach a course in “Human Origins” that transfers as a natural science requirement to major universities throughout the country. This course includes molecular biological laboratories in which students extract, amplify, and analyze their own mtDNA sequences.

15. For an overview of these studies, see Murphy, “Imagining Lamanites,” 182–229.


20. Ibid., bxv-bxvii.

21. Ibid.

22. This statement appears on the inside back cover of Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, volume 11, and a similarly worded statement appears under the heading of “By Study and Also by Faith,” http://farms.byu.edu (accessed 19 November 2003).

23. See note 4 above.

24. Ultimately, I must bear responsibility for my decision to share the story with the press. Yet that responsibility should not be confused with an endorsement of the label of Galileo. Hopefully, this essay helps express my point of view more clearly than was possible in the press.


26. Tvedtnes apparently felt prompted to write the dean of my division when he read an announcement on the Edmonds Community College webpage about my upcoming lecture, “Sin, Skin, and Seed: Mistakes of Men in the Book of Mormon.” Email message from John Tvedtnes to Richard Asher, Tom Murphy Lecture, 7 February 2003. See also Murphy, “Simply Implausible,” 130–31, note 84.


28. For a summary of what I see as key points of agreement, see Murphy, “Simply Implausible,” 111. Daniel Peterson cites this same list without refuting any of its particulars. However, he does complain that it is expressed in my own words rather than those of authors at FARMS or FAIR. See Daniel Peterson, “Prolegomena to the DNA Essays,” FARMS Review 15, no. 2 (2003): 26–28.

29. Peterson, “Prolegomena to the DNA Essays,” 32.

30. Brigham H. Roberts speculates that Joseph Smith could have based the Book of Mormon on the work of Ethan Smith, a Congregationalist minister from Poultney, Vermont, who had drawn upon widespread speculation that Indians might be descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel and combined it with popular beliefs that an ancient white race had built the mounds found along the Great Lakes, Mississippi, and Ohio rivers. When John Wesley Powell assumed the directorship of the Smithsonian’s new bureau of ethnology in 1881, he directed research efforts that convincingly demonstrated that ancestors of contemporary Native Americans, not an ancient white race, had built the spectacular mounds of ancient America. See Brigham H. Roberts, Studies of the Book of Mormon, 2nd ed., ed., Brigham D. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); Robert Silverberg, mound Builders of Ancient America: The Archaeology of a Myth (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1968); Thomas W. Murphy, “Imagining Lamanites: Native Americans and the Book of Mormon,” PhD diss., University of Washington, 2003.

31. Living Hope Ministries, DNA vs. the Book of Mormon, VHS, Brigham City, Utah: 2003. The video is available online at http://mormonchallenge.com. For a more accurate representation of my perspectives on these issues, see Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis; Murphy, "Imagining Lamanites."
BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE BORDERLANDS—II

By D. Jeff Burton

![Figure 1: Groups in the LDS Orbit]

1. CORE MEMBERS: true believers, unwaveringly supportive, the acceptable.
2. BORDERLAND MEMBERS: those who consider themselves faithful to and part of the Church but don't fit comfortably in Group 1.
3. MEMBERS-OF-RECORD ONLY: non-participants, non-believers, non-supporters.
4. DOTS—previous members, prior investigators, and non-LDS family members.

I feel like I am in this horrendous trap that I can't get out of. I just pray, pray, and pray! Recently I have been on [some websites] that have literally blown my mind to the point I have been in constant prayer to keep from losing it.

THIS POIGNANT STATEMENT was part of an email from ‘Jessica’ (not her real name), a long-term and much-troubled Borderlander. You can think of Jessica as a mature housewife living in Utah County and married in the temple to a staunch Group 1 true believer. Jessica is the mother of four grown children and a convert to the Church during her teenage years.

In this column, we explore the stories of Borderlanders because it is useful to know how others have successfully (or unsuccessfully) dealt with problems. In my last column, I talked about my own lifelong experience in the Borderlands—which I consider to be successful and comfortable.

Those who enter the Borderlands either become short-term visitors (staying for weeks or months before returning to Group 1 or, more commonly, moving on to Group 3 status), or they stay for many years. Those who stay either eventually establish a warm and comfortable home (like I have) or become troubled wanderers (like Jessica).

Long-term Borderland occupants include (1) members who appreciate the Church and religion and who hope to receive a testimony, (2) faithful members who support the Church but are not overly concerned about “getting a testimony” (this is where I fit in), (3) spouses of true believers who, to avoid disrupting their families, can’t or won’t leave (Jessica’s situation), (4) troubled Church employees (who can’t give up job and retirement benefits), (5) members who have had a “lost-my-testimony” experience and in their frustration and anguish just don’t know what to do, (6) those who can’t leave the group because they feel closely attached to their ward members and friends. A troubled few linger for years, enduring painful emotional problems, unable to return to Group 1, move on, or make a comfortable home in the Borderlands. Jessica is one of these unfortunate souls.

I have distilled Jessica’s and my many communications over the past six months into the following interactive paragraphs. Some details have been modified to protect the confidentiality and identities of the people involved.

JEFF: How did you come to find yourself in the Borderlands?

JESSICA: During my teenage years, I lived summers with my aunt who was LDS. One thing led to another, and I was baptized into the Church. (Ironically, a few years after I married into it, my aunt left the Church!) Then came BYU and marriage. I was twenty-three when I attended my first temple ceremony, which horrified me and left me with little desire to ever go back. That was my first experience of questioning, doubting, and feeling separated from others—this, more than thirty years ago. In recent years, many other troubling issues have popped up: polygamy viewed as the law of heaven and the order of the celestial kingdom; the subsequent dehumanizing, emotional abuse of women; and many other things.

[Jessica then details many of her concerns, citing the typical complaints and concerns one finds on LDS-related internet sites, e.g., about God having sex with Mary, Joseph Smith and others marrying teenage girls, blood atonement, and Adam/God.]

JEFF: We really don’t know the full facts about [such] complaints and claims, which are variously and widely repeated with little or questionable proof. Take all such writings and claims with a grain of salt.

Here are my suggestions for struggling members of the Borderlands like you:

• Avoid becoming an easy “true believer” in anti-Mormon literature and claims.
• Become a pure seeker of knowledge and understanding; if you can’t be a “true believer,” try becoming a detached but participating student of Mormonism; become an active but objective observer of our religion. (From an objective standpoint, it actually looks pretty good.)
• Work on your personal relationships with God, Jesus, family, and friends; let the Church and Mormonism be as much a part of your religious life as you can.
• Devote yourself to the people/behavior part of the LDS equation—honesty, kindness, unselfishness, sharing, love, doing good for others. (Isn’t this the core of Christ’s teachings, after all?)
• Don’t let your troubles and concerns destroy important relationships, such as those with your husband and children.
• Accept the fact that all people have a “personal religion” that is unique to them, try to accept people around you as they are; try to accept and understand that your husband is on a different but parallel path to salvation. Accepting others usually results in being accepted, too.

JESSICA [A week later.]: Thanks for the tips. I have not visited any more of those anti-Mormon Internet sites. Can’t handle it. (Still, I cannot get “blood atonement” out of my mind.)

But those horrific accounts regarding the abuses of polygamy, and murder, and other stuff are taken from the Journal of Discourses, the Deseret News, and various journals, not just conjured up in someone’s head. How can truth be built on such corruptions? Did those frenzied
He’s really shaken by my questioning and all. Thinks the devil’s got me. And our love for each other has suffered.

frontier “prophets” just go crazy with power, real or imagined?
JEFF: Who knows? I don’t dwell on such issues since they don’t impact my daily life nor my personal relationships in any meaningful way.

JESSICA: I [recently read] the conference talk by Jeffrey Holland, “A Prayer for the Children,” that essentially repudiates any kind of skepticism, calling negative attention to “those who pitch their tents out on the periphery of religious faith” (as though, if you don’t embrace Mormonism, per se, then you have no faith at all). It further illuminates the “price to be paid” down the line—children, their children, etc.—if we don’t “convey powerful, heartfelt convictions regarding the truthfulness of the Restoration and the divine guidance of the Church from the First Vision to this very hour.” If you don’t have that conviction (and that seems incomprehensible to true believers), you can’t be a hypocrite and try to convey what you don’t believe! What do you say about that? The balancing act I have had to do at home is absolutely draining, mentally and emotionally. I would not wish it on anyone.

JEFF: Elder Holland’s talk left me with a few questions, too. Obviously he was talking to true believers who might not fully share their testimonies with their kids (or who might live like they don’t have a testimony). I’m not sure how he would treat those who have not yet received or don’t have the gift of “knowing”—people like us, who are willing to be faithful members of the Church without that strong “testimony.” I have written to him to ask him how his instruction applies in this case.

JESSICA: As it relates to my husband, the best and only course I can take is not to talk about religion at all. I’m sure you know the type. He’s really shaken by my questioning and all. And our love for each other has suffered. Mine more than his, probably.

JEFF: Maybe it is best to wait for the right time to talk to him, i.e., after he trusts you a little more.

JESSICA: From your experience, do you have a formula for helping couples cope with such strong religious polarization?

JEFF: I wish there were a formula, but every couple’s situation is different. Have you considered couples counseling? You both need to return to your ultimate intentions and commitments to each other. What you both must be willing to say (and act, and do, and be) is: “Our relationship is the most important thing in my life.” “You (the spouse) are the most important person in my life.” “All other facets of life, while important and useful, will assume a secondary role, including the Church.” Note that I didn’t say “including my personal relationship to God,” which is integral to each person’s life. It tends to transcend all facets of life. The Church is here to help us meet our prime spiritual goals, commitments, and intentions. It is an institution intended, in part, to help sustain our personal quest for happiness and salvation and to aid us in maintaining a good relationship with our Father in Heaven. The Church also has several of its own divinely mandated goals which it strongly encourages us to participate in: saving the dead, perfecting the saints, preaching the gospel to others. These are worthy Church goals and warrant our support, as we can give it.

JESSICA: There is such an oppressive, heavy cloud hanging in the air at home. My husband has mellowed somewhat, but at times he can’t resist tabs like, “If you can’t accept [Church-related teachings], then just leave,” and stuff like that. I just want to do a primal scream! I am sending you an article written by Robert Kirby a while back, “Thou Shalt Not Coerce Thy Spouse.” I have loved his column ever since moving here.

JEFF: Did your husband read that article? Sometimes humor can defuse even the most difficult of problems.

JESSICA: My husband switched from the Tribune to the Deseret News now that it is a morning paper. God forbid you should get an other viewpoint!

JEFF: How about taking both papers? There is always an acceptable compromise if both partners in a relationship are willing to look for it.

JESSICA: As for “leaving,” family, fear, and economic suicide keep me from going. I recognize that one of my weaknesses is deeming myself powerless. My problem is not having a career and being able to support myself (my own stupid faults) along with age factoring into the equation. Even if I did have a career background, being in my fifties is surely a disadvantage to being hired. I guess I am a total dichotomy, a fighter, strong but at the same time fragile.

SUNSTONE

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Jeff. There are ways of being tactfully honest that allow everyone be comfortable. You’re a smart woman, and I suspect you know what to say. One approach is to use “faith,” as your approach to any question. “Well, I don’t know for sure, but I can/will accept that it is true (right) through faith.”

[Several months pass, and things are not going well between Jessica and her husband.]

Jessica: Much to my surprise, [my husband] told one of our daughters everything and said we were likely to get a divorce. He claims I am trying to corrupt my family when I’ve said nothing to anyone about my problems. She called me sobbing, begging me not to get a divorce, saying she could not bear it, that it would kill her, and so forth. She begged us both to get marriage counseling. I wish I could just evaporate! My extended, non-Mormon family are appalled about “religion” causing so much pain and misery. Truly, I wish I could go to sleep and not wake up.

[Two months later things are looking up.]

Actually my situation is better now. I am not challenging my husband (an exercise in total futility), and he has moved from being “religious” to being more “spiritual.” As you know, we can be one without the other. There is more peace, acceptance, and accommodation now.

Jessica’s painful rollercoaster experience is not unique. Thankfully it is also not universal among long-term residents of the Borderlands. As I see it, in these difficult “true-believer and lost-my-testimony” couples, the problems which arise—those so sadly experienced by Jessica and her husband—often occur because (among other things) there is:

• a fear of impending changes in basic relationships,
• the worry of important “membership groups” (family, quorum, ward) will respond when they “find out,”
• a lack of recognition of each other’s points of view,
• an unwillingness to accept the other as they are,
• no real communication between the two partners,
• an inability to use Christ’s principles of love for one another.

Let’s do a little fantasizing. Suppose the conversation between Jessica and her husband could be like this:

Jessica: I have something important to talk to you about, and I hope you will understand my plight.

Harry: Okay, you have my undivided attention.

Jessica: Although I thought I had a “testimony,” I realize now that it was built on shaky ground and that I need to do some thinking about my relationship with God and the Church. And its really causing me some turmoil inside. It’s like I’ve lost a close companion. I’m sure you’ve noticed my silence in church lately.

Harry: This sounds serious.

Jessica: Yeah, I’ve learned some new things that have shaken my belief system to its very core, but I love you and want to do the right thing. Don’t get me wrong, I love our involvement with the church, our ward neighbors, the things the Church does for people, the service we can render, and so forth. It is just that I’m really confused about the Joseph Smith story and the origins of the Book of Mormon.

Harry: I know you love me, and I love you, too. We’ll get through this together.

And a testimony is only one part of our personal relationship with our Father in Heaven. I hope you’ll once again find the peace of “knowing,” but if not, it’ll be okay. How can I be most helpful?

Jessica: If you’ll just try to understand me and what I’m going through . . . and support me as I deal with this, and be there for me . . . that is all I need and want.

Harry: No problem. [Harry takes her in his arms.] What do you want to do next?

Jessica: Nothing drastic. I want to keep going to church and be involved and tell people that I’m going to try to be faithful to Christ’s teachings and continue to be same person I was before I lost my testimony.

Harry: Jessica, I’m with you all the way. Even if you never get that testimony back, it’s okay because I know the kind of person you are, and so does our Father in Heaven.

Jessica: Thanks. Together we’ll weather this storm.

Harry: What about the kids?

Jessica: Let’s not alarm them. I’ll let them know I love them more than anything else in this world, and that I won’t cause any trouble for them—but I will be tactfully honest, without giving them any details about the cause of my concerns. And you can continue to bear your testimony to them. Being a faithful mom and Latter-day Saint will be almost as good, especially if we’re working as a team.

Harry. Well, in the end, all of our children will develop a relationship with our Father in Heaven that works for them, and each of them will work through the testimony issue. It could be a really healthy experience for them. But this could also be very traumatic for them if we don’t handle it well. I’ll follow your lead.

Jessica: Okay, but this is a team effort. And the kids come first.

I REALIZE this conversation might be a little farfetched in today’s LDS world. But we can dream about a better future, can’t we? And all of us in the Borderlands can make that future happen now for our families, if we try.

If you have any thoughts for Jessica, please send me a letter or email. In the next issue, I’ll share another Borderlander’s experience.

NOTES

1. In my first column, I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief, and testimony, a different view of LDS history, some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria. See Figure 1.

2. See my December 2003 SUNSTONE column for a description of a personal religion built around the LDS model.

3. If Elder Holland responds and gives permission, I will let you know what he said.


Please send me any of your thoughts, experiences, or tales from life in the Borderlands.

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UNREMITTING PASSION

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

directed by Mel Gibson
released 25 February 2004

Reviews by Robert A. Rees and Eric Samuelsen

At the ultimate moment of Christ’s suffering on the cross, God himself can no longer watch and turns away from the scene. Gibson does not turn away, nor does he allow us easily to turn away.

OVER THE CENTURIES, “The Greatest Story Ever Told” has been told many times and in many ways. It has been told sparsely and grandly, sacredly and commercially, profoundly and sentimentally. And yet people keep telling it and keep searching for new ways to tell it. Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ is the latest, and undoubtedly the most ambitious and expensive telling in history. It has stirred more controversy than any film made about the life of Christ, including Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ (1988, based on the novel by Nicos Kazantzakis).

The first movie to deal with the life of Christ was Alice Guy’s French film Jésus devant Pilate (1898). And more than twenty feature-length films have followed, including Cecil B. DeMille’s The King of Kings (1927), George Stevens’ The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), and Franco Zeffirelli’s Jesus of Nazareth (1977). These have ranged from silent to Dolby Digital Sound, from the reverent to the satiric (Monty Python’s The Life of Brian), and from musical to grand epic. None has taken as full advantage of the range and variety of cinematic technology as has Gibson.

In my literature and film courses at UCLA, I emphasized to my students that most films based on familiar texts are generally disappointing because each of us tends to make his or her own personal visualization (or internal movie) while reading the text; therefore, anyone else’s representation is likely to be disappointing in some particulars. Part of the problem with Gibson’s Passion is that the text (selected scriptures from the Old and New Testaments, and for Latter-day Saints, modern scripture) is written so indelibly on our hearts. Each of us has contemplated Christ’s suffering through repeated readings of Isaiah and other Old Testament books, the Gospels, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. In addition, many of us are familiar with sacred musical settings of these texts which help them become even more emotionally embedded. Thus the power of such phrases as “he was wounded for our transgressions,” he was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,” “he poured out his soul unto death,” and “they pierced my hands and feet” are a part of our lived spiritual experience as well as our cultural memory.

The Passion of the Christ offers particular problems for Latter-day Saint viewers. The Latter-day Saint understanding of the atonement of Christ is in some ways unique in the Christian world since we believe that it was in Gethsemane that Christ, in the words of James E. Talmage, “in some manner, actually and terribly real though to man incomprehensible . . . took upon Himself the burden of the sins of mankind, from Adam to the end of the world.” That is, we teach that the atonement took place both in Gethsemane and on Calvary. As President Ezra Talf Benson stated, “In Gethsemane and on Calvary, He worked out the infinite and eternal atonement.”

The traditional Christian focus of Christ’s suffering for our sins exclusively on the cross slightly the importance of the extreme anguish that produced the bloody sweat in Gethsemane (hinted at in Luke and made explicit in both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants). Latter-day Saints believe it was in Gethsemane that Jesus’ emotional and spiritual anguish reached their apex, while his physical suffering reached its climax on Calvary. Both constitute what Jacob calls Christ’s “infinite atonement” (2 Ne. 9:7).

Apostle Orson F. Whitney summarizes the Latter-day Saint view of Gethsemane in recounting a dream he once had: “There He was, with the awful weight of the world’s sin upon his shoulders, with the pangs of every man, woman and child shooting through his sensitive soul.” While Gibson begins his film in Gethsemane, Jesus’ struggle there is shown only as a prelude to the suffering he endures as he leaves the Garden and begins his torturous journey to Calvary.

Just as we Latter-day Saints make more of Gethsemane than do other Christians, we make less of the cross. As the Encyclopedia of Mormonism states, “Latter-day Saints do not use the symbol of the cross in their architecture or in their chapels. They, like the earliest Christians, are reluctant to display the cross because they view the ‘good news’ of the gospel as Christ’s resurrection more than his crucifixion.” Suggesting that Latter-day Saints are more like the Eastern Orthodox than the Roman Catholic Church in emphasizing the resurrection over the crucifixion, the same article states, “Moreover, the cross, with its focus on the death of Christ, does not symbolize the message of a living, risen, exalted Lord who changes the lives of his followers.” Of course, one might argue that the cross is the most powerful symbol in Christendom and that there is as much danger in underemphasizing as in overemphasizing its importance. Nevertheless, in The Passion of the Christ, the presentation of the resurrection—we see the winding clothes lying in the sepul-

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cher and Jesus standing naked with a visible hole in his hand—seems more of an afterthought than a celebration of Christ's ultimate triumph over death.

Another problem for Latter-day Saints is the film’s unremitting violence. While the proscription against seeing R-rated films is sometimes followed too rigidly by Mormons (relying on a Hollywood rating system that is at best inconsistent and unreliable), in this case the rating (for graphic, excessive violence) justifies caution in seeing the film, especially for children and young teenagers. Gibson’s more extreme critics have seen his film as characteristic of the “slash and burn” genre, and some have gone so far as to call it “obe-scene” or “pornographic.” While such judgments may be too harsh, the movie is among the most violent I have ever seen, and that includes some very violent films in which Gibson himself has starred or which he has directed.

The film is not without its virtues. The flashbacks to Jesus’ childhood, to the episode of the woman taken in adultery, to the Sermon on the Mount, and to the Last Supper are all convincingly and sensitively presented. In fact, they cause the viewer to want to see more of these events from the life of this extraordinary man as a balance against the sustained violence of the bulk of the movie. Gibson’s depiction of Satan is also one that many LDS viewers would find convincing, especially given the portrayal of the arch-deceiver in Mormon temple films. He moves like a ghostly presence in various scenes, and his final raging “No!” from the depths of hell at the moment of Jesus’ ultimate victory is devoid of the normal “fire and brimstone” images often associated with the devil and hell. One of the more effective moments in the film is when Jesus is praying in Gethsemane, Satan releases a large serpent which slithers to Jesus and begins entangling itself in Jesus’ prostrate body. Moments later we see Jesus’ sandaled foot stomping forcefully on the serpent’s head. The scene, startling in its visual and auditory effect, leaves no doubt about Jesus’ resolve to bear the burden before him.

This film leaves nothing to the imagination. The violence perpetrated against Christ by the Sanhedrin, the Romans, and the crowd surrounding him during his last hours is so graphic, so explicit, and so excessive that it bludgeons rather than evokes the imagination. As the Dolby sound system magnifies the sounds of the Roman instruments of torture, and as blood is spilled and sprayed in nearly every frame while Christ is almost literally flayed alive, I kept thinking of how my feelings contrasted with those evoked by the line from the simple hymn, “How Great Thou Art”:

And when I think that God, his Son not sparing
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in.

I never sing that hymn without a catch in my throat. By contrast, I felt like Gibson had me by the throat throughout the film, pushing his vision of violence in my face. We are told that Gibson filmed his own hand pounding the spikes into Jesus’ hands. Perhaps this is his way of suggesting that he stands for all of us who bear some responsibility for the pec-cata mundi that Christ bore, but I can’t help thinking of it as a metaphor for the deliberate, excessive way in which he drives his point home.

I very seldom have turned away from a movie screen because of what was being shown, but in The Passion of the Christ, I kept turning away. Finally, the violence against Christ is so excessive that I found it unconvincing. Jesus is struck, smitten, kicked, mocked, flogged, and spat upon past the point of credulity. While Christ’s suffering was possibly as great and graphic as Gibson presents it, his vision seems so overdrawn and so overblown that ultimately it isn’t just the viewer’s spirit that is grieved but his imagination as well. That is, the purpose of art is to make an artificial arrangement of experience that seems real, to present the world to us in such a way that it allows our feelings to emerge naturally rather than through manipulation. Ultimately, the filmmaker’s job is to allow us to find our own conclusions from the material which he presents, not force us to accept his.

One of the most puzzling scenes in Gibson’s film occurs during the crucifixion. Being true to Matthew, Gibson shows the two thieves who are crucified with Christ, the one mocking him and the other pleading for mercy. Having just shown us a savior who asks God to forgive his punishers, Gibson next shows an ominous black bird flying over the crucifixion. What kind of a God is it, one wonders, who is at once so tender-hearted and compassionate that a tear falls from his eye and at the same time blinds one of his children?

Toward the end of Gibson’s film I thought of the old Negro spiritual “Were You There?”

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

At the end, in spite of some powerful individual scenes, I didn’t feel as if I had been there. When I walked out of the theater, I noticed that listed just below Passion of the Christ on the marquee was Club Dread. It seemed a more apt title for what I had just witnessed. Important in Christian and Mormon theology is the idea that at the ultimate moment of Christ’s suffering on the cross, God himself can no longer watch and turns away from the scene. Gibson does not turn away, nor does he allow us easily to turn away. This is troublesome in a portrayal of the most significant story in Christian/Mormon culture. I was disappointed to see a film with such potential to pull me inside the story finally leave me outside it.

After watching Gibson’s film, I went home and listened to Bach’s “Passion According to St. John.” As the story
It's a very strange cultural phenomenon, the way a weirdly obsessive pre-Vatican II Catholic film becomes a touchstone for American Protestants. And Mormons. Strange bedfellows indeed, to see who's championing this film.

EL GIBSON’S THE Passion of the Christ is a difficult film to deal with critically. It’s a cultural touchstone in many contradictory and paradoxical ways. Inevitably, I come to the film as a Mormon, a believing Christian. Several prominent LDS luminaries have come out wholeheartedly in favor of the film, including novelist Orson Scott Card, filmmaker Kieth Merrill, and former chair of the BYU Religion Department Robert Millet. For me, though, the film is so relentlessly Catholic, and specifically medieval Catholic, in its sensibilities, I found the film a very odd one for Mormons to have embraced. I don’t mean to imply, of course, that we have nothing to learn from the medieval church, or that we ought to reject wholesale the genuine devotion our fellow Christians have displayed over the past thousand years. I have often directed medieval drama and love the beauty and reverence of the Latin liturgy. But the more one studies medieval thought, the more one realizes how differently we think today. Nowhere is that clearer than in the Passion.

I’m not sure any of the many critics have adequately conveyed just how peculiar this film is. Although some of its defenders have suggested it is taken directly from the synoptic gospels, that’s not true. It employs all the state-of-the-art technology and science of contemporary filmmaking to explore a story derived from the Gospels only in broad outline. Structurally, it doesn’t follow the Gospels at all. The film follows instead the liturgical stations of the cross.

ERIC SAMUELS received a Ph.D. in theatre history and criticism from Indiana University in 1991 and joined the BYU faculty in 1992, where he is currently head of playwriting and screenwriting. He is the author of Gadianton, Accommodations (both previously published in SUNSTONE [July 2001, June 1994]), and fourteen other professionally produced plays.
However, the events Gibson chooses to dramatize are not drawn from the stations of the cross currently outlined by the Catholic Church. As part of the 1965 Vatican II reforms, the Catholic Church omitted such apocryphal events as Veronica's mopping the blood from Jesus face, or the three falls—the three times he's supposed to have fallen down while carrying the cross. Gibson follows pre-Vatican II liturgies and includes those events.

I offer a quick disclaimer. I am not a medieval scholar, nor have I studied the film carefully. I am a theatre teacher and practitioner, with an interest in the field. I am generally familiar with medieval drama, and I have certainly traipsed my way through plenty of medieval churches. And I have seen the film only once, and I have not read the screenplay. I'm responding to this film, frankly, because the reviews I've read of it, especially those written by Mormons, talking about it in specifically Mormon devotional terms, have also simultaneously placed the film in the center of what seems to me quite interesting cultural wars. Orson Scott Card, for example, writes of the film's being "in every way that matters, perfect." And of course he's perfectly welcome to write positively about his encounter with a film that genuinely moved him and strengthened his testimony. But Card's assertion that the film "strictly follows the only historical record we have of these events," is factually inaccurate. The film doesn't actually follow the Gospels much at all.

When I say that the film is medieval in approach, I don't just mean in terms of its graphic depiction of blood-soaked violence. It's true that medieval Catholic iconography is more likely to feature sanguinary images of Christ's suffering than we might find in contemporary Catholicism. And it's certainly true that the scourging and crucifixion are portrayed endlessly and graphically. Roger Ebert says it's the most violent film he's ever seen. It's certainly the most violent film I've ever seen. But when I speak of the film's medieval approach, I mean that a medieval Catholic sensibility finds expression all the way through, and specifically in the Passion events Gibson chose to film. And that sensibility seems to me in specific conflict with LDS understandings of the Passion.

Much of the film is devoted to similar scenes of strange magic, though not all suggest the vengeful, vindictive God of the Judas and Gesmas scenes. But in the garden of Gethsemane, a hooded, androgynous Satan tempts Jesus. Suddenly, a worm crawls up Satan's nostril. Later in the film, we see Satan's Imp—a hideously deformed monster child—cradled in his dark master's arms. These strange references to such apocrypha as Satan's Imp and the coming of the Anti-Christ might seem out of place in what's essentially a devotional film, but in this film, it's the Sermon on the Mount that comes our seeming weird and inappropriate. We see only brief excerpts from that Sermon, and I did feel some excitement at getting to hear the greatest of all sermons as it would have sounded—in Aramaic. But Christ's teachings of forgiveness and charity seem strangely out of place in the film.

Blood is everywhere; this film is very much a tribute to sanguinary magic. In one of its strangest scenes, Mary and Mary Magdalene look with horrified eyes on the torture chamber where Jesus had been scourged. Suddenly, Pilate's wife runs up to them and thrusts piles of cloth into their arms. And they get on their knees and scrub the floor clean.

The film is drenched in blood. Jesus' scourging, which became ultimately quite unwatchable, is portrayed as an utter blood fest. By the end, the two soldiers who have been beating him are exhausted and covered head to foot with his blood. Jesus' own body has been ripped to shreds. The soldier who stabs Jesus in the side is suddenly awash in the film's opening title quotes Isaiah, "and by his stripes we are healed." But Gibson's treatment of the soldier and his spear moment reminds me instead of the ancient legend that because of Christ's blood, this soldier consequently lived forever, condemned to fight in war after war until the end of time.

I have directed medieval Passion plays twice—once in college, the York crucifixion, and once, at BYU, the longer Passion sequence from the Wakefield play of Corpus Christi. Gibson's film incorporates specific details from those fourteenth-century texts, including the way both expand on Matthew.
It isn’t a film about my religion. It is a film about the religion of people I’ve studied in history.

27:19 to make Pilate’s wife a convert to Christ’s teachings. The reliance upon these texts is clearest in the crucifixion itself. In the York play, the soldiers are dismayed to find that they’ve mismeasured the cross. Jesus’ arms are too short, and his hands won’t reach the pre-drilled holes. So they stretch him, literally dislocate his shoulders, so his hands will reach the holes they’ve drilled.

Astoundingly enough, in York that scene is portrayed as comic. It’s a grim, awful sort of comedy, but it is comedic. (Nearly all medieval drama is predicated on abrupt comic-tragic shifts in tone). But of course Gibson’s film doesn’t go that route; the tone is at times baroquely grotesque, but it’s always grim. And absent the context of medieval pageant-wagon performance, the dislocation scene feels gratuitous. As a Mormon, I found myself wondering how that unnecessary detail could be reconciled with symbolism of the Passover. Christ’s bones are conspicuously unbroken in the film; why then dislocate his shoulders?

One colleague has asked me about Jim Caviezel’s performance as Jesus. Caviezel is fine in the role, I suppose. But he’s not really asked to create a character in any traditional sense. His character never forms a human relationship with any other character, except for one very brief and quite lovely flashback scene with Mary. Mostly, in this film, Jesus gets beaten up. It’s just relentless. From the moment of his arrest in Gethsemane, he’s relentlessly, unremittingly, tortured. It’s not just the scourging; he’s been beaten half to death before the scourging even starts. And then the soldiers scourge him with sticks, which are really just a warm-up to what they do with real scourges, whips into which they’ve woven shards of broken glass. It’s just endless. When the commanding Roman officer orders the soldiers to stop, you think, oh, man, I’m glad that’s over. But they’re just turning him over so they can start in on his chest and stomach.

For me, it was self-defeating. I had no sense of devotion, no feeling that Christ went through that for me, for my sins. In fact, Mormon theology insists that the atonement took place in the Garden of Gethsemane, and I don’t know of any Christian theologian who thinks the scourging had much to do with it. Certainly the Bible’s cursory account of the scourging suggests no theological significance to the event. I just grew detached, and by the time we reached the crucifixion, exhausted. It was an unpleasant film to watch, and I was glad when it was over. It isn’t a film about my religion. It is a film about the religion of people I’ve studied in history.

What’s really interesting about the film’s violence is an issue that’s been very prominent in Mormonism: the film’s rating. I walked out of the theatre behind an elderly couple. The wife turned to the husband and said, “So, that’s what R-rated films are like.” I have little doubt that because it’s R-rated, many LDS folks will decide not to see the film. And this may quite possibly be the only R-rated film others will see. And that fascinates me. Because this film is quite specifically not what R-rated movies are like. The level of violence is far beyond that of any film I have ever seen. I’m astounded, frankly, that the film wasn’t rated NC-17.

Hence the following irony. To the limited degree that the terms “liberal” and “conservative” have meaning in Mormonism, and to the even more limited degree that they might be applied to such ephemera as MPAA ratings, we would agree, I suppose, that “liberal” Mormons would generally feel justified in seeing R-rated films and that “conservative” Mormons would generally avoid them. One might presume, therefore, that conservative Mormons would avoid and dislike the film and that liberal Mormons would embrace it. That is, I suppose, the way Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ was generally received. But the strongest positive reactions I’ve read among Mormons have been from people I generally think of as conservatives—Robert Millet, Orson Scott Card, Keith Merrill. And the Mormon liberals I’ve talked to have generally been all over the map about the film.

Still. Because the film is so relentlessly medieval in its sensibilities, the complaints about it fostering anti-Semitism come into clearer focus. While I’m by no means a medievalist, I’m a student of medieval drama, and I can’t pretend that performances of Passion plays throughout the Middle Ages didn’t have a troubling tendency to lead to anti-Semitic violence, to pogroms. And this film hearkens back to the Christian attitudes, and even the specific iconography, of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. It’s true that Gibson cut the subtitle for the line where Caiphas leads the rabble in chanting the line Matthew cites: “His blood be upon us and upon our children” (Matt. 27:25). (In the film, I think they say it in Aramaic. I don’t speak Aramaic, but they say something at that point that is quite longish which doesn’t get a subtitle). And it’s also true that specific Jewish characters are portrayed sympathetically Simon of Cyrene, who helps Jesus carry the cross, for example, is portrayed as genuinely kind and charitable, though not a believer. Still, the history of Passion plays aligns with histories of anti-Semitism in disturbing ways. And this is a medieval Passion set to film. I don’t think concerns about this film’s provoking an upsurge in anti-Semitism are at all unfounded. So far, thank heavens, this doesn’t seem to have happened. But those who feared that it might did, in my view, have legitimate grounds for such fears.

And yet, here’s Orson Scott Card on that very issue:

What I find truly disturbing, as an American, is how the American Left, which supposedly glorifies free speech and cultural inclusion, should so brutally reveal their true colors. The fact that Gibson could not find distribution for this film, and had to turn his production company, Icon, into a distributor (a very expensive and difficult process), speaks volumes—that was no such problem over The Last
Temptation of Christ, which apparently was acceptable because it would offend Christians and denied the accuracy of the scriptural account. Hollywood touts itself as courageous—just like the rest of the PC Left—whenever they stomp on Christians. It’s part of the elitist war on Christianity that’s clearly going on. Other people’s ethnic heritage or “folk beliefs” can be celebrated in school—but Christian customs and beliefs can hardly be mentioned.4

This issue about how the film currently seems to be functioning in Mormon and Christian/American culture, including in our political culture, is very interesting to me. The film has been embraced primarily by conservative Protestants, by evangelicals and fundamentalists alike. And it seems to be increasingly popular as well with those Mormons who tend to align themselves politically with the Christian right. That Gibson initially had difficulty finding distribution is being touted as further evidence of further persecution by the “PC left” against Christians.

Anecdotal evidence for this observation: We recently had some folks over to play games, and eat snacks, and chat. They were old friends from the ward and a new couple who have just moved in. We played a kind of movie trivia game, and so conversation naturally rolled around to Gibson’s Passion. Within that conversation, this line of dialogue: “Boy, it’s just getting harder and harder to be a Christian anymore. Here’s Mel Gibson being persecuted for making a Christian film. The last days are upon us.”

I think there’s a kind of Christian Right paranoia that this film, and the controversy surrounding it, plugs into. (I don’t mean, of course, to suggest that there’s not also a large degree of paranoia among liberals.) Newsweek and Salon have both done big stories about Passion, and both featured interviews with Christian clergy who would probably be considered “liberal,” specifically in regards to their willingness to embrace biblical higher criticism. To these scholars, the Gospel of Matthew should be seen, in part, as a political text. Accordingly, there’s no reason to think that Caiaphas led a Jewish mob to shout “Crucify him,” nor that they essentially forced Pilate’s hand, nor that they shouted “Let his blood be upon us.” Whoever wrote Matthew (probably not Matthew) had an interest in attacking the Temple hierarchy of his day while at the same time flattering the Roman authorities, so he created a sympathetic Pilate and a bloodthirsty Jewish mob. Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers. To blame any part of it on Jews is historically dubious.

To Christian evangelicals, however, these are fighting words. Not all evangelicals teach inerrancy of scripture or biblical literalism, but many do, and most evangelicals are uncomfortable with higher criticism. So are most Mormons. So to accuse this film of anti-Semitism is partly to accuse Matthew of anti-Semitism, which means you’re accusing the Bible of anti-Semitism. So the liberal forces of political correctness are attacking a good Christian film. At least some of the argument is being framed that way.

However, to embrace higher criticism, to detect in Matthew’s text a political agenda, to question whether Matthew wrote it, to question whether or not Jewish high priests incited a riot to get Jesus crucified is as legitimately Christian as embracing inerrancy is. To say, “As a Christian, I didn’t care for this film” is as legitimately a Christian response as to say “As a Christian, I was profoundly moved by it.” To say that good Christians should embrace this film is as nonsensical as saying that good Christians should dislike The Last Temptation of Christ. I’m reminded of current political rhetoric, which implies that President Bush, as an evangelical Baptist, is more legitimately Christian than Senator Kerry, a Catholic, or of the suggestion that Republicans and conservagatives are more legitimately patriotic or American than liberal Democrats are. This is a film that plugs into a cultural war, and what’s distressing is that it’s a cultural war that doesn’t need fighting.

Obviously, the Left is as prone to demonize the Christian Right as the Right is to demonize “the forces of political correctness.” But evangelical Protestantism does exist and does have a history. And no serious student of American religious history can fail to notice American Protestantism’s long battle with Catholicism. So to see how sympathetic current evangelical Protestants seem to be to a quintessentially Catholic text like Gibson’s Passion may well be a positive development. Evangelical Protestants also have, of course, a history of anti-Mormonism. Strange bedfellows indeed, to see who’s championing this film. Is there something weirdly medieval and weirdly pre-Vatican II Catholic about some elements in conservative Mormon culture? Or current evangelical Protestantism? Apart from a shared hostility to science? And is there, at times, a shared commitment to a particularly un-Christian kind of power politics?

D ID I like the film? My response is more complicated than that. Generally, I think the film was most effective when it focused on people other than Jesus. The actor who played Peter, for example, was superb. There’s a lovely moment when Jesus falls while carrying the cross, and we see a flashback to a moment in his childhood when he fell and scraped his knee, and Mary ran to him, and we cut back and forth between a child crying, a mother running, and Mary watching Jesus with the cross, then running to help her fallen son. That is lovely. I haven’t talked much about Mary in the film, but she is predictably omnipresent and a very powerful visual presence. Although the resurrection didn’t take a lot of time in the film, it is nicely handled, and I found it quite moving. And when Jesus dies, we cut to basically a satellite photo of Golgotha and see Jesus reflected in a tiny drop of water, which then falls from the sky, a tear from Our Father’s eye, and when it hits the ground, an earthquake hits. That is a terrific moment, I think.

It’s a very strange cultural phenomenon, the way a weirdly obsessive pre-Vatican II Catholic film becomes a touchstone for American Protestants. And Mormons. But then, it’s a very peculiar film, a medieval Passion play, using state-of-the-art Hollywood technology. It is actually a fascinating film, in many ways as foreign to my own sensibilities as reading the York play or Corpus Christi generally is to my students’ sensibilities, and for precisely the same reasons.

NOTES
3. I think it’s likely that with these images, Gibson is following the eleventh-century medieval demonologist Michael Psellus (1018–1078), who posited the notion of a series of small, impish sub-demon classes governing the land, the water, the earth, and so on. According to Psellus, the anti-Christian will be an imp who grows to adulthood. For a good discussion of medieval demonology, see Jeffrey Russell, Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984).
4. Corpus Christi is the name of the medieval festival that came about six weeks following Easter. Passion plays were part of the Corpus Christi festival, as were performances of what we now call “mystery plays.”
AS THE MASSACHUSETTS Supreme Court declared that state’s ban on same-sex marriage unconstitutional and the city of San Francisco began to issue marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples, several LDS leaders and prominent Mormons predicted the “self-destruction” of the world and deemed the fight against same-sex marriage “the pivotal battle of our age.”

In some of the most extreme LDS rhetoric to date, former General Relief Society presidency counselor and current Deseret Book CEO Sheri Dew compared the gay rights movement with the rise of Hitler, and Deseret News columnist Lee Benson likened San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom to communist leader Nikita Khrushchev.

In a 10 January worldwide priesthood leadership broadcast, President Gordon B. Hinckley declared, “The traditional family is under attack” and added that “the world is marching toward self-destruction.”

Echoing similar sentiments, Apostle Boyd K. Packer stated, “Nothing happened in Sodom and Gomorrah which exceeds the wickedness and depravity which surrounds us now.” In a speech broadcast worldwide to members of the J. Reuben Clark Law Society, Packer continued, “The sacred relationship between a man and a woman, husband and wife, through which mortal bodies are conceived and life is passed to the next generation, is being showered with filth.”

President Packer then urged LDS lawyers to “give of your time and of your means to the building up of the church and the kingdom of God and the establishment of Zion, which we are under covenant to do, not just to the church as an institution, but to members and ordinary people who need your professional protection.”

Prominent Latter-day Saint and Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney declared opposition to his state’s Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriages. “Amending the Constitution may be the best and most reliable way to prevent . . . confusion and preserve the institution of marriage,” Romney wrote for Meridian magazine. “The people have the exclusive right to protect the nation and Constitution from judicial overreach.”

On 8 February, LDS author Orson Scott Card denounced the “systematic destruction of the institution of marriage.” “No law in any state in the United States now or ever has forbidden homosexuals to marry,” wrote Card in the Rhino Times. “Any homosexual man who can persuade a woman to take him as her husband can avail himself of all the rights of husbandhood under the law.”

THE PROCLAMATION IN ACTION

IN 1995, THE FIRST PRESIDENCY and Quorum of the Twelve issued A Proclamation to the World, a document warning that “the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.” Although it has not been canonized, the Proclamation gives philosophical foundation to many of the current teachings, actions, and lobbying efforts carried out by the Church. Since 1995, LDS leaders have joined a number of conservative coalitions to lobby against same-sex marriage in California, Nevada, Hawaii, Alaska, and other states.

The Church also established the conservative World Family Policy Center at Brigham Young University “to provide balanced, pro-family input and effectively educate the United Nations System on moral, religious and other value-based issues.”

In July 2003, the World Family Policy Center sponsored an international World Family Policy Forum in Salt Lake City. With more than one hundred delegates from thirty-eight countries, the forum was the largest gathering of high-level diplomatic corps outside of an official U.N. venue.

“We do believe that this effort to destroy the family is motivated by evil designs [that] are unalterably opposed to [the family],” Elder Richard G. Scott told the delegates during the forum.

The World Family Policy Center and the LDS Relief Society each sent representatives to the Third World Congress of Families, held 29–31 March in Mexico City. Co-sponsored by conservative groups from the U.S., Mexico, Venezuela, Canada, and Australia, the purpose of the Congress is to “orchestrate a common strategy to affirm and defend the natural family.”

“THE PIVOTAL BATTLE OF OUR AGE”

ON 24 FEBRUARY, PRESIDENT George W. Bush announced a proposed amendment to declare same-sex marriages unconstitutional—a development that World Family Policy Center manager Richard Wilkins has been promoting for years.

“The President issued a call to arms,” Wilkins wrote shortly after the announcement. “The pivotal battle of our age has been joined.” Wilkins deems the amendment “the only sure way to restore order to this venerable and surpassingly important social institution.”
Despite Wilkins’ endorsement, the Church has not issued an official statement regarding the proposed amendment, and LDS leaders and politicians remain divided on the matter. LDS Senator Orrin Hatch, who last August had been quoted saying that he favored the amendment, now says he is not convinced the amendment is necessary because the federal Defense of Marriage Act already defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

Some conservative groups oppose the amendment because they believe that defining marriage is the prerogative of the individual states and therefore it should not fall under federal jurisdiction. “Be conservative with the Constitution—don’t amend it,” reads a Deseret Morning News ad run by Citizen Outreach, a right-wing national group.

A bill defining marriage as the union of “a man and a woman” was recently passed by both houses of the Utah legislature. States traditionally recognize marriages performed in other states, and the recent Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling has led Utah lawmakers to fear that they’ll have to recognize same-sex marriages. “Marriage is between a man and a woman legally married,” said Sen. Chris Buttars, R-West Jordan. “Anything other than that is sexual perversion.”

Utah Republicans rejected a proposed amendment that would have changed the language of the bill to define marriage as between “one man and one woman.” Democrats argued that the change would clarify that the ban also extends to polygamous marriages, but GOP members deemed the clarification unnecessary because the state constitution already outlaws polygamy.

A second measure, similarly amending the state constitution, passed in both legislative bodies and will go to Utah voters for ratification in November.

“Let America run from Utah if they want,” said amendment proponent Rep. LaVar Christensen, R-Kamas. “This is a moral question, and we make no apologies for that.” Rep. David Ure, R-Kamas, defended the amendment saying, “We have a right to declare what’s in the nature of God’s law.”

EVENT IN WASHINGTON DC

A COALITION OF MORMON and non-Mormon leaders gathered 28 February at the Washington D.C. Temple Visitors Center to reaffirm the “continuing importance of a stable family based on the marriage of a husband and a wife” and to denounce same-sex marriage as “an attack on the family.”

In the course of the conference, Deseret Book CEO Sheri Dew compared those who do not oppose same-sex marriage to those who did nothing to oppose Hitler. “At first it may seem a bit extreme to imply a comparison between the atrocities of Hitler and what is happening in terms of contemporary threats against the family—but maybe not,” Dew wrote in a version of the speech posted by Meridian magazine <www.meridianmagazine.com>.

Dew also described a photo of a gay couple getting legally married—a picture she had seen in the photo in question turns out to be Eric Ethington, a Mormon man who served an LDS mission in Korea.

Leaders of Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons, issued a statement expressing “outrage” over Dew’s statements. “We agree with LDS Church president Gordon B. Hinckley when he says that families are under attack,” the Affirmation statement reads. “But when we see LDS leaders provoke disgust at our families, spend millions of dollars so that we will never be able to marry, and lobby so that our children will never have two legal parents, we arrive at a different conclusion about who is the aggressor and who are the victims.”

—AFFIRMATION: GAY AND LESBIAN MORMONS

“When we see LDS leaders provoke disgust at our families, . . . we arrive at a different conclusion about who is the aggressor and who are the victims.”

—AFFIRMATION: GAY AND LESBIAN MORMONS

Deseret Book CEO Sheri Dew (below) stated that not opposing gay marriage is like not opposing the rise of Hitler. Referring to this picture of LDS returned missionary, Eric Ethington (above left), his partner, and their two daughters, Dew said, “This is hard for me to stomach.”

Newsweek “What distressed me most was the fact that they were both holding an infant ‘daughter’—twin girls they had adopted. I was, frankly, heartsick. What kind of chance do those girls have being raised in that kind of setting?” Witnesses to the presentation say Dew’s language was stronger than that printed in Meridian, with Dew saying of the picture of the gay men and their children “It’s hard for me to stomach.”

In an ironic twist, and unknown to Dew, one of the grooms in the photo in question turns out to be Eric Ethington, a Mormon man who served an LDS mission in Korea.
WITH FLDS SHAKEUP, POLYGAMISTS FLEE, FIGHT EVICTIONS

STRIPPED OF THEIR priesthood and families, some twenty members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints face the prospects of either leaving town or fighting eviction orders. FLDS president and prophet Warren Jeffs has ordered the men to vacate properties that legally belong to the church.

The FLDS community includes some 6,000 members, most of whom live in the border towns of Hildale, Utah, and Colorado City, Arizona. Jeffs, who took the FLDS reins in 2002, gave some of the wives of the disciplined men a “noble release,” which means they can now marry a different husband.

Former Colorado City Mayor Dan Barlow and two of his brothers have left town and now live near St. George, Utah. Milton Holm and Ross Chatwin are fighting their eviction orders, claiming they should be allowed to remain in the homes they built or the church should pay them for improvements they made to the properties.

“Warren gave my family to my younger brother, Ed. I think that’s disgusting,” Holm told the Deseret News. “Warren is ripping families apart to punish and hurt men. In a way, husbands are becoming a dime a dozen around here. The wives belong to Warren.”

In related developments, an “underground railroad” of sorts has formed to help teenage girls and boys from the FLDS communities escape the possibility of their being forced to marry someone not of their own choosing, sometimes with only hours of notice. So far, dozens of young people have taken advantage of these offers to stay with friends and relatives. After living on the “outside” for a while, some have chosen to return to their homes; but others, most notably two girls, Fawn Broadbent, 17, and Fawn Holm, 16, now commonly referred to as “the Fawns,” have become public figures and are fighting in the courts to have their legal guardianship transferred from their parents to non-polygamous relatives.

CHURCH SAYS NO GUNS IN CHAPELS

IN A STATEMENT that delighted gun control advocates, the Church’s First Presidency announced that “churches are dedicated for the worship of God and as havens from the cares and concerns of the world. The carrying of lethal weapons, concealed or otherwise, within their walls is inappropriate except as required by officers of the law.”

The statement came on the heels of tension between various religious groups and the conservative Utah state legislature following its passing of a law that requires churches either to register with the state or post notices on their buildings if they did not want concealed weapons inside. Many Utah religious leaders publicly stated they would not comply with the law, claiming that separation of church and state exempts them from having to register or post notices in order to deny worshipers from carrying concealed weapons on their premises.

The LDS Church has agreed to comply with state law and will register as having banned guns from its properties. The move met with both praise for the Church’s commitment to keep guns out of houses of worship and disappointment over its unwillingness to join other faith-based groups in protesting the new law.

MORMON STUDIES CONTROVERSY ERUPTS

THE PECULIAR PLACE of Mormon studies in Utah colleges was debated in February as Mormon historian D. Michael Quinn was rejected for a position at the University of Utah. Religious historian Colleen McDannell called the rejection “blatant discrimination” and said that University of Utah history professors see “no intellectual or cultural merit in Mormonism.”

Some observers conclude that the rejection means exactly the opposite: that at a time of budget cuts, the university doesn’t want to inflame the LDS-dominated state legislature by hiring a scholar famous for writing on controversial Mormon topics. Others claim they simply rejected Quinn because the opening is in Utah history, not Mormon history. Quinn had been a finalist for the position vacated by the recent death of Dean May (see SUNSTONE, October 2003, p. 6).

Stunned, history department chairperson Eric Hinderaker called McDannell’s statement an “astonishingly egregious breach of confidentiality” of closed-door personnel discussions. Robert Goldberg, a historian in the department rejected McDannell’s broad characterizations, saying he and the five
those who voted against hiring Quinn are not looking for a Mormon apologist. But, he said, they don’t want an avowed critic, either.

Despite the prominence of Mormonism in Utah society and history, Utah state colleges have been slow or reluctant to develop formal programs in Mormon studies. Shortly before his passing in 2001, former BYU professor Eugene England initiated efforts to establish such a program at Utah Valley State College, and Mormon-related courses have continued to be offered on the Orem, Utah, campus. Paraphrasing historian Jan Shipps, UVSC professor David Knowlton says that “Western history tends to be a discourse with a missing center, a doughnut.” By failing to acknowledge Mormons and their history, Western history “has ignored one of the most populated areas of the region along with its people’s social dynamics and concerns.”

In a related development, formal fundraising has recently begun at Utah State University for an endowed chair in Mormon history and culture named in honor of the late Leonard J. Arrington.

“ILLEGALS” CAN HAVE TEMPLE RECOMMENDS

A CONTROVERSY ERUPTED in Utah’s church-state relations as Russell Sias, co-founder of Utahns for Immigration Reform and Enforcement (UFIRE), cited LDS doctrines in support of HB109, a failed legislative bill that would have prohibited undocumented workers from getting driver’s licenses. Invoking the Twelfth Article of Faith’s dictum of “obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law,” Sias reportedly told members of the Latino legislative task force that “illegals” should not be issued temple recommends or allowed to hold positions in the priesthood.

This latest round of publicity is not BYU’s first in relation to airbrushing. According to Bryan Waterman and Brian Kagel, authors of a book about BYU’s history, the cover of the 1986 student directory featured a picture from which the beard of BYU founder Karl G. Maeser had been removed. The incident, which attracted national media attention, also led to an opportunity for humor as the Student Review, an off-campus student newspaper, published cut-out beards that could be fastened to the directory by those who wanted an unaltered Maeser. (See The Lord’s University: Freedom and Authority at BYU, 156).

In recent years, LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley has counseled LDS youth to avoid tattoos and any body piercing beyond one pair of earring holes for women. In a 13 January address, BYU President Cecil Samuelson specifically addressed the matter of bare midriffs, alluding to complaints he had received from a former BYU student who recently attended her 50th year reunion. “It shocked me to see so many tummies on the campus,” the letter said. “I don’t know how many tummies she actually saw on campus,” Samuelson said, “but it doesn’t take all the fingers on one hand to count too many.”
People

Named. LEVI PETERSON as editor of Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought following the 31 December 2003 resignation of former editor, KAREN MARGUERITE MOLONEY. Peterson, a noted LDS author and retired English professor now living in Issaquah, Washington, had been associate editor before Moloney stepped down. In accepting the post, he has agreed to serve out the remaining four-and-a-half years of the editorial term. “I am very appreciative of the highly competent group whom Karen assembled. These people are who make the journal function,” Peterson wrote to SUNSTONE. “As for editorial policy, I will try to maintain Dialogue’s tradition of serving as a high-quality forum for diverse opinions and points of view on Mormon matters. I am proud of this tradition and hope I can live up to the vision and determination of the editors who have preceded me.”

Moloney, whose resignation letter cited time commitments associated with her teaching duties at Weber State University, along with increased family responsibilities as reasons for stepping down, shepherd Dialogue through the production of the recently published Spring 2004 issue devoted to reflections on peacebuilding in today’s war-torn world. With work having already begun at the time of her departure, Moloney’s name will appear as associate editor on the masthead of the Summer 2004 issue.

Competing. As FOX television’s American Idol continues to dominate in the ratings, one face viewers keep seeing is LDS finalist JON PETER LEWIS. A BYU-Idaho pre-med student, Jon Peter (affectionately dubbed “JPL”) has kept his religious affiliation fairly low-key, only mentioning that his ability to speak fluent Spanish might be what would surprise his fans the most. Lewis had been serving a Spanish-speaking LDS mission during the first two Idol seasons. At the time SUNSTONE went to press, John Peter had survived three rounds of eliminations and has continued to endear himself to fans (particularly the ladies) with his Elvis-like swinging hips and down-home charm.

Hitched. Congratulations to Sunstone friends TODD COMPTON and LAURA HANSEN (now Compton). After getting acquainted at the 2003 Sunstone West in San Francisco, California, the two were married Saturday, 27 March, in Toquerville, Utah. Todd is the author of In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith and the co-editor of A Widow’s Tale: The 1884–1896 Diary of Helen Mar Kimball Whitney. Laura has a degree in journalism from Humboldt State University and is the daughter of Sunstone board member Nadine Hansen.

Appealed. After a nearly four-year battle, CHRISTINA AXON-FLYNN finally won a round in her lawsuit against the University of Utah. A former drama student, Axon-Flynn sued the university after she was pressured to use in class language she found objectionable. A lower court had ruled in favor of the university, but the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the decision and sent the case back to a lower court and to an eventual jury trial. Axson-Flynn insists she’s not for censorship, nor does she believe in changing the content of artwork. She contends there is a difference between auditioning for a role and being required to perform as a part of coursework.

Church teaching as apparent justification for their political positions,” said Monsivais.

Tony Yapias, director of the state’s Office of Hispanic Affairs, said he was “assured by the Church that the members don’t need to worry about [not being granted] temple recommends, that they’re issued on the basis of personal worthiness and not nationality.”

BILLIONAIRE LAUNCHES BRAVE NEW WAY TO DO GENEALOGY

IN THE 1950S, Mormons conducted genealogical research using bulky charts. In the ’80s and ’90s, they began to use computers. Could genealogical research soon be conducted with a cotton swab and a saliva sample?

The Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation allows anyone who has had a simple DNA test done to compare the genetic markers of their Y-chromosome DNA (the paternal line) with those sent in by volunteers who have already done their genealogy. Such comparison can help online visitors establish who their ancestors were.

Especially accurate for establishing ancestors up to eight generations back, this technology can be used to go back as far as fifty or sixty generations. In order to protect the identity of the living, those who find matches will be able to see only those who lived before 1900.

The project is being funded by LDS billionaire James Sorensen. “It’s a ‘turning the hearts’-type process,” Sorensen declared in an interview with the Deseret Morning News, in reference to scriptural passages from Malachi and the Doctrine and Covenants that inspire faithful Mormons to do temple work and genealogy. “A lot of people working here are working on the basis that they feel something more than just a test-tube study.”
**SUGGESTIVE PICTURES STOLEN**

A FIERCE CONTROVERSY erupted at Salt Lake Community College as a group of suggestive photographs were displayed, then moved to a different room, and finally stolen from the premises. Shot by local artist Don Farmer, the photographs displayed two LDS missionaries kissing and embracing in various stages of undress.

On the first day of the college’s annual Gay Pride Art Show, students got into a shouting match after one of them began taking down Farmer’s photographs. Police were called, and the photographs were moved to a different room and re-hung; but two days later, three of the five photographs were stolen. The stolen pictures were ones that contain LDS symbols such as the Book of Mormon, garments, and name tags.

“Some people are offended by our use of garments in the photos,” wrote Matthew Grierson, one of the models, on his website. “But the photos are not meant to offend; they are meant to create awareness and open lines of communication, as many people don’t understand that this does exist within Mormon culture, especially out in the mission field.”

The photographs are now on display at <www.affirmation.org/art>.

Those interested in the project can visit <www.smgf.org>.

**MORMONS HOOKED ON DA VINCI**

HOW POPULAR IS the novel, *The DaVinci Code*, among Mormons? Count as a big hint the 700 who attended a recent lecture on the subject at Brigham Young University—plus the hundreds who were left outside.

“Mystery, Metaphor and Meaning: LDS Perspectives on the *Da Vinci Code*” is a series of lectures by BYU professors exploring different aspects of Dan Brown’s popular novel. Since its publication one year ago, the novel, packed with stories about secret societies, cryptic messages, and conspiracy theories, has sold 4.5 million copies.

For LDS readers, the appeal is partly due to the novel’s notion that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a special relationship. Based on nineteenth-century statements by Orson Hyde and Orson Pratt, some Mormons believe Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus’ wives.

During the first lecture, BYU professor Eric Huntsman refused to state his opinion about the nature of the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, but he said scriptural evidence for a close relationship is significant.

“If the evidence is inconclusive, then why is [Mary Magdalene] there?” Huntsman asked. “Why is she prominent in the scriptures?”

“Still,” he added, “I’m not going to be making some sensationalistic claims.”

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**Solar Flares**

**God Promotes Vegetarianism.** Quoting from D&C 89, a Salt Lake City billboard promotes vegetarianism and a more humane treatment of animals. “And (animals) hath God made for the use of man only in times of famine and excess hunger,” reads the sign, posted along the south side of 3900 South near 300 West. The ad portrays a man in robes (presumably God), holding a staff in one hand and carrots in the other.

“Animals raised for meat on factory farms live miserable lives and die bloody, violent deaths,” says Sean Diener, who is LDS and coordinates the PETA campaign. “Anyone who thinks that Jesus would approve of the way these animals are raised and killed completely misses the gospel’s greatest message—compassion.”

Although it is impossible to estimate how many LDS are vegetarian, close to two hundred Latter-day Saints interested in vegetarianism participate in MormonVeg, an online discussion group at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MormonVeg/

**R-Rating Trumps Potential Lessons in the Passion.** While delivering a fireside talk on Church standards to more than 400 youth gathered in the stake center in Huntington Beach, California, stake president Frank Parker took the opportunity to renounce Mel Gibson’s movie to the teens by telling them that “even though the movie is about Jesus, the Prophet would disapprove of your seeing it.”

In a game called “What’s wrong with this picture,” the stake president displayed overhead images to the wide-eyed group of 12- to 18-year-olds and asked them to explain what was not right with the various pictures. Unable to locate his illustration of Gordon B. Hinckley standing in line at a movie theater under a marquee that read *The Passion of the Christ*, Parker described the picture to the youth, then asked and answered his own “what’s wrong” question by stating, “We have been told by the prophet not to see R-rated movies and even though this movie is about Jesus, Latter-day Saints should not see it.”

According to our source, one young woman in the congregation had already seen the film with her parents and felt that viewing *Passion* had moved her toward wanting to live a better life. The chastisement she received from her peers after the fireside for her having seen the film did not have the same effect.
MORMON CINEMA BEGINS ANOTHER REEL

WITH THE RELEASE of movies such as The Best Two Years and The Home Teachers, and with the celebration of the third LDS Film Festival, Utah-based filmmakers and actors continue to expand the Mormon film industry.

More than 1,000 BYU students and movie fans participated in the festival held in February at the Provo City Library and Orem’s University Mall. In addition to short projects by BYU film students and graduates, the festival screened Saints and Soldiers and The Best Two Years, two full-length features being released nationally.

“In short films, people try new things,” says festival organizer Christian Vuissa. “The festival is, in that sense, a showcase that encourages creative thinking. Some of the students who participated in last year’s festival are now making full-length features, such as Jared Hess and Jeremy Coon.”

Hess and Coon wrote, directed, and produced Napoleon Dynamite, which screened this year at the Sundance Film Festival. Set in Preston, Idaho, Napoleon Dynamite focuses on the life of a man who alters his eccentric daily life in order to help his best friend become class president. Intended for a broader, non-LDS audience, the film was picked up by Fox Searchlight and will have a wide theatrical release this spring.

Directed by Scott S. Anderson, The Best Two Years follows four LDS missionaries in Holland, including one who has just received a “Dear John,” and an enthusiastic greenie, played by omnipresent LDS actor Kirby Heyborne. “Anderson finds gentle humor in the details of mission life,” writes Sean P. Means for the Salt Lake Tribune, “but [he] also explores the spiritual side of mission work... Even for non-Mormons, there is an undeniable power in the scenes where these young men talk about their faith.”

MORMONS AND MOVIE VIOLENCE

AS LDS FILMMAKERS expand their creativity, they confront questions of values and content. Mormons have been accused of having strict standards in matters of language and sexual content but lax ones concerning violence. Recent developments seem to confirm this perception.

While the LDS Film Festival awarded Kohl Glass’s violent short The Promethean for its creativity, depictions of violence in big productions can have disastrous financial consequences. The Motion Picture Association of America recently dealt a blow to the World War II drama, Saints and Soldiers, by giving it an R rating.

“My wife and I don’t see R-rated movies,” says Saints and Soldiers producer Adam Abel. “So it’s interesting now to have made one. Am I not supposed to see my movie?”

Anxious to release the film for LDS as well as mainstream audiences, the filmmaker appealed the MPAA rating, and, according to the online version of Newsweek, studied movies such as Pearl Harbor before reshooting some scenes with less blood in order to ensure a PG-13 rating upon appeal. Just days before SUNSTONE went to press, it was announced that the appeal had been successful.

Even though an R-rating makes a film taboo for many Mormons, LDS prophets have seldom warned specifically against R-rated movies. Elder Alexander Morrison even once praised Saving Private Ryan for portraying violence as something horrible, rather than enjoyable (see SUNSTONE, March 2003, 16–22). Likewise, BYU religion professor Robert Millet recently praised Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ, one of the most violent and gory movies of the season, which he described as “moving.” “I don’t know if
my system could have taken it another hour. But it was a beautiful experience,” said Millet.

AMID CONTROVERSY, GAY MORMON MISSIONARY FILM FINALLY SCREENS

AFTER WEEKS OF controversy, the film Latter Days finally screened in Salt Lake City on 17 March. The comedy tells the story of a gay Hollywood waiter who falls in love with a 19-year-old LDS missionary who is then forced to rethink his beliefs. Amid rumors of threats and protests by local customers, Salt Lake’s Madstone Theater decided to cancel a scheduled engagement. After having originally turned it down, the Salt Lake Film Society reconsidered and finally picked up the controversial film, screening it at the Tower Theatre.

“By making this movie, I hoped I would send a message back to that 19-year-old [I once was], who was so uncertain about himself, that everything was going to be OK,” says Latter Days director C. Jay Cox, who is gay and a returned LDS missionary. “But he ended up having just as much to say to me. I was able to reaffirm a lot of spiritual tenets that I’ve kind of re-discovered because of him, because of the movie.”

GET THE FIRE SPARKS CONTROVERSY

A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT the lives of LDS missionaries was aired by PBS in December 2003. Get the Fire! Young Mormon Missionaries Abroad follows three Utah teens from their homes in Salt Lake City through their training at the MTC and finally to their destination in the Germany Munich Mission.

The documentary, however, turned out to be controversial, as filmmaker Nancy du Plessis juxtaposed images of the missionaries speaking imperfect German and having doors slammed in their faces with interviews with five returned missionaries who have since abandoned Mormonism. Du Plessis says she included the interviews because test audiences “had questions to things that my subjects never wanted to talk about.”

One year into the project, LDS officials withdrew their support. That problem, along with depleted funds, forced du Plessis to finish the film with imperfect lighting and sound.

In an interview with the Salt Lake Tribune, returned missionary Brady Flamm described as unpleasant his experience as one of the film’s missionary subjects. “I got nicer and nicer to her, thinking it would be harder for her to trash me. But she did it anyway.”

Viewer comments, both praising and criticizing the film, can be found at <www.pbs.org>.

BYU ATHLETES PARTY, GET PUNISHED

IN A STORY that received wide media attention, Brigham Young University has punished six BYU football players for participating in a party at which they allegedly drank alcohol and had sex with a female BYU athlete. The party took place on 19 January at the home of three members of the BYU football team.

The female student had first claimed that she had been raped—an allegation she later recanted. She said she had fabricated the rape story because “she was simply embarrassed and somewhat frightened as to her status at the school.” Investigators concluded that the sex had been consensual.

BYU will not reveal the names of any of the players, and coaches will not comment on why some names are not on the new football roster. However, local media reports have named four players as having been dismissed or suspended. BYU says that two of the six players involved in the incident have been placed on probation and will be able to continue with the team.

LDS MAYOR OUT OF JAIL

MORE THAN A year after being accused of misusing public funds, former Boise, Idaho, Mayor Brent Coles got out of jail on 23 February. Coles is one of three Boise City officials, all LDS, who pleaded guilty or were convicted for misusing city funds to visit various LDS temples and other sites.

Among the billing violations they found, auditors determined that Coles and former chief-of-staff Gary Lyman were reimbursed by the city of Boise for non-business-related trips to Salt Lake City, long-distance phone calls to the LDS Church, a limousine ride from a Boston hotel to a nearby LDS temple, and a trip to Nauvoo.

Coles pleaded guilty to one count each of misusing public money and presenting a fraudulent voucher. Lyman pleaded guilty to two counts of misusing public money, one count of presenting a fraudulent voucher, and one count of illegal wire-tapping.

The third person involved in the scandal was former Human Resources Director Tammy Rice. Rice accompanied Lyman on a city-funded trip through Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, which reportedly included a stop at historic Nauvoo. Prosecutors also contended that Rice and Lyman were having an affair.

Last year, LDS leaders in Boise released Coles and Lyman from their church callings—Coles as a high councilor and Lyman as a member of a stake presidency.

At the time the scandal broke, newspaper articles noted the irony that Lyman had also used city funds to buy ten copies of Standing for Something: 10 Neglected Virtues That Will Heal Our Hearts and Homes, the bestselling book by LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley. Chapter 2 of the book is titled, “Where There Is Honesty, Other Virtues Will Follow.”
In closing an issue of the magazine in which a good number of pages are devoted to questions about what the Book of Mormon is, it is appropriate to remember at least some of the things it actually says. And who better to turn to for delivering its message of Zion and universal brotherhood than the indomitable Hugh Nibley?


THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS have always believed that the breakthroughs in science that have bettered the condition of man by bringing light and truth are an organic part of the restoration of the gospel. For us that is the great breakthrough: “The morning breaks, the shadows flee,” “Now a glorious morn is breaking,” “The veil o’er the earth is beginning to burst,” “An angel from on high the long, long silence broke.” For us the whole thing was a breakthrough. And it was just one surprise after another, nothing expected, contrived, or anticipated. The testimony of Oliver Cowdery appended to the Pearl of Great Price catches the spirit of the event: “What joy! what wonder! what amazement! While the world was racked and distracted—while millions were groping as the blind for the wall, and while all men were resting upon uncertainty, as a general mass, our eyes beheld, our ears heard. . . . ‘Twas the voice of an angel, from glory, ‘twas a message from the Most High! . . . Man may deceive his fellow-men, deception may follow deception, and the children of the wicked one may have power to seduce the foolish and untaught, till naught but fiction feeds the many . . . but . . . one ray of glory from the upper world, or one word from the mouth of the Savior, from the bosom of eternity, strikes it all into insignificance, and blots it forever from the mind!” Every breakthrough is also a breakout, liberating mankind from restraints and repressions of various kinds.

This is illustrated all through the Book of Mormon, beginning with the case of Lehi, depressed and frustrated by conditions in Jerusalem. Traveling in the desert, he saw a spectacle like Moses’ burning bush, “a pillar of fire . . . upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much,” which sent him scurrying back to Jerusalem, where he threw himself on his bed and had a vision in which “he saw the heavens open,” and so on (1 Nephi 1:6-8). Here, then, was a breakthrough presently leading to a breakout, as Lehi fled in the night from the land of Jerusalem into the desert; and then another breakthrough when he left the Old World behind. Arriving in the New, Nephi suffered oppression under his brethren until he received a revelation and broke with them, leading his own following into a place apart, where they were able to live “after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27). Other such breakthroughs followed in the Book of Mormon—those of Mosiah, and of Alma at the waters of Mormon.

What he meant by “the manner of happiness” is illustrated in the model society of 4 Nephi: “And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free” (4 Nephi 1:3); “and it came to pass that there was no contention among all the people, in all the land” (4 Nephi 1:13); “and how blessed were they! . . . The first generation from Christ had passed away, and there was no contention in all the land” (4 Nephi 1:18). It was a noncompetitive society, which is the breakthrough I would ask you to envisage.

Since I have been asked to tell what breakthrough I would like to see, I will state it quite frankly. It is the same one the prophets, seers, and revelators of modern times have yearned and worked for: namely, the observation by the Latter-day Saints of the law of consecration. I’m only expressing a personal wish, but that is what was asked for. I would like to see it happen in the first place because I have covenanted to keep it, and I would like to be able to do so.

The program is an urgent one, and since the world is steadily getting worse, the chances of carrying it out in a sympathetic environment have not been improving.

The express purpose of the law of consecration is the building up of Zion; it is God’s plan, and his alone, for doing that. We do not wait until Zion is here to observe it; it is rather the means of bringing us nearer to Zion.
ANNOUNCING THE 2004 BROOKIE & D.K. BROWN FICTION CONTEST

THE SUNSTONE EDUCATION FOUNDATION invites writers to enter its annual fiction contest, which is made possible by a grant from the Brookie and D. K. Brown family. All entries must relate to adult Latter-day Saint experience, theology, or worldview. All varieties of form are welcome. Stories, sans author identification, will be judged by noted Mormon authors and professors of literature. Winners will be announced in SUNSTONE and on the foundation’s website, <www.sunstoneonline.com>; winners only will be notified by mail. After the announcement, all other entrants will be free to submit their stories elsewhere. Winning stories will be published in SUNSTONE magazine.

PRIZES will be awarded in two categories: SHORT-SHORT STORY—fewer than 1,500 words; SHORT STORY—fewer than 6,000 words. Prize money varies (up to $400 each) depending on the number of winners announced.

RULES: 1. Up to three entries may be submitted by any one author. Four copies of each entry must be delivered (or postmarked) to Sunstone by 30 June 2004. Entries will not be returned. A $5 fee must accompany each entry. No email submissions will be permitted.

2. Each story must be typed, double-spaced, on one side of white paper and be stapled in the upper left corner. The author’s name may not appear on any page of the manuscript.

3. Each entry must be accompanied by a cover letter that states the story’s title and the author’s name, address, telephone number, and email (if available). This cover letter must be signed by the author and attest that the entry is her or his own work, that it has not been previously published, that it is not being considered for publication elsewhere and will not be submitted to other publishers until after the contest, and that, if the entry wins, SUNSTONE magazine has one-time, first-publication rights. Cover letters must also grant permission for the manuscript to be filed in the Sunstone Collection at the Marriott Library of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. The author retains all literary rights. Sunstone discourages the use of pseudonyms; if used, the author must identify the real and pen names and the reasons for writing under the pseudonym.

Failure to comply with rules will result in disqualification.
A young Peruvian student named José summed up the dilemma. He told the audience and panelists how he grew up believing he was a Lamanite and now felt “overwhelmed with the surprise coming from the science. . . . We don’t know where the Book of Mormon took place. We don’t know where the Lamanites are. If we don’t know who the Lamanites are, how can the Book of Mormon promise to bring them back? It’s an identity crisis for many of us that [must] be understood.”

Things are truly at a crossroads. We need a Liahona.