

*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:

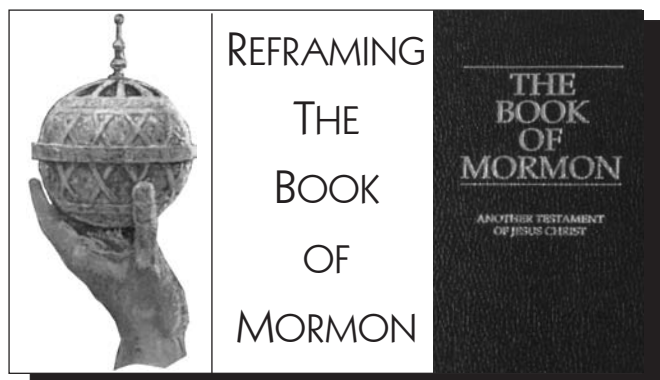
## A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON ITS PLACE IN HISTORY AND RELIGION

*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

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.<sup>1</sup>

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



### I. 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

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

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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 together the disparate elements of our experience in such a way that we can understand our place within an overarching story.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these capacities of symbols bears important weight in my contention that the Book of Mormon is foremost a symbolic history, providing an 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.<sup>6</sup>

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-

ited patterns of behavior. Thus, Jung postulates that a newborn infant's psyche is not at all a *tabula rasa*, unmarked by any form, but is in fact a repository of all humankind's history and ancestral past. The psyche is equipped from birth with latent structure and adaptational modes that existed prior to the emergence of ego and the conscious experience of itself. For this reason, Jung argues, universal patterns occur in individuals as well as collectively in cultures.

#### B. JOSEPH SMITH AS SHAMAN

THE SECOND SET of claims in my overarching thesis is the contention (1) that in many ways, Joseph Smith expressed and lived out the archetypal pattern of the ancient shaman or holy man, seer, and healer; and (2) that the Book of Mormon is the result of a monumental shamanic accomplishment in the way it became a symbol able to bridge irreconcilable differences. The Book of Mormon is what I call a "divine third," a remarkable symbol that allows disparate parties to stand intact and whole while still making an accommodation with each other.

Even though the concept of shamanism is generally associated with Asian and Native American cultures, it is an archetypal pattern relevant to most major religions, including Christianity. The word shaman, Siberian in origin, refers to that particular type of medicine man or woman, holy person, or healer who controls and mediates realities of the other world for the benefit of the community. According to Ake Hulkcrantz, the shaman is "a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, obtained ecstasy in order to create rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of an individual and/or group members."<sup>7</sup>

Shamanic power derives from *direct* experience. The shaman is particularly talented in negotiating the chaos and archetypal understandings which dominate those realms outside the microcosm. More particularly, the shaman functions to restore balance and harmony when illness or evil are present in individuals, or when a community or tribe is struggling to maintain its own psychic integrity. The shaman reconciles polarities which can create intolerable tension in human life: good and evil, light and darkness, health and disease, sin and righteousness, integrity and fragmentation, wholeness and compartmentalization, self-definition and individuality versus capitulation.

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 ultimate and sublime in a way which still honors the fullness of their power. Anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff states:

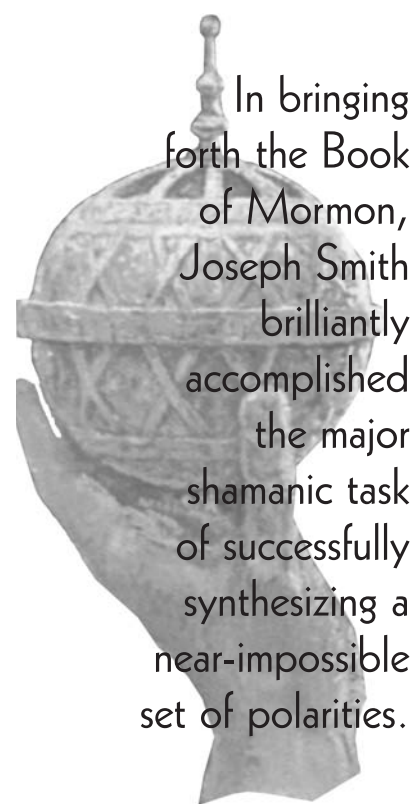
Shamanic balance is a particular stance. It is not a balance achieved by synthesis, nor a static condition achieved by resolving oppositions. It is not a compromise. Rather, it is a state of acute tension, the kind of tension which exists when two unqualified forces encounter each other, meeting headlong,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

which the Westerner, schooled in the Aristotelian tradition, is extremely uncomfortable. . . . We Westerners have come to feel that enduring this sort of tension is not really necessary, that somehow it is possible to allow one pole to exist and prevail without its opposite. We seek good without evil, pleasure without pain, God without Satan, and love without hate. But the shaman reminds us of the impossibility of such a condition, for he stands at the juncture of 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*.<sup>8</sup>

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 return with a cure; as judges, they settle political disputes or questions of law; they may be asked to find lost property. When a culture, clan, family, or group is out of balance, they call upon the shaman to restore them. The shaman 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 primordial or chaotic realms, creating sacred experiences out of which he or she evolves a myth of healing or meaning that synthesizes the tensions threatening the group's well-being. In short, shamans create a living religion.

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 Shippo 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> This view is particularly conveyed in Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

#### 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 settles 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

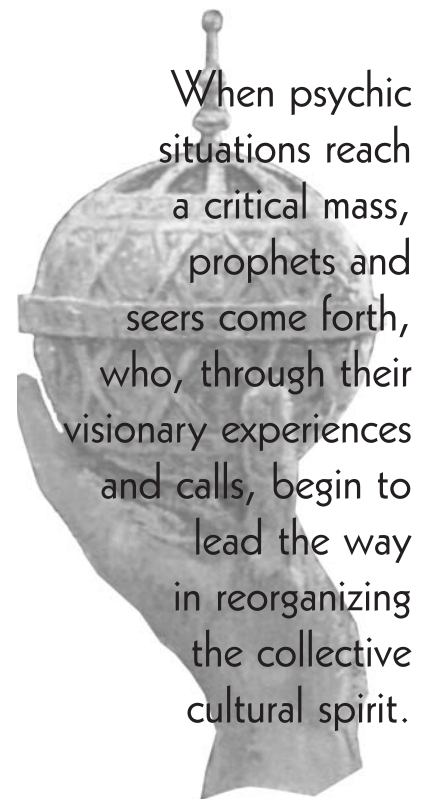
book teaches that America is a promised land to *both* the Indian and the European, as both were led to its shores by the hand of God.

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.<sup>15</sup> 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 of 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, roundabout 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.<sup>16</sup>

#### 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. . . .<sup>17</sup>

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 Shippis 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*

**I**N 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:

- “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.”<sup>18</sup>
- “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 numinous, 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.”<sup>19</sup>
- “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.”<sup>20</sup>
- “[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.”<sup>21</sup>

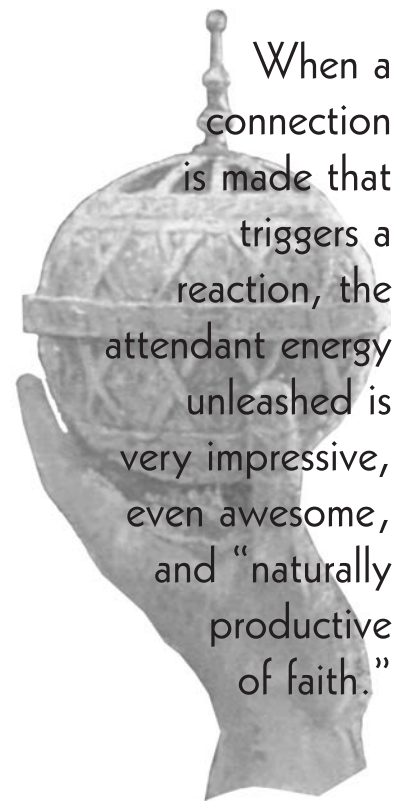
### A. STRIKING CHORDS, UNLEASHING ENERGIES

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*.”<sup>22</sup>

(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



When a connection is made that triggers a reaction, the attendant energy unleashed is very impressive, even awesome, and “naturally productive of faith.”

the elements of the image do we get the sense that there is a meaningful definition of what we are actually dealing with emotionally.”<sup>23</sup>

(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 instinctual 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 descendants 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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 discussions, 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.<sup>27</sup>

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 theorists 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" dynamics applied to the Smiths, or even this article's contention that Smith is helpfully seen as following a shamanic archetype—have much to offer in understanding the Book of Mormon. However, I do not believe 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 limited by specific theories of human development, yet too often the applications venture outside the scope of the

theory and become very speculative in order to prove their point.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is again easy to see why we're excited when we approach the book this way. Book of Mormon characters feel real enough to readers to elicit a felt connection to archetypal motifs. The characters typically react to the events the book is describing in classic, "human" fashion, and we can see ourselves and those we know "in" them. And these symbolic hits, just like Book of Mormon connections with ancient patterns, geographical features, and nineteenth century issues, release numinous energies. As Jung says, a symbol "carries conviction and at the same time expresses the content of that conviction." But, again, theories which try to derive all of the Book of Mormon and other elements in Mormonism from Joseph Smith's life are guilty of a category mistake. They are attempts to literalize and fix as *the* truth of the Book of Mormon what is better understood as simply one more example of the way symbols work in connection with our favorite theories and frameworks to excite the human mind.

**THE BOOK OF MORMON AS PROPHETIC MESSAGE.** Finally, seeing the Book of Mormon as a symbolic history helps us understand the energy and power many feel as they note won-



*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, 8–9).

3. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: A Search Book* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), 27–41.

4. C. G. Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 6, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 473–75, emphasis in original.

5. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Rites, and Symbols: a Mircea Eliade Reader*, vol. 2, eds., William G. Doty and Wendell C. Beane (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1976), 346–51.

6. C. Jess Groesbeck, "C. G. Jung, Personality Theory," in *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, 4th ed., ed. H. Kaplan et al. (Baltimore: Wilkins and Williams, 1985), 433–36.

7. Ake Hulkrantz, "A Definition of Shamanism," *Temenos* 9 (1973): 25–37.

8. Barbara Meyerhoff, "Balancing Between Worlds: The Shaman's Calling," *Parabola* 2 (Spring 1976): 10, emphases added.

9. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 33–34.

10. Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 7, 36–47.

11. Charles D. Tate Jr, ed., *View of the Hebrews: 1825 2nd Edition, Complete Text by Ethan Smith* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1996).

12. C. G. Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 10, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 49, 510.

13. T. C. McLuhan, *Touch the Earth: A Self-portrait of Indian Existence* (New York: Promontory Press, 1971), 107.

14. It is striking, for example, that Luman 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 background 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 North, 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.

16. John Neihart, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 25–26, 42–43, emphases in the original.

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.

Raised under these conditions, Hansom Lake began to suffer deeply from bereavement 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 its 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 grandiose 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 catalysts 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. Shipps, *Mormonism*, 35–36.

18. C. G. Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 5, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956), 231.

19. *Ibid.*, 232.

20. C. G. Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 9:1, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956), 120.

21. C. G. Jung, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, 477.

22. C. G. Jung, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 231, emphasis in original.

23. John Weir Perry, *Roots of Renewal in Myth and Madness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 1976), 164.

24. John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, rev. ed. (Provo: FARMS, 1999).

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 Melekin is advancing the thesis that the Book of Mormon was set in Africa. Melekin writes on his website, [www.eritrean-n-d-p.com](http://www.eritrean-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.

27. Two representative works for this approach are: Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed. *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), especially chapters 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, and 10; and

Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004). Three others that raise similar questions without pushing the argument that nineteenth-century influences rule out the Book of Mormon's still being a translation from ancient writings are: B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brigham D. Madsen (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Blake T. Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 66–123; and Mark D. Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999).

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,  
saviour 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,  
sour my hands  
until they resemble sliced bread,  
the backs sunslapped,  
curved palms opening white  
from the lye knife.

—VICTOR W. PEARN