

# SUNSTONE

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YEA, YEA  NAY, NAY

## PHOBIA BY ANY OTHER NAME—FLASHBACK

AH, YES: THE 2004 COMMENT OF Sheri Dew, president of Deseret Book Company and best-selling biographer of Church President Gordon B. Hinckley, that she could barely stomach (i.e., felt nauseated at) seeing a photograph of a returned LDS missionary and his male partner being civilly married in San Francisco, each holding one of their adopted daughters (SUNSTONE, March 2004, 73).

And yet, after expressing comments such as this publicly and privately, social conservatives bristle today when they are called "homophobic" by "so-called liberals," and insist: "It is part of the radical gay agenda to call normal people 'homophobic' merely because good Christians criticize the claim of gays that they have the right to marry. We love gay people, but hate their homosexuality and lifestyle."

FLASHBACK TO 1954: A white Southern Baptist woman of prominence looks at a photo of a black man being civilly married to a white woman in Boston and says publicly that the photo makes her feel nauseated. Criticized by "so-called liberals," she replies: "It is part of the radical Negro agenda to call decent people 'racist' or 'Negrophobic' merely because good Christians criticize the claim of Negroes that they have the right of miscegenation. We love Negro people but hate their blackness and race-mixing."

Different target, same disgust, same fears of allowing a despised group the rights of the dominant group, same denials.

D. MICHAEL QUINN  
 Los Angeles, California

## PARSIMONY

I FOUND SEVERAL ARTICLES IN THE "Reframing The Book of Mormon" section (SUNSTONE, March 2004) to be quite interesting and enlightening. I commend SUNSTONE for having the courage to admit that traditional LDS views of the Book of Mormon need to be re-examined. I must admit up front that I am one of those who has, as Trent D. Stephens describes, adopted the first reaction to the latest data on the Book of Mormon. I happen to believe that "the data refute the historic authenticity of the Book of Mormon," and that "therefore, belief in the book is unfounded and should be abandoned."

That said, I still found the articles very interesting. But, particularly interesting to me was Ralph A. Olsen's article, "A Malay Site for Book of Mormon Events." One reason for this is that, several years ago, I independently put forth the same idea myself. I didn't do the extensive research that Olsen has apparently done, but I find his logic and data quite compelling. He certainly makes a much better case for his argument than any of the apologists at FARMS do for theirs. As a proponent of Occam's Razor (which Olsen cites in his end-notes), I find Olsen's proposition is far more "parsimonious" than the convoluted mental gymnastics required to accept a New World location for the Book of Mormon. Olsen refers to himself as "an old chemist meddling in hallowed ground." I must say that as an old geographer with a specialty in Polynesia, I find his proposition very interesting. If I were to accept, as Olsen does, that "the Book of Mormon is a genuine record of actual peoples and events and not merely a metaphorical or spiritual record," then his proposition is the most reasonable I have seen so far. However, I still have extreme difficulty accepting the Book of Mormon as "a genuine record."

PRESTON BISSELL  
 Eau Claire, Wisconsin

## AGAIN!

GOD BLESS THE THINKERS. THEY keep handing such dilemmas to those who shudder and stammer and scratch their heads over what to do with this little book called the Book of Mormon. (See SUNSTONE, March 2004.) After all, its contents certainly must be accepted only with a wink or an asterisk until the book itself passes a real thinking man's test. For goodness sakes, how can we accept teachings on love and obeying the commandments of God and that Jesus Christ is our Savior until we dig up bones of at least one pre-Columbian horse?

So, year after year, we struggle to follow the promptings of the thinkers. But it takes so much faith.

They told us that all native peoples poured across the Bering Strait, apparently bumping into one another as they hastened to take advantage of a fairly brief environmental opening. Then they told us that settlements in New Mexico showed up before those travelers could get so far south unless they took Interstate 5 through California. Then, they told us that, while, yes, Central and South America were home to ancient civ-

ilizations, none existed at the times suggested in the Book of Mormon. Now they report discoveries placing people in Central America exactly during Book of Mormon times.

Now we have DNA testing. And we are told that all peoples native to North, Central, and South America were made in China. Oh, bother. I don't know what that does to the trade deficit, but I do know one thing for certain. There goes the Book of Mormon. Again. All those teachings down the drain of disbelief. Until some technician pokes a needle into a kid in Chile and pulls out a Middle Eastern connection. But not to worry. There will always be those horses.

Heaven help us if we put the Bible to such tests before we accept its authenticity. Of course we believe in Paul's conversion story. Both versions. The creation story? You bet. Story A or Story B? Judas certainly came to an untimely ending. But was it Ending A or B? We have Abraham's family riding camels before camels were domesticated, Israelites popping up where they were not, Mary and Joseph struggling to get to Bethlehem to follow a Roman edict that didn't exist. Oh my.

Of course one difference between the two books is that Joseph Smith said he translated everything correctly. We have no such claims for the Bible. I suggest, however, a basis for possible error even if Smith translated perfectly. It's not uncommon for generals to expand a bit on the truth when recounting heroics or when estimating enemy casualties. And before the advent of precision instruments and precise geographical boundaries, distances and landmarks tended to be in the eye of the beholder.

I'm not suggesting that books of faith need not answer to some reason and logic, and I welcome each new scientific wrinkle as much as I welcome those working at the ironing board. But most Latter-day Saints are too busy to stand around in the laundry room to watch. In other words, despite the "oh-the-sky-certainly-is-falling-this-time-for-sure" rhetoric, the Church will go on. Babies will still disrupt sacrament meetings. Odd chemical combinations will still show up at ward dinners. Faithful priesthood brethren will still wear white shirts. And only elderly women will be allowed facial hair at Brigham Young University.

GARY RUMMLER  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

## THE REAL CONFLICT

**I**N HIS ATTEMPT TO GRAPPLE WITH problems DNA evidence poses for Book of Mormon historicity (SUNSTONE, March 2004), Trent D. Stephens incorrectly frames the issue as "metaphysics" vs. science. The simple fact is that the Book of Mormon makes historical claims that can be tested. We are not talking about one house and one family, as Stephens hyperbolizes. The Nephites ruled over and dominated the region, if not the continent. A whole nation as described in the Book of Mormon does not simply disappear. So unless the Nephites and Lamanites lived in a fourth dimension, some kind of incontrovertible evidence should have appeared by now.

Stephens's reference to the lack of evidence that large numbers of Israelites occupied ancient Egypt is irrelevant because that portion of the Bible may indeed be based on myth. Stephens seems to be telling readers: if you believe the biblical account of the Exodus and it can't be proven, then you must accept my argument about the Book of Mormon. This line of reasoning works only with those similarly situated and proves nothing to those who do not share his bias.

While Stephens criticizes creationists as "religious fanatics" because they reject the scientific data for evolution, he is guilty of ignoring the implications of Amerindian DNA,

which amounts to the same thing. To escape the implications of DNA and other evidence, Stephens uncritically relies on the Limited Tehuantepec Theory of Book of Mormon geography, which asserts that the vast majority of Native Americans are not Lamanites and that Book of Mormon events took place in the small region of Central America surrounding the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. As Brent Lee Metcalfe and I explain in the introduction to *American Apocrypha* (Signature Books, 2003), this theory is nothing more than an ad hoc hypothesis designed to shield the Book of Mormon from negative evidence. It only exists to save the Book of Mormon and has no other merits.

Stephens's willingness to undermine the Book of Mormon's prophetic spirit in order to save its historicity will no doubt trouble many believers. According to Stephens (and other apologists), Lehi's prophecy in 2 Nephi 1:6-11—that America would be preserved exclusively for those of Israelite blood until a future time of apostasy—was false, for at that time, the Amerasians already occupied the New World. Stephens's suggestion that Lehi uttered this false prophecy because he had no "real concept of the vastness of the area of which he spoke" is hardly reassuring. Stephens then equivocates on the meaning of "this land," but in the end, he can give no other reason for this line of questioning than his need to defend the Book of Mormon.



*You can quote most of Isaiah, but it's too hard to engrave the name of your wife?*

JEANNETTE ATWOOD

As usual when Mormons find the evidence is not in their favor, Stephens invokes Moroni's promise that sincere prayer will be rewarded by a spiritual witness (Moroni 10:4–5). But, in light of his previous discussion undermining the ability of prophets to interpret “the workings of the spirit,” how confident is Stephens about his own testimony? If history teaches anything, it teaches us not be overly confident about ecstatic religious experience. While Mormons tend to think their spiritual experiences are somehow different, mystical and spiritual states are ancient, cross-cultural, and rooted in biology. Whether we're talking about Nirvana, Brahman, Tao, *Unio Mystica*, Absolute Unitary Being, or lesser mystical states such as divine presence, born-again, burning in the bosom, and religious awe, all originate in specific areas of the human brain and can be triggered through meditation, prayer, and ritual. Scientists are now discovering more about the nature of mystical and spiritual experiences, which originate in the lower part of the brain, the limbic system and, to some extent, the frontal and parietal lobes. Spiritual experiences are part of being human, but they are far from infallible guides to truth. Moreover, they are subject to manipulation, cultural bias, and—unlike science and reason—they are not self-correcting.

Like many believers, Stephens seeks to harmonize religion and science. But why should we? What is it about religion that causes us to want to bend reality to save it? If the truth makes us free, why do we choose conformity? Obviously religion fulfills an emotional need so powerful that it becomes impervious to reason. Scientific method was invented to override emotional biases and help us overcome our tendency to make subjective judgments. Those who use scientific and other scholarly methods had better be prepared to have their false notions challenged. But isn't that the whole purpose of using such tools? It seems to me that the real conflict is not between science and religion, but rather between our emotional attachment to tradition and our inability to embrace change as inevitable and beneficial.

DAN VOGEL  
Westerville, Ohio

*Trent D. Stephens responds:*

DAN VOGEL'S LETTER HELPS PROVE one of the main points of my SUNSTONE essay: the apparent conflict between science and religion comes from the interpretation of texts and data rather than from the texts and data themselves. Vogel claims that “the

Nephites ruled over and dominated the region, if not the continent.” But consider the actual text, which says (476 years after the original colonization), “My son, I would that ye should make a proclamation throughout all this land among all this people, or the people of Zarahemla, and the people of Mosiah who dwell in the land, that thereby they may be gathered together . . . on the morrow” (Mosiah 1:10). The whole land must have had a radius of not much more than twenty miles for a proclamation to go out for everyone to meet one day hence. Vogel also writes, “According to Stephens . . . Lehi's prophecy in 2 Nephi 1:6–11—that America would be preserved . . . was false.” But the prophecy's reference to “this land” does not have to be an allusion to America as a whole. It is Vogel who is reading “America” into the text.

In my essay, I suggested four paths one might take in light of the new DNA data concerning Native American origins: “One: [One may conclude that] belief in the [Book of Mormon] is unfounded and should be abandoned. Two: The data may be ignored. . . . Three: People may take a wait and see attitude. . . . Four: The Book of Mormon story is still true . . . [but] Middle Eastern colonization in the Americas may have been very small compared to the remainder of the population.” I did not suggest which path someone should take. In fact, I stated that, “rejecting the authenticity of the Book of Mormon because its story is not supported by scientific evidence may be the most practical and most rational choice.” I have no argument with anyone who chooses this course, and I understand that position.

I then stated, “The last conclusion, not to reject the Book of Mormon story, but to modify interpretations of that story in light of scientific data, seems a reasonable compromise for anyone who attempts to espouse both science and Mormon theology.” This is the approach I have chosen. Having spent the past thirty-five or more years of my life in the biological sciences and, at the same time, having chosen to follow a religious life, I find such compromise a part of my everyday life.

It appears that, for whatever reason, Vogel is not willing to tolerate such a position. Apparently, in his mind, the choice is black and white: one must reject the Book of Mormon because of the data, or reject the data. My options three and four are apparently out of the question.

According to Vogel, all religious experience is limbic and therefore, by implication, self-originating. He states, “Whether we're talking about Nirvana . . . or . . . burning in the bosom and religious awe, they all origi-

nate in specific areas of the human brain and can be triggered through meditation, prayer, and ritual.” One might note how similar Vogel's list and conclusion is to that of the Book of Mormon's Korihor: “dreams . . . whims . . . visions and . . . pretended mysteries . . . [claimed by believers to originate from] some unknown being, who they say is God—a being who never has been seen or known, who never was nor ever will be” (Alma 30: 28).

Vogel asks, “Stephens seeks to harmonize religion and science. But why should we?” My answer to that question is the same as it is for any of my other scientific and intellectual pursuits: I don't know. I simply feel driven by intellectual curiosity to do so. I find it fulfilling. And it's a heck of a lot of fun—which, as it turns out, is also a limbic function. Vogel asks me a specific question, “How confident is Stephens about his own testimony?” My answer: Very. Do I think the experience of testimony is unique to Mormons? No. Do I find having a testimony confining, forcing a choice of conformity? Not as much as thinking my own limbic lobe is the only creative force in the universe.

TRENT D. STEPHENS  
Pocatello, Idaho

## INVESTIGATOR-FRIENDLY

I FOUND MYSELF BRISTLING AS I READ the editorial, “On Being Investigator-Safe” in the recent issue of SUNSTONE (March 2004). I wasn't distressed about the overall point that editor, Dan Wotherspoon, was trying to make (I actually think we agree about many points) so much as it was about the concept of “investigator-safe” itself, to which he was reacting. This worry about needing to watch everything we say out of fear we'll somehow hurt the chances that someone will join the Church seems to me to be just another spin-off of the general Mormon moral and intellectual superiority complex: we assume investigators and non-member friends are not able to understand or accept the more controversial areas of our religion. This attitude is based on the false assumption that people outside of the Mormon faith are children who can't sort through issues in an intelligent and understanding way. Did anyone ever stop to think of how investigator-unfriendly this attitude might be?

I firmly reject the paradigm that a person evolves from innocent babe to naive tender investigator to zealous, “true believer Mormon” and then into erudite reader of SUNSTONE magazine. That model is simplistic on both ends of the equation—more ap-

appropriate for a *Flintstones* episode than for today's postmodern, information-driven age.

Most investigators are seeking something better after having been exposed to a wide array of religious ideas. Little published in SUNSTONE will seem very radical to someone who has been exploring the big picture of religious diversity. In my experience, most successful investigators have been better informed than the average, comfortable member of the Church who is happily doing all his or her duties. What might be perceived as outrageous by the parochial corridor ostrich is rarely going to scare anyone off who has rummaged round the fringes of religious thought to any extent. "Investigator-safe" implies an enormous arrogance and a profound cluelessness about what most intelligent people think and know outside of the center of this one relatively small church.

In fact, some of the mainstream LDS material comes across to me as potentially more investigator-unsafe than anything that comes out of SUNSTONE and its associated forums, symposiums, website, and general rabble-rousing. "Approved material" too often makes Latter-day Saints come off sounding childish, narrow, cultish, and mindlessly obedient.

Consider the recent general conference priesthood session in which a speaker showed pictures of a Latino Priesthood leader visiting and ultimately chasing a reluctant less-active teenager into the waves of the ocean and physically dragging him back to church. How "investigator-safe" is that? I hope most conference participants, awake enough for this story to register, thought of it more as a humorous allegory in service of the "never give up" principle than as a good model for re-activation.

Story time. I have a friend at work who is an evangelical Christian. He is intelligent, nationally respected in his field, teaches college courses, is married with a nice family, and likes to golf. He is politically conservative, carries a handgun, and listens to Rush Limbaugh on the radio. Yet for some reason he is mildly curious about Mormonism. He has read part of the Book of Mormon and other literature, and I would not be surprised to learn that he has taken a couple of the missionary lessons. I doubt he is going to convert. He is dedicated to his church but interested in us to a degree. By accident, I left an old copy of SUNSTONE where he could read it.

His response quite surprised me. He told me that the magazine really opened his eyes to the strength, depth, vitality, and diversity of Mormon religious thought. He said that a faith has to be quite mature to spontaneously generate material like this and that SUNSTONE

unintentionally refutes most of the false propaganda about Mormons that some evangelicals try to pawn onto the public. Although he might not personally agree with most of what was in the magazine, he wishes his church had a few courageous souls willing to write like this. His respect for us was boosted by SUNSTONE more than by anything else he had ever encountered. He said that a cult does not generate or tolerate material like this.

I think we underestimate the potential of SUNSTONE magazine as a missionary tool, especially for people not reached by traditional approaches. We Mormons are largely tolerated now: no mobs burning us out. We are respected by some and admired by a few. Yet *tolerance* is far from *admiration*, and most Mormons don't seem to understand this distinction. In the past, conversion to Mormonism required an explosive leap across this entire spectrum. As we become better respected and even admired, the leap is shorter and can happen more methodically. SUNSTONE can appeal to those investigators who are already closer to the admiration end of the continuum, because, like us, many are thinking/exploring people, not leapers.

I would love to find a mission president who would try this experiment: Divide the mission into two equal halves, as far as possible. Instruct one half of the missionaries to use the *Ensign* in standard door approaches and street meetings. Instruct the other half to use SUNSTONE in a parallel manner. It would be interesting to see how many doors are opened and how much success each half experiences, and how many missionaries would be forced to deepen their perspective on the diversity and strengths of their own tradition as they teach the gospel. Ultimately, my guess would be that the "SUNSTONE-bred" investigators would have better retention five years after baptism, because as J. Golden Kimball said about conversion, "Easy come, easy go."

SUNSTONE is investigator-friendly, as far as I am concerned. I recommend it as part of the arsenal of some missionaries and member-missionaries alike, if they are so inclined.

MIKE HENINGER  
Atlanta, Georgia

## COMING HOME

**I T FEELS LIKE COMING HOME!** THAT'S what I thought when I read the December 2003 SUNSTONE. Actually, it was the special edition featuring the late Eugene England (January 2002) that re-interested me in the Sunstone community after more than a decade of being away. I still can't believe Gene

is gone. From the day he and I first met at the University of Utah in 1960 and formed a small, five-person "dialogue" study group, his impact on me was powerful and indelible. Gene was easily my most challenging and severe critic, but also one of my most faithful, loving, and generous friends. Thank God he left us a legacy of *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought*, and its inspired offspring—SUNSTONE, the Association for Mormon Letters—as well as his personal example of purity, integrity, and commitment.

Although I've not met the new editor, Dan Wotherspoon, he feels like a long lost brother when, in his "State of the Body" editorial, he expresses his hope that "the Church can be a true home." By "Church," I hope he means the greater community of Christ in contrast to ecclesiastical scaffolding.

Rebecca Chandler, another whom I have not yet met, surely rang my bell with her teaching metaphors and disclosures of the true and varied nature of her birth family. And, Rebecca, your "wish list" is a treasure! Your wise old rabbi who responds to a reluctant prodigal by saying, "Bring him back as far as he will come, and I will go to him," is a choice, to-be-wished-for example. That is how I imagine Jesus would behave. Mormon ecclesiastics should be so wise!

Then, of course, there are the tenth anniversary stories of the "September Six" who had been excommunicated en masse from the Mormon ecclesiastical machine. Two are my old friends Paul Toscano and Lavina Fielding Anderson. I have often wondered if their rallying to aid me during my own excommunication process a year earlier in 1992 in any way prepared them for theirs a year later.

**I T FEELS LIKE coming home!** Now speak those words in a faint Russian accent. That's what my dad said to my brother and me in late 1961 when we announced our intention to change our name from Kregg to Kovalenko.

My brother Virgil and I had always hated our birth name because we knew it wasn't real. It was a concocted "American-sounding name" to hide the true origin of an illegal Russian/Ukrainian refugee.

I was in graduate school at the University of Utah, and my brother was an officer in the U.S. Air Force in 1961 when Dad and Virgil came to visit me at the university. It was the first time we three had come together as adult men. The first words out of my mouth when they walked through my door were, "Dad, what are we doing with this awful name? It has no meaning, no history, no heritage, and no roots. I hate it!"

YEA , YEA  NAY , NAY

## ON WAGGING THE DOG

by Kevin Christensen

Virgil jumped into the fray with the same sentiments. Our dad exclaimed with surprise and excitement, “Oh, my sons, I hate it, too! But I was afraid to say anything because I thought you would laugh at me.”

“That settles it, Pop! We’re changing it back to the original,” the two of us simultaneously announced. Not long after, Virgil and I, independently, on the same day, in different cities in Utah and unknown to each other, had our respective surnames changed to our father’s birth name. It took Dad and Mom in California months to catch up with the same change.

I remember the conservative presiding Salt Lake City municipal judge trying to argue me out of my decision—this being at the height of the Cold War—reminding me what had happened to many people with German names in our country during WWII. Finally, after wrangling with me for some time, the judge threw up his hands and exclaimed, “Well! Here’s a guy who *really* thinks they’re going to take over!”

My dad died in 1964, a little more than two-and-a-half years later, not in his Ukrainian homeland (his “Rodina”), but with his true name restored. He would never have dreamed that thirty-plus years later, in 1995, his sons would find four generations of his Ukrainian family alive and well and then visit them in his own hometown! Nor would he have predicted that five years after that, a Russian convert to the Church in Belarus, named Ivan Kovalenko, would be sent on an LDS mission to California, begin an American family search, and find us, his relatives, in Texas, Utah, and New Mexico! Nor would Dad have believed that his oldest child, Dorothy Kregg, the existence of whom his sons knew nothing about, would initiate a search on the Internet in 2003, looking for any trace of her father whom she had always loved and never forgotten. Dorothy found far more than the gravesite she was looking for. She found two younger brothers and a whole bunch of nephews and nieces—newly discovered first cousins to her four sons! All this, to say nothing of other newly discovered relatives in Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Latvia, and Canada.

To me, all these events—those published in the December SUNSTONE issue, as well as my own recent family discoveries—are literal examples of the fulfillment of Moroni’s spin on Malachi 4:6 (JST 1:39). They are witness to, and further evidence of, a growing awareness that we all are in process of “coming home.”

EUGENE KOVALENKO  
Los Alamos, New Mexico

COMMENTS IN THE March 2004 SUNSTONE raised concerns about whether the influential work of FARMS and FAIR scholars with regard to studies of Book of Mormon geography and culture is akin to “the tail wagging the dog.” As the unsigned introduction to the “Reframing the Book of Mormon” section puts it, “Are these LDS apologists, rather than Church leaders, creating new doctrine, and if so, by what right?”<sup>1</sup>

As it happens, in an essay published in SUNSTONE thirteen years ago, Todd Compton wrote a relevant article dealing with “Counter-Hierarchical Revelation,”<sup>2</sup> by which he means instances where the initial inspiration for a teaching or Church program flows *up* the hierarchy, rather than coming down through channels. Compton took his examples from scripture and from official Church histories, taking particular notice of the consistent patterns in the circumstances. He discusses the stories of Paul’s rebuke of Peter at Antioch, Nephi’s subtle rebuke of Lehi, Emma Smith’s triggering the questions that led to Joseph’s receiving the Word of Wisdom, Orson Pratt’s doctrinal conflicts with Brigham Young, and several others.

In one example, Compton tells the story of a twenty-five-year-old Joseph F. Smith’s refusing the counsel of two apostles who wanted to take a freight boat to shore under circumstances that Smith thought dangerous and unwise. Despite his being told, “Young man, you had better obey counsel,” Smith refused to board the boat, which soon overturned and nearly came to tragedy for the two apostles. Compton reports that “This example shows a young man who simply had more experience and knowledge in a limited area than men who, though they were apostles and his ecclesiastical superiors, were newcomers to Hawaii and probably not well acquainted with seafaring, at least in the local

area. . . . Thus a Church leader who seeks to wield his ecclesiastical authority in an area in which he has little or no expertise perhaps runs the risk of overstepping his bounds.”<sup>3</sup>

Compton also cites the story of Levi Savage, a member of the Willie Handcart company, for whom both events and Brigham Young confirm that “with expertise in a limited area [he] was more inspired than an apostle [Franklin D. Richards] out of his element.”<sup>4</sup>

In his discussion of non-hierarchical revelation, Compton also observes that “the counselor offices in Church government implicitly acknowledge this pattern of checking leaders. If the prophet were infallible, if he received a steady, direct stream of revelation, and were entirely self-sufficient, he would not need counselors.”<sup>5</sup> Compton recognizes the tension between “authoritarian wrong-headed” leadership on the one hand, and “authoritarian wrong-headed critics” on the other. “But in none of my examples did the person leave the Church when they received their individual inspirations. . . . Counter-hierarchical revelation does not negate the hierarchy. . . . The people I have looked at are usually on good terms with the Church structure—either as a part of it or related to it somehow.”<sup>6</sup>

The LDS scriptures never describe Church leadership as infallible. To the contrary, the Doctrine and Covenants bluntly states that these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding. And inasmuch as they erred, it might be made known; and inasmuch as they sought wisdom, they might be instructed (D&C 1:24–26).

The scriptures do not describe revelation as passive nor as an all-at-once experience, but rather from “time to time” conditioned on



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both expedience and seeking (D&C 1:28). We must take thought, and “study it out in [our] mind” before we can expect revelation (see D&C 9). We are to study, to ponder, to “seek out of the best books words of wisdom” (D&C 88:118), with the expectation that by doing so we can always be instructed “more perfectly” not just in the “law of the gospel” but with respect to a “knowledge of countries and kingdoms” (D&C 88: 78–79).

Statements from the Book of Mormon indicate that understanding revelation requires preparation and study. Nephi insists that “none other people . . . understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews . . . save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:5). When Jesus appears to the Nephites, he tells them, “I perceive that ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words. . . . Therefore go . . . and ponder upon the things which I have said, and ask of the Father, in my name, that ye may understand, and prepare your minds for the morrow” (3 Nephi 17:2-3).

Alma’s experiences also seem to indicate something other than easy omniscience when it comes to knowing the exact things of God:

Behold, I do not say that he will come among us at the time of his dwelling in his mortal tabernacle; for behold, the Spirit hath not said unto me that this should be the case. Now as to this thing I do not know; but this much I do know. . . .” (Alma 7:8).

Now these mysteries are not yet fully made known unto me; therefore I shall forbear (Alma 37:11).

Now, I unfold unto you a mystery; nevertheless, there are many mysteries which are kept, that no one knoweth save God himself. But I show unto you one thing which I have inquired diligently of God that I might know. . . . (Alma 40:3).

It sufficeth me to know that this is the case. . . . (Alma 40:5).

I have inquired diligently of the Lord to know; and this is the thing which I do know. . . . Behold it has been made known unto me by an angel. . . . (Alma 40:9, 11).

But behold, I give it as my opinion. . . . (Alma 40:20).

Clearly, according to the Book of Mormon itself, we ought to consider how prophets or other leaders come to say what they say. If we take an eternal view, the most expedient message of the prophets pertains to our salvation. “Now is the time to repent, for the day of sal-

vation draweth nigh. . . . He doth sound these glad tidings among all his people . . . wherefore they have come unto us. And they are made known unto us in plain terms that we may understand. . . .” (Alma 13:21–23). Not everything, though, bears directly on the glad tidings of salvation. Not everything in revelation is plain, and not every tradition or interpretation is authoritative. Some things require more effort to learn, and on some things relevant to the Book of Mormon and the peopling of the Americas, little effort had been made, sometimes because preconceptions interfere with the necessary inquiry. In 3 Nephi, for example, we have this warning: “And now, because of stiffneckedness and unbelief, they understood not my word; therefore I was commanded to say no more of the Father concerning this thing unto them. . . . And they understood me not, for they supposed. . . .” (3 Nephi 15:18, 22) The uncritical presuppositions of the ancient disciples interfered with both inquiry and understanding.

It is no different for us moderns. John Sorenson has shown that the first serious attempt to develop a comprehensive internal geography of Book of Mormon lands from the text did not appear until 1938, more than one hundred years after the book’s publication.<sup>7</sup> No one had made the effort. On the cultural side, Brant Gardner argues that sufficient information on ancient Mesoamerica has not been available until the past thirty years.<sup>8</sup>

Joseph Smith obviously did not consider his visions and revelations as grounds to exclude himself from the study of Hebrew, and the enthusiasm with which John Lloyd Stephen’s *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* was received in Nauvoo in 1841, shows that he saw new discoveries worth his attention. Even with respect to his own understanding of the Book of Mormon in the Wentworth letter, which heavily borrowed from a previous publication by Orson Pratt, he wrote, “For a more particular account, I would refer to the Book of Mormon.”<sup>9</sup>

With respect to the Saints’ tendency to uncritically take tradition as a guide, Joseph remarked:

But there has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation. It has been like splitting hemlock knots with a corn-dodger for a wedge, and a pumpkin for a beetle. Even the Saints are slow to understand.

I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints

prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all.<sup>10</sup>

Given the fact  
that there is conflict,  
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Which statements  
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I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, “Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further;” which I cannot subscribe to.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly the long-emerging theories which propose that Book of Mormon events took place in ancient Mesoamerica conflict with many LDS traditions, but the traditional understandings about exclusive Hebrew ancestry and hemispheric geographies are clearly pre-critical. Why should these ideas be considered binding? Why suppose that we must set up stakes, rather than prepare our minds to learn more? Arguing that interpretations of certain revelations have been flawed is not the same as arguing that the revelations themselves are so flawed as to be

untrustworthy or false. The New Testament itself contains examples of reinterpretation on matters such as the time of the second coming and the Lord raising the temple in three days. It is one thing to theorize how God would or should do things and quite another to demonstrate the validity of those theories from the evidence at hand.

With respect to the widely held view of Asiatic ancestry for American populations, the SUNSTONE introduction's statement that

All religious communities share in some measure the different kinds of core experience, but once we get to the key historical events that define and bind communities, we start to see separation. Mythic patterns may point to universals, but a shared history makes particular affirmations and concrete demands.

"recent publicity over DNA studies . . . have confirmed long-held scientific notions that Amerindians descend from Asian—not Middle Eastern—peoples" is inaccurately qualified. Scientifically speaking, no DNA scientist could possibly confirm that indigenous peoples have exclusively descended from Asiatic sources. And further, as David A. McLellan writes, "According to the specifics of the Book of Mormon story line, it may not be possible to recover the genetic signature of Lehi or Mulek. Too many influences would have resulted in too many violations of equilibrium-preserving conditions."<sup>12</sup>

Nor is the SUNSTONE introduction accurate in its suggestion that the recent DNA controversy has suddenly sent Latter-day Saint scholars scrambling for a new way to understand the Book of Mormon. Matt Roper's excellent essay, "Nephi's Neighbors" in the *FARMS Review* demonstrates that many LDS

leaders and scholars have for the past eighty years been urging the Saints to recognize the Asiatic contribution to Amerindian ancestry.<sup>13</sup> Other Church leaders have resisted or ignored such arguments. Given the fact that there is conflict, we have to consider the grounds upon which disputants make statements. Which statements involve careful study, and which involve uncritical presuppositions and blind deference to tradition? If a careful, devotional approach by FARMS and FAIR scholars (among others), is licensed by such scriptures as I have cited, and if such an approach is offered without compulsion, but as part of ongoing study and faith, why object when many Church leaders begin to find these things persuasive and worth the notice and attention of the Saints?

WITH respect to the notion that the Book of Mormon might be read profitably as an ahistorical work, notice that Alma says, "If ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words . . . even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words" (Alma 32:27). Alma does not specify *which* portion. That is left to each individual. Whatever works for each is a good place to start.

With respect to core religious experiences in general (in contrast to the doctrinal containers we use to interpret and carry them), there are "divers ways" that God manifests "things unto the children of men, which [are] good" (Moroni 7:24). Scholars of comparative religion<sup>14</sup> observe powerful, life-changing responses to multiple kinds of experience. For example, many people have reported powerful impressions in response to order and design in creation. Plato started here, as well as Joseph Smith (according to the 1832 account of the First Vision). Many people in Western cultures report kinds of numinous experience, which involve a sense of being seized by the Personal Other (as in Moses 1, for example). In the East, however, reports of mystical experience predominate: experiences of unity, serenity, loss of ego boundary, and the impersonal oneness (as described, for instance, by the Buddha). Numinous encounters may also occur in Eastern reports (as with Arjuna's vision in the *Bhagavadgita*), and mystical experience can occur in the West (as with Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism).

Whatever the particular form they take, such encounters may lead to experiences of reorientation and reconciliation (that is, changes in both thinking and feeling), which provide release from sin or guilt and offer

courage in the face of suffering, mortality, death, and loss, as well as the power to change destructive behaviors. Joseph Smith's first vision and Alma 36 offer accounts of such reorientation and reconciliation. These experiences can lead in turn to deepened experience of moral obligation or awakened conscience, and of what Martin Buber calls "I and Thou," the sense of life lived in the presence of God, where God speaks through events, and we answer through actions.<sup>15</sup>

The point is that there are many ways for people to have the kinds of core religious experience that Latter-day Saints associate with the restored gospel. Scriptures and rituals from a variety of traditions, even works of literature, contain mythic patterns with genuine power to guide us through life. The Book of Mormon can also, therefore, be profitably approached as myth.

But something fundamentally important is missing from the mythic approach: the discovery of key historical events in which the work of God seems manifest. The recognition of such events gives a community a shared history—and shared history, more than anything else, is what defines and binds communities. The shared history of Jews centers on the Exodus. For Christians, it is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And the shared history of the Latter-day Saints includes Joseph's translation of the Book of Mormon.

All religious communities share in some measure the different kinds of core experience, but once we get to the key historical events that define and bind communities, we start to see separation. Mythic patterns may point to universals, but a shared history makes particular affirmations and concrete demands. Richard Bushman has observed that what makes us Mormons is not philosophy, but what we believe happened to real people.<sup>16</sup> "Is not this real?" Alma asks (Alma 32:35). Those who say "no" aren't bound in the same way as those who say "yes."

GRANTING that space was limited in the March 2004 "Reframing the Book of Mormon" issue of SUNSTONE, and that the focus of the authors was elsewhere, it is still important to observe that none of the essays discussed at all the Old World correlations in the Book of Mormon. This area of work has implications for approaching the Book of Mormon as historical. Starting with Hugh Nibley's *Lehi in the Desert* and adding the new Potter and Wellington book *Lehi in the Wilderness* and the recent compilation *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, we have an impressive body of

work, and a much more settled approach to geography and history than is possible with the New World portion of the book.<sup>17</sup>

Methodist researcher Margaret Barker's work on Christian origins and the temple adds to the weight of all of this in an exponential fashion.<sup>18</sup> Barker argues that "the original gospel message was about the temple, not the corrupted temple of Jesus' own time, but the original temple which had been destroyed some six hundred years earlier."<sup>19</sup> One common criticism of the Book of Mormon is that it anachronistically projects Christian ideas into the time of the Old Testament (as in Lehi's preaching or Nephi's vision of the Savior). Barker's efforts to recover an understanding of the first temple may help to establish that the Book of Mormon's Old Testament-era Christianity isn't an anachronism after all.

I'm also personally very impressed with Brant Gardner's recent work on the Mesoamerican side of things—particularly his comment that for him, everything changed when, instead of "looking for the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica," he started "looking for Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon." He says this conceptual shift made a huge difference in the nature and quality of the correlations he has seen.<sup>20</sup>

But, as Thomas Kuhn says, in paradigm debates, we all get to decide for ourselves "which problems are more significant to have solved."<sup>21</sup> It's the unconstrained picking and choosing and weighing that makes for the chaos in Book of Mormon geographies. In his Book of Mormon sourcebook, Sorenson includes a long checklist of requirements the Book of Mormon text demands that any potential Book of Mormon geography would have to solve.<sup>22</sup> In the fourteen years since then, various authors have proposed alternate geographies to Sorenson's, but not one has used the list. Why not? We prefer not to constrain our choice of which problems are more significant to have solved. For some, Nephite "north" must be precisely our north. For those who like to believe the New York Cumorah is the only one, traditions about the New York hill anchor their approaches to geography. Gardner and Sorenson offer other solutions, a very complex set all dependent on a single correlation and time period. In all cases, "To be accepted as a paradigm, a theory must seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact, it never does, explain all the facts with which it may be confronted."<sup>23</sup> My preference for the Sorenson model simply says that I appreciate the problems that it solves, and I expect that further solutions and refinements will be forthcoming.

For individuals, if a mythic approach to the Book of Mormon keeps you here, fine. I think it's a valid option, and the presence of such things is healthy both for a religious tradition and for individuals, whether in the extreme form C. Jess Groesbeck offers in the March 2004 SUNSTONE, or Ostler's 1987 approach via an "expanded" Book of Mormon with a partially compromised historicity,<sup>24</sup> or Nephi's exemplary "likening" approach which takes symbolic types from historical, even biographical, models.

But to adopt a mythic approach as a replacement for, rather than a complement to, historicity, would be suicidal for our faith community. We'd fall apart. I am reminded of Hugh Nibley's description of "a real knock-down, drag-out fight between the 'Allegorists' and the 'literalizers' in the [Christian] Church, ending in a complete victory for the intellectuals."<sup>25</sup> We should take that history as a caution for ourselves.

Revisionist critics such as Thomas W. Murphy and Brent Lee Metcalfe clearly lobby for a re-framing of the Book of Mormon that consists of abandonment of any pretensions to historicity. Capitulation to these scholars and their position would amount to their not only wagging the dog, but also stuffing and mounting it as well. ☹️

## NOTES

1. "Reframing the Book of Mormon," SUNSTONE, March 2004, 19. The context for this question is the issues raised in Brent Lee Metcalfe's essay, "Reinventing Lamanite Identity," about 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 origin are flawed, if not erroneous, and why their word should count more than that of LDS prophets on one hand, and that of secular scholars on the other?" Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Reinventing Lamanite Identity," SUNSTONE, March 2004, 23.
2. Todd Compton, "Counter-Hierarchical Revelation," SUNSTONE 82 (June 1991): 34–41.
3. *Ibid.*, 37.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 38.
6. *Ibid.*, 40.
7. John Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of*

*Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo: FARMS, 1992), 22–23.

8. Brant Gardner, email to author, 17 May 2004. For details, see his essays and Book of Mormon commentary at <http://frontpage2000.nmia.com/~nahualli/LDStopics.htm>.

9. See this discussion in Matt Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors" *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 97–99.

10. Joseph Smith Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Joseph F. Smith, ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 331.

11. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1805–1847*, 7 vols., ed. B.H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 6:57.

12. David A. McLellan, "Lehi's Genetic Signature," *FARMS Reivew* 15, no. 2 (2003), 89.

13. Roper, 99–113.

14. Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A comparative Study of Science and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 53–55.

15. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

16. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 187–88.

17. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Deseret: The World of the Jaredites: There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988). George Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness* (Springville: Cedar Fort, 2003). John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds, *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem* (Provo: FARMS, 2004).

18. William Hamblin, ed. FARMS Occasional Papers 2. Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies" (Provo: FARMS, 2001).

19. Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK 2004).

20. Brant Gardner, email to Kevin Christensen, 22 October 2002. Publication forthcoming.

21. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 110. For a lengthy discussion of paradigm debates in LDS circles, see Kevin Christensen "Paradigms Crossed" in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1995), 144–218.

22. Sorenson, 357–64.

23. Kuhn, 17–18.

24. C. Jess Groesbeck, "The Book of Mormon as Symbolic History: A New Perspective on Its Place in History and Religion," SUNSTONE, March 2004, 35–45; Blake Ostler "The Book of Mormon as an Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 66–124.

25. Hugh Nibley, *The Ancient State: The Rulers and The Ruled* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 353.

## Pontius' Puddle

